



MORE SIGNIFICANCE THAN VALUE: EXPLAINING DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SINO-JAPANESE CONTEST OVER THE SENKAKU/ DIAOYU ISLANDS

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The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are presently the focus of a dangerous contest between the People's Republic of China and Japan, one that even now has the potential to spark a military conflict that could draw in the United States. How has this come about? Whether seen from a strategic, economic, or historical perspective, the value of the islands does not appear to merit the risks of such a contest. Consequently, what has driven the escalation is not anything particular to the islands themselves, but rather the increasing symbolic stakes attached to them, their role within the domestic politics of both sides, and the measures each side has taken to shore up its respective claims.

At 00:50 on June 9, 2016, in the East China Sea, a frigate belonging to the Chinese navy¹ entered the contiguous zone surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands on a course toward the islands' territorial waters.² While ships belonging to various Chinese agencies had entered both the contiguous zone and the territorial waters around the islands in the past, this was a first for a Chinese naval vessel. A Japanese Self Defense Forces destroyer following the vessel's movements hailed it, advising it to change course — to no avail. Meanwhile, in Tokyo, a team assembled inside the crisis management center of the prime minister's office to monitor the situation. In the early hours of the morning, the Chinese ambassador was summoned to the Japanese Foreign Ministry, where Vice Minister Saiki Akitaka met him with a demand for the vessel's immediate withdrawal. While declining to formally accept this demand,

the ambassador conveyed that escalation was undesirable and that he would report back to Beijing. The Chinese naval vessel subsequently exited the contiguous zone at 03:10.³

Unlike previous “white-on-white” engagements — a label denoting the color of the ships' hulls — between the Japanese Coast Guard and non-military Chinese vessels, this incident held the potential of becoming a dangerous “gray-on-gray” military showdown. Had the Chinese naval ship entered the islands' territorial waters, it is highly conceivable that the Japanese government would have authorized the Japanese Self Defense Forces to employ force. Saiki would later reflect that there was real concern at the time that the situation would escalate into a serious confrontation between the Chinese and the Japanese forces.⁴ The tensions of that night reflect the stakes involved: Intentionally or unintentionally, actions by either side could

1 For the purposes of this piece, uses of the term “China” post-1949 shall refer to the People's Republic of China.

2 The Japanese name for the islands is “*Senkakushotō*,” while the People's Republic of China uses “*Diaoyudao*”; for the purposes of neutrality, this piece uses “Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.” A “contiguous zone,” as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, consists of the waters extending not more than 24 nautical miles “from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured” in which states may “exercise the control necessary to (a) prevent infringement of its customs, fiscal, immigration or sanitary laws and regulations within its territory or territorial sea; [and] (b) punish infringement of the above laws and regulations committed within its territory or territorial sea.” See: *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*, accessed on July 9, 2019, https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf.

3 This account is reconstructed from contemporary reporting and interviews with anonymous Japanese officials. For Japanese news reports, see: “Senkaku ni gunkan, mimei no kinpaku,” [Chinese warship near Senkaku, early morning tension], *Asahi Shimbun*, June 9, 2016, Morning Edition, 2; “Senkaku setsuzoku suiiki ni Chūgoku gunkan,” [Chinese warship in Senkaku contiguous zone], *Yomiuri Shimbun*, June 9, 2016, 1; “Senkaku setsuzoku suiiki ni Chūgoku gunkan,” [Chinese warship in Senkaku contiguous zone], *Mainichi Shimbun*, June 10, 2016.

4 Vice Minister Saiki Akitaka, author's interview, Tokyo, July 14, 2017. Subsequent analysis suggested the People's Liberation Army Navy was not engaged in a planned provocation, but rather reacting to Russian warships transiting the contiguous zone from the south, returning to Vladivostok. See, “Chūgoku gunkan ga Senkaku shūhen no setsuzoku suiiki-hairi...” [Chinese warship enters contiguous zone around Senkaku...], *Reuters*, June 9, 2016, <https://jp.reuters.com/article/china-fragate-senkaku-idJPKCN0YU2NF>; Some, however, suggested Sino-Russian collusion. See, “Senkaku setsuzoku suiiki ni Chūgoku gunkan,” [Chinese warship in Senkaku contiguous zone], *Mainichi Shimbun*, June 10, 2016.

have sparked a military escalation involving the world's three largest economies.

Consisting of five core islands and a number of other minor features, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are claimed by Japan, the People's Republic of China, and Taiwan.⁵ Although Japan has administered the islands since 1972 — when the United States transferred control — and continues to maintain that no dispute exists, its position has increasingly been challenged by the presence of official Chinese vessels in the islands' adjacent waters.⁶ The United States, while not taking a stance on the sovereignty of the islands, nevertheless has committed itself to come to Japan's defense should it be attacked in the exercise of its administrative control.⁷ The islands thus constitute a potentially dangerous flashpoint in East Asia, highlighted by a number of analyses as a possible trigger for armed conflict — if not war — in the region.⁸

My goal in this paper is to supply an evidence-based, theoretically informed account of recent developments in the contest over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. To do so, I draw upon primary and secondary source material in Japanese and Chinese, as well as extensive interviews in both countries. I argue that, objectively speaking — apart from the mere fact that the Senkaku/Diaoyu are tangible features in the East China Sea to which Tokyo and Beijing both lay claim — the particular details of the disputed islands in themselves are by and large irrelevant.

Rather, to explain why the islands have become the flashpoint they are today, we must look at how their significance within Sino-Japanese relations has grown in ways that have little to do with their actual, inherent value. Specifically, there are three important dimensions to the increased significance of the islands. The first dimension is symbolic. Since late 2010, the islands have increasingly become a proxy for an array of latent and newly emerging intangible concerns, frustrations, resentments, and anxieties on both sides. These have given the islands import and salience by raising the perceived stakes involved. The second dimension is domestic. The emergence of an active contest over the islands generated both opportunities and vulnerabilities within the domestic political sphere of each state. At crucial moments, these domestic

dynamics have raised the profile of the dispute and increased pressure on policymakers to take firmer action. The third dimension is competitive. The islands have become the concrete focus of an ongoing set of escalatory, interactive dynamics, in which actions taken by one side to improve its standing in the dispute elicit counter-measures from the other. These spiralling dynamics continue to play out across a variety of domains and remain a source of further potential conflict.

In brief, since late 2010 the islands have increased in significance as a symbol, as a domestic political football, and as an object of ongoing, competitive jockeying. Existing work has highlighted certain aspects of these roles in isolation, but I argue that we must view them as the interwoven pieces of a whole. The islands became increasingly salient as a domestic political issue in no small part because of their growing symbolic significance. But at the same time, the symbolic import of the islands benefitted immensely from being championed by domestic politicians, activists, and others who latched onto the issue, whether opportunistically or out of sincere conviction. As the island's symbolic and domestic political importance rose, so too did the respective pressures on the leaders managing the contest to take stronger action. This set in motion competitive spirals of move and counter-move between Tokyo and Beijing. The friction this generated has, in turn, helped to further feed into the islands' symbolic and domestic political significance. The different facets of the islands' increasing significance are therefore closely interconnected.

This paper proceeds in six parts. First, it lays out why the escalation over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands since 2010 is so puzzling. Second, it investigates arguments concerning the material value of the islands. Third, it examines the potential *non*-material value attached to the islands before 2010. Fourth, it evaluates the possibility that leaders on either side actively sought to initiate the dispute for self-interested reasons. Fifth, it offers an alternative explanation, arguing that we need to examine the increasing significance of the islands within Sino-Japanese relations with a focus on three dimensions. Finally, it concludes by considering potential paths forward.

5 This paper focuses primarily on relations between Japan and the People's Republic of China concerning the islands. Relations between Japan and Taiwan and between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China concerning the islands are outside the purview of this article.

6 See, "Senkaku Islands Q&A," Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 13, 2016, http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/senkaku/qa_1010.html.

7 Mark Manyin, *Senkaku (Diaoyu/Diaoyutai) Islands Dispute: US Treaty Obligations* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2016).

8 Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 176–78; Michael McDevitt, *Senkaku Islands Tabletop Exercise Report* (Suffolk, Virginia: Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, 2017); Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, "Active Denial: Redesigning Japan's Response to China's Military Challenge," *International Security* 42, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 148, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00313.

The Puzzle of Escalation

Prior to 2010, the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands were a relatively peripheral issue in Sino-Japanese relations. On Sept. 7, 2010, however, a Chinese fishing trawler collided with Japanese Coast Guard ships in the waters surrounding the islands, resulting in the Japanese detention of the ship and crew and the arrest of the captain. This spiraled into a major diplomatic incident, as Beijing applied increasing pressure on Japan for their return. Japan first released the ship and crew, and then eventually also the captain, after which tensions subsided.

But in 2012, tensions reignited when — despite Beijing's objections — the Japanese government chose to preempt an initiative by the nationalist mayor of Tokyo to buy several of the islands from a private owner by purchasing the islands itself. This unleashed a new round of conflict involving popular protests and official tensions. As Sheila Smith has written, "Until 2010, what had largely been perceived as a manageable difference between Tokyo and Beijing, of interest only to small groups of nationalist activists in both countries, had blown up into a major confrontation between the two states."⁹

The 2010 collision and subsequent 2012 purchase were thus decisive turning points in the nature of the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. This is evidenced by substantial shifts in the official and popular prominence of the dispute. Consider the attention the islands have received from the *People's Daily*, the Chinese government's official mouthpiece: Only 16 articles referenced the islands in the five years before the 2010 collision

compared to 312 in the five years after.¹⁰ In Japanese officialdom, that these events marked turning points in the dispute is evidenced by parliamentary references: As one study demonstrates, 2010 marked a watershed for the islands' salience within parliamentary debates, with mentions increasing exponentially over previous years.¹¹ As for the popular prominence of the dispute, the Chinese

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search engine, Baidu, shows few online searches for the islands in the five years prior to 2010. In September 2010, there was a sudden burst in Chinese interest, which was subsequently dwarfed in 2012 with searches increasing nearly six-fold.¹² In Japan, Google Trends shows little interest in the islands in the years before the 2010 incident as well. Interest first shot up massively in 2010 and then again in 2012.¹³

Seven years on, the prominence of the dispute has subsided somewhat; however, the situation in the waters around the islands remains a far cry from the status quo ante. Since 2012, official Chinese maritime vessels have conducted regular incursions into the islands' territorial waters, and official Chinese aircraft have repeatedly appeared in the airspace above them.¹⁴ In 2013, Beijing announced an Air Defense Identification Zone including the airspace over the islands, raising the risk of aerial confrontation. Though there has been progress since then — most notably a

9 Sheila A. Smith, *Intimate Rivals: Japanese Domestic Politics and a Rising China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 190.

