The Senkaku Islands Dispute between China and Japan

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When I visited Japan and Korea on a college-related business trip in November 2012, there was constant nervous talk about the Senkaku or Diaoyu Islands territorial dispute between Japan and China.¹ Both nations lay claim to this small group of islands, many of them little more than bare rock outcroppings, in the East China Sea. There is a growing wave of nationalism in both China and Japan that some fear could spark a war between East Asia's dominant powers. There have been many anti-Japanese riots in China, angry demonstrations in Tokyo, and major boycotts of Japanese goods, particularly cars, in China that have badly hurt the Japanese economy. Because of close security relations between the United States and Japan, there is a chance that the United States might somehow become involved in this conflict. It is in the interest of all parties concerned to find a peaceful resolution to the dispute before the confrontation of these powers really turns ugly.

The islands themselves have little to offer anybody and on balance have remained uninhabited through the distant past. The key economic benefit to the nation controlling them would be the right to claim the territorial waters around them. There are rich fishing grounds in the area as well as the potential for large scale oil and gas reserves in the seabed near the islands. Both China and Japan are in desperate need of large supplies of both gas and oil and control of these resources might be of great use to the victor in this dispute, but future economic benefits are only part of the story. Nationalism, a long history of hatred and

¹Japan refers to the island chain as the Senkaku Islands while China calls them the Diaoyu Islands. The Republic of China (Taiwan) refers to them as the Taioyutai. For the sake of convenience, I will refer to them as the Senkaku Islands.
²For a detailed analysis of General Grant's visit to both Japan and China, see my article, "The Mikado, Gurauto Shogun and the Rhapsody of US-Japanese Relations in Early Meiji" in Education About Asia 11.3 (Winter 2006): 39–43.
bloody warfare, and a rapidly changing balance of power in East Asia between a greatly diminished Japan and a rapidly rising China are all factors that have made the dispute over sovereignty over the islands a major issue for both countries.

There are three scenarios which provide the setting for this paper: a brief confrontation between Japanese and Chinese students in one of my classes at Mary Baldwin College in the Fall of 2012; a large public demonstration I witnessed in Shinjuku, Tokyo in the Spring of 2012; and the confrontation between Japanese and Chinese ships in the Senkaku Islands in 2010.

Mary Baldwin College each year receives a group of 20 to 25 exchange students from Japan, Korea, China and India. As a way of introducing them to the United States I offer all these students an introductory class in American history and culture during the Fall Semester. Before coming to class one day I had read in the *New York Times* of an angry riot in China over Japanese claims over a small chain of uninhabited islands known in Japan as the Senkaku Islands. I commented in class how this dispute had put a damper on Sino-Japanese relations. Immediately one of my Japanese students jumped up and said, “Those islands belong to Japan. We have every right to control them. We got them by treaty over 100 years ago.” Then a Chinese student blurted: “But no, not at all. Historically, these islands belong to China. Japan stole them in the late 1800s when China was weak, but we got them back after World War II. Japan has no right to them.” The two students were friends so there was little lasting rancor, but their reactions reflected a strong divide between their two respective countries.

Six months earlier I was visiting Tokyo with several of my American students. It was a cold clammy day in front of Odakyu Department Store in Shinjuku in central Tokyo in late April 2012. A few sound trucks were parked in the street with a group of older men together with a plethora of Japanese flags. A small crowd made up mainly of older man stood on the sidewalk to listen to the speakers rant on and on, oblivious to the light rain and cold wind. Hundreds of pedestrians passed by every minute, most of them totally ignoring the demonstration and the few men who were handing out leaflets, asking them to consider their cause.

I was curious and had no better plans that afternoon so I stopped and watched the spectacle for a while. The leaflet focused on the Senkaku Islands, a small group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea south of Okinawa and northeast of Taiwan. The Senkaku Islands consist of five small islands and three large barren rocks that jut out of the water. The pamphlet, which was adorned with the Rising Sun Flag
of Japan, stated in no uncertain terms that the Senkaku Islands are sovereign Japanese territory. It accused China of coveting the islands and castigated the “weak” Japanese government for not showing any backbone in confronting the Chinese over the problem.

The third scenario is the September 2010 confrontation between Japan and China over a Chinese fishing trawler’s provocative behavior in the Senkaku region, which demonstrated how quickly small incidents can spiral into major diplomatic and possibly military confrontations. The Japanese arrest of the Chinese captain and its crew and the seizure of the boat prompted a strong reaction in China. There were anti-Japanese riots, assaults on Japanese citizens, huge boycotts of Japanese goods, and an embargo of Chinese shipments of rare earth metals needed by Japanese industry. When the U.S. State Department then announced that the Senkaku Islands fell under the protection of the US-Japan security treaty, the crisis became a big deal not only in Beijing and Tokyo, but also in Washington.

