



## Leon Panetta's Diaoyu Dilemma

2012-09-17 18:17:10

*By Stuart Wiggin*

---

US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has talked of the potential for widespread conflict regarding disputes in East Asia during his trip to the Asia-Pacific region, which kicked off when he touched down in Japan this past weekend. At the start of his Asia tour, Panetta told reporters, "I am concerned that when these countries engage in provocations of one kind or another over these various islands, that it raises the possibility that a misjudgment on one side or the other could result in violence and could result in conflict." Panetta's words were spoken following a weekend of disturbances across a number of Chinese cities, as Chinese people protested against the Japanese government's purchase of several of the disputed Diaoyu islands.

The current strain on Sino-Japanese relations, due to competing claims over the uninhabited island chain, represents a major headache for all involved, not least the US. Prior to arriving in Japan, Panetta told reporters aboard his military aircraft on September 16 that the strategy that the US is pursuing "is really about maintaining and strengthening, not just our presence, but also a system of rules and norms and institutions in Asia that have brought decades of security and prosperity." Again, the talk is positive, but the events on the ground reveal a clear demand from a very vocal section of the Chinese population for their government to further assert the country's sovereign claims.

The protests, some of which were relaxed while others turned riotous, have laid out the complexity of the problem which US officials are confronted with when attempting to play the role of peacemaker within the region. Add to this the fact that many Chinese academics and officials doubt the true intentions of the American government in the Asia-Pacific, and the task is doubly hard. Recently, following joint military operations in the western Pacific by Japanese and US forces, Lu Jinghua, Assistant Research Fellow at the Center on China-America Defense Relations at the Academy of Military Science for the PLA stated that the operations showed "that America's stance on the Sino-Japanese territory dispute is changing from strategic vagueness to strategic clarity, signaling open support for Japan."

Aboard his military aircraft, Panetta told the American Forces Press Service, "Countries are searching for resources; there's going to be questions raised as to who has jurisdiction over these areas. What we don't want is any kind of provocative behavior resulting in conflict." As of yet, officials in both China and Japan have managed to remain calm amid an increasing amount of rhetoric from both sides. Nonetheless, China has been holding military drills near the disputed islands and sent six surveillance ships to the islands on September 14; a mission which, according to Xiao Huiwu, deputy head of the China Marine Surveillance agency, "achieved the goal of demonstrating China's sovereignty claim and ensured the country's maritime interests." Ultimately, the move did very little in bringing the dispute any closer to resolution.

Meanwhile, images of people holding placards in Japan and China, both denouncing one another, will do little to assuage the anger that both countries' citizens are feeling. It is within this context that Panetta's visit provides yet another opportunity for the US administration to calm the fears of those government officials in Beijing and help steer both China and Japan away from any form of possible conflict. An important aspect of the relationship which Panetta's staff is no doubt aware of is related to comments recently made by Zhao Xiaozhuo, senior colonel and deputy director of the Center on China-America Defense Relations at the Academy of Military Science for the PLA. Zhao summarized one of the major differences dictating the Sino-US relationship. "The US may believe that military trust is an outcome of frequent exchanges at different levels and establishment of people to people understanding, thus putting more emphasis on various kinds of exchanges. However, China thinks that political trust is the prerequisite of military trust, not vice versa. If there is no basic trust at the political level, how can military trust be established?" As a result of this, Zhao added that US intentions "need to be explained by Panetta to the Chinese military leadership face to face and to the Chinese people as a whole."

With this in mind, Chinese officials would probably benefit from a clarification of the 1960 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan. Under Article 5 of the treaty, "Each Party recognizes that an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional provisions and processes." Following Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's comments that the islands were included within the treaty, Shen Dingli, executive dean of the Institute of International Studies and director of the Center for American Studies at Fudan University, noted that "there is a major departure from previous US positions concerning the interpretation of the Japan-US Security Treaty, certainly for "stability" in favor of Japan and the US, which generates virtual instability of Sino-Japanese and Sino-US relations." In order to avoid this predicament, in which virtual instability becomes the norm, Ted Galen Carpenter, senior fellow at the Cato Institute, has even gone so far as saying that, "US leaders need to convey to their Japanese counterparts that, regardless of language in the US-

Japan Security Treaty, the United States will not back Japan in any armed conflict over disputed territories."

There is obviously more to lose from conflict than there is to gain for both sides. Furthermore, China would conceivably have to confront the world's largest navy should conflict break out. As a result, conflict is certainly unlikely, though as Ted Galen Carpenter of the Cato Institute has noted, "One should not underestimate the role of emotions and national pride in these disputes." China's course of image building, as identified by Robert Sutter, Professor of Practice of International Affairs at the George Washington University, has "conditioned Chinese opinion." As a result of this, the Chinese public is likely to be vociferous in calling for action in asserting claims of sovereignty on an issue whereby they are the victims; something that will be hard to deal with from a political and military perspective.