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Chinese activities in the waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands have undergone a significant change over the past few months. This is a potentially dangerous development for Sino–Japanese relations.

Whilst international security analysts continue to focus on the troubled waters of the South China Sea, a storm is gathering in the adjacent and much less reported East China Sea. The eye of this storm is the small group of islands under Japanese administrative control known as Senkaku. The islands are claimed by China under the name Diaoyu, and by Taiwan as Diaoyutai. In July, Japan’s newly released Defence White Paper stressed that Chinese authorities are ‘relentlessly’ pressing their claims to the islands with ever-increasing levels of maritime activities seeking to change the ‘status quo’. In particular, the document sought to draw attention to the possibility of enhanced competition in international security, notably – but not exclusively – between China and the US in the aftermath of the coronavirus crisis.

What is the specific status quo that authorities in Beijing wish to change, and why does it matter to international security in the age of increasing competition? Leading Japanese security experts have argued that the increase in Chinese maritime law-enforcement vessels in the waters around the Senkaku islands is designed to empower Beijing with the possibility to claim that it has control of the area in a decade or two. A closer inspection of data on Chinese operational behaviour of the last half decade opens up a different line of interpretation. In fact, Chinese constabulary forces have been operating on the basis of an attritional strategy that is likely to enable Beijing to challenge Japan’s administrative control of the islands long before the end of this decade. Against a complex bilateral relationship in which US–China competition is unlikely to ease and the Japanese political stability unfolding from Shinzo Abe’s premiership draws towards a close, Chinese claims of control might come much sooner than expected. If so, what does this all mean for the stability of Northeast Asia?

Taken into a broader context, the recent longer forays into the territorial waters around the Senkaku islands that occurred in early July mark the beginning of the Chinese attempt at implementing administrative control. This form of attritional behaviour in the conduct of constabulary activities is part of a trend that precedes the coronavirus crisis and that it is likely to lead to more frequent contacts between the Japanese and Chinese coast guards – especially during the height of the fishing season. The dispute is entering a new and potentially more volatile phase, one in which it will become increasingly difficult for Japanese authorities to defend their position and prevent further escalation without the risk of conflict with Beijing. Still, the sooner Tokyo takes action the higher the potential to delay further destabilising changes.

Operationalisting Administrative Control: When Does It Happen?

When does a claim become a reality? Historians will find it challenging to assess whether a specific occurrence in contemporary affairs is to be deemed of sufficient significance to indicate that ‘something new has happened’. In Sino–Japanese maritime relations, one likely candidate for consideration may very well be 5 July 2020. On that day, China’s maritime activities in the waters around the Senkaku islands entered a new phase. Two Chinese coast guard vessels deployed in the area and set a new milestone. They exited the islands’ territorial waters after sailing for 39 hours and 23 minutes. This marked the longest time Chinese surface assets had ever spent inside the waters’ 12-mile limit. This was no mere ‘incursion’. It was, as Chinese official reports would have it, a fully-fledged law enforcement patrol of sovereign waters.

In the past, this type of statement could have been dismissed as political rhetoric, lacking adequate tactical action to validate it. Now, doing so would be a mistake. This deployment was not an isolated event. It followed a similarly extended foray of more than 30 hours completed just two days prior. Combined, these two activities represented the longest time Chinese vessels have spent continuously operating inside the territorial waters of the Senkakus since September 2012.

Chinese law enforcement vessels entered the area in sporadic instances in July and March 2012, August 2011, and on one brief occasion in December
2008. However, in response to the Japanese government’s purchase of three of the group’s eight islands, Chinese authorities started to deploy assets inside the territorial waters on a regular basis from 2012. The goal was to normalise the Chinese law enforcement presence and start to actively challenge the Japanese government’s position of effective administrative control. These latest deployments were not just about showing presence.

Indeed, if regular presence is one preliminary condition for proof of control, the exercise of sovereign law enforcement rights in territorial waters is a subsequent vital step to legally and politically sustain such a narrative. This is why the length of these incursions represents a potentially important novelty in Beijing’s operational behaviour. If the ‘routinisation’ of deployments distinguished the first step of China’s challenge to the status quo – a tactic otherwise known as ‘salami slicing’ – then these new extended deployments mark the beginning of a genuine exercise of control. During the second extended stay, the ships reportedly operated at some four to six miles off the islands on average, coming as close as two and a half miles from the shoreline. The ships also sought to approach Japanese fishing boats on at least one occasion – an act that is consistent with the attempt at exercising law enforcement rights – prompting the Japan Coast Guard to deploy its own assets to counter Chinese actions. Since the regular incursions started in 2012, the tactical situation has matched the Chinese narrative, explaining such operational activities as an exercise in control.

