

purchase was prompted in large part by Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro's offer to buy them from their owners.

The Impact of Two Crises: 2010 and 2012

The two crises between Japan and China over the islands changed the politics and the diplomacy over the Senkaku Islands. In the months following the two-week confrontation over the Chinese fishing trawler captain, conservatives strongly criticized the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) for its failure to manage the China dispute, suggesting that the Kan Naoto cabinet buckled under pressure from Beijing.

Advocates for stronger defense of Japanese sovereignty over the islands, such as Governor Ishihara, became openly critical of the DPJ government. By early 2012, Ishihara argued that the weakness of Japan's central government made it necessary for him to step in and purchase the islands to defend their sovereignty against China. This growing Senkaku nationalism also affected the LDP leadership race: all of the candidates advocated stronger island defense in preparation to challenge the DPJ in the anticipated late 2012 Lower House elections. The winner, Abe Shinzo, advocated the time had come to place government officials on the islands.

The JCG emerged as a focal point of policy contention. For much of the postwar years, the JCG had remained out of the public spotlight. Unlike Japan's postwar Self-Defense Force, the JCG had a civilian policing mission, and while

it was on the frontline of some of Japan's most pressing maritime challenges, the JCG sought to remain below the political radar. The Chinese fishing trawler incident, however, propelled the JCG into the testy parliamentary politics when one of their personnel leaked a video of the incident on YouTube.

The Senkaku Islands dispute also drove the agenda of the US-Japan alliance. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton publicly stated US security protections for the islands in the midst of the 2010 confrontation with Beijing, and subsequent US defense and foreign policy leaders continued to warn China of the need to peacefully resolve their differences with Japan over the islands. Growing tensions, and the increasing concerns over an accident or miscalculation leading to a military clash, prompted high-level US attention to the dispute. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee also stepped in to reassure Japan, while cautioning China about US intentions should there be use of force against Japan over the islands. Even President Barack Obama sought to clarify the US commitment under the security treaty to the defense of the islands when he visited Tokyo in April 2014, the first US president to comment on the treaty's Article Five protections for the uninhabited islands.

Today's Asia and Japan's Island Dispute China's rise is putting increasing pressure on maritime Asia, and Japan's territorial dispute with China in the East China Sea is one of mul-

iple island disputes in the region. Maritime boundaries as stipulated under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) are demarcated by land features, and thus these island disputes carry significant meaning for the delineation of EEZs. Japan and China not only disagree over the Senkakus' sovereignty, but also continue to disagree over how to identify their maritime boundary across the East China Sea.

The East China Sea also is home to a growing military presence. The continuing focus of China on eventually acquiring Taiwan means the sea is home to both submarine and surface fleets. In addition to the maintenance of coastal defenses, North Korean nuclear and missile proliferation has also brought greater attention to anti-ballistic missile defenses. Increasingly sophisticated air forces operate in closer proximity, as the announcement of an ADIZ by Beijing last year demonstrates.

Beijing and Tokyo continue to find direct diplomatic dialogue on their relationship difficult, although efforts on both sides continue to find a way back to a bilateral understanding on managing their differences. While a resolution of the sovereignty dispute seems unlikely, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō and President Xi Jinping will need to embed this thorny dispute within a larger framework for Japan-China relations, one that recognizes their mutual interest in a peaceful and prosperous Asia-Pacific. ■

Explaining Recent Senkaku/Diaoyu Tensions *The Domestic Dimension*

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China and Japan have an ongoing territorial dispute over a series of small islands (called Diaoyu 钓鱼 in Chinese or Senkaku 尖閣諸島 in Japanese) in the East China Sea. This brief essay begins with a cursory

synopsis of recent events (since 2012) between China and Japan regarding this conflict. I then summarize China's perspective on the dispute before offering some hypotheses regarding possible domestic drivers of Chinese foreign policy

behavior in this context. The article concludes by examining some of the strategic implications stemming from this analysis.

This most recent round of frictions can be traced to the April 2012 announcement by Tokyo's nationalist governor, Ishihara Shintaro, of his intent to purchase the islands from a private Japanese owner. China viewed this action as a provocative move toward "nationalization" of the disputed territory. Shifting the ownership of the islands from the private sector to the public realm seemed—at least in China's eyes—to be a provocative escalation of the status quo. In response, Hong Kong activists set out for the Senkakus, and on August 14, 2012, seven of them disembarked onto one of the islands. Five days later, ten Japanese activists swam ashore and raised Japanese flags on the island chain. On September 10, the Japanese national government announced that it had decided to preemptively purchase the disputed islands. According to many in China,

the Japanese offer to buy the islands was a calculated attempt to place the islands squarely in the state's possession and strengthen Japan's territorial claim. Rather than defuse the situation created by Ishihara's proposal to buy the islands, some more conspiratorially oriented perspectives in China saw Japanese Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko's decision to step in as part of an orchestrated effort to nationalize the islands.