10 Full-text search of *People's Daily* articles for "钓鱼岛" comparing the period between Sept. 6, 2005, and Sept. 6, 2010, to the period between Sept. 7, 2010, and Sept. 7, 2015. For longer-term analysis showing a similar trend, see, Yasuhiro Matsuda, "How to Understand China's Assertiveness since 2009: Hypotheses and Policy Implications," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Strategic Japan, April 2014, 4.

11 Yasuo Nakauchi, "Ryōdo O Meguru Mondai to Nihon Gaikō 2010-Nen Ikō No Ugoki to Kokkai Rongi" [Territorial issues and Japanese diplomacy — Developments after 2010 and Parliamentary Debate], *Rippō to chōsa*, 342 (2017): 3.

12 Baidu Zhishu query for the personal computer search history data for "钓鱼岛," using <http://index.baidu.com/> (Baidu account necessary for use) accessed July 12, 2018. Interestingly, closely tracking this was searches for "钓鱼岛地图" (Diaoyu Islands map) suggesting many people were trying to locate the islands.

13 Google Trends query for "尖閣" search history in Japan, <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=JP&q=尖閣>, accessed Aug. 7, 2018. Notably, the most interest appears in November 2010, ostensibly due to the video scandal discussed below.

14 See, "Trends in Chinese Government and Other Vessels in the Waters Surrounding the Senkaku Islands, and Japan's Response," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, June 8, 2018, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page23e_000021.html; "China's Activities Surrounding Japan's Airspace," Ministry of Defense of Japan, accessed June 26, 2018, http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/ryouku/.

maritime communication mechanism between the Japanese Self Defense Forces and the People's Liberation Army¹⁵ — as well as a more general improvement in the tone of relations, the area around the islands has become more crowded and the possibility for serious conflict remains.

The above broadly describes *what* happened, but not *why*. Looking to the existing literature on territorial disputes, one approach to seeking an explanation would be to ask what it is about the contested islands' material value — be it strategic or economic — that has motivated such tensions. Another approach would be to examine the islands' preexisting non-material value — religious, ethnic, or historical. A third approach would be to adopt a cynical perspective, investigating the potential of a “wag-the-dog” scenario in which the governments involved intentionally initiated the dispute to distract from domestic concerns or, alternately, to gain bargaining leverage in other areas.

This paper examines each of these explanations in turn and finds them wanting. The material value of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands is, at best, questionable. Nor does it explain why tensions did not begin until 2010. If anything, estimates of the islands' economic value have been repeatedly adjusted downward. Regarding non-material value, the islands are uninhabited and host no sites of major religious or ethnic meaning. If there have been revisions to their perceived historical significance, these have arguably occurred as a function of post-2010 developments. And lastly, all available evidence suggests neither side was initially seeking escalation. The following three sections lay out these findings in detail, leaving the developments in the years since 2010 a mystery.

The Question of Material Value

A number of existing approaches explain territorial disputes according to the tangible benefits possession of a disputed territory can supply. These include strategic advantage, natural resources, control of trade routes, an increased population or tax base, or extra land to settle.¹⁶ Given that the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are small and uninhabited, most material arguments have focused on their strategic or economic value.

Strategic Value

One argument for the strategic value of the islands is that possessing them would aid the Chinese military in breaking through the first island chain separating continental China from the Pacific Ocean. Alternately, were Japanese forces to possess them, it would help prevent a Chinese military breakthrough.¹⁷ The first island chain stretches from the Korean peninsula southward across the Japanese Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, and beyond to the Philippines.¹⁸ The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are located inside this island chain, northeast of Taiwan on the western edge of the Okinawa Trough.

But while nearer to the first island chain than the Chinese continental coastline, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are, at their closest, still at least 60 miles (100 km) away from any feature in the chain.¹⁹ Consequently, even if the People's Republic of China possessed the islands, penetrating Japanese-held sections of the chain would still require Chinese military vessels to transit a considerable distance and pass through one of several bottlenecks, most prominently the Miyako Strait, between the Japanese islands of Okinawa and Miyako. These islands already house formidable Japanese military capabilities, including mobile, surface-to-ship missiles covering the strait's entrance, and a submarine sound-surveillance system extending

15 "Japan, China Launch Maritime-Aerial Communication Mechanism," *Mainichi Shinbun*, June 8, 2018, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20180608/p2a/00m/Ona/002000c>.

16 Paul Diehl and Gary Goertz, *Territorial Changes and International Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 14–18; Paul Diehl, *A Road Map to War: Territorial Dimensions of International Conflict* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999), x–xi; Monica Duffy Toft, "Territory and War," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 187–89, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0022343313515695>; Paul Hensel, "Contentious Issues and World Politics: The Management of Territorial Claims in the Americas, 1816–1992," *International Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (March 2001): 81–109, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0020-8833.00183>.

17 Li Ran, "Zhuanjia cheng riben kanzhong wo guo diaoyudao zhanlue jiazhi," [Experts claim Japan is focused on the strategic value of our country's Diaoyu Islands], *Renmin Wang*, July 7, 2012, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2012/0717/c115361-18534590.html>; Akimoto Kazumine, "The Strategic Value of Territorial Islands from the Perspective of National Security," *Review of Island Studies*, Oct. 9, 2013, <https://www.spf.org/islandstudies/research/a00008/>.

18 Toshi Yoshihara, "China's Vision of Its Seascape: The First Island Chain and Chinese Seapower," *Asian Politics and Policy* 4, no. 3 (July 2012): 293–314, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1943-0787.2012.01349.x>.

19 Measured from Taisho-jima/Chiweiyu.

along the Ryuku archipelago.²⁰ Apart from mobile, land-based missiles stationed across the chain, Japan can also deploy guided-missile patrol boats, submarines, and even mines to block critical passageways.²¹ Correspondingly, Japan does not need control of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands to obstruct the Chinese navy's movement through its portion of the first island chain. Therefore, as one analyst has noted, to break through the chain the Chinese military would likely attempt capturing islands such as Miyako and Ishigaki for control of the strait that lies between them.²² Certainly, Japan could do more to increase its defenses on these islands.²³ But taking them remains a daunting task involving the long-distance transport of an invasion force. Chinese possession of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands would not markedly change that fact.

A second argument for the strategic value of the islands is that they would provide a platform for placing strategically useful assets — such as radar installations or missiles — closer to either the island chain or the Chinese continental coastline, respectively, as well as nearby sea lines of communication.²⁴ And yet, such an advantage would be marginal at best. For one, anything placed on the islands would be highly vulnerable. Only one of the islands — Uotsuri/Diaoyu Island — has a surface area greater than half a square mile (or 1 sq km). But at less than 1.4 square miles (3.6 sq km.) it is just “a bit larger than New York City's Central Park.”²⁵ Accordingly, the islands have scant space to hide assets or develop redundancies. In a conflict scenario, assets on the islands would offer easily identifiable targets unlikely to survive an opening salvo.²⁶ Moreover, the islands are relatively

isolated: They are over 60 miles (100 km) from either the nearest Japanese islands or Taiwan and more than 180 miles (300 km) from the Chinese mainland. Resupply under combat conditions would pose major logistical difficulties.²⁷ What is more, such capabilities can be placed elsewhere. To cite a former Japanese defense official, “you could get the same result from putting radar on the Senkaku as from putting it nearby on a ship, or, alternately, by flying AWACS [Airborne Warning And Control Systems] you could get information from farther away.”²⁸ Not only do ship-mounted and airborne capabilities have the advantages of mobility, the latter also have the advantage of altitude, providing a much farther radar horizon.²⁹ So, while the strategic value of the islands is not zero, it is quite low. According to one former Japanese vice admiral, they are “just junk rocks, no strategic value.”³⁰

Still, one could argue that Beijing's behavior in the South China Sea — including fortifying tiny features with military hardware despite international condemnation — demonstrates the value it places on such outposts. There are, however, several crucial differences. First, compared to the relatively isolated Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the outposts built by the People's Republic of China in the South China Sea sit within a crowded cluster of contested features, where other claimants have already competitively established military footholds to cement their position.³¹ Second, while Chinese military assets on these small outposts are similarly vulnerable to U.S. attack, they nevertheless offer intimidating advantages against less well-equipped competitors

20 Desmond Ball and Richard Tanter, *Tools of Owatsumi: Japan's Ocean Surveillance and Coastal Defence Capabilities* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2015), 11, 103.

21 Toshi Yoshihara, “Sino-Japanese Rivalry at Sea: How Tokyo Can Go Anti-Access on China,” *Orbis* 59, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 69–71, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2014.11.006>.

22 Yoshihara, “China's Vision of Its Seascape,” 306–07.

23 Heginbotham and Samuels, “Active Denial.”

24 Taylor Fravel and Alexander Liebman, “Beyond the Moat: The Plan's Evolving Interests and Potential Influence,” in *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles*, ed. Saunders, et al. (Washington, DC: CreateSpace, 2011), 53–54; Zhu Fenglan, “21 Shijichu De Riben Haiyang Zhanlue,” in *Yatai Diqu Fazhan Baogao*, ed. Zhang Yunling and Sun Shihai (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2006), 249.

25 For the dimensions, see, “The Senkaku Islands: Location, Area, and Other Geographical Data,” *Review of Island Studies*, Feb. 17, 2015, https://www.spf.org/islandstudies/info_library/senkaku-islands/02-geography/02_geo001.html; for the quote, see Manyin, “Senkaku (Diaoyu/Diaoyutai) Islands Dispute,” 1.

26 Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, “Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, US Airsea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia,” *International Security* 41, no. 1 (Summer 2016): 7–48, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00249.


27 Anonymous interviews, Japanese Self Defense Force officials, Tokyo, April–May 2017.

28 Anonymous interview, former Japanese Defense Ministry official, May 2017.

29 Biddle and Oelrich, “Future Warfare in the Western Pacific,” 23–24.

30 Retired Vice Admiral Yoji Koda, author's interview, Tokyo, April 19, 2017.

31 “Occupation and Island Building,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative, <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/>.



In short, although potential oil and gas resources may have initially generated an interest in the islands decades ago, it currently remains unclear what resources actually lie in the surrounding seabed...

in the South China Sea “whose navies barely rate as coast guards.”³² Placing assets on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands would not grant such advantages with regards to Japan, a more formidable adversary. Lastly, to date, the People’s Republic of China has only militarized features in the South China Sea that it has already controlled for decades. Militarizing the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, however, would require first expelling Japan and risking a wider conflagration with the United States. In this regard alone, the potential strategic value of the islands pales in contrast to the costs and dangers of such a confrontation, even assuming the Chinese military were to prevail. Nor would preventing Japan from militarizing the islands stop the latter from shifting capabilities westward. In fact, Japan has already moved assets westward by stationing a defense facility, complete with radar, to the south of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands on another island, Yonaguni.³³ All said, it is difficult to argue that the marginal strategic benefit the islands would offer either side justifies risking war to obtain them.

