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China's Xi Jinping's New Hard Line and the U.S.–Japan Alliance

Dean Cheng

Two recent speeches by new Chinese leader Xi Jinping have attracted attention, providing the first insights into the views of China's new leadership. One is focused on China's internal political situation; the other discusses Chinese foreign policy. In combination, they could indicate the direction of Chinese policy for the next 10 years of Xi Jinping's tenure as senior leader of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

However, what has been revealed thus far offers an instructive narrative for rising tensions in the East China Sea. The U.S. should respond in a calibrated, firm fashion in support of its Japanese allies.

Not Encouraging. When Deng Xiaoping sought to reinvigorate reform elements in the PRC in 1992—in the wake of Tiananmen and a growing body of old-line Communists intent upon reasserting

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) control over the entire economy—he conducted what has become known as the “Southern Tour.” Visiting the hotbeds of economic reform in the south of China (including Shenzhen, one of the earliest “special economic zones”), he threw his support behind continued economic liberalization and helped ensure that his policy of “Reform and Opening” would be sustained.

In December of last year, Xi Jinping visited several southern cities in what was widely touted as a “new Southern Tour.” Much of the coverage at the time suggested that Xi was walking deliberately in Deng's footsteps, signaling a revival of economic liberalization and perhaps even more political opening. But with the leaking of the content of a major speech Xi gave during his “tour,” far from promising political reform, Xi was apparently warning against it.¹

While economic reform need not be tied to political reform, the apparent message from Xi was that the CCP intended to give up none of its power—which bodes ill for the prospects of revived economic liberalization.

Tensions with Japan. Meanwhile, Xi has also given some

indications about where he stands on foreign policy. The top leadership of the CCP, the group that actually rules the PRC, is the Political Bureau (Politburo). In remarks to a Politburo study session, which have not yet been formally released but the official Chinese press has excerpted, Xi appears to have had two main points. On the one hand, as the Chinese press has emphasized, he reaffirmed commitment to the policy of “Peaceful Development,” a position first laid out by Deng Xiaoping.

At the same time, however, other parts of that speech have been highlighted by the foreign press. They have noted that he also warned that the PRC would never sacrifice any of its “core interests.”² Instead, he admonished that no foreign state should hope that “we will swallow the bitter fruit of damaging China's sovereignty, security, or development interests.” The reference to “core interests” stakes what the Chinese portray as non-negotiable territorial claims. These “core interests” include not only Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang but also at times the South China Sea and the islands at the heart of the current tensions with Japan—the Senkakus.³

In fact, the full extent of Xi's position may already be reflected in the

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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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ongoing, escalating tensions around the Senkaku Islands. These uninhabited islands, located between Taiwan and Okinawa, have become the epicenter of a growing crisis between China and Japan. While both sides had generally relied upon maritime law enforcement forces to maintain a presence, the PRC began to conduct overflights several weeks ago, to which the Japanese responded with planes from the Air Self Defense Forces. Beijing saw this as a provocation.

In the latest spiral, Chinese frigates reportedly “locked” their fire control radars onto Japanese targets in two separate incidents, once against a Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force vessel and once against a Japanese helicopter.⁴ While the Chinese have subsequently denied the charge, the situation remains fraught with danger, since it raises the possibility of accidental or inadvertent escalation. The 2001 EP-3 incident, in which a Chinese jet fighter pilot collided with a U.S. patrol aircraft, is a reminder of just how easily a situation could develop.

What the U.S. Should Do.

- **Deploy American civilian law enforcement and government ships.** The U.S. should consider deploying one or more Coast Guard cutters to the area of the Senkakus. Doing so would signal American support without
- injecting additional U.S. military forces into the area. Like the Chinese Fisheries Law Enforcement Command vessels or Japanese coast guard ships, such a civilian law enforcement vessel would express official U.S. government support while minimizing the propaganda potential of Beijing blaming the U.S. for exacerbating the situation.
- **Reinforce the American presence.** At the same time, however, the U.S. should also make clear that it is prepared to maintain escalation dominance so that, if Beijing decides to rattle sabers more loudly, the U.S. is capable of responding as necessary. To this end, Pacific Command should be considering deployment of additional assets to bases throughout Japan and not solely to Okinawa. These should include not only naval and air forces but also missile defense batteries to counter China’s ballistic missile forces.
- **Cancel Chinese participation in RIMPAC.** The decision of Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and Pacific Command to extend an invitation to the Chinese to participate in the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) was ill-advised from the beginning. After all, the RIMPAC exercises are conducted with

American allies and friends, not with states antagonistic to U.S. allies and friends. With the Chinese engaging in brinkmanship with Japan, a key U.S. ally, this provides an opportunity to clearly signal that Beijing’s behavior will have consequences.

Support for a Friend. The deployment of American assets to provide additional monitoring of the air situation in the Senkakus is one means of signaling American support for Tokyo (consistent with U.S. defense treaty commitments), but it also runs the risk of creating the basis for an incident involving U.S. and PRC forces, as the Chinese have now apparently shadowed American aircraft.

Nonetheless, having already extended such support, it would be extremely ill-advised to withdraw it (short of a Chinese move to de-escalate the situation). The only thing worse than not supporting an ally would be the perception that the U.S. was retreating from Chinese resolve. In this light, the U.S. should underscore its ongoing commitment to the region and its steadfastness as an ally while striving to stabilize the situation.

—*Dean Cheng is Research Fellow in Chinese Political and Security Affairs in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.*

1. Zhuang Chen, “The Symbolism of Xi Jinping’s Trip South,” BBC News, December 10, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-20662947> (accessed February 12, 2013); and John Kennedy, “Xi Jinping’s Opposition to Political Reforms Laid out in Leaked Internal Speech,” *South China Morning Post*, January 28, 2013, <http://www.scmp.com/comment/blogs/article/1137727/xi-jinpings-opposition-political-reforms-laid-out-leaked-internal> (accessed February 12, 2013).

2. Chris Buckley, “China Leader Affirms Policy on Disputed Islands,” *The New York Times*, January 29, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/30/world/asia/incoming-chinese-leader-will-not-to-bargain-on-disputed-territory.html?_r=2& (accessed February 12, 2013).

3. Edward Wong, “Chinese Military Seeks to Extend Its Naval Power,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/24/world/asia/24navy.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (accessed February 12, 2013); and Zhong Sheng, “China’s Will to Preserve Its Territorial Sovereignty Will Not Be Tested,” *People’s Daily*, January 17, 2012, <http://world.people.com.cn/GB/16892732.html> (accessed February 12, 2013). It is worth noting that editorials attributed to “Zhong Sheng” have often been the most bellicose and hard-line.

4. BBC News, “China Rejects Japan Radar-Lock Allegation,” February 8, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-21378035> (accessed February 12, 2013).