China’s Naval Expansion
In the Western Pacific
By Yoichi Kato

For a number of countries in the region, China’s peaceful rise has run into troubled waters in the East China Sea and the South China Sea. The recent incident between Japan and China involving the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands is only the latest example of a more assertive China. The Asahi Shimbun’s national security correspondent, Yoichi Kato, argues that China’s tactics may be backfiring.

When a Chinese fishing boat collided with two Japanese Coast Guard cutters in September near the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, it was more than just an accident at sea. It was a clear demonstration of how China’s growing maritime presence has made the region more volatile. The incident west of Okinawa set off a diplomatic spat between China and Japan that quickly escalated, roiling public sentiment in both countries and threatening to damage the bilateral relationship.

China’s naval expansion has also had a significant impact on the security environment in the South China Sea as its assertive behavior has in some cases backfired. Clearly, the strategic balance in the Western Pacific is rapidly changing.

What is going on? The incident off the string of rocky, uninhabited islands called Senkaku by Japan and Diaoyu by China was a big shock for Japan, not because of the aggressive maneuvers of the fishing boat, which bumped into the Japanese Coast Guard vessels after it was ordered to leave Japanese territorial waters around the island, but because of the unprecedented, harsh response from the Chinese government following seizure of the ship, its crew and captain by Japanese authorities. China not only demanded the return of the ship and its crew, it took what appeared to be retaliatory actions. Two weeks after the incident four Japanese businessmen in China were promptly taken into custody for allegedly entering a restricted military facility without proper authorization. More important, Chinese exports of rare earth metals to Japan — which are vital to the manufacture of a number of high-tech products — were also suspended, even though the Chinese government denied that it was involved in the decision or that it was related to the Senkaku incident.
It seemed as if China was resorting to every available means short of the use of force to coerce Japan to retract its claim to the islands.

What appeared to bother the Chinese most was that throughout the spat Japan strongly maintained its claim of sovereignty over the islands and dealt with the incident strictly according to Japanese domestic law — an implied rejection of the idea that the islands are disputed territory. Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara repeatedly denied that there was any territorial dispute, thereby rejecting Chinese claims. As a result, China maintained its hard-line stance and tensions remained high, even after Japan released the captain before the legal process had quite finished.

The collision itself might well have been an accident, but the aggressive reactions of the Chinese government apparently were not. In a series of previous maritime incidents, China has demonstrated its intention to expand its sphere of influence in the region. Here are just a few of these incidents:

• In October 2008, a flotilla of four PLA Navy surface combatants cruised around the Japanese archipelago, passing through the Tsugaru Strait between Honshu (the main island of Japan) and Hokkaido.

• In December 2008, two inspection ships of the China Maritime Surveillance (China’s equivalent of the coast guard) sailed around the Senkaku Islands, spending more than nine hours in Japan’s territorial waters.

• In April 2010, a PLA Navy surface action group, consisting of 10 ships, including two submarines and two guided missile destroyers, conducted an exercise in the East China Sea and proceeded to the Pacific Ocean, passing through the channel just south of Okinawa.

While there were no incidents involving Chinese and Japanese naval vessels during these maneuvers, in the April exercise by the surface action group, a Chinese helicopter flew very close to a Japanese Maritime Defense Force destroyer, which was conducting surveillance, prompting the Japanese government to make a formal protest to the Chinese government.

Behind these aggressive activities, Japan sees not only China’s growing naval capabilities, but also an intention to engage in what military experts call “anti-access/area denial” activities, as various recent US documents describe them. Japanese authorities believe that China, in the event of a possible conflict, aims to deny access by foreign navies — especially that of the US — to the East China Sea and the South China Sea, while acquiring the capability to limit access to the Western Pacific outside of the so-called First Island Chain (Japan’s mainland-Okinawa-Taiwan-the Philippines). The ability to cruise in and out of Japan’s southwestern islands, including Okinawa, which make up the central part of the First Island Chain, would be crucial for China in such an anti-access/area denial strategy.

Such a demonstration of de facto “ownership” of disputed territorial waters by China is more evident in the South China Sea.

China’s advance in the South China Sea started in the 1970s when the US withdrew from Vietnam. China now claims sovereignty over the entire South China Sea, and occupies a number of islands and atolls in the disputed Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands. In some cases involving disputes with Vietnam, China has even resorted to the use of force to assert its claims. Indeed, China’s grip over the South China Sea seems much stronger than over the East China Sea.

The strategic significance of the South China Sea for China involves safeguarding access to natural resources and protecting the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) that run through these waters. There is also a widely held view among security experts that China is trying to establish a “bastion” or a sanctuary for its nuclear-missile submarines, which could launch nuclear ballistic attacks against the US. China has recently built an underground submarine base on Hainan Island, which faces the South China Sea. China has also recently conducted a number of military exercises in the region, including naval maneuvers, amphibious landings and the mid-air refueling of fighter aircraft over the South China Sea.

Japan hasn’t been the only country to experience China’s maritime assertiveness. Tensions with the US escalated in March 2009 when the
US surveillance ship *Impeccable* was harassed by a number of Chinese ships as it conducted surveillance activities south of Hainan Island.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

China’s newly assertive behavior in both the East China Sea and the South China Sea is having a clear impact on the policy of regional states including the US.

At a meeting in July of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum (ARF), US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said the US had a “national interest” in freedom of navigation and open access to Asia’s maritime commons. She went on to say: “The United States supports a collaborative diplomatic process” to resolve territorial disputes and “opposes the use or threat of force.” This statement, even though it sounded benign and did not mention China, was a clear signal that the US would not stand idly on the sidelines of territorial disputes between China and the countries of ASEAN.