History of the Dispute

The issues lie deep in the history of relations between Japan and China. China states that these islands have been under Chinese jurisdiction since ancient times, but Japan disputes this claim noting that nobody lived there or paid much attention to them and other nearby islands until the early Meiji period (1868–1912). Chinese claims to the island are largely based on history. I have an old European-made map from 1740 which shows the islands belonging to China and I have seen copies of old Chinese maps that include the islands as part of their frontier. Chinese acknowledge that their defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 and the subsequent Treaty of Shimonoseki ceded the islands to Japan. They further state that the treaties that ended World War II clearly state that all territories seized from China before World War II would be returned to China. The Chinese government feels that the United States is complicit with Japan in depriving the Chinese of their “rightful ownership” of the islands. The Chinese news agency Xinhua recently published a dispatch noting that Diaoyu and its affiliated islands have been considered part of China since ancient times. Chinese people were the first to discover, name and administer these islands. In June 1971, the US signed the Okinawa Reversion agreement with Japan to “return” Diaoyu and other [adjacent] Islands to Japan, privately taking China’s territory in a backroom deal between Japan and the US. China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement on Dec. 30, 1971, pointing out that this act is completely illegal.
Japanese claims are quite different, but also rely on a certain view of history. Japanese officials state that there is no evidence of any Chinese or anybody else ever living on the islands prior to the late 1800s. Thus, the islands are historically *terra nullius*. They argue that while China did acknowledge prior claims to the islands when they signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki, what in effect happened was that the Chinese had agreed to accept Japan’s assertion that nobody had controlled the islands before 1895, but that China was now recognizing Japanese control. After World War II Japan returned all territory formerly belonging to China, but since China had never actually owned the islands and because the United States had administered the islands from 1945–72 as a part of Okinawa, when the U.S. returned Okinawa to Japanese administration, the Senkaku Islands from their point of view also returned to Japanese control.

A rapidly modernizing Japan laid claim to the nearby Ryukyu Islands (now Okinawa Prefecture) in the late 1870s. These islands were of strategic importance to both Japan and China. Throughout recorded history the Ryukyus had been an independent kingdom that paid tribute to both Japan and China. Japan decided that it wanted to control the Ryukyus and said that it was willing to go to war with a rapidly declining Chinese empire to get them. When former American President and Civil War hero Ulysses S. Grant passed through China on his way to Japan in 1879 on the final leg of his famous worldwide tour, both Japan and China asked Grant to negotiate with the other party on their behalf.²

Grant played the role of “honest broker.” Although his three-month stay in Japan was much longer than his sojourn through China, he refused to take sides. He successfully urged both sides to negotiate the issue, reminding them that a full-scale Sino-Japanese War at that point would only serve to weaken both countries to the extent that the Western powers could take advantage of their weakness. Sadly for both Japan and the Ryukyus, the negotiations failed and shortly thereafter Japan simply walked in and seized the islands.

When Japan defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, the peace treaty specified that Japan would gain control of Taiwan and all of its contiguous islands including the Senkakus. Japan did little with these islands between its initial conquest of China and the end of World War II when it was forced to return Taiwan to China. The various treaties that ended the Allied occupation of Japan in 1951 clearly specified that all provisions of prewar treaties including the 1895
agreement were null and void, but the fate of the Senkakus, probably because of their lack of habitation, remained unclear. The United States saw the Senkakus as part of the Ryukyu Islands in the wake of the 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty with Japan and today states that the islands are under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Japan Security Treaty system, thus offering Tokyo at least its tacit support in the dispute.

**Japan’s Maritime Boundaries in the East China Sea Region**

Neither China nor Japan agreed to fixed territorial boundaries after World War II in the East China Sea region. During the immediate postwar period the area was primarily important for fishing, and trawlers from both countries and Taiwan largely left each other alone. A United Nations survey of the seabed in the late 1960s, however, determined that a large deposit of hydrocarbon resources probably existed on or near the continental shelf that stretches off the China coast, obliging the region’s nations to step up their territorial claims.

China’s claims were the most ambitious. The width of the East China Sea is only 360 nautical miles which creates a problem for both China and Japan since the UN suggests that nations can claim an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) that extends 200 miles off shore. Thus, whoever controls the Senkakus could claim economic and political sovereignty over a huge area of the East China Sea. China, however, argues that the natural extension of its continental shelf, which runs right up to the Okinawa trough, should be used to determine each state’s EEZ. This proposal is clearly unacceptable to Japan because it would bring Chinese territorial waters in propinquity with Okinawa (Smith 2012, 387).

