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**RICHARD RIGBY. Japan steps up military activity in the South China Sea.**Posted on [18/09/2016](#) by [John Menadue](#)

The announcement in Washington, in the context of last week's visit by Japanese Defence Minister Tomomi Inada, of stepped up Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force activities in the South China Sea, including exercises with the US Navy, has to be one of the more ill-judged decisions taken regarding this contested area in recent times. It will do nothing to alter China's claims or diminish its presence, but will provide oxygen to precisely those forces in China who see it being subjected to a campaign of encirclement and containment. It will further fire nationalist extremism, and not only add to existing tensions in the South China Sea, but almost inevitably lead to China escalating its activities in the East China Sea around the Diaoyu/Senkakus. (We'd better get used to not calling them islands, if we follow the logic of the Hague Tribunal concerning the nature of Taiping Island/Itu Aba. The latter clearly has more of the features necessary to be classified as an island than Diaoyu/Senkaku and yet was denied this status by the Tribunal. Still less can Japan's absurd claims regarding Okinotori-shima (*shima*-island) be given any credence.)

This unwelcome announcement comes at a time when in the aftermath of the tribunal findings, China, after initial huffing and puffing and the usual expressions of outrage in the media specially devoted to such expostulations, such as *Global Times*, has so-far (but perhaps in the light of this decision not for much longer) refrained from further escalation, and has entered into just those more constructive discussions with the Philippines and others wisely urged by the United States. This makes the announcement all the more puzzling and untimely.

That Inada, whose revisionist posture is well known and who repeatedly refused to answer questions regarding the Nanjing Massacre and other Japanese atrocities during her inaugural press briefing in early August, should be tone deaf to the impact of heightened Japanese naval activity in the sensitive South China Sea area is, unfortunately, to be expected. But that the Americans of all people should be equally cavalier in their introduction of this new element into an already dangerous mix (for which China must, let there be no doubt, bear the major responsibility at least in recent years), is of great concern. How can the reappearance of Japanese warships flaunting the Rising Sun naval ensign that symbolised half a century of aggression and depredation (they really should have changed that flag), possibly help make things better?

Australia may at some stage feel the need to act independently in its own interests, but it should avoid any involvement in this.

***Richard Rigby is Director of the ANU China Institute. He previously worked in DFAT and ONA for 33 years, including three postings in China and one long posting in Japan. He is qualified in Chinese and Japanese, and visits both countries frequently***

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