



Chinese Ships Swarm the Senkaku Islands

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Chinese fishing boats and one public vessel (a vessel belonging to the government of the People's Republic of China) entered Japanese territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands on August 5, 2016. In the subsequent period through August 18, a total of 32 Chinese public vessels entered Japan's territorial waters, with a maximum of 15 such ships simultaneously spotted in a zone contiguous to the territorial waters. As many as 15 Chinese public vessels gathered in the contiguous zone around the Senkaku Islands where approximately 200 to 300 fishing boats from China continued their operations. Those public vessels from China repeatedly intruded in Japanese territorial waters while following the fishing boats. It was the first case of such an event.



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It is obvious from this incident that China increased the pressure on the Senkaku Islands. However, we must consider the causes of this event from three levels.

The first level is the base layer. In short, China will not abandon its claims about dominion over the Senkaku Islands and it will not stop its activities to dismantle Japan's effective control over the islands. Public vessels are leading players in such activities. At this point, China is not considering capturing the Senkaku Islands through an exercise of military force. This is because China thinks it will not be able to beat US armed forces, which would intervene in the event of a military clash with Japan.

Measures against Japan's interventions in issues in the South China Sea are the second level. Those issues are security affairs for China. The United States represents a threat in this respect. China thinks international relations are games that are played by global powers. China wants to expel the US armed forces from the South China Sea in order to deter or counter the exercise of military force by the United States.

People in China reportedly say that it is inevitable for surrounding smaller nations to suffer some damage for the sake of China's security. Such damage is a big problem for the surrounding countries, but China says it will solve the problem with the victim nations on a bilateral basis. China does not understand Japan's assertion that the reclamation of reefs

and the like in the South China Sea and their conversion into military bases by China are a violent challenge to the established world order. China has a logic of its own.

Japan has no place in this story. Nonetheless, Japan intervenes in issues in the South China Sea. China sees a separate purpose behind Japan's interventions. The purpose is to restrain China in order to curb its military actions in the East China Sea.

The Permanent Court of Arbitration denied China's claims in the South China Sea on July 12, 2016. Japan strongly supports this judicial decision. China maintains the view that Japan is stirring up the global community in an attempt to isolate China and keep it occupied with issues in the South China Sea. For that reason, China is strongly opposing Japan's diversionary move and is stimulating the activities of public vessels and the like in Japan's territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands.

As a matter of fact, China criticized Japan for having learned about the unfavorable judicial decision for China before its announcement on July 12, claiming Japan had pulled the strings behind the scenes. With that criticism, China resumed the activities of its public vessels in the waters around the Senkaku Islands.

However, the activities of a large number of Chinese fishing boats and public vessels that began on August 5 were provocations on a level that was different from the previous one. There must be different reasons from the two described above for China to increase the level of its hard-line stance against Japan.

No clear answer for China's escalated actions was found in Japan. Such was the case because no peculiar event occurred between Japan and China during that period. For that reason, politics within China, instead of Sino-Japanese relations, are regarded as the cause of China's acts of provocation. The actions were timed to synchronize with the Beidaihe meeting, where party policies and personnel affairs are adjusted ahead of the Communist Party of China Convention held every five years, which also suggests this as a possibility.

Chairman Xi Jinping is criticized in China for his repeated diplomatic blunders. China entered a situation that could increase its isolation because the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs kept showing an excessively high-handed attitude. Leaving diplomacy entirely to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is said to be a mistake in China. True to such opinion, the Politburo for the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China has had no member in charge of diplomatic relations since November 2002. We can say that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had no option but to take a tough stance.

It is obvious that Japan will strongly protest if China continues to act boldly in the waters around the Senkaku Islands. The author thinks that China could also predict that Japan would bring its acts of provocation to the attention of the global community. In fact, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs began sending out such information in English.

The deterioration of its impression in the global community just before the G20 summit is not desirable for China. The administration led by Xi Jinping will lose authority if China, the host, is criticized at the G20 summit.

China's diplomacy began to show changes in the middle of August 2016. The country proposed the preparation of a draft for a code of conduct in the South China Sea with mid-2017 as the target period for high-level talks with countries belonging to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The code of conduct represents a multilateral framework about which China had previously been negative.

China signaled its decision to ratify the Paris Agreement to the United States just before the G20 summit. The ratification of the Agreement is an event that US President Barack Obama wants to turn into his legacy. China also gave Japan the expectation that discussions on a land-sea communication mechanism might advance.

Participating countries will not criticize China strongly at the G20 summit, enabling Chairman Xi Jinping to appeal for diplomatic success to observers within China. There is a possibility that China's diplomacy will toughen, combining hard and soft approaches. Domestic politics are also involved in changes to China's foreign policy. Countries around China must be very flexible, if they are not to be at the mercy of sudden changes in China's attitude.

Note: This article was written in Japanese on 9 September 2016 and translated for Discuss Japan.

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