**The Islands and National Security**

Both China and Japan see control of the islands as vital to their national security. Since the 1980s China has greatly expanded its naval fleet and is becoming a major maritime power in East Asia. Outgoing President Hu Jintao told the 18th Communist Party Congress on 8 November 2012 that “We [China] should enhance our capacity for exploiting maritime resources, resolutely safeguard China’s maritime rights and interests, and build China into a maritime power,” adding that it is essential for China to “build a strong national defense and powerful armed forces that are commensurate with China’s international standing” (Hu 2012).

China’s naval build up and its supposed goal of building a submarine base in the Senkaku region greatly concerns Tokyo. Frequent Chinese surveying activities in the East China Sea in areas in
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or near what Japan claims to be its territorial waters and in what Japan calls its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) further rankle the Japanese. The Japanese are further concerned that the Chinese recently have expanded their defenses and defense perimeter farther from the coast and are approaching areas that are sensitive to Japanese national security. The United States shares Japan’s concerns about the challenges posed by the growing reach of Chinese maritime and air capabilities extending into the East and South China Seas (Smith 2012, 373).

Japan, however, in recent years has also significantly strengthened its navy. According to naval expert James Hardy,

Under the division of labor worked out between the two navies, the U.S. Navy supplied the offensive firepower, manifest in aircraft carriers and other high-end implements of war. The defensive-minded JMSDF [Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force] acted as a gapfiller, making itself proficient at niche missions like minesweeping, anti-submarine warfare, and offensive submarine warfare.” However, in more recent days Japanese Admiral Katsutoshi Kawano indicates that Japan is going well beyond this to expand its own naval capacity. He highlighted “Japan’s role in recent international minesweeping drills and new procurements such as a 5,000-ton anti-submarine warfare (ASW) destroyer; two Kawasaki P-1 maritime patrol aircraft (MPAs) to replace ageing P-3C Orions; and modernization of the service’s Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems. (Hardy 2013)

The Senkaku crisis has forced Japan to seek both to strengthen and revise its security pact with the United States. In 2010 American Secretary of State Hilary Clinton reiterated that the disputed islands fell under the US-Japan security alliance thus requiring the U.S. military to come to Japan’s aid during a possible clash there. However, some Japanese officials have questioned whether the United States would actually risk a war with China over what are on the surface little more than barren rocks surrounded by shark-infested waters. Japanese leaders want the United States to take a further step and openly support Japan’s claim to the islands (Packler 2012b). It is unclear however, whether the United States is willing to take this step at this time. Nevertheless, the U.S. commitment to defend the Senkakus with Japan means that any further escalation of the crisis would have profound implications for all three nations.

Japan’s conservative Liberal Democratic government announced on 8 January 2013 that it would increase the nation’s defense budget by more than 100 billion yen ($1.15 billion) and that its defense ministry
had begun to explore a series of five war scenarios, three of which involved its Self-Defense Forces squaring off against the People's Liberation Army. These three all involved a potential crisis in the East China Sea where an aggressive China might seize the Senkaku Islands by force or where China might launch an invasion of Taiwan which might involve simultaneous attacks on Japanese forces in Okinawa (Cole 2013).

**Historical Memory of Japanese War Crimes in China and Conflicting Nationalisms**

Relations between China and Japan remain tense today almost seven decades since the end of World War II. Japan's intense invasion of China that destroyed the land and killed many millions of Chinese has left deep resentment between the two nations. It is possible for former enemies to reconcile their differences and to construct new relationships if the guilty parties acknowledge their sins and take measures to right old wrongs. Germany, in a spirit of sincere contrition and cooperation in building a new united Europe since World War II, has built strong ties with its former enemies. Japan, on the other hand, has never fully acknowledged its responsibility for the terrible destruction of life it caused in World War II. There have been some half-hearted apologies by the Emperor and several prime ministers, but they have never fully convinced their neighbors, especially China and Korea, of their sincerity. Shared national memories and enmity remain deeply embedded in the psyche of many Japanese and Chinese. One can find ample evidence of this phenomenon in two of the major museums dedicated to World War II, one in Tokyo and the other by the remains of Marco Polo Bridge on the outskirts of Beijing.

