



Japan: A Show of Military Strength Nov 10, 2004

Summary

Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force aircraft and surface ships were sent to interdict and track a foreign submarine spotted inside Japan's territorial waters Nov. 10 in the first dispatch of Japan's navy for this purpose since a 1999 incident involving suspected North Korean spy ships. The incident reflects the growing tensions between Japan and China, and reveals more of the evolution of the Japanese self-defense forces.

Analysis

Japanese Defense Agency Director Gen. Yoshinori Ono ordered Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) aircraft and surface ships to interdict and track a suspicious submarine spotted in the early hours of Nov. 10 in Japan's territorial waters near Miyako and Ishigaki islands in Okinawa prefecture. By the time the ship was dispatched, the submarine already had left Japan's waters, but still was being tracked by a Japanese P3C maritime patrol aircraft. Japanese Defense Agency officials suspect it was a Chinese nuclear submarine.

The incident is significant for two main reasons. First, it demonstrates the continuing evolution of the role of Japan's self-defense forces. Second, it reflects the growing tensions between China and Japan. Both the timing, coming amid a war of words between Tokyo and Beijing as to whether China is a military threat to Japan, and the place, near a proposed location for more forward-deployed Japanese and U.S. military aircraft, suggest that no accidental straying across amorphous maritime lines occurred.

The submarine was spotted in the early morning by a Japanese P3C patrol, and Defense Force officials held their first meeting on the intrusion at 6:50 a.m. local time. By 8:10 a.m., a crisis management task force had been set up at the prime minister's office, and a little more than half an hour later, at 8:45 a.m., Ono ordered the dispatch of defense force assets to the area. By that time, however, the submarine already had left Japanese waters, and Tokyo tracked its movement with additional air assets. It was not until 3 p.m. that a meeting of the directors general of several Japanese agencies finally convened, long after the submarine was gone.

Although the bureaucracy failed to keep pace with the developing situation, the deployment of JMSDF assets was in itself a shift for Tokyo. In dispatching the navy, Ono invoked Article 82 of the Self-Defense Law, which allows, with approval of the prime minister, the deployment of defense force vessels to deal with a maritime security issue the coast guard is deemed incapable of effectively handling. The last time (and also the first time) the order was issued was in March 1999, during the pursuit of two suspected North Korean spy ships operating near the [Noto Peninsula](#) and Sado Island. That case also marked the first time the Japanese coast guard had fired warning shots at a suspicious vessel since 1954.

The after-action reports from the 1999 incident indicated that the lines of communication between the coast guard and the navy were inadequate, and that the time before the military was finally deployed was too long. In the Nov. 10 case, Ono chose to order the military into action without convening a National Security Council meeting or a Cabinet meeting, and instead simply sought Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's go-ahead for the dispatch. Although even this was apparently not fast enough, it certainly was a step in that direction.

Japan's self-defense forces have been undergoing significant changes since the late 1990s, focusing on inter-operability, communications with the police and coast guard, and a stronger

role in internal security. Force restructuring is under way to create a better-equipped and more advanced fighting force, capable not only of patrolling Japan's coastal waters but also of maintaining a forward-deployed capability -- protecting the vital shipping lanes from the Middle East through the Strait of Malaca and the South China Sea.

Ultimately, Tokyo is moving rapidly to abandon the pacifist constraints of its 1946 constitution and become a more "normal" nation, one both capable and willing to defend its national interests through cooperation or with military might. Although this evolution has been long in coming, the process has accelerated in recent years, on the back of the [Taepodong launch](#) and the ongoing war on terrorism.

But the evolution of Japanese defense policy does not go unnoticed in the region, and is contributing to renewed tensions between Tokyo and Beijing. China and Japan have had shaky relations since the end of World War II, as have many of Japan's former possessions from the war years. But as China's economic boom started to add additional heft to its goals of regional -- and ultimately global -- influence, power and reach, it is facing a Japan that sees in China a new regional threat, replacing the Soviet Union as the dominant challenge in the region.

On Nov. 7, Japanese media released information on a September Defense Agency report that postulates three scenarios in which China attacks Japan. The report, constructed by the committee on defense capability, is part of a broader defense review that will ultimately lead to the revision of the National Defense Program Outline. Beijing reacted strongly to the report, with Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue issuing a stinging rebuke Nov. 9. "The parties concerned should give up their Cold War mentality and work to promote peace and development in Asia, and the world as whole," Zhang said. Beijing accused Tokyo of trying to meddle in the Taiwan issue, and said such comments and actions are an affront to China's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Perhaps not coincidentally, Japanese media reported in October that U.S. Marine aircraft and Japanese F-15C aircraft could be moving from Okinawa to Shimoji, an island in Okinawa prefecture further west -- and [closer to Taiwan](#). In early November, there were reports that Tokyo was considering setting up an electromagnetic wave-detecting station on Miyako Island capable of intercepting communication signals from Chinese warships and aircraft. These same islands are where the suspected Chinese submarine was spotted.

Tokyo and Beijing have been engaged in a war of words recently, as both stake claims to disputed islands, reefs and waters. Although this bickering for control of the maritime area between the East Asian states has been going on for some time, it has intensified more recently, as both look toward a potential future confrontation and in the near term look to try to exploit resources and control shipping lanes.

The spotting of a submarine does not suggest hostilities are going to break out any time soon, but it does reiterate the often-tense state of relations between Japan and China, one the world's second largest economy, the other one of the fastest-growing and biggest destinations for foreign investment. Both are seeking new roles in the post-Cold War world, and a stronger voice in regional and international affairs. They might be headed down the road for a collision.

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