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China challenges Japanese sovereignty over Okinawa

By John Chan

18 May 2013

In a move that will escalate diplomatic and military tensions in East Asia, China's state-owned *People's Daily* published an article on May 8 implicitly asserting Chinese claims over Okinawa, a Pacific island long held by Japan that houses key US military bases.

China is already involved in a tense dispute over Japan's moves to nationalise the nearby Senkaku/Diaoyu islets, which sit astride key shipping lanes and undersea energy resources.

The *People's Daily* is the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the article's two authors, Zhang Haipeng and Li Guoqiang, are scholars from the official Chinese Academy of Chinese Sciences. They referred to Okinawa as "Ryukyu"—the name of the island chain of which Okinawa is a part and Okinawa's name before it was annexed by Japan in the late 19th century—describing it as a "vassal state" of the imperial Ming and Qing dynasties in China.

Zhang and Li argued that the Allies' post-war diplomatic agreements stripped Japan of its pre-war colonies and limited its territory to the Japanese archipelago. They insisted that the return of both Okinawa and the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands to Japan by the US in 1972 violated these agreements. They wrote that the "time to reconsider the unresolved problem of the Ryukyus has finally arrived."

The Japanese government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reacted furiously. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga responded on the day of the article's publication, stating that Tokyo had "lodged a stern protest that we can by no means accept the article in question if it reflects the Chinese government's stance". He insisted it is "beyond question" that Okinawa is Japanese territory.

The Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman, Hua Chunying, rejected Japan's protests, however, claiming that the "scholars' academic articles reflect attention and research paid by China's populace and academia to the Diaoyu islands and related historical problems."

Beijing's explicit defence of these academics makes clear that their article is part of a broader campaign to assert Chinese territorial demands in the East China Sea. Hua suggested that Beijing intends to use the issue of Okinawa to pressure Tokyo over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, saying that the islets "are China's inherent territory, and have never been part of the Ryukyus or Okinawa." The Diaoyu/Senkaku islands are currently administered by Japan, through Okinawa Prefecture.

Li, one of the *People's Daily* article authors, told the media: "We're pointing out the facts, telling the Japanese government that if there are questions about the Ryukyus, then they can't even begin to talk about the Diaoyus."

The issue of breaking the Ryukyus away from Japan had only been discussed among ultra-nationalist academic circles in China. Until last week, they had not been officially endorsed.

Such ultra-right-wing views, however, are now being promoted as "mainstream" in China. The *Global Times* outlined a "three-step" action plan, that if Tokyo failed to make concessions over the Diaoyu islands, China must put up "essential efforts" to support separatist elements "who want to restore their country", the Ryukyus. It insisted that China's "patronage" over Ryukyu kingdom as a vassal state is an "indisputable fact" from the 14th to the 19th century, before the Japanese colonisation in 1879.

A hawkish Chinese general Luo Yuan publicly declared that the Ryukyus "absolutely do not belong to Japan", but rather to China.

The argument that Okinawa is part of China because it was once a vassal state of medieval Chinese emperors is a reactionary position. It will only intensify the nationalist climate in both China and Japan. It plays into the chauvinist sentiments promoted by both the Beijing and Tokyo governments, and blocks the development of a united struggle of the entire international proletariat against the rising danger of war in the region.

Significantly, Chinese claims on Okinawa based on the history of the Chinese empire were previously advanced by the right-wing Chinese nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-shek.

In the post-war period, Mao Zedong's Stalinist CCP called for a so-called "national liberation" of Ryukyus to pressure the US, which had turned the island chain into a Cold War base against China, complete with nuclear weapons. With 32 US bases housing two-thirds of the American forces in Japan, Okinawa remains the physical linchpin of the US-Japan alliance, at the heart of Washington's "pivot to Asia" that is aimed at containing China.

In 1972, the Nixon administration handed back Okinawa and the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, which were under American control, to Japanese administration. Mao, who had just re-established relations with US imperialism, decided to avoid raising the issue with Japan, as his main objective was to re-integrate China into the world imperialist order. This paved the way for the restoration of capitalism under his successor, Deng Xiaoping, after he came to power in 1978.

Beijing did not re-assert claims to the Diaoyu islands until the late 1990s, as it became more desperate for oil resources and concerned about US military encirclement in the Western Pacific.

It appears that Beijing regards Okinawa a political "soft spot" of Tokyo that it can pressure. The *People's Daily* article came just after Abe held his "sovereignty restoration day" on April 28 marking the end of the US occupation of Japan 61 year ago, following World War II. (See "Japanese government promotes 'Sovereignty Restoration Day'") Protests erupted in Japan against Abe's promotion of right-wing Japanese nationalism, with Okinawa at the forefront. The prefecture's governor Hirokazu Nakaima skipped the "sovereignty" day ceremony and local assembly members also staged protests in the Okinawan city of Ginowan, as a "day of humiliation".

Okinawa suffered huge civilian casualties during the last battles in the Pacific War, especially as the Japanese army, facing defeat, forced civilians to commit mass suicide. There is on-going mass resentment in Okinawa over the large-scale stationing of American military forces on the island under the terms of the US-Japan Security Treaty. US troops, who are not subject to Japanese law, had repeatedly angered the population by committing sexual assaults and murders against Okinawans.

By attempting to promote secessionist sentiment in Okinawa, Beijing is playing with fire. The *People's Daily* relies on arguments similar to those employed by the Western powers to support minority separatist tendencies within China, such as in Tibet. With 56 ethnic minorities spread out over vast regions, China is far more vulnerable to destabilisation and separatist agitation than Japan.

Okinawa would be at the forefront of any US-China conflict in the West Pacific. On Tuesday, the Japanese defence ministry claimed to have detected two "unidentified" foreign nuclear submarines just outside Japanese territorial waters south of Kumeijima Island in Okinawa.

Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera told reporters that he was ready to take drastic measures, including potentially launching an attack, “upon getting approval” from Prime Minister Abe, if they entered Japanese waters. The Japanese media speculated that the two submarines were Chinese, shadowing the US nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Nimitz sent to South Korea to participate in new joint military exercises.