Clinton also made a significant statement in October regarding the dispute over the Senkaku Islands. In a joint press conference in Hawaii with her Japanese counterpart, Foreign Minister Maehara, she said that the Senkakus fell within the scope of Article 5 of the US-Japan Security Treaty. That meant the US was effectively stating it had an obligation to help Japan defend the islands, if they were attacked.

While the “Press Guidance” of the US State Department for its internal use stops short of openly admitting to such a commitment, it notes that the US position is that the islands have been under Japan’s administrative control and that the security treaty applies to all territories under Japanese administration. Clinton’s statement was only a small step forward in the logic of the argument, but it had enormous significance.

A US government source told me that both statements by Clinton were intended to send a message to China that the US will stand by friends and allies in territorial disputes if China does not seek a peaceful resolution.

What the Senkaku incident further demonstrates are the inherent strategic risks arising from territorial disputes. First of all, traditional notions of deterrence have only limited utility, because these conflicts typically start with low-intensity skirmishes. But things could escalate quickly and in a way that none of the involved parties originally intended. Moreover, compromise in such circumstances is extremely difficult, because the disputes are directly connected with sovereignty issues. It is also hard to establish a multilateral mediation mechanism, because each country in the region has its own interests and claims.

In Japan, the response to the Senkaku incident was swift and drastic. The Diet quickly approved the accelerated acquisition of four large patrol vessels and four helicopters for Japan’s Coast Guard. This was aimed at enhancing maritime patrol capabilities in response to the Senkaku incident.

In the ongoing review of Japan’s multi-year defense plan, the National Defense Program Guidelines, one of the most significant trends is the shift in strategic focus to China. The aggressive reaction of China to the Senkaku incident has only added momentum to this shift. As a result, we will probably see a stronger emphasis on redirecting strategic assets to southwestern Japan, where the Chinese challenge is clearer. In order to deal with China’s growing anti-access/area denial stance, Japan is considering stronger coun-

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A Chinese government official told visiting US officials that the South China Sea is a “core interest” of China and it would not tolerate any interference. A number of Chinese academics and former government officials now contend that there is no official record of such a statement and it is doubtful that it was actually made. Aside from what was really said, it is apparent that there is a growing recognition among many observers in China that the country’s aggressive behavior in the East China Sea and the South China Sea is not in China’s interests and some adjustments — if not back-pedaling — will need to be made.

**COLLECTIVE RESPONSE?**

Similar reactions can be seen among the littoral states in the South China Sea.

Vietnam, which has one of the most severe disputes with China over the Paracel Islands, has made approaches to the US to establish stronger military ties in what appears to be an effort to counter China’s growing influence in the South China Sea. In August, the aircraft carrier USS *George Washington* visited the coastal city of Da Nang (one-time home of a major US military base), immediately followed by the guided missile destroyer USS *John S. McCain*. Da Nang is only about 300 kilometers from Hainan Island, where China has a new naval base. In 2009, Vietnam hosted other port visits by US naval ships including the aircraft carrier, the USS *John C. Stennis*, and the 7th Fleet’s command flagship, the USS *Blue Ridge*.

Vietnam is not alone. Neither the US nor its partners and allies will admit it, but it is evident that there is a network of nations emerging in the region that are trying to counterbalance — if not contain — the growing strength and influence of China. The recent aggressive behavior by China in both the East China Sea and the South China Sea is apparently adding momentum to that regional movement. So in this sense, at least, China’s willingness to apply pressure in the region has backfired.

It is interesting to see that similar views are shared by some Chinese academics. At a recent conference in Shanghai on Japan-US-China trilateral relations held shortly after the Senkaku incident, one of the Chinese participants said that the way the incident unfolded showed a failure of Chinese diplomacy and that China could be isolated as a result.

Moreover, some Chinese academics and experts in diplomatic affairs have recently denied a *New York Times* report in April this year that a Chinese government official told visiting US officials that the South China Sea is a “core interest” of China and it would not tolerate any interference. A number of Chinese academics and former government officials now contend that there is no official record of such a statement and it is doubtful that it was actually made. Aside from what was really said, it is apparent that there is a growing recognition among many observers in China that the country’s aggressive behavior in the East China Sea and the South China Sea is not in China’s interests and some adjustments — if not back-pedaling — will need to be made.

**STRATEGIC CHEMISTRY**

At the root of the changing security climate in the Western Pacific is the strategic chemistry between the US and China. China has pursued its military buildup without paying too much attention to the strategic balance in the region. Its main concern and motivation has been to acquire adequate military capability to safeguard China’s economic interests. It could be called “national security unilateralism.”

The US, meanwhile, is trying to maintain its primacy in the region in spite of the relative decline in its influence due to the rise of China. The approach and tools used by the US are, in general, less aggressive than those of China. It might be called “benign hegemonism.”

If you compare the national security objectives of both countries, you will come up with potential areas of conflict. They are (1) value promotion by the United States, (2) China’s pursuit of multipolarization of the region and world, and (3) China’s aggressive pursuit of economic interests.

Both the East China Sea and the South China Sea have these elements of potential conflict. That makes strategic coordination and adjustment between the US and China more difficult. But make no mistake, the effort is crucial. How the region as a whole establishes peaceful and prosperous coexistence in the two “China Seas” could dictate the future of Asia and the Pacific.

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