Economic Value?

But what of their economic value? A central factor is the potential 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone entitlements assumed to be conferred on the state with sovereign rights to these islands under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Given overlapping claims, one study has calculated that potentially 19,800 square nautical miles of exclusive economic zone entitlements are at stake.³⁴

These entitlements are seen as valuable primarily due to a 1969 U.N. Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East report, which suggested the area “may be one of the most prolific oil reserves in the world.”³⁵ Importantly, the report failed to

confirm actual reserves, only hypothesizing their existence given the area’s geological structure. At the time of the report’s release, Taiwan and Japan (both claimants) entered into joint development negotiations; however, these ended in 1970 when the People’s Republic of China voiced objections.³⁶ Since then, there has been no exploratory drilling, due to the contested nature of the area, and thus the actual presence of oil and gas reserves remains unsubstantiated.

Nevertheless, this has not stopped speculation. One figure for the fossil fuel prospects of the entire East China Sea that has frequently appeared in Chinese academic writings is 109.5 billion barrels.³⁷ This number, however, is of apparently dubious provenance, allegedly stemming from a 1969 *New York Times* article in which a Japanese official quotes findings from the U.N. report. The report, however, contains no such number.³⁸ Another common figure is 3 to 7 billion tons — purportedly put forward by official Chinese experts in 1982 without any hard evidence.³⁹ Other similarly high Chinese estimates exist, but as a U.S. Energy Information Administration report notes, they remain without corroboration and “do not take into account economic factors relevant to bring them to production.”⁴⁰ In fact, one source from a major Chinese oil company confided that “inside the [Chinese] oil industry, you do not hear anyone making big claims about oil and gas around the islands these days, especially given the limited findings in other parts of the East China Sea.”⁴¹

Indeed, other recent estimates are more conservative. In 2006, one Japanese official estimated oil and gas reserves on Japan’s side of its self-proclaimed East China Sea median line — including potential Senkaku/Diaoyu entitlements — at approximately 500 million kiloliters, equivalent to less than a year’s worth of

32 James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, “Five Shades of Chinese Gray-Zone Strategy,” *National Interest*, May 2, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/five-shades-chinese-gray-zone-strategy-20450>.

33 Ball and Tanter, *Tools of Owatsumi*, 22–27.

34 Victor Prescott and Clive Schofield, *The Maritime Political Boundaries of the World* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2005), 436–39.

35 Cited in James Manicom, *Bridging Troubled Waters: China, Japan, and Maritime Order in the East China Sea* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 43.

36 Manicom, *Bridging Troubled Waters*, 44.

37 See, for instance, Caihua Ma et al., “Diaoyudao Ziyuan Jiazhi Tanjiu ” [Study of the resource value of the Diaoyu Islands], *Zhongguo Yuye Jingji*, no. 6 (2012): 126.

38 See Lengcui Fei, “Diaoyudao Daodi Cangle Duoshao Shiyou?” [How much oil do the Diaoyu Islands really contain?], *Qingnian yu Shehui*, no. 11 (2012): 34; for the original, see, “Japan Will Press Efforts to Exploit Major Oil Find,” *New York Times*, Sept. 1, 1969, 2.

39 Qian Song, “Haiyang Shiyou—Shiyou Shengchan Zengzhang De Qianli Suozai ” [Offshore oil—the potential for growth in oil production], *Zhongguo shiyou he huagong jingji fenxi*, no. 2 (2006): 46.

40 “East China Sea,” U.S. Energy Information Administration, Sept. 17, 2014, <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/regions-topics.php?RegionTopicID=ECS>.

41 Anonymous interview, Beijing, July 2018.

Chinese consumption at 2015 levels.⁴² The Energy Information Administration has estimated “proved and probable reserves” in the *entire* East China Sea at approximately “200 million barrels of oil” and “between 1 and 2 trillion cubic feet” of natural gas.⁴³ At China’s 2015 consumption levels, that equals just 16 days’ worth of oil and between 55 to 100 days of natural gas.⁴⁴ In short, although potential oil and gas resources may have initially generated an interest in the islands decades ago, it currently remains unclear what resources actually lie in the surrounding seabed, and recent estimates have tended to decrease expectations significantly.⁴⁵

A second potential source of economic value is the fishing resources around the islands. At present, under a 1997 agreement, each side has agreed not to enforce its laws on the “nationals and fishing vessels” of the other in the waters 12 nautical miles beyond the islands. The friction, however, is within the narrow 12-nautical-mile bands of water surrounding the islands. The Japanese government claims these as territorial waters to which the 1997 agreement does not apply,⁴⁶ and Chinese fishing boats thus face being chased off by the Japanese Coast Guard when approaching.⁴⁷ These waters, however, constitute only a small fraction of the disputed East China Sea exclusive economic zone area. Moreover, due to over-fishing in the general area, the fishing stocks in these waters have declined precipitously in line with broader trends

in the East China Sea.⁴⁸ This decline, together with factors including increasing fuel costs for travel to the islands, has put off many local Japanese fishers from traveling to the islands.⁴⁹

A third potential source of economic value is seabed mining, primarily of polymetallic manganese nodules or polymetallic sulfides.⁵⁰ But polymetallic sulfides and economically viable concentrations of manganese nodules are generally limited to deeper waters, the former around underwater vents.⁵¹ In the East China Sea, the chief concentrations are in the depths of the Okinawa Trough, in the vicinity of undisputed Japanese islands in the Ryukyus.⁵² The shallower waters of the continental shelf floor surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands would thus appear to offer considerably less of potential value, while sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands would make only a relatively minor difference for claims in deeper waters.⁵³

There is a further issue concerning the economic value of the islands: Settling the question of sovereignty over them would still leave unresolved the problem of who is entitled to the resources in and below their surrounding waters. Granted, under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the state with undisputed sovereignty over the islands would have claim to 12 nautical miles of territorial waters around each of the features above water at high tide. But as noted above, many of the resources under dispute lie outside these narrow

42 Diet Session 164, Sangiin gyōsei kanshi iinkai, April 24, 2006. Calculated based on consumption figures provided by the U.S. Energy Information Administration: “International Energy Statistics,” U.S. Energy Information Administration, accessed Feb. 12, 2018, <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/data/browser/>.

43 “East China Sea.”

44 Calculated based on consumption figures provided by the U.S. Energy Information Administration: “International Energy Statistics,” U.S. Energy Information Administration, accessed Feb. 12, 2018, <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/data/browser/>.

45 Paul O’Shea, “How Economic, Strategic, and Domestic Factors Shape Patterns of Conflict and Cooperation in the East China Sea Dispute,” *Asian Survey* 55, no. 3 (May/June 2015): 555–56, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2015.55.3.548>.

46 Nobukatsu Kanehara and Yutaka Arima, “New Fishing Order—Japan’s New Agreement on Fisheries with the Republic of Korea and with the People’s Republic of China,” *Japanese Annual of International Law*, no. 42 (1999): 27–28, https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/jpyintl42&div=4&g_sent=1&casa_token=&collection=journals.

47 Hirose Hajime, “Kaijōhoanchō Ni Yoru Senkaku Keibi No Rekishi” [A history of Japanese Coast Guard policing of the Senkaku], *Sōsa kenkyū* 65, no. 9 (2016).

48 Makomo Kuniyoshi, “Senkakushotō Ni Okeru Gyogyō No Rekishi to Genjō” [History and current state of Senkaku fisheries], *Nippon Suisan Gakkasishi* 77, no. 4 (2011): 707; Tseng Katherine Hui-yi, *Lessons from the Disturbed Waters: The Diaoyu/Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands Disputes* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2015), 75–78. Given that fish generally do not pay attention to borders, this is not surprising.

49 “Fuon’na ryōba/Senkaku” [Turbulent fishing grounds/Senkaku], *Ryuku Shimpō*, March 1, 2013, 3.

50 Thomas Peacock and Matthew H. Alford, “Is Deep-Sea Mining Worth It?” *Scientific American* 318, no. 5 (May 2018): 72–77, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-race-is-on-to-mine-and-protect-the-deep-sea-floor/>; G.P. Glasby, “Deep Seabed Mining: Past Failures and Future Prospects,” *Marine Georesources and Geotechnology* 20, no. 2 (2002): 165, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03608860290051859>.

51 Nobuyuki Okamoto et al., “Current Status of Japan’s Activities for Deep-Sea Commercial Mining Campaign,” paper presented at the 2018 OCEANS-MTS/IEEE Techno-Oceans (OTO), 2018.

52 Satoshi Ueda and Nobuyuki Okamoto, “Nihon Shūhen Kaiiki Ni Bunpu Suru Kaiteinessuikōshō No Kaihatsu Purojekuto No Gaiyō,” [The Overview of Project for Developing Seafloor Massive Sulfides in the EEZ of Japan (sic)], *Journal of MMIJ* no. 131 (2015).

