

Hot summer for Japan and China disputes

Prime Minister Abe made some pointed comments this week, highlighting Japan's determination not to yield to China on territorial issues.

By Justin McCurry, *Correspondent* / July 19, 2013



Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (l.), who is also leader of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, shakes hands with voters during his stumping tour for the July 21 Upper House election in Funabashi, east of Tokyo, July 19.

Toru Hanai/Reuters

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TOKYO

If Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's choice to visit voters on a sparsely populated island in the East China Sea on a campaign stop earlier this week is any indicator, it could be a long and tense summer for Japan's already fractious relations with China.

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"Today, we face continuing provocation to our country's territorial land, sea, and airspace," he told coast guard officers on the island of Ishigaki, located just 93 miles from the disputed Senkaku Islands, which are also claimed by China.

Though he was speaking to voters ahead of upper house elections this weekend – which are expected to give the Japanese prime minister's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) control of both

chambers of the Diet for the first time in six years – Prime Minister Abe's real audience was China.

"Abe's message to China is extremely clear in regard to Japan's determination not to yield to China on territorial disputes," says Christopher Hughes, professor of international politics and Japanese studies at Warwick University in the UK.

Abe said the that repeated incursions by Chinese surveillance ships into waters near the islands – known as the Diaoyu in China – posed an "extreme challenge" to Japan's territorial security.

Later, Abe told voters from Ishigaki that he would make "no compromise, not even a step" on the territorial issue.

Abe's comments were a reminder that the perceived naval threat from China remains uppermost in his foreign policy thinking as China seeks to gain the upper hand by sending surveillance ships to the disputed area no fewer than 52 times in the past 10 months.

"Japan is keen not to militarize the dispute and is using the very substantial Japan Coast Guard as its first line of defense to ward off the Chinese presence," says Mr. Hughes. "His visit to Ishigaki ... was a demonstration of Japan's resolve on the territorial issue. It was designed to send a message loud and clear to China about Japan's standing up for the defense of its claimed territory, even if it is doing so through the civilian coast guard."

Away from the economy

In recent days, Abe has broken off from his early focus on Abenomics – his multifaceted prescription for Japan's deflation ills – to remind Beijing that it could soon be dealing with a less benign Japan.

Last month, Japan noted China's "dangerous" maritime activities as a threat to stability in its annual Defense white paper – a reflection of Tokyo's military shift from Russia in the North to China in the southwest.

Tensions between the two East Asian rivals reached a low point in September, when Japan's then prime minister, Yoshihiko Noda, nationalized three of the islets that comprise the Senkaku chain, sparking violent protests in Chinese cities.

While armed conflict to secure rights to the Senkaku Islands' rich fishing grounds and potentially huge gas deposits is almost unthinkable, analysts have warned of the dire unintended consequences of an accident or military misstep.

Coming up

The coming months could prove critical in determining the immediate future of relations between China and Japan, the world's second- and third-biggest economies, with vitally important trade ties.

This week the Yomiuri Shimbun reported that Japan could nationalize hundreds of unclaimed remote islands in an attempt to shore up its territorial claims. If any island's ownership is unclear, the government will give it an official name and nationalize it, the Yomiuri said.

The region is also waiting to see if Abe, a nationalist, will use his party's expected election victory this weekend to kick-start his campaign to revise Japan's pacifist Constitution and turn the self-defense forces into a regular army, complete with the legal authority to come to the aid of an ally even if Japan is not itself under attack.

There is a faint possibility, too, that Abe will choose to mark the Aug. 15, anniversary of Japan's defeat in the Asia-Pacific War by paying an official visit to Yasukuni, a Shinto shrine in Tokyo that honors the country's war dead, including several class-A war criminals. Abe has not commented on a possible visit, but is known to regret failing to pay homage at the shrine when he served as prime minister for a year in 2006.

This September, China is unlikely to allow the first anniversary of Japan's purchase of the Senkaku Islands to pass unnoticed.

Cautious optimism

Despite the delicate diplomatic backdrop, there are reasons for cautious optimism, according to Tetsuo Kotani, a research fellow at the Japan Institute of International Affairs.

"Both Japan and China understand that they have to find common ground after September," Mr. Kotani says. "Their claims [over the Senkaku Islands] are completely at odds, so it will be hard to change their basic stance."

One option, however, would be for Japan to end its insistence that there is no diplomatic case to answer over the islands, thereby allowing Tokyo to maintain its sovereignty claim and China to score a minor diplomatic victory.

Aides to Abe and his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, are working furiously to arrange an informal meeting on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Russia in September in the hope that the two leaders can begin an overdue thaw, Kotani says.

"But Japan understands that this is not a good time to fundamentally change its relations with China or South Korea," Kotani adds. "The leaders of those countries face domestic challenges [notably cementing their new leaderships] over which Japan has very little influence. It would be better for Japan to adopt a wait-and-see approach."

'Exacerbated tensions'

Professor Hughes agrees that political transition in Beijing has encouraged the regime to play up territorial and nationalist issues, but adds that Japan, too, has “exacerbated tensions” under Abe.

While standing firm on the Senkaku Islands issue is understandable, Hughes says, the LDP’s obsession with historical revisionism, constitutional change, and other items on the Japanese nationalist wish list is “simply worsening ties with China and South Korea, and is counterproductive for Japan’s efforts to demonstrate its position as a leading international and liberal power in East Asia,” he says.

“Rather than moving to a brave new equilibrium, Japan just appears backward looking, obsessed with its past, and incapable of leading the region forwards.”

There appears to be little prospect, though, of a lull in the diplomatic tit-for-tat between now and September.

On Thursday, Chinese media accused Abe of playing the “China threat” card in an attempt to pick up extra votes on Sunday.

The People’s Daily, the newspaper of the ruling Chinese Communist Party, accused Abe of using the Senkaku dispute to rearm Japan. “The aim is to create tension and provoke incidents; to push Japan’s military development,” it said.

Fence mending

Still, Hughes believes that Abe, who after Sunday will not have to face an election for another three years, may yet build on attempts to mend fences with China and South Korea, having recently sent envoys to Beijing and Seoul.

“One hope might be that when he wins the upper house elections, that will give him a sufficient mandate and domestic breathing space to appeal less to certain elements of the electorate and his party by looking tough, and instead start talking to China,” he said.

“However, another thesis is that Abe will simply become more emboldened to focus on his real political agenda, which is not so much Abenomics, but his pet projects on revisionism and military strengthening.”

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