

Should Americans Die for the Senkaku Islands? Joe Biden Says Yes.

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President-elect Joe Biden says Americans might have to die for the Senkaku Islands. You know, the 51st state. Er, a distant U.S. territory. Er, a vital geographic outpost blocking invasion routes into America. Er, some uninhabited rocks claimed by both China and Japan.

Bingo!

According to the official “read-out” of the phone call between the president-elect and Japanese **Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga**:

“Biden confirmed that Article 5 of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty will be applied to the defense of Okinawa Prefecture and the Senkaku Islands. Article 5 stipulates that the U.S. is obliged to defend Japan should its territories come under attack. Former President Barack Obama was the first US leader to declare that the pact applies to the Senkakus.”

The Pentagon takes this responsibility seriously. Last month the US and Japan undertook exercise Keen Sword 21, which tested moving units among Japanese islands. **Lt. Gen. Kevin Schneider**, commander of US forces in Japan, observed that “the same capability would be used to deploy combat troops to defend the Senkaku Islands or respond to other crises and contingencies.”

Well, at least Tokyo bears an equivalent obligation to come to the defense of Guam and the Commonwealth of Marianna Islands, American territories in the western Pacific, right?

Huh, huh. You must be kidding! Until recently the Japanese Self-Defense Force didn’t even have authority to aid US personnel or vessels under attack while engaged in defending Japan. When Tokyo sent humanitarian JSDF personnel to Iraq to support the US occupation, they were primarily defended by *Australian combat troops*. Finally, five years ago the official security guidelines were changed to allow Japan’s quasi-military to act a little bit more like, well, a real military.

Explained the Carnegie Endowment’s James Schoff:

“The guidelines suggest that Japan will expand the range of support activities for the US, such as helping to protect US ships if they are attacked, more coordinated missile defense activity, and helping out with minesweeping at sea

and other actions to protect secure sea lanes. Whereas the alliance in the past was almost completely about the US helping to protect Japan, the new guidelines suggest a more balanced relationship, even if Japan still limits the situations where it can use military force. Japan will severely restrict its ability to use force, but it should be able to provide more information and logistical support to the US in a conflict than it ever could before.”

So much for helping to defend American territory. Nevertheless, at the time this change was treated as a revolutionary accomplishment.

In World War II Imperial Japan’s defeat was total and the US imposed a “peace constitution” on the occupied country, banning possession of a military. As the Cold War intensified Washington reconsidered that policy, but Tokyo enthusiastically hid behind the letter of the law to resist America’s subsequent pressure to rearm. Other states in the region, including Washington’s most important allies, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines, also opposed what they feared would be the Japanese empire redux.

Tokyo created the JSDF and treated it as distinct from a military, since the new force was allowed to do little more than shoot at invaders on Japan’s beaches, if that. Still, though Japan capped defense outlays at one percent of GDP, that was enough to create a serious and sophisticated, if limited, military capability. But it has taken years for Japanese governments to increase the JSDF’s authorized missions, while multiple proposals for constitutional reform, to formally legalize a military, have foundered.

Nevertheless, as North Korea’s and China’s military outlays and ambitions have increased, so have Tokyo’s – a little bit. Successive governments have assumed America’s continued defense commitment, while beginning to hedge by improving their own forces. President Obama and now President-elect Biden sought to calm Japanese fears by promising to sacrifice American lives to guarantee every meter of claimed Japanese territory. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo did the same, though not President Donald Trump, who has been much more skeptical of “endless wars” than the appointees with whom he surrounded himself.

Of course, Washington also is pushing Japan to do more. So are Tokyo’s old enemies, including, perhaps most surprisingly, the Philippines. The rise of China, highlighted by its growing totalitarian tendencies and international aggressiveness, has concentrated minds throughout the region. Suddenly the idea of having Japanese vessels and planes wandering East Asian doesn’t sound so bad.

However, Biden’s readiness to increase an already expansive American commitment is bad policy for several reasons. The most obvious problem is that ownership of the Senkakus, known as the Diaoyus in China, is contested. They total five islands and three reefs, all uninhabited, and lack any intrinsic value. However, sovereignty yields control over surrounding waters and resources, which in turn yields fisheries and hydrocarbons.

Tokyo controls the territory, but Beijing’s claim is serious. Japan grabbed the group as part of its victory over the decrepit Chinese Empire in 1895 (along with the Korean peninsula and island of Formosa, present day Taiwan). Tokyo views its conquest as dispositive while treating the Soviet Union’s end-of-the-war seizure of the Kuril Islands in 1945 as invalid and refuses to negotiate. The People’s Republic of China could do little in its early years to challenge Japan now has greater ambition and ability and is refusing to take no for an answer.

The US has no stake in the outcome, other than a general commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes. However, that position looks biased when Washington's client won't address the issue peacefully. Worse, America's position encourages Japanese intransigence, which in turn leaves the PRC with no choice but to use force to win recognition of its claim, let alone achieve satisfaction. Which could put the US on a collision course with a nuclear-armed power fighting much closer at home with much more at stake.

Is Tokyo worth taking such a risk? Even if so, preserving Tokyo's sovereignty matters a lot more to the US than preserving Tokyo's sovereignty over a few barren rocks. So it would make sense to restrict Washington's commitment to ensuring Japan's independence. Which, notably, Beijing has not threatened and probably has no interest in ending.