53 And this would depend on the People’s Republic of China asserting an exclusive economic zone on the basis of sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which it has not yet done. Such a claim on these resources, particularly those more northerly, would more likely be based on continental shelf entitlements. See, Mark J. Valencia, “The East China Sea Dispute: Context, Claims, Issues, and Possible Solutions,” *Asian Perspective* 31, no. 1 (2007): 139, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42704579>. For the Chinese claim, see, “Submission by the People’s Republic of China Concerning the Outer Limits of the Continental Shelf Beyond 200 Nautical Miles in Part of the East China Sea,” United Nations Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea, Dec. 14, 2012, https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/chn63_12/executive_summary_EN.pdf.

confines and thus ownership would depend on further exclusive economic zone entitlements.⁵⁴ And yet, it is far from certain an international court or arbitral tribunal would grant the Senkaku/Diaoyu exclusive economic zone entitlements. Specifically, to qualify for an exclusive economic zone or continental shelf entitlement, the features in question need to be capable of sustaining human habitation or economic life of their own.⁵⁵ Given the stringency with which the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling applied this requirement to the South China Sea, it is questionable whether the small, uninhabited Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands would qualify.⁵⁶

Let us assume, nevertheless, that one or more of the Senkaku/Diaoyu features were found to meet the legal requirements for generating an exclusive economic zone entitlement. In negotiations or judicial proceedings to allocate exclusive economic zones between claimants in the East China Sea, such an entitlement might still only receive reduced consideration or be wholly discounted due to a variety of factors. These include the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands' relatively small size, lack of population and economic activity, and distance from other features.⁵⁷ Even if the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands' entitlements to an exclusive economic zone were granted full effect in the process of drawing borders, they would still need to be weighed against all the other potential exclusive economic zone and continental shelf entitlements that extend from Taiwan, continental China, and the Japanese archipelago and also require consideration. With all these overlapping entitlements, the final determination of the exclusive economic zone boundaries in the East China Sea is far from straightforward. Given that the processes of negotiation or third-party arbitration pertaining to maritime borders is highly complicated and unpredictable, the actual benefits to be reaped

from having sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands when entering into such proceedings are very uncertain and possibly quite trivial. This also assumes such proceedings would even occur. As one legal scholar notes, "the unpredictability of litigation, the probable domestic illegitimacy of any adverse result, and the lack of any means short of force to enforce a judgment all work to discourage litigation or arbitration."⁵⁸

Evaluating Material Motives

Asked in 2016 if the islands have strategic or economic value, former Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda replied, "No, no, using all that petrol for patrols ... I think it is a waste."⁵⁹ Strategically, the islands are isolated and easily targeted, and attempting to militarize them would entail substantial risk for marginal advantage. The fishing stocks are in decline while potential oil and gas reserves remain unconfirmed and have repeatedly been re-estimated as lower than previously thought. Moreover, it remains uncertain what — if any — advantage sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands would provide in negotiations or judicial proceedings over the delimitation of maritime resource entitlements, should these ever even occur.

Nevertheless, one could argue it is perceptions, not the actual value, that matter. Policymakers may, after all, still be driven by perceived material aims. For instance, retired Maj. Gen. Luo Yuan claims the islands are "treasure islands" and have "great geostrategic significance."⁶⁰ But we should be careful in taking such publicly presented rationales at face value, particularly when they come from Chinese military hawks who are active in public affairs.⁶¹ In truth, if Beijing's aim is installing stationary military outposts in the East China Sea, it has easier options. In fact, having already built

54 Carlos Ramos-Mrosovsky, "International Law's Unhelpful Role in the Senkaku Islands," *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law*, no. 29 (2007): 931, https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/upjil29&div=27&g_sent=1&casa_token=&collection=journals.

55 See, Article 121, *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*, accessed on July 9, 2019, https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf.

56 The requirement was clarified as, "the objective capacity of a feature, in its natural condition, to sustain either a stable community of people or economic activity that is not dependent on outside resources or purely extractive in nature." See, "The South China Sea Arbitration (the Republic of the Philippines V. The People's Republic of China)," Permanent Court of Arbitration Press Release, The Hague, July 12, 2016, <https://pca-cpa.org/en/news/pca-press-release-the-south-china-sea-arbitration-the-republic-of-the-philippines-v-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>; Manyin, "Senkaku (Diaoyu/Diaoyutai) Islands Dispute," 1.

57 Clive Schofield, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back? Progress and Challenges in the Delimitation of Maritime Boundaries since the Drafting of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea," in *30 Years of UNCLOS (1982-2012): Progress and Prospects*, Guifang Xue and Ashley White (Beijing: China University of Political Science and Law Press, 2013).

58 Ramos-Mrosovsky, "International Law's Unhelpful Role in the Senkaku Islands," 907.

59 Former Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, author's interview, Tokyo, July 10, 2017.

60 Yuan Luo, "Diaoyudao Bu Shi Wuzuqingzhong De 'Huangdao,'" *Huanqiu Shibao*, Sept. 4, 2012.

61 Andrew Chubb, "Propaganda, Not Policy: Explaining the PLA's Hawkish Faction (Part One)," *China Brief* 13, no. 15 (2013), <https://jamestown.org/program/propaganda-not-policy-explaining-the-plas-hawkish-faction-part-one/>.

several oil and gas rigs in the East China Sea further to the north, abutting the Japanese-demarcated median line, the Chinese government could erect more such structures to the south, along its side of the median line near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and adjacent important sea lanes. Such rigs can host radar and missile emplacements. Indeed, the Japanese side has already accused Beijing of installing military-use radar on its northerly rigs.⁶² If Beijing desires a tripwire between Japan and Taiwan, these could serve the purpose.

Alternately, if the driving motive is economic, joint development would offer considerable gains over the status quo without the risk of costly conflict. In actuality, this may be the only feasible option for Tokyo, as underwater topography is unfavorable to unilateral Japanese development of what is likely to be natural gas.⁶³ The Japanese government has itself admitted as much.⁶⁴ Ironically, running a pipeline to the Chinese coast is far more feasible.⁶⁵ One might argue it still makes sense for Japan to defend its claim in order to prevent China from taking all the spoils. But Beijing has already, on multiple occasions, proposed joint development while shelving the sovereignty issue.⁶⁶ Admittedly, such cooperation would require ironing out many details. And yet, there are successful precedents: In 1974, Japan and the Republic of Korea agreed to jointly develop highly anticipated petroleum deposits in waters where both shared overlapping claims, although they subsequently found little of value.⁶⁷

It is extraordinarily difficult to prove a negative. Yet, if the core motives for escalating the contest over the islands were material, we should have expected the protagonists to act in ways that maximize advantages or gains in these categories. That we have not, and the prominence of the dispute has increased even while the islands'

economic value now appears less than originally thought, suggests other things at work.

Non-material Value?

Another potential approach, also drawn from the literature on territorial disputes, would be to examine preexisting *non-material* factors, such as the historic or religious value of the contested space, or the ethnic heritage of its population.⁶⁸

The actual disagreement between Japan and the People's Republic of China over the islands, however, is of relatively recent provenance, beginning when Beijing first publicly challenged Japanese sovereignty with its own claim in 1971.⁶⁹ Before that, the islands had a relatively trivial existence: They had no religious or historic meaning of note, no Chinese citizens had ever lived there, and a Japanese fish-processing factory that had been there before the war had long been abandoned. At the time Beijing raised its claim, the islands were uninhabited, with several of them leased to the United States for target practice. Strikingly, in 1972, when Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei brought up the islands with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai during normalization negotiations, Zhou's response was, "Because oil has emerged, that is why this is a problem."⁷⁰ It is, therefore, difficult to argue the islands possess any distant historical lineage of value.

Even today, the islands remain nothing more than small, isolated, uninhabited features without any population, meaningful infrastructure, or sites of major religious or historical consequence. Critics might simply retreat to saying that territory is an issue of national sovereignty, and that regardless of their history, once both sides laid

62 Ankit Panda, "A New Chinese Threat in the East China Sea? Not So Fast," *The Diplomat*, July 23, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/07/a-new-chinese-threat-in-the-east-china-sea-not-so-fast/>.

63 Rongxing Guo, *Territorial Disputes and Seabed Petroleum Exploitation: Some Options for the East China Sea* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, September 2010), 9, 19, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/territorial-disputes-and-seabed-petroleum-exploitation-some-options-for-the-east-china-sea/>; Manicom, *Bridging Troubled Waters*, 154.

64 "Sekō keizai sangyō daijin no kakugigo kishakaiken no gaiyō" [Press conference with METI Minister Sekō after Cabinet Meeting], Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry, Sept. 13, 2016, <http://www.meti.go.jp/speeches/kaiken/2016/20160913001.html>.

65 Guo, *Territorial Disputes and Seabed Petroleum Exploitation*, 19; Manicom, *Bridging Troubled Waters*, 154.

66 Reinhard Drifte, "The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Territorial Dispute Between Japan and China: Between the Materialization of the "China Threat," *UNISCI Discussion Papers* 32, no. 32 (May 2013): 26, http://dx.doi.org/10.5209/rev_UNIS.2013.n32.44789; "Sangiin gyōsei kanshi iinkai," Diet Session 164, April 24, 2006.

67 Clive Schofield and Ian Townsend-Gault, "Choppy Waters Ahead in 'a Sea of Peace Cooperation and Friendship?': Slow Progress Towards the Application of Maritime Joint Development to the East China Sea," *Marine Policy* 35, no. 1 (2011): 28–29, <https://econpapers.repec.org/RePEc:eee:marpol:v:35:y:2011:i:1:p:25-33>.

68 Diehl and Goertz, *Territorial Changes and International Conflict*, 19–20; Toft, "Territory and War," 189.

69 "Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaobu shengming (1971 nian 12 yue 30 ri)" [Chinese People's Republic Foreign Ministry Statement (1971 December 30)], Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China, accessed April 5, 2018, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/diaoyudao/chn/flfg/zcfg/t1304543.htm>.

70 Akira Ishi et al., *Nitchu Kokkou Seijouka, Nitchu Heiwa Yuukou Jouyaku Teiketsu Koushou* [Concluding Negotiations for Sino-Japanese Normalization, the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship] (Tokyo: Iwanami, 2010), 68.

Even today, the islands remain nothing more than small, isolated, uninhabited features without any population, meaningful infrastructure, or sites of major religious or historical consequence.

claim to the islands they became a core national interest.⁷¹ Additionally, critics could also point to the overlapping claims to the islands advanced by Taiwan and the People's Republic of China, thus linking the issue to the larger question of Chinese national unification. But even if one were to concede these points, they still do not explain the historic variation in how the dispute has unfolded within Sino-Japanese relations. General concerns over sovereignty fail to explain why certain territories might be valued more than others. Concerns over national sovereignty or unification are also longstanding and static and thus do little to explain how the willingness of both sides to risk conflict over the islands has changed over time.

There remains important historic variation that needs explaining, particularly between the nature of the dispute in the pre- and post-2010 periods.

Prior to 2010, both sides had adopted a delaying strategy regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.⁷² Indeed, in 1972 Zhou stated he did not want to discuss the dispute,⁷³ and in 1978 Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping suggested shelving the issue for the next generation to solve.⁷⁴ Neither actively sought to raise the dispute and were responding to its having been brought up by the Japanese side. And while Tokyo never publicly acknowledged — and in fact repeatedly denied — shelving the dispute, in practice, both countries subsequently worked to minimize the issue while Japan continued to exercise administrative control.⁷⁵

Admittedly, there were points of friction. In 1978, when members of the ruling Japanese Liberal Democratic Party criticized their leadership for not leveraging Treaty of Peace and Friendship negotiations to get Beijing to cede its claim, hundreds of Chinese fishing ships appeared near the islands.⁷⁶ The Chinese central government, however, later described the incident as “accidental,” generating speculation that this was the result of internal divisions over the treaty.⁷⁷ In 1992, the People's Republic of China passed the Law on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone, which explicitly names the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands as its territory. This move was reportedly fiercely debated internally and done under pressure from the military.⁷⁸ But as both Beijing and Tokyo were more focused on the Japanese emperor's upcoming visit to China, there was limited fallout.⁷⁹ In 2008, official Chinese ships entered the territorial waters around the islands for the first time.⁸⁰ In light of other high-level efforts to improve relations at the time, including a Sino-Japanese East China Sea joint development agreement — concluded

71 Alessio Patalano, "Seapower and Sino-Japanese Relations in the East China Sea," *Asian Affairs* 45, no. 1 (2014): 37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2013.876809>.

