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China's rise in regional powershift on display as island disputes mar APEC talks

By Eric Talmadge (CP) – 1 day ago

YOKOHAMA, Japan — The annual summit of Pacific Rim leaders is intended to be a forum for discussing economic issues and trade. But in talks on the sidelines of the two-day summit, security was a major subplot — and a power shift caused by the rise of China was the common thread.

Though not on the formal agenda of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, the summit wrapped up Sunday after a flurry of bilateral meetings that were dominated by territorial disputes among the region's most powerful players — China, Russia and Japan.

None appeared to be willing to budge.

Host Prime Minister Naoto Kan appeared to make no progress toward persuading Chinese President Hu Jintao to back off on China's claims to several islands in the East China Sea that both nations call their own. Kan was even more flatly rebuffed when he strongly protested Russian leader Dmitry Medvedev's visit to an island in the northern Pacific that Soviet troops occupied in the closing days of World War II.

Medvedev told him the island was Russian territory, and he reserves the right to go there whenever he wants.

"Our Japanese colleagues, I hope, will adopt a more appropriate attitude toward this," said Medvedev's foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov.

Analysts said the discord reflects a broader trend involving how the Pacific Rim, including Russia and the United States, is adjusting to a changing balance of power. China has assumed a much larger role because of its economic rise and an expansion and modernization of its military that has allowed it to take a more hands-on approach to project its newfound might.

In the diverse and politically volatile region where China's presence is felt most acutely, high-profile disputes like the rival island claims are being watched closely by countries pondering whether to move more closely into Beijing's sphere of influence or — as Japan has done for decades — throw in their chips with Washington.

"The forum is not about security, but all of the players care about this a lot," said Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. "Everyone at the meeting has something at stake in East Asian security."

With emotions still high, it was unclear until the 11th hour if Hu or Medvedev would even agree to meet with Kan. Hu's meeting lasted only 22 minutes — and came just after a shrill rally by thousands of flag-waving Japanese near the venue — and Japanese officials described Kan's encounter with Medvedev as "tense."

Japan's dispute with China has been something of a test-case in diplomacy with a more assertive Beijing. It hasn't gone well.

Relations between the two nations have deteriorated since a September collision between Japanese patrol vessels and a Chinese fishing boat near a group of small islands called Diaoyu in China and Senkaku in Japan. The islands, surrounded by rich fishing grounds and possibly lucrative natural resources, are controlled by Tokyo but also claimed by Beijing.

Beijing demanded an apology and compensation after the incident, Tokyo countered that Beijing should pay for damage to the patrol boats, and then China cut off ministerial-level contacts, repeatedly called in Tokyo's ambassador to complain and postponed talks on the joint development of undersea natural gas fields.

Some Japanese observers have suggested that Medvedev used the rift between China and Japan as an opportunity to push Russia's own claims, since he chose to time his visit to Kunashir island — Kunashiri in Japanese — at the height of the Japan-China dispute.

Though the rival claims to the islands in the Kuril chain have kept Japan and Russia from signing a treaty to end their World War II hostilities, no Russian or Soviet leader had ever taken the diplomatically aggressive step of actually going there.

Such moves have played to fan nationalism at home and fueled feelings of victimization over past animosities that can be traced back to well before World War II.

But Bandow, of the Cato Institute, said China's rise presents a new challenge.

"There is clearly a nervousness about increased Chinese aggressiveness," he said. "Chinese have been slow and cautious, nuanced — 'the peaceful rise' and all this stuff. But now they seem to be tossing a lot of this stuff aside. What they're getting is precisely the reaction they don't want, for everybody to be nervous about them and (think) that maybe America should stick around."

Ding Xueliang, a China expert at Hong Kong's University of Science and Technology, said

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Chinese President Hu Jintao, right, is welcomed by Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan and his wife Nobuko at the start of a cultural event at the APEC forum in Yokohama, Japan, Saturday, Nov. 13, 2010. (AP Photo/Itsuo Inouye, Pool)

Map



China's recent actions have already been a windfall for the United States.

"If you talk to people in this region, they would tell you they are making very, very strong requests from this part of the world asking the U.S. to be more deeply involved," he said.

In a meeting with President Barack Obama, Japan's Kan noted that Washington has been a reliable ally.

"We have had various problems in our relations with Russia and China, and I thank President Obama for his support," Kan said. "Not only the Japanese people, but also our neighbouring countries have realized the importance of the United States and the presence of the U.S. military."

Washington, which has about 50,000 troops in Japan under a decades-old mutual security treaty that binds it to protect Japan, has offered to mediate talks between Tokyo and Beijing to help resolve the dispute with China. Beijing, however, has refused to participate in any such forum.

Obama, whose administration has been courting Indonesia and Vietnam to bolster security alliances that would counter China, was quick to portray the U.S. as the region's most trustworthy partner.

"The commitment of the United States to the defence of Japan is unshakable," Obama said. "Japan and the United States are stronger when we stand together."

Associated Press writers Malcolm Foster and Elaine Kurtenbach contributed to this report.

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