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Dealing with Japan: time for US to say no

By Doug Bandow - 12/5/2012

Faced with an increasingly bitter territorial confrontation with China, Japan wants a stronger U.S. defense guarantee. Washington should say no to war with the People's Republic of China over a worthless pile of rocks claimed by Japan.

China has been playing an increasingly assertive role throughout the Asia-Pacific area. The result has been territorial disputes throughout the region.

Beijing's relations with the Philippines and Vietnam have turned truculent. But the former's dispute with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has become especially bitter.

The territory is controlled by Japan but the PRC has been sending paramilitary and surveillance ships into the surrounding waters. War could result from mistake or miscalculation.

Washington has taken no position on the respective territorial claims, but two years ago Secretary of State Hillary Clinton indicated that the islands fell under the U.S.-Japan defense treaty. Nevertheless, many Japanese remain skeptical that Americans are prepared to go to war with Beijing to enforce Tokyo's claims. For good reason. Doing so would be madness.

Japanese Defense Minister Satoshi Morimoto has proposed updating the alliance defense guidelines to include the Senkakus. Japan wants to add another enemy for America to fight.

It wasn't supposed to be this way under the Democratic Party of Japan, which took power three years ago. Although the DPJ moderated its tone during the campaign, the party earlier had pledged to "do away with the dependent

relationship in which Japan ultimately has no alternative but to act in accordance with U.S. wishes, replacing it with a mature alliance based on independence and equality.”

But a succession of DPJ prime ministers has sought even greater U.S. defense subsidies. The DPJ also repudiated its promise to Okinawa to reduce the large American military presence there.

Although Japan possesses the world's third largest economy, it prefers not to pay for its own defense. Unfortunately, the Obama administration seems only too willing to grant Japan's request. In fact, Washington officials apparently were angry over Tokyo's decision to cancel joint military exercises which would have simulated recapture of an island.

It is well past time for Washington to act as the world's 911 call center.

Tokyo can deter China. Japan already has created a capable “Self-Defense Force.” If the Japanese government spent in accordance with its economic resources and perceived security threats, it could quickly create a military which Beijing would have no desire to confront.

Of course, history still hangs over the region. Tokyo's neighbors would prefer that Japan do little, but that should be of no account to the U.S. nearly seven decades after the end of World War II. These countries can engage in histrionics over the depredations of a long-defeated militaristic empire only because they expect salvation from America in any crisis. Forced to defend themselves, they would quickly reconsider the benefits of Japan-bashing.

Although the PRC has a large economy, it remains a poor nation. Despite its bluster, China cannot afford war with Japan, especially over such minimal stakes.

Moreover, Beijing's increasing aggressiveness should be a wake-up call for the other states in the region to overcome their differences and cooperate. Individually they are outclassed by the colossus to the north, but collectively they have the political and military wherewithal to constrain China. As long as they can rely on America, however, they need not make the effort.

Obviously Asia matters to the U.S. However, no power, including the PRC, is capable of dominating the region. Washington should remain watchful and wary, acting as an off-shore balancer, ready to act if an overwhelming, hegemonic threat eventually arises.

Even if China seeks to play that role, the threat is years, or decades, away. In the meantime, the PRC's neighbors should be responsible for their own security, and especially that of disputed territories.

Promising to go to war creates obvious danger for America. Today Japan is cautious. But if it is convinced that it can rely on the U.S. military, Tokyo may very well take a more confrontational stance with the PRC.

Moreover, Uncle Sam is effectively bankrupt, borrowing money from China to spend to defend Japan from China. This is no time to expand U.S. military commitments — to Tokyo or anyone else.

Before being corrupted by the allure of power, the DPJ wanted to end Japan's unnatural defense dependence on the U.S. The Obama administration should help Tokyo take the first step. Washington should make clear that if Japan claims the Senkaku Islands, Japan can defend the Senkaku Islands.

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