72 Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

73 Ishi et al., *Nitchu Kokkou Seijouka, Nitchu Heiwa Yuukou Jouyaku Teiketsu Koushou*, 68.

74 Masato Tomebachi, *Senkaku Wo Meguru "Gokai" Wo Toku* [Resolving misunderstandings surrounding the Senkakus] (Tokyo: Nihon Kyōhōsha, 2016), 92; Lili Zhang, *Xin Zhongguo He Riben Guanxi Shi* [History of Relations between Japan and the new China] (Shanghai: Renmin Chubanshe, 2016), 146.

75 Tomebachi, *Senkaku Wo Meguru "Gokai" Wo Toku*, 16–17, 79–97; Taylor Fravel, "Explaining Stability in the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Dispute," in *Getting the Triangle Straight: Managing China-Japan-US Relations*, ed. Gerald L. Curtis, Ryosei Kokuburn, and Jisi Wang (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010).

76 Daniel Tretiak, "The Sino-Japanese Treaty of 1978: The Senkaku Incident Prelude," *Asian Survey* 18, no. 12 (December 1978): 1235–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2643610>.

77 Tretiak, "The Sino-Japanese Treaty of 1978, 1243; Hajime, "Kaijōhoanchō Ni Yoru Senkaku Keibi No Rekishi," 114–16; Ryosei Kokuburn et al., *Nitchūkankeishi* [History of Sino-Japanese Relations] (Tokyo: Yuhikaku Aruma, 2014), 133.

78 Mori Kazuko, *Nitchū Hyōryū* [Sino-Japanese Drift] (Tokyo: Iwatami Shinsho, 2017), 89, 215.

79 Kazuko, *Nitchū Hyōryū*, 90; Kokuburn et al., *Nitchūkankeishi*, 179–80.

80 Richard C. Bush, *The Perils of Proximity: China-Japan Security Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 74–75.

despite internal Chinese opposition — some have attributed this to dissenting Chinese hardliners.⁸¹

More prominently, however, it was small activist groups on both sides that generated problems. In the 1970s, the dispute had already galvanized “Protect the Diaoyu” groups in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United States. In Japan, various nationalist groups also rallied to the cause, the most prominent being the Nihon Seinensha.⁸² Attempts by these actors to land on the islands, or alternately, in the case of Nihon Seinensha, advance the cause by building and registering lighthouses, constituted an ongoing irritant, particularly in the 1990s.⁸³ Additionally, in 2004, after multiple failed attempts, members of the mainland China-based “Chinese Federation for Defending the Diaoyu Islands” landed on one of the islands for the first time. In response, the Japanese government simply repatriated the Chinese activists back to the Chinese mainland. The government in Beijing, for its part, prevented further attempts by the group to travel to the islands.⁸⁴ On the whole, both Tokyo and Beijing repeatedly worked to contain the impact of their activists: Beijing suppressed press coverage and prevented organized protests, while Tokyo refused to officially recognize the efforts of its nationalist groups and sought to limit their activities.⁸⁵

All in all, Japanese policy prior to 2010 could be summarized with the words of Japan’s foreign minister, Sonoda Sunao: “eschew provocative, propagandizing behavior ... only carefully, calmly do what is necessary for domestic political needs.”⁸⁶ The policy of the People’s Republic of China, in turn, could, with few exceptions, be summed up in Chinese Vice Premier Gu Mu’s words: “[The Diaoyu Islands] have always been Chinese territory. ... [W]e can temporarily shelve the sovereignty issue. Let

the later generations resolve it.”⁸⁷ Erica Downs and Phillip Saunders argue that in the past this policy to contain the dispute was due to concerns about its possible impact on bilateral economic relations.⁸⁸ Given mainland China’s economic growth, one could suggest that economic relations with Japan are not currently as crucial to Beijing as they were when Downs and Saunders were writing. But the fact is that even now Japan still remains a major economic partner. As recently as 2017 Japan ranked as China’s third largest export destination and second largest import partner, as well as a key source of investment.⁸⁹ Moreover, Taylor Fravel, writing in 2010, also noted a number of other reasons we should have expected both sides to avoid conflict, including the deterrent effect of U.S. commitments, the desire by both to maintain a regional reputation as “constructive and benign powers,” and the prior ability of all sides to manage the dispute.⁹⁰ Given all these countervailing factors, an explanation is still needed for the substantial change that took place after the 2010 collision incident.

Intentional Conflict?

A third potential explanation would be that the 2010 confrontation was intentional. One conceivable reason for deliberately provoking an escalation of the dispute would be to distract from internal issues and improve the domestic popularity of each country’s respective leadership, a position commonly advanced under the rubric of “diversionary war theory.”⁹¹ Another possibility is that the escalation demonstrates, as Krista Wiegand has argued, an intentional effort at “issue linkage” in which Beijing sought to use “the islands

81 Mori Kazuko, *Nitchū Hyōryū*, 208–11. Miyamoto Yūji, former Japanese ambassador to the People’s Republic of China (2006–2010), author’s interview, Tokyo, May 12, 2017. Importantly, this also resulted in a strengthening of the Japanese security operations around the islands. See, Bush, *The Perils of Proximity*, 74–75.

82 Jinxing Chen, “Radicalization of the Protect Diaoyutai Movement in 1970s–America,” *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 5, no. 2 (2009); Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 127–34, 212–17, <https://doi.org/10.1163/179303909X12489373183055>.

83 Erica Strecker Downs and Phillip C. Saunders, “Legitimacy and the Limits of Nationalism: China and the Diaoyu Islands,” *International Security* 23, no. 3 (Winter 1998/1999), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539340>; Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 127–34; Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China’s Foreign Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 116–18.

84 Shi Jiangtao, “Protesters Barred from Diaoyu Mission,” *South China Morning Post*, July 20, 2004, 5.

85 Weiss, *Powerful Patriots*, 120–25; Downs and Saunders, “Legitimacy and the Limits of Nationalism.”

86 Tomebachi, *Senkaku Wo Meguru “Gokai” Wo Toku*, 81.

87 Zhang, *Xin Zhongguo He Riben Guanxi Shi*, 153.

88 Downs and Saunders, “Legitimacy and the Limits of Nationalism.”

89 “The World Factbook, East and Southeast Asia: China, 2017,” Central Intelligence Agency, accessed on March 13, 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ch.html>.

90 Fravel, “Explaining Stability in the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands Dispute,” 159.

91 Tir, “Territorial Diversion.”

dispute as bargaining leverage to gain concessions from Japan on other disputed issues.”⁹²

All available evidence, however, suggests the initial incident in 2010 was neither planned nor welcomed by either side. The trawler’s captain was reportedly intoxicated when arrested, and thus was not likely a covert Chinese agent.⁹³ Though initially feted upon returning home to mainland China, he was subsequently forbidden to fish and subjected to a “soft” house arrest.⁹⁴ Additionally, the Chinese government’s response — far from seeking to immediately leverage the incident — was restrained at first. Although protesting to the Japanese ambassador and canceling visits and East China Sea joint-development negotiations, in the first week after the captain’s arrest, Beijing suppressed protests and conveyed to Tokyo through back channels, “Somehow, please just get this settled without a fuss.”⁹⁵ Only after the Japanese side decided to extend the detention of the fishing captain despite releasing the ship and crew did Beijing escalate its response. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao publicly pressed for the captain’s release, reports emerged of an alleged Chinese embargo on rare-earth exports to Japan, and Beijing detained four Japanese citizens.⁹⁶ Nothing here suggests an official Chinese conspiracy or reactive opportunism. In reality, Beijing was likely responding to an initially perceived loss: Tokyo had asserted its domestic law in the waters around the islands.⁹⁷

Neither would this seem to be a clever plot planned by the Japanese government. Maehara Seiji, the

Japanese minister in charge of the Japanese Coast Guard at the time, subsequently claimed to be following an “arrest manual” inherited from a previous administration.⁹⁸ Even if Maehara did see a chance to assert Japanese jurisdiction, little preparation was made for what to do afterwards. The Kan Naoto administration was left scrambling for ways to contain the damage, fearful of being forced to pay the political price for intervening in the legal process in order to end the incident.⁹⁹ Facing increasing pressure from Beijing, a Japanese foreign ministry delegation gave a presentation to the local prosecutor’s office, ostensibly at the latter’s request.¹⁰⁰ The following day, the prosecutor announced the captain’s release. As Maehara himself admits, the handling of the situation was a “mishmash” (*chūtohanpa*).¹⁰¹

Notably, both countries subsequently sought to mend the relationship. Kan met with Wen on the sidelines of a summit in October 2010, where both agreed to promote a mutually beneficial strategic relationship. When the triple disaster of March 11 struck Japan in 2011 — the earthquake, tsunami, and meltdown at the Fukushima nuclear plant — Beijing expressed condolences and provided aid in an effort to improve relations.¹⁰² Preparations thus began to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Sino-Japanese normalization. As Kan’s successor, Noda Yoshihiko, recalls, in 2011 he “had no premonition” that the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands would again become a problem.¹⁰³

Consequently, when in April 2012 the mayor of Tokyo, Ishihara Shintaro, proposed purchasing the

92 Krista Wiegand, *Enduring Territorial Disputes: Strategies of Bargaining, Coercive Diplomacy, and Settlement* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 98.

93 Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 190.

94 “Senkaku oki shōtotsu jiken no chūgokujin senchō ga ‘jitaku nankin’ jōtai, shutsugyo mo kinshi” [The Chinese captain from the Senkaku sea collision under ‘house arrest,’ also forbidden to fish], *Searchina*, May 24, 2011.

95 Citing a Japanese official, Tsuyoshi Sunohara, *Antō: Senkaku Kokuyū-Ka [Secret Battle: The Senkaku Nationalization]* (Tokyo: Shinchō bunko, 2013), 23.

