



The Japan-China Feud in the East China Sea A Better Scheme for Status-Quo Management?

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Power Shift and the Crumbling of the Status Quo

In retrospect, the year 2010 should be remembered as the historical turning point of relations between Japan and China. This turning point has made long-standing management of the bilateral status quo increasingly obsolete. In 2010, China surpassed Japan's nominal GDP and became the world's second-largest economy. The shift of relative-power superiority from Japan to China would for the first time since the early twentieth century create a bilateral relationship where China's GDP and military expenditure are constantly larger than those of Japan, and this gap is rapidly widening. As Japanese anxiety grows about China's military modernization, the Chinese leadership's strategic intentions, and the potential for tensions to escalate, these concerns have in turn fueled a bitter domestic debate in Japan about its national security strategy. China's ascendancy and growing assertiveness, as well as Japan's fear of the rapid power shift, have caused bilateral norms and understandings generated in the 1970s to begin crumbling.

Coincidentally, since 2010, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy and maritime authorities have visibly increased their activities in the East China Sea. Most symbolically, in April 2010 a flotilla of ten PLA Navy vessels transited the Miyako Strait in the

southwest island chain and conducted antisubmarine exercises in the western Pacific. Then in September of that same year, a Chinese fishing boat collided with Japanese coast guard vessels off the Senkaku Islands, which caused a ten-day diplomatic standoff between Tokyo and Beijing over the detention of the Chinese captain. Since this incident, Japan's growing sense of vulnerability about these remote islands has provoked a domestic upsurge of support for securing the country's territorial sovereignty.

Two years after the fishing boat collision off the Senkaku Islands, the Yoshihiko Noda administration "nationalized" three out of five islands on September 11, 2012. Then foreign minister Koichiro Genba insisted that the objective was to minimize any adverse impacts on the Japan-China relationship, by preventing nationalist Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara from

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buying and developing facilities on the islands.¹ For the purpose of maintaining the calm and stable management of the Senkaku Islands, in Genba's words, purchasing the islands was the "only viable and best option available to protect bilateral relations."

It is worth noting that behind the scenes officials from the both the Japanese and Chinese governments have tried to minimize the potential escalation of tensions. In August 2012, for example, Japanese officials held a series of intensive exchanges with their Chinese counterparts and seemed to believe that they had gained the understanding of the Chinese government, in line with Genba's logic for purchasing the Senkaku Islands.² The Jiji Press even reported that the Chinese government would reluctantly tolerate Japan's decision on the condition that Japan would pledge commitment to the "three no's," including that there be no landing, no investigating, and no constructing on and around the Senkaku Islands.³

However, this new *modus operandi* was conspicuously denied by the Chinese government. At their tête-à-tête talk during the Vladivostok APEC meeting in September 2012, President Hu Jintao decisively told Prime Minister Noda that "any attempt to buy the islands by Japan will be viewed as illegal and invalid." In spite of receiving a strong message of denial, Noda decided to purchase the islands a day after the bilateral exchange. He repeatedly emphasized that the nationalization was carried out "from the standpoint of continuing to maintain and manage the Senkaku Islands peacefully and stably." However, whereas Japan claimed that it had only consolidated the long-standing status of sovereignty, China interpreted this decision as a major violation of the status quo.⁴

Laying the Foundation to Resume a Japan-China Dialogue

Since September 2012, relations between Japan and China over the East China Sea have seen few signals of compromise. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has long advocated for improvement of "mutually beneficial relations based on common strategic interests" with China. Ten months into his administration, however, Tokyo and Beijing have failed to generate political conditions for a bilateral summit. As a condition for holding talks, China reportedly demanded that Tokyo acknowledge that a territorial dispute exists and agree on a no-entry zone around the Senkaku Islands of twelve nautical miles.⁵ However, these demands have no chance of being accepted by the Japanese government, which claims that the islands are legally and historically part of Japan.

Meanwhile, tensions in the East China Sea intensify almost daily. Japan's latest defense white paper (2013) expresses deep concerns over the increased level of activities by China's maritime law-enforcement authorities, which involve frequent intrusions into territorial water off the Senkaku Islands. PLA vessels and aircraft are also conducting what appear to be training exercises but often penetrate Japan's air-defense identification zone. Such

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¹ Koichiro Genba, "Japan-China Relations at a Crossroads," November 21, 2013, *International Herald Tribune*, November 21, 2012, http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/annai/honsho/gaisho/gemba/pdfs/iht_121121_en.pdf.

² Tsuyoshi Sunohara, *Antou: Senkaku Kokuyu ka* [A Secret Feud: Nationalization of Senkaku] (Shincho Sha, 2013).

