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China-Japan Tensions: Heading for the rocks?

By Euan Graham

Synopsis

Spiralling tensions between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands are the most serious manifestation of weakened leadership and transition politics across Northeast Asia. The resulting drift towards militant nationalism poses a great threat to regional security.

Commentary

TOKYO'S NATIONALISATION of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has been provocative to China and Taiwan, though it is actually a pre-emptive move to contain domestic political challenges. However, China's strong counter-reaction, fed by its own domestic pressures, has brought tensions to a new high and threatens to derail bilateral relations. Nationalist posturing on maritime sovereignty disputes risks being reactively entrenched as political leadership across Northeast Asia undergoes transition for the remainder of 2012. While the costs of conflict between East Asia's two strongest states are self-evident and should serve as deterrence the potential for "irrational" confrontation during this period of drift is growing.

Japan's domestic challenges

The Japanese government's decision to purchase several of the disputed islands in the East China Sea for US\$26 million, from their private owner, was cemented on 11 September 2012. The move effectively ends the rival bid, announced in April, by Tokyo's Governor Shintaro Ishihara, to buy and develop the islands. Though seen as nationalist grand theatre, Ishihara's initiative was politically effective and received popular support. Prime Minister Noda's counter-move, while drawing protests from Beijing and Taipei, was therefore forced upon him by domestic politics.

Japan's diplomatic challenge has been to persuade China of this. While a formal meeting between Noda and President Hu Jintao was not possible at the recent APEC summit, Japan has been actively using diplomatic channels to get its message across. The head of the foreign ministry's Asian and Ocean Affairs Bureau, was dispatched to Beijing on the day the purchase deal was signed. Tokyo is believed to have offered additional assurances that it will not develop the islands economically, as Ishihara has urged. In the lead-up to the purchase, China warned Noda's administration not to allow right-wing nationalists to hijack policy, implicitly acknowledging the domestic challenges it faced.

China's robust reaction

However, directing its official anger at Japan's central government, the language of Beijing's official statements has hardened steadily as senior leaders lined up to denounce the nationalisation as an illegal act. Chinese government ministries and agencies also rolled out a series of retaliatory responses. The State Oceanic Administration announced on 11 September that it would conduct "routine monitoring" of surrounding waters, mirroring an environmental survey conducted by the Tokyo municipal government earlier in the month.

China's Foreign Ministry announced new base points for the islands, in an effort to add legal weight to its sovereignty claims, while the defence ministry reserved the right to take "retaliatory measures". China Marine Surveillance dispatched two patrol vessels in the islands' vicinity to assert Beijing's sovereignty claims. The Global Times newspaper described this as part of China's "first round of countermeasures against Japan".

Non-official Chinese sentiment has been unrestrained, if not bellicose. An editorial in the Global Times stated flatly that China's "future priority isn't to maintain stable ties, but to protect its core interests as Sino-Japanese relations sour", and urged that "a lesson is necessary to dispel (Japan's) contempt toward China since the Meiji Restoration". US Assistant Secretary Kurt Campbell has called for "cooler heads to prevail", indicating Washington's rising concerns, following Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's comments at APEC.

The United States avows impartiality on sovereignty claims, but has publicly clarified that its defence commitments extend to the islands, since the US-Japan security treaty covers "armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan". Washington is therefore in no position to act as mediator; nor is ASEAN equipped for this role.

Leadership transition

While there is no direct connection between the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute and that between Japan and South Korea over Takeshima/Dokdo islands, they share a common link in that political leaders in all three countries either "play to the gallery" or are unable to restrain populists such as Ishihara from tapping into nationalist sentiment. The problem across Northeast Asia is that China, South Korea and Japan are all undergoing leadership transition, with governments likely to be weak or distracted into 2013.

In Japan, Noda faces a party leadership contest at the end of September, which he will probably win, and then a lower-house election as early as November. Here, his odds will narrow against the opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The LDP leadership is also up for grabs and there is a real possibility that Governor Ishihara's son could emerge as Japan's next Prime Minister, a change of guard likely to give a more overtly nationalist tone to Japanese politics. Pressure felt from Japan's other territorial disputes, including recent island visits by Russian and South Korean leaders, contributes to an uncompromising stance on the Senkaku, the one disputed territory under Japan's effective control. This dynamic will constrain options for whoever leads Japan into 2013.

In China, predictions that the impending leadership transition would mean a low profile on territorial disputes have proved well wide of the mark. From the South China Sea to the East China Sea, China's approach over the past year has become noticeably more assertive and concerted. Exerting greater control over maritime resources and sovereignty claims have become dominant in the discourse at grassroots, political and military levels, with reinforcing feedback effects.

Japanese defence implications

For Japan, though it still harbours the most technologically advanced and capable navy in Asia, the implications of the worsening territorial dispute with China transcend politics and diplomacy. Japanese defence planners have adjusted their northward Cold War contingency horizon to a "dynamic" focus on Japan's southern approaches. Boundary patrols around the Senkaku are led by the civilian Japan Coast Guard. However, the Self Defence Forces have extended their surveillance posture south of Okinawa and are being trained and equipped for the defence of outlying islands.

Although Japan's formidable defence capabilities and the US treaty guarantee constrain China's military options in the Senkaku/Diaoyu, making adventurism unlikely, the danger is that as Beijing moves to assert its sovereignty claims through an enhanced paramilitary patrol presence, so the risk rises of collisions or other "kinetic" events. Should these occur, in the current period of political drift, they will inevitably produce a clamour for retribution that China's leaders may be unable to resist.

It is therefore alarming, if no longer alarmist, to envisage a China-Japan military clash breaking out in the East China Sea. Such a calamity, needless to say, would eclipse tensions in the South China Sea as a threat to East

Asia's security and prosperity.

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