96 Alastair Iain Johnston, “How New and Assertive Is China’s New Assertiveness?” *International Security* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2013): 23–26, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00115; Linus Hagström, “Power Shift’ in East Asia? A Critical Reappraisal of Narratives on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Incident in 2010,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5, no. 3 (Autumn 2012): 282–83, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pos011>. Johnston disputes the embargo using Japanese import data. This, however, overlooks the pervasive “quasi-smuggling” on the People’s Republic of China side — many 2010 rare earth exports were not classified as such when leaving the People’s Republic of China but registered in Japanese import data upon arrival. See, Nabeel A. Mancheri and Marukawa Tomoo, *Rare Earth Elements: China and Japan in Industry, Trade and Value Chain* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Institute of Social Science, 2016), 159–60. At the time, multiple Japanese firms did report sudden stoppages, and officials from the People’s Republic of China reportedly confirmed the embargo to U.S. counterparts privately. See, Richard McGregor, *Asia’s Reckoning: The Struggle for Global Dominance* (London: Penguin UK, 2017), 265. The evidence, however, remains inconclusive at best. Michael Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 9, 2017, 85–90, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-coercion-maritime-asia>. On the detention of Japanese nationals, see: Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 191; Hagström, “Power Shift’ in East Asia?” 281. Hagström suggests the timing could be coincidental.

97 M. Taylor Fravel, “Explaining China’s Escalation over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands,” *Global Summitry* 2, no. 1 (2016): 24–37, <https://doi.org/10.1093/global/guw010>.

98 Maehara, author’s interview.

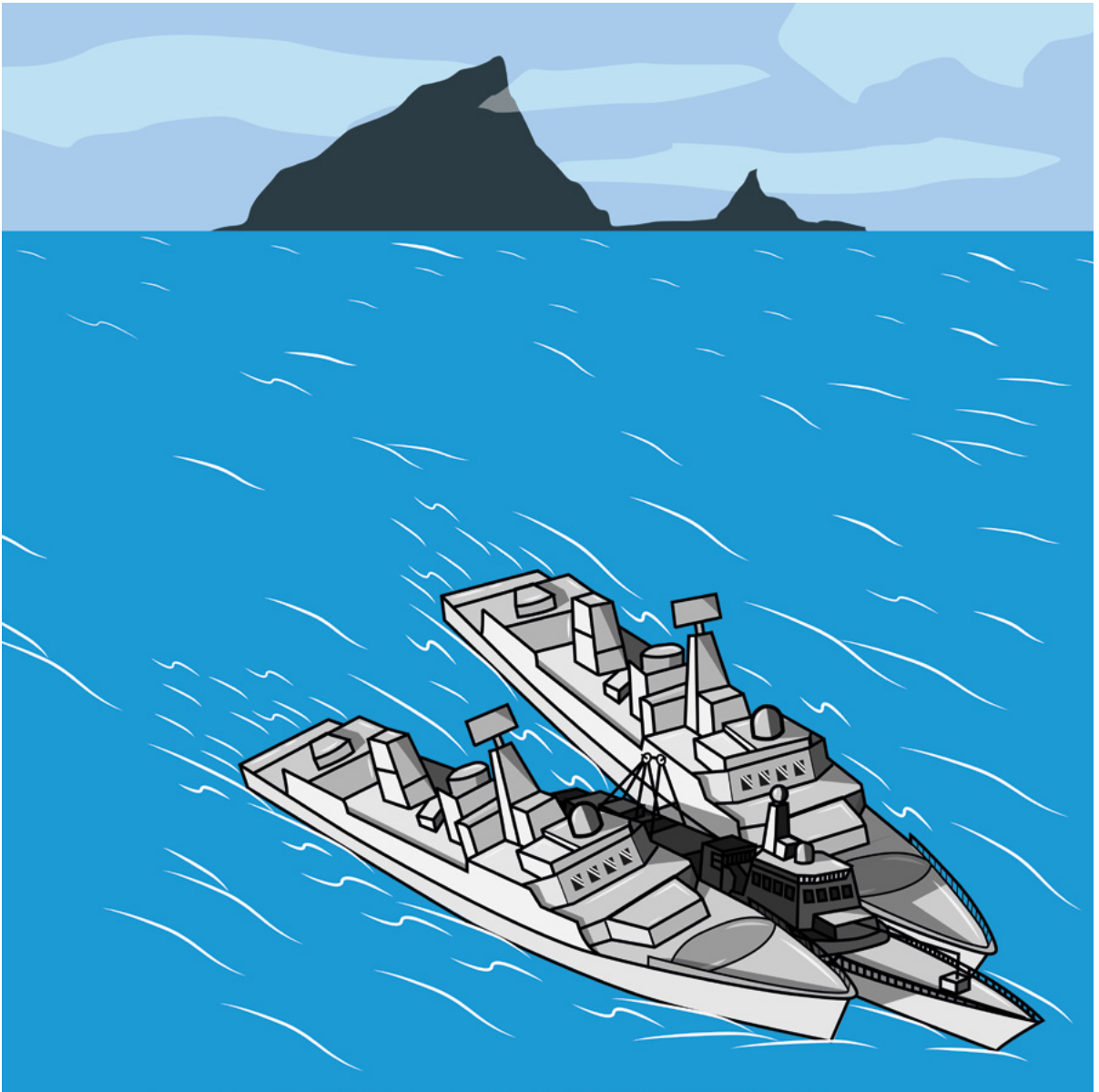
99 Sunohara, *Antō*, 16–17, 36.

100 Sunohara, *Antō*, 39–43.

101 Maehara, author’s interview.

102 Sunohara, *Antō*, 49; Zhang, *Xin Zhongguo He Riben Guanxi Shi*, 299.

103 Noda Yoshihiko, former prime minister, author’s interview, Tokyo, Sept. 5, 2017.



islands, it was a development unwelcome to both governments. Ishihara was well known as a right-wing nationalist and there were concerns he would provoke Beijing such that “Sino-Japanese relations would enter an extremely dangerous state.”¹⁰⁴ To contain the situation, the new Noda administration began quietly exploring the possibility of preemptively buying the islands. Behind the scenes, it also reached out to Chinese officials, arguing it was better for the Japanese government to hold title to the islands. Initially, the Japanese government thought it might be making headway in gaining tacit acceptance from Beijing of this point.¹⁰⁵ The hope was to surreptitiously transfer the islands’ ownership without any publicity.

This plan failed, however, when in July 2012 a Japanese newspaper made the story front-page news and Noda was forced to publicly announce his plans to pursue a potential purchase.¹⁰⁶ Compounding the damage, this announcement also coincided with an important wartime anniversary, the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in 1937 which had precipitated Imperial Japan’s full-scale military invasion of China. Even still, the Chinese government only began meaningfully escalating its response in mid-August, suggesting it, too, had initially wished to handle the issue quietly. But despite the apparent initial intentions of both sides, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands subsequently became a highly salient flashpoint. Yet it remains unclear why.

104 Yoshihiko, author’s interview.

105 Sunohara, *Antō*, 173–83, 253–55.

106 Sunohara, *Antō*, 189–91.

The Three Dimensions of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands' Increased Significance

In examining the evidence, three dimensions of the islands' increased significance emerge as important in explaining how the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands have developed into the flashpoint they are today. Those dimensions are symbolic, domestic, and competitive. The initial catalyst for the islands to begin growing in significance was the 2010 collision incident. The 2012 Japanese purchase of the islands exacerbated this even further.

The Symbolic Dimension

Surveying official statements, news reports, and comments from government officials regarding the islands, it becomes clear that the dispute over the islands rapidly came to implicate much more than their immediate, tangible value. Political scientists have long suggested that international relations are populated with a variety of intangible concerns. State actors care about reputation, status, prestige, and honor within the international community.¹⁰⁷ In some cases, these are ends in themselves, such as, for instance, when international prestige satisfies a need for national self-esteem or a certain international status constitutes an important element of a state's national identity. In other cases, they can be a means to an end — for example, in order to increase the international deference a state enjoys and ease its ability to achieve its desired outcomes.¹⁰⁸ The pursuit of intangibles — such as reputation — may even stem from mistaken

fears over how other states will evaluate a given state's resolve.¹⁰⁹ Such concerns may be particularly salient for state actors who believe their international standing does not reflect what they are due, or alternately, perceive their status and prestige to be slipping away. Apart from global concerns, there may also exist intangible concerns that are particular to certain relationships between specific states. These include not only particular fixations with relative status and hierarchy vis-à-vis key counterparts, but also historical resentments and grievances, stories of unrectified humiliation and betrayal, and even mutual suspicion and prejudices.¹¹⁰

Even before 2010, Sino-Japanese relations had experienced various episodes of contention over intangible issues. In the early 2000s, issues concerning the legacies of Japanese aggression against China — the “history problem” as it is called — loomed large. In particular, Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's annual visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, where 14 Japanese Class A war criminals are enshrined, were an especial irritant — by the end of his administration the top Chinese leadership refused to even meet with him.¹¹¹ This was exacerbated, among other things, by disputes over textbook content and ongoing wartime compensation issues.¹¹² Beijing's official position was that Japan was not taking the proper attitude toward its history, while for many on the Japanese side, the Chinese government was also responsible for cynically playing up history and exaggerating the threat of Japanese militarism.¹¹³ Indeed, in a 2010 poll, the majority of Chinese respondents blamed a lack of Japanese historical consciousness for the

107 Allan Dafoe, Jonathan Renshon, and Paul Huth, "Reputation and Status as Motives for War," *Annual Review of Political Science* no. 17 (May 2014): 371–93, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-071112-213421>; T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *Status in World Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to US Primacy," *International Security* 34, no. 4 (Spring 2010): 63–95, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2010.34.4.63>; Barry O'Neill, *Honor, Symbols, and War* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001); Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Reinhard Wolf, "Respect and Disrespect in International Politics: The Significance of Status Recognition," *International Theory* 3, no. 1 (2011): 105–42, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971910000308>.

108 Dafoe et al., "Reputation and Status as Motives for War," 382–83.

109 Shiping Tang, "Reputation, Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict," *Security Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 34–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410591001474>; Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010); Daryl Press, "The Credibility of Power: Assessing Threats During the 'Appeasement' Crises of the 1930s," *International Security* 29, no. 3 (Winter 2004/2005): 136–69, <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288043467478>.

110 Reinhard Wolf, "Resentment in International Relations," paper presented at the European Consortium for Political Research Workshop on Status Claims, Recognition, and Emotions in International Relations, Mainz, March, 2013; Khaled Fattah and K.M. Fierke, "A Clash of Emotions: The Politics of Humiliation and Political Violence in the Middle East," *European Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 1 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F13540661081000053>; Paul Saurette, "You Dissin Me? Humiliation and Post 9/11 Global Politics," *Review of International Studies* 32, no. 3 (2006): 495–522, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40072200>; Richard Herrmann et al., "Images in International Relations: An Experimental Test of Cognitive Schemata," *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (September 1997): 403–33, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2600790>.

