American ships, B-52s sent in for military exercises with Japan

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CAHA, OKINAWA, JAPAN An American carrier battle group and a flotilla of Japanese warships will arrive today near a vast stretch of ocean claimed by China in what is shaping up as a test of how Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the United States will stand up to the challenge.

The joint U.S.-Japan exercises in the sea are a direct challenge to China's claim. On Tuesday, the U.S. military said two Air Force B-52 bombers flew over the sea without notifying Beijing despite China's demand that it be told if anyone plans to fly military aircraft over its self-claimed "air defense zone."

The aircraft took off from Guam on Monday, part of a regular exercise, said a U.S. defense official who spoke to AFP news service on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to divulge the information.

China has been laying claim to nearly 1 million square miles of ocean known as the East China Sea, insisting that the sea's energy resources and fisheries belong to China. Much of the ocean territory it claims is hundreds of miles from its shore, including waters off the coasts of Japan, Taiwan and South Korea.

On Saturday, China went further, announcing it had designated much of the sea as an air defense zone. The zone includes the Japan-held Senkaku Islands, a string of uninhabited islets that China calls the Diaoyus. The Chinese Defense Ministry said the zone was created to "guard against potential air threats."

"China has been pushing and testing Abe since he took office and for the most part he has been passing," said Brad Glosserman, executive director of the Pacific Forum Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think tank in Honolulu.

"This is a very dumb, very risky move by China," he said. "If the People's Liberation Army tries to interfere (with the U.S.-Japan exercise), there will be real problems."

The Chinese action represents a test for Abe, a conservative party prime minister elected in 2012 who has vowed to shift Japan's deferential military posture to a muscular stance that recognizes its right to defend itself.

On Tuesday, Abe said he would not recognize the Chinese air zone over the East China Sea or any of its claims to the Senkakus.

"We take steps against any attempt to change the status quo by use of force as we are determined to defend the country's sea and airspace," Abe said.

For the United States' part, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said the Chinese action represents a "destabilizing attempt to alter the status quo" and "will not in any way change how the United States conducts military operations in the region."

To that end, the U.S. Navy arrived in force Tuesday off the coast of Japan for a complex exercise in which Japanese naval ships and U.S. fighter jets, warships and submarines will practice scenarios for a possible attack on Japan.

Sailing into the waters southeast of Okinawa on Tuesday to prepare for a long-planned exercise was the aircraft carrier USS George Washington, guided-missile cruiser USS An­rietam, guided-missile destroyers USS Curtis Wilbur, USS Lassen, USS McCampbell, USS Mustin, maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft and a Navy submarine.

China issued a protest and the U.S. government over the ex­ercises and opposition to China's claim to an air defense zone over the sea. Defense Ministry spokesman Yang Yujun said Japan's complaints about the zone is "absolutely ground­less and unacceptable," according to Japan's Kyodo news service.