When one visits Yasukuni Shrine in the Kudanshita area of downtown Tokyo, as I did most recently in May 2012, one gets a very slanted view of the War. The theme of the museum next to the shrine is that the Japanese were the “good guys” and that the Allied Powers were the “bad guys.” We are told that Japan’s unselfish goal was the liberation of Asia from Western imperialists. Japanese soldiers fought hard for this liberation and Japan lost the war and suffered horribly the agony of defeat. But, ultimately, Japan was the victor because its war goals were achieved—the Western powers made a futile attempt to recover their colonies and their influence in Asia, but the Japanese victories in the early stages of the war had unleashed the forces of nationalism in all these Asian countries which ultimately led to their liberation. There were no displays or mention of the Nanjing Massacre or any other massacre in China and a prominently displayed book that I
purchased in the museum bookstore went to great lengths to deny that the Nanjing Massacre had never occurred. Apparently, all of the pictures that Chiang used in her book, *The Rape of Nanjing*, were fakes, as were those in other works by other authors, doctored as Allied propaganda to humiliate the Japanese. Despite such Japanese denials, there is plenty of firm evidence to show that the massacre happened just as it was reported. A colorful film running continuously in the museum’s theatre, “Lest We Forget,” is a tribute to Japan’s WWII heroes who died liberating Asia from the West.

In mid-July 2006, I visited the Museum for the War of Resistance Against Japan in Beijing. Located next to the Marco Polo Bridge, it is a very modern structure full of exhibits commemorating China’s historic resistance to the Japanese invaders. One sees many exhibits of Japanese forces cheering “Banzai” as they shoot Chinese civilians while other photos show piles and piles of corpses of Chinese soldiers and civilians murdered by the Japanese. The terrible destruction of the Nanjing Massacre is shown graphically in a whole range of pictures that show heroic efforts of the Chinese people to fight against the Japanese aggressors. The real heroes, of course, are the Chinese Communists led by Mao, although there are pictures of Nationalist troops and Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek, who also fought the Japanese. Interestingly, there are statues and memorials to certain other foreigners who fought the Japanese on behalf of the Chinese including American general Claire Chennault, who greets you as you walk through the front door.

Conversations that I had with numerous Chinese intellectuals while on a summer Fulbright in 2006 convince me that many Chinese, few if any of whom actually experienced the Japanese invasion, continue to bear varying degrees of hostility towards Japan. These feelings were especially evident in 2005 when there was a wave of demonstrations across China fueled by the Senkaku Islands dispute, the visit of then-Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to Yasukuni Shrine, and a Japanese-government sanctioned textbook which barely mentioned Japanese war atrocities in China. Professor Odd Arne Westad correctly noted that

Japan’s sins of omission in dealing fully with its past hinder its present foreign policy, but they pale in comparison with China’s historical sense of entitlement to regional hegemony and its virulent new form of state-sanctioned anti-Japanese nationalism. Sadly, these chauvinist attitudes are unlikely to change under the new Communist leadership installed in November.
Even China’s diplomatic language emphasizes toeing the party’s line on history rather than discerning present-day interests, and it assumes that only one position in international affairs — usually China’s — can be correct. (Westad 2013)

Chinese antipathy towards Japan is mirrored by growing hard feelings among many Japanese concerning China. A 2005 poll reported by Reuters showed that just over seventy percent of Japanese have negative feelings about and are distrustful of China (Reuters 2005). Furthermore, there is a perceptible rise of nationalism among many Japanese concerned over their country’s increasingly weak economy and fading global status. There is mounting anxiety in Japan over China’s growing assertiveness in East Asian affairs and its gradual but very real evolution as the leading power in the region, a position long held by Japan. The recent election victory of Japan’s Liberal Democratic Party and its leader Abe Shinzo is a possible indication of voters’ increased sense of nationalism.

The Senkaku Islands have become a flashpoint where both nations are attempting to vent their nationalist frustrations. Despite strong economic ties between Beijing and Tokyo, political relations have become even tenser since 2010 when Japan detained the captain of a Chinese trawler that had collided with two Japanese boats patrolling the islands. This incident intensified when Ishihara Shintaro, the conservative and rigidly nationalistic governor of Tokyo, suggested that Tokyo should buy the islands from their current Japanese proprietor. This suggestion prompted strong protests from China and the occupation of the islands by a group of Hong Kong Chinese activists who were quickly arrested by Japanese and returned to China.

Nationalist groups such as the ones I encountered in Shinjuku are taking advantage of the current weakness of the Japanese government to compel Japanese leaders to take a more assertive stance towards China. Most Japanese seem to be very reluctant to even contemplate a military confrontation with China, but at the same time there is this rising sense of nationalism and frustration in Japan. As noted at the start of this paper, when I suggested to a group of East Asian students at my college that Japanese claims to the Senkaku Islands were rather bogus, the Japanese students shouted that the “Senkakus are Japanese” and that they were not willing to compromise their feelings on this point.