111 Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 59; Ming Wan, *Sino-Japanese Relations: Interaction, Logic, and Transformation* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 260.

112 Caroline Rose, *Sino-Japanese Relations: Facing the Past, Looking to the Future?* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

113 Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 95–96; Karl Gustafsson, "Recognising Recognition through Thick and Thin: Insights from Sino-Japanese Relations," *Cooperation and Conflict* 51, no. 3 (2016): 255–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0010836715610594>.

history problem between the two countries, while Japanese respondents primarily blamed China's anti-Japanese education.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, these controversies over history played out primarily in the realm of rhetoric and, occasionally, protests — not military planning. The flare-up of the dispute over the islands, however, supplied these struggles over history a concrete focal point.¹¹⁵

The official Japanese position is that the islands were *terra nullis* when declared Japanese territory in 1895. In the decades that followed, China did not challenge Japanese use of the islands, and neither did it object to U.S. administration of the islands after World War II. From the Japanese perspective, the Chinese government's 1971 claim thus appeared suspicious so close on the heels of the publication of the U.N. Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East report suggesting the existence of significant petroleum deposits.¹¹⁶ In this view, by making a historical claim Beijing was duplicitously inserting itself into the game retroactively when it appeared there was material gain to be had, again twisting history to its own political ends.¹¹⁷

The official Chinese position, however, is that China first discovered and administered the islands and that Japan only secretly incorporated them after gaining the upper hand in the 1894–1895 Sino-Japanese War. The islands were thus Japanese spoils of war, ceded with Taiwan, and therefore subject to return under the 1945 terms of the Japanese surrender. But they were not returned, and the People's Republic of China was excluded from the 1951 peace treaty process. Therefore, in 1971, as the United States prepared to transfer the islands to Japan, Beijing made its position clear.¹¹⁸ In this reading, Japan is again white-washing past aggression and distorting history, and has “rejected

and challenged the outcomes of the victory of the World Anti-Fascist War.”¹¹⁹

Granted, these diverging historical arguments existed prior to the 2010 incident, and were known to activists and specialists. With the dispute thrust into the limelight by the events of 2010 and 2012, however, the islands became implicated in the larger “history problem” for the domestic publics in both states, with all the perceptions of bad faith that entailed.

The islands became more than just another vessel for historical disagreements, frustrations, and grievances, however. They also came to implicate higher matters of justice. In China, this is exemplified by a sudden uptick after the *People's Daily* referred to Japan as “stealing” (*qiequ*) the islands in 2010.¹²⁰ The language of theft was also used in Japan, where, as one Japanese commentator noted, the logic took the following pattern: The events triggered a “[the islands] ‘may be stolen’ victimhood-consciousness,” resulting in “an instantaneous ‘we cannot let [them] be stolen’ reflexive response.”¹²¹ Certainly, if, as each country insists, the islands are its “inherent” territory,¹²² the other country cannot but have criminal intent and is acting unjustly.

All the above erupted against the larger backdrop of Sino-Japanese relations, in which China was seen in both countries as increasingly overshadowing Japan politically, economically, and militarily.¹²³ Notably, 2010 was the year China's gross domestic product surpassed Japan's, becoming second only to the United States'.¹²⁴ Consequently, within Japan, Beijing's conduct crystallized fears of how a stronger China might behave in the future: bullying and ignoring the rules and using its military and economic might to assert its prerogatives

114 "Dai 6-kai nitchū kyōdō seronchōsa" [The Sixth Japan-China Joint Attitude Survey], Tokyo-Beijing Fōramu, Aug. 12, 2010, <http://tokyo-beijingforum.net/index.php/survey/6th-survey>.

115 For detailed analysis, see, Reinhard Drifte, "The Japan-China Confrontation Over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands—Between 'Shelving' and 'Dispute Escalation,'" *Asia-Pacific Journal* 12, no. 30 (2014), <https://apjif.org/2014/12/30/Reinhard-Drifte/4154/article.html>.

116 "Senkaku Islands Q&A."

117 The common Japanese term is *ato dashi janken* — entering a game of paper-rock-scissors after the other side has shown its hand. See, Tomebachi, *Senkaku Wo Meguru "Gokai" Wo Toku*, 6.

118 "Diaoyu Dao, an Inherent Territory of China," The State Council of the People's Republic of China, September 2012, http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/08/23/content_281474983043212.htm.

119 "Diaoyu Dao, an Inherent Territory of China."

120 Chisako Masuo, "Lun Zhongguo Zhengfu Guanyu 'Diaoyudao' Zhuzhang De Fazhan Guocheng" [The Development Process of Chinese Official Discourse on Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands], *Contemporary Japan and East-Asia Studies* 2, no. 2 (2018): 17.

121 Takashi Okada, *Senkaku Shotō Mondai: Ryōdo Nashyonarizumu No Miryoku* [Senkaku Islands Problem: The Attraction of Territorial Nationalism] (Tokyo: Sososha, 2010), 3.

122 Both even use the same word, 固有 (Japanese: *koyū*, Chinese: *guyou*).

123 Giulio Pugliese and Aurelio Insisa, *Sino-Japanese Power Politics: Might, Money and Minds* (Springer, 2016); Michael Yahuda, *Sino-Japanese Relations after the Cold War: Two Tigers Sharing a Mountain* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 39–63.

124 Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 21. This was mentioned repeatedly in interviews on both sides.

in the region and beyond.¹²⁵ Indeed, as Smith notes, in Japan the 2010 incident earned the title “Senkaku *shokku* [shock],” as it demonstrated how a “hostile” China might behave.¹²⁶ Some in Japan even began suggesting a domino logic — “If we give them Senkaku, next it will be giving over Yonaguni Island or even the main island of Okinawa.”¹²⁷ These concerns resonated with poll results revealing unfavorable popular perceptions of Chinese people more generally, likely influenced by recent negative press concerning poor behavior by mainland Chinese tourists in Japan as well as a high-profile scandal involving poisoned Chinese food imports, but also suggesting possible racist undertones of longer lineage within certain parts of the population.¹²⁸ On the eve of the 2010 collision, only a small percentage of Japanese people reported viewing mainland Chinese as peaceful, altruistic, or trustworthy, and a majority in earlier polls described mainland Chinese people as greedy, nationalistic, and rude.¹²⁹ All this further echoed and bled into larger anxieties over Japan’s place in the world given its declining population and internal malaise.¹³⁰

For Beijing, however, Japanese behavior belied the notion that other states would accord China greater respect in line with its growing strength. The inverse logic of the Chinese axiom “those who are backwards will be bullied”¹³¹ is that great powers should receive greater deference. Yet, from the official Chinese perspective, Japan was showing no such deference: It obstinately refused to acknowledge the dispute, unilaterally abrogated the implicit agreement between the two countries to shelve the issue, and repeatedly and flagrantly

disregarded Beijing’s warnings.¹³² In the words of a general in the People’s Liberation Army, “Japan should view these warnings very clearly, today’s China is different from the China of the past.”¹³³ The China of the past may have been preyed upon due to its weakness, but the strong China of today deserved to have its wishes respected. That Japan did not do so spoke to larger suspicions in China that Japan “cannot acknowledge any other Asian country, cannot accept any other Asian country’s development, believes Japan should stand eternally at the head of the Asian powers.”¹³⁴ This corresponded to more general views recorded in polls: Large majorities of Chinese respondents perceived the Japanese people as arrogant, nationalistic, and violent.¹³⁵

The islands thus became a symbol of something larger for both countries. In the words of a former high-ranking Japanese defense official, “it is not a struggle over economic interests ... it is not something that would affect the military balance, and so what is left is honor—it is a nationalistic symbol.”¹³⁶ Similarly, a former Japanese vice admiral stated that the islands “are a kind of psychological symbol ... politically and psychologically we cannot allow China to take them.”¹³⁷ Former Japanese ambassador Miyamoto Yūji framed the stakes even more poignantly: “We consider giving them up, what will they do next, does Japan really want to be a part of China, dominated by Chinese influence? ... If Japanese lose the guts to defend the Senkaku, we become, ‘Yes, I follow your orders, China, king.’”¹³⁸

Alternately, multiple Chinese interviewees in academia and at think tanks also privately conveyed the islands’ value to be neither strategic

125 Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 189–236; Shogo Suzuki, “The Rise of the Chinese ‘Other’ in Japan’s Construction of Identity: Is China a Focal Point of Japanese Nationalism?” *Pacific Review* 28, no. 1 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2014.970049>; Hagström, “Power Shift’ in East Asia?” 275–80.

126 Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 189.

127 Okada, *Senkaku Shotō Mondai*, 3.

128 Yuko Kawai, “Deracialised Race, Obscured Racism: Japaneseness, Western and Japanese Concepts of Race, and Modalities of Racism,” *Japanese Studies* 35, no. 1 (2015): 23–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10371397.2015.1006598>.

129 “Dai 6-kai nitchū kyōdō seronchōsa” [The Sixth Japan-China Joint Attitude Survey], Tokyo-Beijing Fōramu, 2006, <http://tokyo-beijingforum.net/index.php/survey/6th-survey>; “China’s Neighbors Worry About Its Growing Military Strength,” Pew Research Center, Sept. 21, 2006, 4, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2006/09/GAP-Asia-report-final-9-21-06.pdf>.

130 Hagström, “Power Shift’ in East Asia?” 292.

131 “Luohou jiu yao ai da.” See, Peter Hays Gries, *China’s New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2004), 50–51.

132 Guo Jiping, “Diaoyudao shi zhongguo lingtu, tiezheng ruzhan” [The Diaoyu Islands are Chinese territory, the mountain-high evidence is ironclad], *Renmin Ribao*, Oct. 12, 2012, 3. (Guo Jiping being the pseudonym for authoritative foreign affairs commentaries.)

133 Jin Yinan, *Shijie Dageju Zhongguo You Taidu* [The grand international setup, China has an attitude] (Beijing: Beijing Lianhe Chuban Gongsi, 2017), 66.

134 See, Wang Fan, *Daguo Waijiao* [Great Power Diplomacy] (Beijing: Beijing Lianhe Chuban Gongsi, 2016), 279.

135 “China’s Neighbors Worry About Its Growing Military Strength,” 4.

136 Yanigisawa Kyōji, former assistant chief cabinet secretary for national security (2004–2009), author’s interview, May 24, 2017.