³ Jiji Press, August 28, 2012.

⁴ However, it should be noted that it was China that first altered the status quo in 1992 through its adoption of the Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone, under which Beijing claimed that the Senkaku Islands, known as the Diaoyu Islands in Chinese, were part of Chinese territory.

⁵ "China Set Summit Precondition for Japan: Declare No-Entry Zone around Senkakus," *Kyodo News*, June 22, 2013.

brinkmanship became especially worrisome in January 2013 when a PLA Navy vessel activated its missile-guidance system and locked on a Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force vessel with its fire-control radar system. This was a watershed moment in the bilateral standoff at sea by heightening tension not only between the Japanese coast guard and Chinese maritime law-enforcement agencies but also among navies. Yet while the magnitude of the escalation and the possible damage caused by miscalculation are significantly increasing, there are few existing mechanisms for Tokyo and Beijing to manage maritime risk.

Thus, it is crucial for both governments to immediately cultivate tools for crisis management in the East China Sea. Establishing a reliable maritime communication mechanism between counterpart agencies, understanding the other side's interception procedures at sea, and securing a streamlined command structure at the tactical level are key goals that Tokyo and Beijing need to concretely address.

Establishment of new communication channels among key political leaders is also an urgent task. Traditional personal connections among leaders and party-to-party relations almost disappeared mainly due to generational change, and Japan hands in China and China hands in Japan are both losing their influence on foreign policy. The fishing boat collision in 2010 and the disputes over the nationalization of the Senkaku Islands in 2012 showcased the breakdown of strategic communication between the two capitals. Japan and China both need political leaders and bureaucrats who have vast experience in bilateral relations. At the same time, it is necessary to cultivate a new generation of "Japan-China hands" consisting of key stakeholders

from both governments who reflect the shifting realities of each country's domestic politics.

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How can Tokyo and Beijing resume bilateral, top-level communication at this stage? As Prime Minister Abe mentioned, neither side should begin by setting unrealistic preconditions for holding a meeting. As noted earlier, the Chinese demand to "shelve" the issue of sovereignty over the islands and return to the model of the 1970s does not provide a practical solution. Japan's position firmly remains that there was no formal bilateral agreement over "shelving" during past negotiations in the 1970s. Thus, any proposal to change the status of Japan's sovereignty is unacceptable. Even if both sides were to agree to shelve the issue, there would still be no assurance that China would stop challenging the status of Japan's

valid control of the islands by scaling down maritime activities off the Senkaku Islands.

Instead, Japan and China need to seek an innovative, pragmatic, and mutually acceptable solution. While Tokyo would reject any negotiation with Beijing over the sovereignty of the islands, it could acknowledge that China's claims do exist and that the stability of the area surrounding the Senkaku Islands is both countries' mutual concern. Based on this acknowledgement, both capitals would be able to reach a *modus vivendi* not to escalate tensions in the East China Sea. Both sides could also take steps to build confidence that their maritime activities, including fishing, investigative and surveillance operations, and military training, will not intentionally provoke the other side. Specifically, the scaling down of China's activities in waters surrounding the islands is indispensable for mitigating Japan's mounting concerns. This will ensure Japan's calm and stable approach toward the Senkakus, without a need for Tokyo to take additional measures to assert its valid control. This *quid pro quo* on mutual

restraint should be the guiding principle to manage the feud in the East China Sea.

Finally, Japan and China should work to foster mutual understanding on their maritime security policies. Japan's adoption of a "dynamic defense" concept in the National Defense Program Guideline was intended to enhance the Self-Defense Forces' operational capability to deal with a so-called gray-zone conflict, which emphasized continuous and seamless intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations, especially in the southwest of Japan. Such a dynamic defense posture will contribute to a stable escalation-management mechanism in the East China Sea. At the same time, China's reorganization of maritime law-enforcement authorities and their integration into the Coast Guard will also streamline the command at sea and provide a more credible condition for bilateral risk management. It will be highly important for both countries to capitalize on these opportunities for rebuilding the scheme for status-quo management.

The most significant questions will be whether the escalation of tensions between the two countries can be held in check and whether a crisis-management mechanism can be implemented.

The reality of deep economic interdependence between Japan and China is often overshadowed by nationalistic sentiments over political disputes. Overcoming this strategic mismatch is both countries' urgent task. The most significant questions will be whether the escalation of tensions between the two countries can be held in check and whether a crisis-management mechanism can be implemented. The management of the feud in the East China Sea is an important test case for how bilateral relations will develop into the next decade. ∞

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