

The Marines Will Not Defend the Senkakus 海兵隊は尖閣を守るつもりはない

Sato Manabu

Translated by Michiko Hase

The June 7-8 meeting between U.S. President Obama and Chinese President Xi must have disappointed Prime Minister Abe, who is intent on using the Senkaku issue to induce the United States to create a new cold war regime against China, as well as many politicians who champion a hard-line anti-Chinese stance.

The two leaders discussed at great length North Korea and cyber issues/cybersecurity and also economic issues and military-to-military relationships. Over dinner on the first night, the talk focused on North Korea, but the Senkaku issue was also brought up. In the discussion, the United States did not change its previous stance that, although the Senkaku Islands are covered by the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, the U.S. does not take a position on the sovereignty issue, calling for a solution through dialogue. The Japanese media reported that "Japanese and U.S. diplomatic sources" later revealed that Obama had warned China not to engage in threatening actions. However, the very fact that the United States invited the Chinese leader to the United States to hold a two-day summit is evidence that the U.S. is not contemplating a "new cold war" or "war over the Senkaku Islands."



A few days after the summit, on the other hand, a military exercise to "recapture a remote island," began on June 11 on San Clemente Island, off the coast of California. The Japanese media gave broad coverage to this "Dawn Blitz," amphibious training in which Japan's Self-Defense Forces [SDF] joined and which included Marine Ospreys [vertical takeoff and landing aircraft] landing on the Maritime SDF destroyer Hyuga.

Many articles reported that the U.S. military and SDF conducted a joint exercise on a remote island using the Ospreys. Such reporting must have lead many people, including Okinawans, to believe that U.S. Marines from Okinawa would be going to the Senkakus aboard the Ospreys to wage war with China.

It is improbable, though, that the Ospreys deployed at Futenma would ever go to war in the Senkakus carrying ground combat troops. The Japanese media did not mention how the

Marine Ospreys were transported to San Clemente Island during the training to retake a remote island, creating the impression that the Ospreys had been flown from Air Station Miramar in San Diego. But it should be remembered that “Dawn Blitz” is a large-scale joint drill between the Navy and the Marine Corps. The San Diego-based Navy amphibious assault ship Boxer participated in the drill and transported the Ospreys. Likewise, it would require the Sasebo-based amphibious assault ship Bonhomme Richard to transport the Ospreys from Futenma to a battlefield. It would be suicidal to fly the Ospreys, transport aircraft, without armed protection, to recapture Chinese-occupied Senkaku Islands.



This is not the impression one gets from Japanese reporting, however. I cannot help concluding that the reporting is deliberately designed to convince people that the Ospreys deployed at Futenma are going to war in the Senkakus.

It was reported that on June 12 Jeffrey Bader, a “former senior U.S. government official” who was Senior Director for East Asian Affairs on the National Security Council during the first half of President Obama’s first term, criticized the Abe administration’s handling of historical

issues. Bader was one of the key figures who shaped the Obama administration’s China policy. In 2012, he published a memoir, *Obama and China’s Rise*, in which he reflected on his role. In discussing the Senkaku issue in this book, he repeats “absurd/ity” twice in one page, asserting that “it was absurd to think that China and Japan could have an armed conflict over the rocky islets or that the United States would be drawn in” (p. 107). To the U.S. government, the idea that the United States would be dragged into an armed conflict over the Senkakus is a sheer absurdity.

Prime Minister Abe, faced with the Senkaku issue, wants Japan to attain the position of a “special U.S. ally” like Israel, Taiwan, and South Korea, an ally that the United States will defend militarily no matter what. As tributes to curry favor, he has agreed to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations, to construct a new base at Henoko, and to allow the deployment of the Ospreys, but it is crystal clear that the United States has no intention of making Japan a special ally. There is no direct relationship between the discussion [at the Obama-Xi summit] about U.S.-China military relations for the next few decades and the Senkaku issue. Although temporarily overshadowed by the “Hashimoto remarks,”¹ Prime Minister Abe’s own right-wing ideology is not a “value shared” with the United States. Prime Minister Abe has yet to recognize the position he is in: whatever tribute he may offer, he will be cut off the moment his true intentions are exposed. Comical is his illusion that as long as he keeps scoring points, his true intent will be forgiven once a U.S-China cold war regime becomes a reality.



Why will the United States not institute a new cold war? The depth of U.S.-China economic interdependence is well known. China's U.S. Treasury holdings in April this year, recovering from last year's temporary dip, stood at \$1,206 billion, \$160 billion more than second-place Japan's. China holds as many as one-eighth of all outstanding U.S. Treasury securities. Further, China's foreign exchange reserves exceed \$3 trillion, roughly three times those of Japan.

On the other hand, the United States is the biggest importer of Chinese goods, surpassing Hong Kong, China's intra-regional trading partner. The dollars China earns from its exports to the United States go back to the U.S. to cover U.S. debts; this pattern, established in the 2000s, has not been altered even by the financial crisis. In other words, for both the United States and China, a direct armed conflict could potentially be catastrophic to their respective economies.

Why, then, does the Marine Corps keep "hinting" at going to war in the Senkakus from Futenma? It's for their self-preservation. Obama has declared that the United States will no longer engage in large-scale ground combat, and the Marine Corps, along with the Army, will be targeted for large reductions. Congress has shown no sign of ending sequestration, and military budgets will continue to be cut. The

Marine Corps, the superfluous ground combat force, wants to hang onto Okinawa, its vested interest, by all means and induce the Japanese government to expend more money for them. This is why they are flying the Ospreys all over Japan, pretending to be preparing for war in the Senkakus. On top of all this, they have now started a new business of teaching amphibious landing to the Self-Defense Forces. Now, Japan must look at the facts with a cool head; otherwise, it will end up committing an enormous mistake once again.

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¹ Translator's note: In May 2012, Hashimoto Toru, the controversial mayor of Osaka and co-leader of the right-wing Japan Restoration Party, caused an uproar within Japan and [internationally](#) when he [openly defended](#) Japan's military "comfort women" system during World War II and [suggested](#) that the U.S. military in Okinawa "utilize *fuzoku* (sex-oriented businesses) that are legally available in Japan" to control the sexual energies of *mosa* [fierce warriors] like the U.S. Marines. Hashimoto's outrageous remarks had the effect of making Prime Minister Abe look less extremist by comparison, at least temporarily.