

## Japan's Abe says will not tolerate islands challenge

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U.S. President Barack Obama shakes hands with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (L) in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington on Friday.

**Photo: Reuters**

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe vowed on Friday that he would not “tolerate” any challenge to Japanese control over the contested Diaoyutai Islands (釣台), which are called the Senkakus in Japan and are also claimed by Taiwan, after China’s growing incursions into the area.

“We simply cannot tolerate any challenge now and in the future. No nation should make any miscalculation or underestimate the firmness of our resolve,” Abe said at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

“No one should ever doubt the robustness of the Japan-US alliance,” he added.

Speaking after talks at the White House with US President Barack Obama, Abe added that “I have absolutely no intention to climb up the escalation ladder.”

He called for the two nations to work on common interests and called Japan’s relations with China “among the most important” with any country.

“The doors are always open on my side for the Chinese leaders,” Abe said.

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The Japanese leader insisted that history and international law proved that the islands “are Japan’s sovereign territory.”

Abe said that no one contested Japan’s sovereignty between 1895, when Tokyo annexed the islands, and 1971, the year before the US returned the islands along with Okinawa to Japan after seizing them in World War II.

Japan has often charged that China only became interested in the East China Sea territory in recent times, after learning that it was potentially rich in oil and gas deposits.

China disputes the Japanese position and argues that it has controlled the islands since the 1368-1644 Ming Dynasty.

At the White House earlier, Abe said the security environment in the region is becoming “more and more difficult.”

Seated next to Obama, Abe said through a translator that the US and Japan share the goal of securing “freedom of the seas” and settling differences through the rule of law, rather than force.

Abe said that Japan intends to deal with challenges from a position of strength. He plans to increase Japan’s defense budget for the first time in 11 years.

“Japan must stay strong, strong first in its economy and strong also in its national defense,” Abe said, according to the text released by his office. “Our Defense Ministry will receive an increased budget to do just that.”

Tensions over the islands flared in September last year when Tokyo bought three of the islands

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from their private owner, sparking violent protests in China that damaged Japanese businesses. Bilateral trade fell 3.3 percent last year to US\$333.7 billion, the first drop since 2009.

Meanwhile, Japan said a Chinese government ship briefly entered its territorial waters off the Diaoyutais yesterday.

The fisheries patrol boat entered the waters in the East China Sea at 4:48pm and was sailing about 19km northwest of Diaoyu Island (釣魚台, Uotsurijima), one of the islands, the Japanese coast guard said in a statement.

However, the Chinese ship moved out of the zone after about an hour, watched by a Japanese coast guard vessel, it said.

The incident was the latest in a series, with Japan claiming in one case that Chinese vessels had locked weapons-targeting radar onto a Japanese ship and a helicopter. Beijing denied the charge.

Meanwhile, China sharply criticized Abe on Friday for telling a US newspaper that Beijing had a "deeply ingrained" need to challenge its neighbors over territory.

Abe told the Washington Post in an interview published on Thursday that China uses disputes with Japan and others to shore up its domestic support.

China's confrontational stance risked eventually harming its economy and scaring off foreign investors, Abe said.

"Such behavior is going to have an effect on their economic activity at the end of the day," the newspaper quoted him as saying.

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"In the case of China, teaching patriotism [is equivalent to] teaching anti-Japanese sentiment," he added.

Beijing fired back, with Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Hong Lei (洪磊) saying outsiders have no right to criticize how China works.

"Only Chinese people have the right to speak about whether China's political system and development strategy is suitable," he told a regular briefing on Friday.

"The great renaissance of the Chinese people cannot be obstructed by anyone," he added, saying that Beijing had demanded a clarification.

Hong was earlier quoted by the state-run Global Times newspaper as saying Chinese officials were "shocked" at Abe's comments.

"It's rare that a country's leader would brazenly distort facts, attack its neighbor and instigate confrontation among countries in the region," Hong said, according to the newspaper.

China's Xinhua news agency in a commentary on Friday warned the US that backing Tokyo would risk damaging ties with China, urging Washington against "being hijacked" by Japan.

"US support for Japan on the issue would not only damage Washington's credibility as a constructive superpower, but also as an important partner of China on many pressing global issues," the commentary said.

US backing would only encourage Japan "to take further provocative actions, which will definitely send China-Japan relations to new lows and even threaten the peace and stability in East Asia," Xinhua said.

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