

‘Don’t take sides’ in China-Japan islands conflict

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6 January 2015

EXCLUSIVE

THE majority of Australians believe the nation should remain neutral in any armed conflict - between China and Japan over the East China Sea islands and reject US requests for a military contribution to support Japan.

An online poll commissioned by the new Australia-China Relations Institute, headed by former foreign minister Bob Carr, found 71 per cent of respondents were against Australia taking sides in a conflict over the uninhabited islands known as Senkaku in Japanese and Diaoyu in Chinese. The poll, to be published today, reveals that 68 per cent said an Australian prime minister should turn a US president down if asked for a contribution.

The islands are administered by Japan but claimed by China, which 14 months ago created a new air defence identification zone that includes the islands, and seeks to require aircraft within it to comply with Beijing’s rules.

Barack Obama said in Tokyo last April that the US commitment to Japan’s security was - “absolute and ... covers all territories under Japan’s administration, including the Senkaku islands”.

“We don’t take a position on final sovereignty on the Senkakus but historically they’ve been - administered by Japan and should not be subject to change unilaterally,” the US President said.

Of the 1000 Australians over 18 surveyed by UMR Research for Mr Carr’s institute, 76 per cent said that if Australia supported Japan and the US in a conflict with China, the value of Australia’s trade with China would fall. However, just 40 per cent of the respondents were even aware of the dispute between China and Japan over the islands.

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop told The Australian it was not surprising Australians would “indicate overwhelmingly they don’t want our country involved in a hypothetical war”.

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said she did not believe that conflict would occur. If it did, it was a “broadly held view that the nations with competing territorial claims would lose much more than they would gain”.

She said Australia did not take sides on territorial issues and argued they should be resolved through peaceful negotiations. She witnessed this at work, she said, when she had lunch with Japan's Foreign Minister, Fumio Kishida, in Beijing shortly before the long-awaited meeting in November between Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and China's President Xi Jinping.

The survey followed the publication of the Australia-China Relations Institute's first major paper, on the same theme, drafted by Nick Bisley, professor of international relations at La Trobe University, and Brendan Taylor, head of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University. Mr Carr said the Taylor-Bisley paper concluded that the **ANZUS** treaty, which binds Australia, New Zealand and the US to co-operate on defence matters, was triggered not only by legal niceties, but by the tone of the relationship — “what would the Australian people want done?”.

He acknowledged there had been a lessening of the tension between China and Japan on the islands since their leaders met at the APEC summit in Beijing in November. But “there is still no agreement on the substance, or on the management of the issue”.

Lowy Institute executive director Michael Fullilove said public opinion would depend on how such a crisis developed, on the role of the US, and on the leadership provided by the government.

Narushige Michishita, director of the Security and International Studies program at Tokyo's Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, noted Australia was not obliged to defend Japan by treaty. “What we expect from Australia is moral support — to stand up against unlawful attempts to expand territories by force,” he said.

Andrew O'Neil, head of the School of Government and International Relations at Griffith University, noted the questions had been asked in an abstract way. “What if China attacks US forces operating in the East China Sea?” he said. “How about if the (Chinese navy) decides to sink a Japanese vessel as tensions escalate? It's analogous to a Taiwan Strait scenario where Australia, like the US, would be unlikely to intervene if Taipei unilaterally declared independence from China, but would almost certainly assist in the event China initiated conflict.”