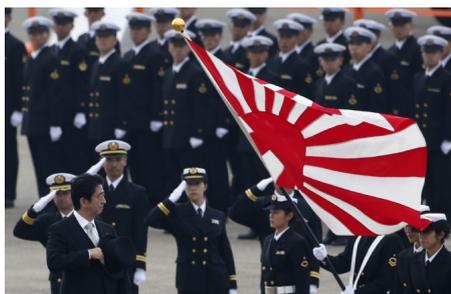


## Tangled up in the blue of the South China Sea

Written by Nguyen tien thinh  
Friday, 28 October 2016 00:00

---

On 19 August 2016, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs went public with an unusual, but outside Japan largely overlooked, statement that since 5 August, 15 Chinese government vessels, accompanying “approximately 200 to 300” fishing boats, had entered the contiguous zone and “at least 32 Chinese government vessels intruded into Japan’s territorial waters” of the disputed but Japan-controlled Diaoyu or Senkaku islets in the East China Sea.



This episode is reminiscent of an incident in April 1978 when around 100 Chinese fishing boats appeared near the islets. Yet, the recent stand-off is unprecedented because of the large number of boats and because these were accompanied by an armada of coast guard and fishery law enforcement vessels.

Apparently, Chinese leaders deemed it necessary to turn up the heat. This escalation came after Japan, despite not being a claimant, had become increasingly vocal and active in supporting the Philippines, Vietnam, and the US in their efforts to counter China’s expansion in the South China Sea.

As the Liberal Democratic Party-led government of Shinzo Abe steered Japan into the stormy waters of Southeast Asia, the East China Sea dispute between China and Japan became directly linked to the South China Sea quagmire and long-standing fears of containment among Chinese strategists appear to have come another step closer to materialisation.

In mid-August China felt it necessary to draw a ‘red line’ with Ambassador Cheng Yonghua calling on Japanese officials not to participate in Freedom Of Navigation Operations and other “joint military action with US forces that is aimed at excluding China in the South China Sea.” He

## Tangled up in the blue of the South China Sea

Written by Nguyen tien thinh  
Friday, 28 October 2016 00:00

---

even hinted at possible military action if Tokyo were to ignore the warning.

Earlier this year Abe promised Southeast Asian nations Japan's "utmost support." At the beginning of September, he agreed to provide additional patrol vessels and lend surveillance planes to the Philippines, and confirmed Japan's intention to supply additional, newly-built ones to Vietnam. In spring 2016, Japanese warships including an attack submarine and the large helicopter carrier Ise also started to make highly symbolic port calls to the Vietnamese Cam Ranh and the Philippine Subic Bay naval bases, and participated in Indonesian-led exercises.

In spite of Beijing's warning and in a reversal of her predecessor's statement a year earlier, incoming Defence Minister Tomomi Inada said during a visit to Washington in September that she "strongly supports" the US Navy's Freedom Of Navigation Operations and announced that "Japan, for its part, will increase its engagement in the South China Sea through, for example, Maritime Self-Defense Force joint training cruises with the U.S. Navy and bilateral and multilateral exercises with regional navies." That move appears to cross Beijing's red line.

The Chinese side reacted through the state-controlled media. The Global Times tabloid singled out Japan as the least prudent among regional US allies, labelled possible joint patrols "the 'gunboat policy' of the 21st Century against China", and called on the Chinese government to "resolutely begin military deployment on its expanded Nansha Islands to balance the situation". The editorial also reasoned that China would need to declare an Air-Defence Identification Zone over the South China Sea, that "Japanese naval ships should be the major target of China", and that China should further increase pressure on Japan in the East China Sea.

Together with Japan's ongoing fortification of the Okinawa island chain, including the stationing of anti-ship missile systems, this security politically-charged course may lead to the naval containment of China. Facing the Okinawa island chain as a barrier to the open seas, the South China Sea waterways are, in naval strategists' eyes, China's only other way out.

Thus, it is unlikely that a cornered Beijing will give up control over the seas at its doorstep, especially when its 'humiliated' leaders deem them ever more vital for their national security.

Perhaps, this course of action is less than rationally conceived or well-crafted. In its quest to

## Tangled up in the blue of the South China Sea

Written by Nguyen tien tinh  
Friday, 28 October 2016 00:00

---

'reclaim Japan', the Abe government may just be following the sleepwalkers from Beijing and Washington – who are equally eager to 'rejuvenate China' and to 'make America great again' – on their nightly stroll towards disaster.

.....

Read more at [Policyforum](#)

Click [here](#) for updated South China Sea news