Interestingly, on September 12, 2012, the PRC announced a significant bureaucratic reorganization of the State Oceanic Administration (SOA) and the establishment of a Maritime Security Leading Small Group, with incoming leader Xi Jinping as its head.¹ Both moves were interpreted as an effort to centralize and consolidate the multiple bureaucratic actors involved in China's territorial disputes. If China were to escalate the regional tensions, better that it be done under a centralized, deliberate leadership structure.

Beginning in mid-September, China began sending ships and airborne assets into the territorial waters and airspace around the Diaoyu Islands as part of an effort to challenge Japan's administrative control of the territories. During the ensuing twelve-month period, China would conduct a reported sixty patrols in and around the disputed waters. The Japanese Self-Defense Forces publicly reported to have observed a maritime or airspace incident on an average of once every three days between the beginning of July 2013 to September 2013.²

China's pressure on Japan also took on a populist dimension. During the second half of September 2012, some of the largest anti-Japanese protests since the 1972 normalization of diplomatic relations between China and Japan took place in cities across China. High-profile Japanese firms like Toyota and Honda were forced to temporarily close down factories and offices throughout China. The Japanese Embassy in Beijing, Japanese-made cars, and Japanese

restaurants in cities around China were all targets of vandalism and destruction. One might have assumed that once the various Chinese bureaucratic actors were consolidated and coordinated, regional tensions could be ramped down. Instead, there was a clear pattern of escalatory events that surrounded China's leadership transition.

So what drove Chinese actions during this period of heightened tensions? I suggest that China's new leadership found itself politically constrained in its ability to respond to perceived Japanese escalation. If Japan were seen to be provocative, the emerging leaders in China would have to respond assertively, if only to preempt potential hard-line challenges to their nascent authority. Because of the relatively brittle political succession process in the PRC, senior elites feel particularly insecure during periods of regime transition. Loyal subordinates have yet to be placed in key positions of authority, and the outgoing leadership's personal networks are still quite powerful. Under these conditions, internal voices advocating that China take a "tougher" response to Japan dominated more moderate positions. During China's leadership transition and before the new leadership could fully solidify and consolidate its hold on power, backing down or looking weak on issues related to China's sovereignty or territorial claims were simply too much of a domestic political liability. The effect of this incentive structure was a more assertive Chinese posture.

Although this article focuses mainly on the Chinese side of what is ultimately an interactive Sino-Japanese reprisal dynamic, readers ought to bear in mind that the explanation I am offering suggests that "it takes two to tango," and an accurate analysis should also take into consideration the Japanese side of this relationship. For a number of domestic political reasons, the Japanese side of this equation also found it politically expedient not to look weak in the face of perceived aggression from China. The resulting escalatory

pattern produced a ratcheting up of regional tensions. Nationalistic domestic political dynamics like these are dangerous because they incentivize leaders to act rationally—at least according to a narrow domestic political logic. But when the resulting foreign policy behavior interacts with the other side, the outcome is a pernicious, ratcheting spiral that tends to escalate. Such a dynamic can easily take on a life of its own, and neither side finds itself able to back down.

Recognizing that the motivations behind the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute may be more than simple populist nationalism, what should the United States do? First, Washington needs to develop a more nuanced understanding of the internal political complexities animating the regional power dynamics in East Asia. Too often, we treat other states as unitary actors. Developing such regionalist expertise at the national level will likely require a long-term educational investment, particularly in early-age foreign language instruction and cross-cultural education.

More immediately, the US may be able to more constructively engage disputing parties by highlighting the opportunity costs of elevated tensions. Under certain conditions, there may even be a constructive or more direct role for the US to play. President Barack Obama specified in a April 2014 state visit to Japan that the US-Japan Mutual Defense Treaty includes the Senkaku Islands. However, we ought to proceed down this path cautiously. ■

NOTES

1. Note that the official launch of the new administrative structure for the SOA would not take place until March 11, 2013, at the National People's Congress. The timing of the creation of this LSG may have also been linked to the June 2012 frictions with the Philippines over territorial disputes in the South China Sea.
2. As a point of fact, Japan actually administers the islands and has so far refused to even acknowledge that the islands are under dispute.

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