Conservative Japanese nationalists such as former Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro have improved their public standing in recent years. They have decried what they call the weak-kneed policies of Japan’s mainstream parties towards China and have been advocating a stronger Japanese position in defending its position in the Senkakus. Not long ago these conservatives were small vocal minorities, but Japan’s
economic decline has caused growing unrest among many Japanese and the question of Japanese sovereignty over the Senkakus is increasingly drawing more mainstream attention and support in Japan.

The rising sense of nationalism coupled with Japan’s continued economic stagnation has resulted in a shift of Japanese political opinion to the right. When Ishihara resigned as Tokyo governor in October 2012, soon thereafter merging his small Sunrise Party with Osaka governor Hashimoto Toru’s Japan Restoration Party, he vowed to change the war-renouncing clause (Article 9) of the constitution and to take a far tougher stand against China. He has suggested that Japan should develop its own nuclear weapons and goes so far as to deny that the Nanjing Incident ever occurred—words that are sure to inflame Chinese protest.

While it is unclear whether many Japanese will accept Ishihara’s harsh rhetoric, it is clear that the defense of the islands is indeed spurring greater Japanese nationalist sentiment. During my recent visit to Japan, I asked over twenty-five Japanese acquaintances, most of them middle-aged well-educated men and women, who had sovereign rights over the Senkakus. They all appeared a bit agitated when I broached the topic and they all asserted Japan’s claims to the islands. One of them, a moderate 60-year-old businessman, stated: “The Senkakus are Japanese. The Chinese have never been to the islands and we took them by treaty in 1895. Even though we lost World War II, both the U.S. and Japan asserted Japanese sovereignty over these and neighboring islands. The islands are vital to Japan’s economic and political security.” Interestingly, all my interviewees were reluctant for Japan to go to war with China over the islands, but they felt that a diplomatic settlement would come out in Japan’s favor if the United States stood by its commitment to defend Japan.

Despite this apparent reluctance, Japan is taking steps to upgrade its naval forces and to hold joint military exercises with other Pacific region countries. New York Times reporter Martin Fackler writes,

Taken together those steps, while modest, represent a significant shift for Japan, which had resisted repeated calls from the United States to become a true regional power for fear that doing so would move it too far from its postwar pacifism. The country’s quiet resolve to edge past that reluctance and become more of a player comes as the United States and China are staking their own claims to power in Asia, and as jitters over China’s ambitions appear to be softening bitterness toward Japan among some Southeast Asian countries trampled last century in its quest for colonial domination. (Fackler 2012a)
Another interested party here, of course is Taiwan. Last spring when a delegation of professors and officials from our sister university in Taiwan visited our college, I asked them about these islands. They all smiled quietly and said with confidence. “You know we are Taiwanese. We are Chinese by ethnic origin, but our families have been here longer than there have been English in Virginia. Those islands in fact belong to Taiwan!”

Further Dimensions of this Dispute

The Senkaku Island dispute can and should be settled if both Japan and China agree to work together to exploit the fishing and natural resources in and around the islands. Calmer heads probably will prevail here, but a bigger question is whether a broader rapprochement between China and Japan can be found to calm the tensions exposed by the Senkaku dispute. The balance of the problem lies with the Japanese and the way that they have treated their neighbors since the early Meiji era. Japan during Meiji had a fundamental choice: to join the West in the exploitation of Asia or to help other Asians counter Western imperialism. Tokyo chose the Western option which in turn led to its seizure of Korea, wars in China, and its attempts to dominate Southeast Asia during World War II. Japan again focused its attention on the West after World War II while at the same time failing to make amends with its neighbors for past aggression.

Japan must come to terms with the new political and economic reality of a powerful China. Japan needs good relationships with its neighbors and to show greater contrition for past actions if it is to stop its economic slide. This seemed a real possibility when Hatoyama Yukio became prime minister in 2009. Hatoyama made it clear that Japan needs to drastically improve its relationships with China, Korea, and other Asian states even if that means some distancing from the United States. Unfortunately, Hatoyama proved to be an inept leader and his premiership only lasted for about eight months. Hatoyama has been succeeded by a long list of equally weak and incompetent leaders whose governments have seemed unable or unwilling to counter the demands and appeals of the fervent nationalists who want to reclaim the Senkakus for Japan, even at the expense of good relations with Beijing. Both China and Japan have more to gain from cooperation than conflict. Harping on each other’s past sins will do neither any good. If China and Japan wish to remain predominant powers in the region, they must cooperate with each other. As General Grant noted over a century ago,
both China and Japan would be losers in a conflict over islands in the East China Sea.

References

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