China's ambitions remain focused on regaining territory lost during what is commonly known as the Century of Humiliation, when the once great imperial power was beaten, invaded, and divided by assorted European powers, along with the US and Japan. Although this history doesn't justify today crushing the freedom of Hong Kongers and threatening to conquer Taiwan, a desire to restore control over historic territories still populated by ethnic Chinese is very different from seeking to conquer lands filled with non-Chinese.

However, even a more limited Washington commitment to Japan has two serious drawbacks. While intended to deter aggression by Beijing, it ensures American involvement if conflict erupts, irrespective of who started the fight. And encourages reckless provocations by US allies. Thus, sparring by both sides over the Senkakus/Diaoyus could lead to encounters of the dangerous kind by warships and warplanes.

For instance, U.S.-Chinese relations faced a difficult test in 2001 after an aggressive Chinese fighter pilot collided with an American EP-3 spy plane near Hainan Island, which contained sensitive Chinese military installations. The US and PRC naturally blamed the other; thankfully, the dispute was ultimately resolved diplomatically.

Last year a Chinese ship rammed and sank a Filipino fishing vessel in a confrontation over contested territory. Philippines **President Rodrigo Duterte** took a break from his anti-American posturing to demand US military action: "I'm calling now, America. I am invoking the RP-US pact, and I would like America to gather their Seventh Fleet in front of China. I'm asking them now." Lest his intentions be misunderstood, the blustering Duterte declared: "When they enter the South China Sea, I will enter. I will ride with the American who goes there first. Then I will tell the Americans, 'Okay, let's bomb everything'."

Unfortunately, instead of de-escalating, both Tokyo and Beijing appear to be digging in, making future incidents more likely. Japanese **Defense Minister Taro Kono** complained to China's ambassador about the PRC's behavior. The Chinese embassy responded with support "to build a constructive Sino-Japanese security relationship," but was unrepentant about its actions. Three score members of the ruling LDP established a study group intended to reinforce Japanese sovereignty over the islands, which is only likely to spur additional Chinese challenges.

Moreover, increased US security assurances discourage increased Japanese defense efforts. Tokyo has awoken on security issues because of increased foreign threats and, even more important, decreased certainty of the American commitment. Shoichi Yamada, a professor at Fukui Prefectural University, observed: "We have to be realistic. Right now, the Japan Self-defense Forces are not strong enough to confront the Chinese military on our own, and

it is not clear what the US is thinking at the moment.” The result has been a small hike in Japanese defense outlays and SDF responsibilities.

Belief that Washington can simultaneously promise bountiful and eternal defense subsidies and convince happy clients to do more reflects the triumph of irrational hope over long and painful experience. Why should Japanese governments combat public opinion and waste limited public resources if America promises to do the job for Tokyo?

For years Washington has sought to micro-manage Japanese efforts – convince the authorities to do more under US control while eschewing independent action, essentially treating the SDF as a tool of American, not Japanese, policy. However, that tradeoff looks increasingly dubious from Japan’s standpoint, restricting Tokyo’s ability to fashion policy that best advances its interests. This approach is even worse from a US perspective, requiring Washington to risk war over issues which are not vital against a growing power with much more at stake.

America also is increasingly ill-positioned to protect Japan. The tyranny of distance bedevils even the dominant US military: it costs far more to project power, in this case to the Asia-Pacific, than to deter someone else’s use of power. The same phenomenon makes the US homeland largely immune. Consider how difficult it would be for China to attack Hawaii, let alone the mainland.

Of course, it is not Washington’s job to tell Tokyo how much or in what way to spend on defense. Rather, US officials should decide what they are willing to do and begin rolling back American military obligations. The start for relaxing America’s obligations would be to exempt any contested territories from the so-called Mutual Defense Treaty (which imposes many obligations on the US and only one on Japan, to agree to be defended). Pulling US forces out of Okinawa, where residents host a dramatically disproportionate share of American military facilities, should be another early step. Ending the so-called “nuclear umbrella” over Japan would be a third. Over time Washington should withdraw to a back-up role, on call for only the direst situations.

It is important for Washington to give Japan due notice, thereby allowing it to adjust its defense policy accordingly. Tokyo’s military spending is around \$50 billion annually, less than a fourth China’s estimated levels. Nevertheless, Japan’s unofficial armed forces are capable. Noted the International Institute for Strategic Studies: “While the JSDF’s offensive capacity remains weak, the navy has strengths in anti-Submarine warfare and air defense.” Moreover, “an Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade was also created, tasked mainly with the defense of remote islands.”

However, Japan’s ongoing “build-up” is anemic, with outlays expected to rise by a modest 3.3 percent next year. Tokyo’s military outlays run only one percent of GDP, despite Japan’s obviously ability to do much more to enhance its defensive capabilities. That could even mean a Japanese atomic bomb at some point, something which Washington should allow but not encourage. Japan’s defense should be left up to Japan. In any case, Tokyo does not have to match the PRC, man for man and weapon for weapon. The tyranny of distance also applies to the PRC if Japan is defending against Chinese power projection.

President-elect Biden will be tempted to stage a reprise of the Obama administration, attempting to advance a slightly restrained version of traditional liberal internationalism, which rarely meets a foreign commitment it does not want to make. However, that policy is

no longer viable: the costs and risks for the US are too great, especially in a world of massive deficits and a runaway debt. And an American people tired of endless wars in the Mideast won't look favorably on potentially bigger wars elsewhere. The president-elect should begin his term by promising Americans that they won't die for the Senkaku Islands – or any other forlorn piece of East Asian real estate.

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