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State Dep't Clarifies After Kerry Appears to Announce Policy Shift on Japan-S. Korea Dispute

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By Patrick Goodenough

(CNSNews.com) – The United States has not changed its position on a sensitive territorial dispute between South Korea and Japan, the State Department clarified Thursday after Secretary of State John Kerry appeared to say that the U.S. considers the contested islands to fall under its mutual defense treaty obligations with South Korea.

State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf said it had been unclear which island dispute Kerry was being asked about during a joint appearance with his South Korean counterpart in Seoul.

“Nothing has changed about our policy on the Liancourt Rocks,” she said, referring to a remote outcrop of islets known as Dokdo to the South Koreans and Takeshima to the Japanese. “We don’t take a position on the sovereignty of those islands.”

Kerry’s comments raised eyebrows because, were the dispute to fall under the mutual defense treaty between Washington and Seoul, that would imply that in the event Japan ever took steps to seize control of the islands from South Korea, the U.S. could be called on to intervene in support of one treaty ally against another.

Earlier Cato Institute senior fellow Ted Galen Carpenter said it was hoped that Kerry misspoke.

“If he really meant to make such a commitment to Seoul covering Dokdo/Takeshima, Washington’s East Asia policy is becoming incoherent,” he said. “What would we do if fighting broke out between Japan and South Korea? Would we have the Marines stationed on Okinawa side with the Japanese and the Army units stationed in the ROK [South Korea] fight alongside South Korean troops? Clearly not. A defense commitment to either side regarding Dokdo/Takeshima makes no sense from the standpoint of U.S. interests.”

The mix-up appears to have arisen because the questioner also mentioned another, unrelated dispute in the region, between Japan and China in the East China Sea.

In the case of those islands, which Japan calls Senkaku and China calls Diaoyu, the U.S. has indeed repeatedly reaffirmed that the U.S.-Japan mutual defense treaty applies.

Even though the U.S. says it does not take a position on sovereignty of those islands, which are under Japanese administrative control, U.S. reaffirmation of the treaty obligations amounts to a warning to China not to consider using force to change the status quo there.

(Carpenter called into question the wisdom of a U.S. commitment to defend the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, saying that “it puts Washington in a confrontational mode with Beijing over exceedingly meager stakes.”)

The 1960 U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security states, “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.”

The equivalent clause in the 1953 U.S.-ROK treaty states, “Each Party recognizes that an armed attack in the Pacific area on either of the Parties in territories now under their respective administrative control, or hereafter recognized by one of the Parties as lawfully brought under the administrative control of the other, 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 processes.”

Unlike the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute, the Dokdo/Takeshima tussle pits two treaty allies against each other.

The islands, which are potentially lucrative due to untapped gas resources, are under South Korean administration, but Japan recently fired a new salvo in its longstanding claim by announcing it was amending school curricula to assert they belong to Japan and are illegally occupied by South Korea.

That move, coupled with a December visit by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to a controversial war shrine, revived longstanding strains in Tokyo-Seoul relations.

In Kerry’s press appearance late Thursday, a Korean reporter recalled comments by top U.S. officials affirming treaty obligations with Japan regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute, and asked Kerry whether the same situation would apply with regard to the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute and the U.S.-South Korea treaty.

Kerry replied that he agreed with the position stated by those officials on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

The reporter tried again, asking Kerry via an interpreter, “for the Dokdo Islands, do you believe that it’s part of the defense treaty between Korea and the U.S.?”

Kerry: “The – which island? I’m sorry. I can’t hear you.”

Reporter: “The Dokdo Islands. In the mutual defense treaty between Korea and the U.S., how do you view Dokdo Islands?”

Kerry: “I think we have answered that previously, and we have affirmed that it is.”

“It wasn’t clear that the questioner was asking about the Liancourt Rocks,” Harf said in Washington later. “Apparently the question also referenced the Senkaku Islands, so Secretary Kerry addressed our longstanding position on that issue. Nothing has changed about our policy on the Liancourt Rocks.”

Harf added that U.S. policies remain unchanged in the case of both disputes.

‘Between two allies’

Bruce Klingner, senior research fellow in the Asian Studies Center at the Heritage Foundation said that from the context of the transcript, “it appears Kerry thought he was merely affirming U.S. policy on the Senkakus rather than articulating a new policy position on the Dokdo/Takeshima/Liancourt Rocks issue.”

“Since the 2010 clash between a Chinese trawler and Japanese coast guard vessels, the U.S. has more publicly affirmed its position that the Senkaku Islands are indeed covered by the U.S.-Japanese defense treaty,” he said.

“I am not aware, however, of the U.S. taking a similar public position on the US-ROK defense treaty applying to the Dokdo Islands,” Klingner said. “Although the same logic would seem to apply since the ROK has administrative control of the islands, Washington has avoided taking sides in that sovereignty dispute because it is between two allies. Also, the U.S. does not assess Japan has any intention to attempt to seize the islands by force.”

In his remarks in Seoul Kerry went on to urge South Korea and Japan “to put history behind them,” and said it was critical “that we maintain robust trilateral cooperation, particularly in the face of North Korea’s nuclear threat.”

President Obama is scheduled to visit both Japan and South Korea during an Asian tour in April.