What makes this operational development potentially problematic is that it builds on a growing Chinese capacity to sustain presence in the waters around the islands in a continuous fashion. Regular, continuous, and longer deployments in the territorial waters are in fact consistent with a trend which has emerged since at least January 2020. This year Chinese vessels have in fact been spotted in waters around the islands for more than 100 continuous days. Again, this represents the longest streak since the three islands were acquired by the Japanese government in 2012. Such a continuous presence is seemingly aimed at reinforcing Beijing’s ability to project a capacity to ‘patrol’ the islands.

As the Chinese law enforcement fleet has grown larger and more capable, the length and tactical conduct of its vessels has changed too

Attempts at approaching Japanese fishing boats would suggest as much. Following a case that occurred early in May, official Chinese spokespersons pointed out that the Chinese vessels ‘tracked and monitored’ a Japanese boat illegally fishing inside the territorial waters. In the incident, Chinese vessels asked the Japanese fishing boat to leave the area and eventually ‘resolutely responded to the illegal interference of the Japanese Coast Guard’.

Such a sustained and continuous presence in the waters around the islands represented a new and recent development. This is remarkable in itself,
but it is perhaps even more so since it has happened during the coronavirus pandemic, which required considerable official attention and national resources from Beijing. Yet, measured against the pattern of deployments over a longer period of time, this development builds on already significant increases registered in 2019. While it does not fully allow a dismissal of the idea that the pandemic accelerated Chinese operational opportunism, as witnessed in other territorial disputes in the South China Sea or on the land border with India, it does not support it either.

Indeed, according to official Japanese figures, last year Chinese vessels entered the waters around the Senkakus 1,097 times, spending a total of 282 days, far exceeding previous highs of 819 incursions for over 232 days collected in 2013. Crucially, this sharp increase did not go unnoticed among the leadership in Japan’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). In December 2019, the LDP General Council chair Shunichi Suzuki specifically raised the party’s concerns about Chinese maritime activities, something that the LDP expected Shinzo Abe to consider as the government prepared for President Xi Jinping’s official visit the following spring. Eventually, Xi’s visit was postponed due to the pandemic, but party concerns over Chinese behaviour in the East China Sea have not eased.

Beyond Tactical Opportunism: A Strategy of Constabulary Attrition?

A closer examination of data from the last five years would find that growing Japanese concerns are not without foundation. Since 2015, there have been two changes in Chinese operational patterns which appear consistent with a long-term – and largely unchanged – aim of eroding Japanese administrative control. First, whilst the period from January to June 2020 witnessed a decrease in the number of vessels spotted inside the territorial waters, the average of eight vessels per month, indicative of a two-vessel deployment ‘routine’, is consistent with prior patterns of four incursions per month, as experienced on average in 2019 (with peaks of groups of four vessels per incursion). Weather conditions and fishing patterns seem to be contributing to modulate the number of vessels deployed, with the highest numbers of incursions reasonably taking place during the summer season (May to September).

Second, this year’s relative slowdown in the number of vessels spotted inside the territorial waters has occurred against a background of a stark climb in number of vessels spotted in the contiguous zone. Such an increase in activities here suggests a shift in operational focus. The numbers of vessels spotted in the contiguous zone in 2019 was much higher, and their deployments were designed to last longer and offer greater continuity. The operational pattern indicated an intent to emphasise the continuous nature of Chinese presence – with the possibility of promptly intervening inside the territorial waters, rather than just presence. Thus, taken altogether, Chinese operational behaviour has changed in a fashion that would reinforce the tactical objective of increasing the exercise of control. Higher continuity in presence in the contiguous zone allows for more prompt deployments inside the territorial waters to ‘engage’ with foreign fishing boats, as was the case in May and July.

Within this context, there are two additional considerations worth highlighting. On the one hand, Chinese maritime law enforcement agencies underwent a considerable transformation, with a partial fusion of five organisations beginning in 2013, and the additional not insignificant organisational change that led to the integration of the new Chinese Coast Guard under the command of the People’s Armed Police in 2018. These developments meant a considerable increase in the overall tonnage available to conduct patrols, with the Chinese Coast Guard now boasting more than 500,000 tonnes of aggregated tonnage, as opposed to the Japanese Coast Guard’s overall 150,000 tonnes. While the Chinese have to divide the force over three different theatres to cover the entire extended Chinese coastline, this remains a considerable fleet. This larger fleet has also been taking delivery of much improved ocean-going capabilities over the past five years, with a considerable number of them deployed in the East China Sea.

