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China Assails U.S. Over Alliance With Japan and Possible F-16 Sales to Taiwan

By MARK MCDONALD

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The nomination of Senator John Kerry as the new U.S. secretary of state has been warmly received by China, but the state-run news media on the mainland has sharply attacked the passage of a new military spending bill that is awaiting President Obama's signature.

Two amendments to the \$633 billion bill have drawn particular scorn from Beijing, which has unleashed a series of scathing articles and editorials in the state-run news media.

One provision in the bill says "the United States takes no position on the ultimate sovereignty of the Senkaku islands," but endorses Japan's administration of the fiercely disputed islands.

A commentary by Xinhua, the official Chinese news agency, called the amendment "a gross violation of China's sovereign rights."

The uninhabited islets, located in the East China Sea, are known in China as the Diaoyu islands. They are claimed by China, Japan and Taiwan, all of whom have conducted provocative naval patrols around the islands.

When a Chinese military surveillance plane overflew the islands two weeks ago, Japan scrambled fighter jets in response. The next day, an editorial in Global Times, a mainland

newspaper tied to the Chinese Communist Party, said the overflight "marks the beginning of China's air surveillance" of the islands.

"The situation could easily veer into a serious military clash," the paper said, warning that "if Tokyo keeps on intercepting Chinese patrol planes, such a confrontation is bound to happen sooner or later."

Shinzo Abe, expected to be sworn in this week as the new Japanese prime minister, has suggested he might send government workers or Coast Guard personnel to occupy the islands, a move that would complete a worrisome air-land-sea trifecta.

The new military spending bill, known as the 2013 National Defense Authorization Act, was passed in both houses of Congress by wide margins.

Its amendment on the islands reaffirms Washington's commitment to a bilateral security alliance with Tokyo, and says in part, "The unilateral actions of a third party will not affect the United States acknowledgement" of Tokyo's de facto control of the islands.

"In an apparent move to bolster Japan's unwarranted claims, the document goes even further to say that the U.S.-Japan security treaty applies to the dispute, should the islands come under attack," said an editorial in Monday's editions of the state-run newspaper China Daily. "This is a blatant violation of China's sovereign rights.

"The U.S. meddling in the dispute over the Diaoyu islands is detrimental to regional peace and stability," the paper said, "as it will only embolden the increasingly rightist Japan."

The other provision of the bill that has angered China expresses congressional support for the sale of dozens of new F-16 C/D fighter jets to Taiwan. The amendment, offered by Rep. Kay Granger, a Texas Republican, refers to Taiwan as "our key strategic ally in the Pacific."

"Our support for a democratic Taiwan is consistent with our national security priorities in the region," Ms. Granger said in a statement on her official Web site. "It also demonstrates that we stand by our friends and allies no matter where the threats are from."

China opposes all arms sales to Taiwan, which it considers to be a breakaway province.

"The U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, an inalienable part of China, are the most sensitive issue standing in the way of bilateral ties," China Daily said. "Any mishandling of the issue could derail what is widely seen as the most important bilateral relationship in the world."

The Obama administration declined last year to sell 66 new F-16s to Taiwan but did approve \$5.3 billion in upgrades to the island's 20-year-old fleet of American-made combat aircraft.

Senator John Cornyn of Texas assailed that refusal, saying at the time that the "capitulation to Communist China by the Obama administration marks a sad day in American foreign policy, and it represents a slap in the face to a strong ally and longtime friend."

For China, the upgrades were insult enough, and Beijing summoned the American ambassador and military attaché to register a "strong protest" over what Xinhua called a "despicable breach of faith in international relations."

Another similar response - official outrage, an ambassadorial summons and the like - is certainly possible again if Mr. Obama signs the 2013 bill, which could be this week.

"This is a kind of ritual, and all the players know their roles," Yawei Liu, director of the China Program at the Carter Center in Atlanta, told my colleague Andrew Jacobs. "There is a script they follow and then hope things cool down so they can return to business as usual."

Xinhua said in a signed commentary by Zhi Linfei that the two new amendments, which are not binding on Mr. Obama, are "set to cause harm to China-U.S. relations at a sensitive time of political transition in both countries."

The Xinhua commentary concluded this way:

The history of the past four decades has clearly demonstrated that China and the U.S. can break the curse of zero-sum game between a sitting power and an emerging power, through building a cooperative partnership based on mutual respect and benefit.

So, it's advisable for the Obama administration to reject the two amendments and continue to honor its commitment to building a new type of inter-power relationship with China, by respecting China's vital interests, enhancing strategic mutual trust and handling differences properly.

Meanwhile, the reception for Senator Kerry's nomination has been far less contentious across Greater China.

Greg Torode, the veteran foreign affairs columnist for The South China Morning Post in Hong Kong, wrote that Mr. Kerry has "forged a reputation as an intelligent pro-engagement pragmatist."

"He backed the congressional push behind China's landmark entry into the World Trade Organization and was a key early driver in Washington's normalization of ties with its old enemy, Vietnam.

"And how he juggles Obama's priorities of boosting ties with both Beijing and a wary region at the same time will be a key early test of his skills."