On the other hand, the relative lack of regular media attention to events in the East China Sea – especially when compared to the South China Sea – is understandable, given the overall decrease in numbers of spotted vessels between the second half of 2017 and the end of 2018. One way to explain the relative reductions during this period of time is the significance of the 40th anniversary of the 1978 Treaty of Peace and Friendship to bilateral relations. In 2018, Abe became the first Japanese prime minister to visit China in seven years, signing 52 memorandums of cooperation in a wide range of areas. In May of the same year, ahead of Abe’s visit, Tokyo and Beijing agreed to a maritime and air communication mechanism aimed at enhancing crisis prevention in the East China Sea. The mechanism, however, did not extend to the respective coast guards, leaving what today counts for the majority of frontline encounters unaddressed.

By the same token, it is difficult to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between the political acts taken by China and Japan to emphasise sovereign ownership and operational behaviour. In June, the Ishigaki municipality, in the Okinawa Prefecture, passed a bill to rename an administrative area including the Senkaku islands from ‘Tonoshio’ to ‘Tonoshiro Senkaku’. The bill was nominally aimed at avoiding confusion with a locale in downtown Ishigaki, but the timing seems to relate directly to the growing intrusiveness of Chinese activities vis-à-vis local fishermen operating around the islands. In response to this, the following day the Chinese Natural Resources Ministry revealed a list of names for 50 seabed areas which included the Senkaku islets. Whilst these actions are the latest irritants in how Beijing and Tokyo manage the dispute,
it seems fair to suggest that the broader political picture over the past two years has had a limited impact on the broader direction of operational behaviour.

In all, it is difficult to support the notion that the pandemic created the conditions for a form of tactical opportunism in how China has sought to advance its positions in regard to the Senkaku islands. Yet, what is certain is that neither coronavirus nor warmer political ties have affected a Chinese pattern of behaviour that is clearly aimed at challenging Japanese administrative control of the islands. Indeed, as the Chinese law enforcement fleet has grown larger and more capable, the length and tactical conduct of its vessels has changed too. In an attempt at exercising law enforcement rights on a continuous and regular fashion, Chinese Coast Guard vessels have opted for longer deployments in the contiguous zone to develop the capacity to intervene when Japanese fishing boats appear at the horizon. This attritional behaviour added to the already routinised patrols inside the territorial waters to produce the long-term effect of undermining Japan’s ability to exert effective administrative control.

Conclusions: The Quest for Control That Might Damage Stability

Matthew Goodman has recently summarised the Abe government’s economic approach to China as a three-pronged strategy: engage where possible; hedge when necessary; lead on regional and global rulemaking. Such a description certainly holds value in the maritime context too. Political engagement with Beijing on the management of the dispute has been complemented by tactical pushbacks on intrusions in the waters around the Senkakus, a quest for closer support from the US and a degree of renewed investment in enhancing capabilities and enhanced security coordination with the Japan Self-Defence Forces. These initiatives have also been complemented by consistent positions on the international stage on the importance of respecting the ‘rule of law’ in the management of maritime disputes, and actions in support of freedom of navigation and the maritime order in the wider Indo-Pacific region.

Yet, this strategy may not suffice anymore. In July, China stepped up its game, seeking not merely to showcase presence, but rather to exercise control and as a result directly challenge the Japanese position. The question is not whether Beijing is planning to replace Tokyo in controlling the islands – the issue is when. Challenging Japan’s effective control was not the result of a short-term tactical opportunism. It was a step in a long-term plan that has, at times, slowed down based on specific political circumstances, but that has not fundamentally changed. A combination of material factors – pertaining to organisational reforms and capability improvements – have contributed to implement a new operational practice. As the high fishing season begins, the extent to which this new pattern of behaviour will constitute a new normal is likely to be fully revealed.

One thing is certain. Chinese behaviour is heading towards a full challenge of Japanese control of the islands, establishing it as a contested notion first, with no indication that it will stop at that. This matters because it suggests that bilateral relations may literally be about to enter more troubled and choppy waters. It matters because Japanese authorities may need to soon start reviewing where the ‘red lines’ are on the Senkakus and what are the best ways to communicate them to their Chinese counterparts. It matters because Japanese authorities may need to soon start reviewing where the ‘red lines’ are on the Senkakus and what are the best ways to communicate them to their Chinese counterparts. It matters because as constabulary encounters continue to increase, mechanisms to regulate them may become an urgent requirement. It matters because as politics in Washington enters an electoral period, the substance of US support to Japan might become a matter of debate. It matters because as constabulary encounters continue to increase, mechanisms to regulate them may become an urgent requirement. It matters because as politics in Washington enters an electoral period, the substance of US support to Japan might become a matter of debate. It matters because as politics in Washington enters an electoral period, the substance of US support to Japan might become a matter of debate. It matters because if governments in Tokyo and Beijing fail to take action to manage this attritional situation, the East China Sea might end up being the place to gain prominence in the headlines, and it would not be a positive development if and when that happens.

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