137 Koda, author’s interview.

138 Miyamoto, author’s interview.



nor economic, but primarily symbolic and political.¹³⁹ As one scholar noted, the islands are worthless, but one cannot say so because the issue is too emotional. He continued, “The islands are emotionally important. They are just a few rocks, but we cannot back down. Japan took the islands when China was weak.”¹⁴⁰

In sum, following the 2010 incident, the dispute over the islands quickly became about much more than the islands themselves — they became concrete proxies in larger morally and emotionally charged struggles over history, reputation, recognition, victimization, and status. There is, therefore, an important symbolic dimension to the significance of the islands within Sino-Japanese relations. Their increased symbolic meaning elevated the dispute’s salience and raised the perceived stakes involved.

to differentiate themselves from their competitors by playing to popular hawkish biases.¹⁴²

That said, for the leaders managing the territorial contest, the dispute over the islands constituted a point of exposure that domestic opponents could leverage on a domestic playing field that was not fully level. Not holding power, political opponents were at liberty to criticize without offering solutions or, alternately, to propose tactics that play well domestically regardless of their international ramifications. Importantly, the conflict also erupted at a difficult time for the leadership in both countries. The Democratic Party of Japan, a relatively new party without previous ruling experience, had assumed power. In China, a leadership struggle was underway. The conflict thus was a potential source of vulnerability for those in power and a potential source of ammunition for their critics.

Within Japan, the ruling Democratic Party of Japan quickly came under fire for giving the appearance that the captain had been released due to pressure from Beijing. Linus Hagström has chronicled how policymakers, elites, and the press in Japan viewed the episode:

“a diplomatic defeat,” “caved in to pressure,” “a humiliating retreat,” “a fiasco.”¹⁴³ Above all, the Democratic Party of Japan was attacked as “spineless.”¹⁴⁴ Even the Japanese ambassador in Beijing was criticized for responding to late-night summonses from the Chinese government.¹⁴⁵ The opposition also called for the Democratic Party of Japan to release the coast guard footage of the incident to clarify who was at fault. Chief Cabinet Secretary Sengoku Yoshito argued the video was evidence and could not be made public, but this was ridiculed as deferring to Chinese sensibilities while Beijing spread untruths, such as the claim that the captain was innocent.¹⁴⁶ Consequently, a coast guard official who had access to the video

Afraid of what would happen should Ishihara purchase the islands, the Noda government thus entered into a covert contest with him to buy them first.

The Domestic Dimension

In examining how the dispute developed after the 2010 incident, it is equally impossible to ignore the domestic dynamics that were set into motion in both countries. Domestically, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands became a major political football. Much has been made within the international relations literature of “outbidding,” whereby domestic political actors seek to raise their profile and political chances by taking hardline foreign policy positions.¹⁴¹ The conflict over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands supplied an opportunity *par excellence* for such outbidding. Advocating harsher measures, domestic politicians and political activists were able

139 Anonymous interviews, Beijing, June 18–July 5, 2017.

140 Anonymous interview, Beijing, June 2017.

141 Michael Colaresi, *Scare Tactics: The Politics of International Rivalry* (Syracuse University Press, 2005), 20, 29–35

142 Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon, “Hawkish Biases,” in *American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear: Threat Inflation since 9/11*, ed. A. Trevor Thrall and Jane K. Cramer (New York: Routledge, 2009).

143 Hagström and Jérdén, “Understanding Fluctuations in Sino-Japanese Relations,” 276–79.

144 Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 208.

145 Niwa Uichiro, *Pekin Retsujistu* [Scorching Beijing Days] (Tokyo: Bungei Shunju, 2013), 15.

146 Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 206.

and was angry with the Japanese government's behavior leaked the footage.¹⁴⁷ The leak, in turn, ignited a further controversy over the ruling party's control of its own officials.¹⁴⁸ The overall effect was a blow to the Democratic Party of Japan. As one parliamentarian who belonged to that party relates, after 2010, "we were in a different political climate ... much of the criticism, or even I would say hatred towards the DPJ [Democratic Party of Japan] stems from that, that we were seen as being weak ... almost having a collusive relationship with the Chinese."¹⁴⁹

This, in turn, set the stage for 2012. By announcing his plan to purchase the islands, Tokyo's mayor, Ishihara, cast himself as defending the national interest where the Democratic Party of Japan had failed: "The government should buy them, but it doesn't. Tokyo will defend the Senkaku."¹⁵⁰ Ishihara was known for his antipathy toward the People's Republic of China — frequently referring to it with the derogatory term *shina*.¹⁵¹ But this was also a political opportunity. As Noda observed, "He was the mayor of Tokyo, but after that he founds a new party, and becoming ambitious towards national politics, he may have been looking for something with which to appeal to the public."¹⁵² In the wake of 2010, that is exactly what happened: One early poll showed 69 percent support for Ishihara's plan.¹⁵³ The Liberal Democratic Party followed suit, adding the purchase of the islands to its manifesto.¹⁵⁴ Ishihara quickly amassed a large number of public donations worth 1.4 billion yen, both increasing his leverage and making it difficult to back down.¹⁵⁵ Ishihara was also quite cavalier about the risks. Speaking privately with Noda, he suggested that even if China were provoked to military action, things would be fine, because "if

it involves conventional forces, the Japanese Self Defense Forces would win."¹⁵⁶

Afraid of what would happen should Ishihara purchase the islands, the Noda government thus entered into a covert contest with him to buy them first. Although the Japanese government may eventually have sought ownership of the islands regardless so as to control their use, Ishihara accelerated its timeline, limited its options, and brought unwanted publicity.¹⁵⁷ Complicating matters, the islands' owner was slow and fickle, causing some drama as both sides sought to curry favor with him.¹⁵⁸ Even after securing the owner's agreement to sell, the Japanese government worried he might change his mind. Initially, the Japanese government was hopeful that its counterparts in Beijing might be amenable to its efforts. As events progressed, however, Japan's top officials came to believe that Beijing would object irrespective of the timing and thus it would be better to finish with buying the islands quickly before the upcoming transition in China's leadership.¹⁵⁹ All the same, the forcefulness of the Chinese side's response exceeded their expectations.¹⁶⁰

Even with the purchase completed, the islands remained a prominent domestic political issue in Japan. In the September 2012 leadership race within the Liberal Democratic Party — which was playing out against the backdrop of violent Chinese protests — all candidates but one advocated increasing Japan's "effective control of the islands."¹⁶¹ Chief among these was Abe Shinzō, the victor, who proposed solidifying Japanese control by building a small harbor or structure to house officials on the islands.¹⁶² He continued a hawkish line going into the December lower-house elections, attacking the Democratic Party of Japan for "three years of

147 Masaharu Isshiki, *Nani Ka No Tame Ni* [For something] (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbun Chuban, 2011), 87.

148 Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 207–09.

149 Kitagami Keiro, Japanese Parliamentarian, author's interview, Tokyo, June 6, 2017.

150 Sunohara, *Antō*, 78.

151 "Shina" was a term used by Imperial Japan.

152 Noda, author's interview. On Ishihara's political ambitions, see also, Okada, *Senkaku Shotō Mondai* 16–20, 104.

153 "Gaikō, kiki kanri" seronchōsa kekka" [Diplomacy, crisis management poll results], *Shizuoka Shinbun*, June 18, 2012, 2.

154 Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 224.

155 Approximately \$15,000,000. "Senkaku kifu-kin jōto" [Transfer of Senkaku donation money], *Sankei Shinbun*, 7 September 2012, 1.

156 Noda, author's interview.

157 Nagashima Akihisa, special advisor to Noda for foreign affairs and national security (2011–2012), author's interview, Tokyo, July 19, 2017.

158 Sunohara, *Antō*.

159 Noda, author's interview.

160 Noda, Nagashima, author's interviews.

161 Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 234.

162 "Jimintōsōsaisen - shin sōsai ni Abe moto shushō" [LDP presidential election – new president, former PM Abe], *Mainichi Shinbun*, Sept. 27, 2012.

diplomatic failure.”¹⁶³ The Liberal Democratic Party won, making Abe prime minister. In office, he has maintained a firm position, which arguably has played to his advantage as he has sought to increase Japanese defense spending and loosen legal restrictions on the Japanese Self Defense Forces.¹⁶⁴

Domestic dynamics within the People’s Republic of China are less clear, but internal political pressures also appear to have been at work. Scholars have long noted the importance of Sino-Japanese relations to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, this being a domain of particularly strong perceived nationalist emotions.¹⁶⁵ Nevertheless, prior to the 2010 incident, the administration of President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao had been actively working to improve relations with Japan, reaching a controversial agreement to jointly develop oil and gas resources in the East China Sea. The agreement attracted internal domestic criticism and at the time was pushed through despite objections from members of various maritime security agencies.¹⁶⁶ The Japanese arrest of the fishing captain put Hu and Wen in a difficult position, as it suggested their concessions were for naught. Not surprisingly, the joint agreement was an early casualty of the 2010 confrontation.¹⁶⁷ Wen, in turn, became the face of China’s criticism of Japan, sharply attacking the arrest as “eliciting the anger of all Chinese at home and abroad.”¹⁶⁸

The incident also elicited domestic protests, although these were subject to official restraint.¹⁶⁹ Interestingly, in 2010, Chongqing was both one of the earliest sites of anti-Japanese protests and one of the last — the final demonstration occurred after the central government had begun officially discouraging protests.¹⁷⁰ This protest was apparently tolerated by local authorities, given that calls for the rally had “circulated days in advance and

drawn international media coverage.”¹⁷¹ Although it was unclear at the time, we now know the Chinese Communist Party secretary of Chongqing at the time, Bo Xilai, was engaged in a fierce political struggle for a top leadership position. One of his methods of gaining support was an unorthodox campaign to foster mass popularity. That Bo might have sought to leverage the conflict for political gain is not inconceivable — it would have helped bolster even further his populist credentials while putting pressure on the center.

Bo eventually fell in 2012 — embroiled in a drama involving the murder of an expat. This scandal, along with the larger leadership succession struggle within the Chinese Communist Party prior to the 18th Party Congress, unfolded at the same time as Tokyo was moving closer to buying the islands. The Japanese purchase thus came at a very difficult time for Hu and Wen.¹⁷² As the then-Japanese ambassador recounts, from July 2012 onward, Beijing repeatedly communicated to Tokyo that it should desist with efforts to purchase the islands, conveying the message: “The Party Congress is in November, this will be an extremely large problem.”¹⁷³

The exact details of the leadership struggle remain a mystery — including Xi Jinping’s sudden disappearance in September, officially due to a “back injury.”¹⁷⁴ What is clear, however, is that a considerable hardening of Beijing’s position vis-à-vis Tokyo occurred in mid-August 2012, following a Chinese Communist Party leadership conference in Beidaihe. Online censorship of nationalistic posts concerning the islands dropped precipitously starting August 18, and in mid-August Chinese authorities became more permissive toward nationalist activities, allowing demonstrations and attempts by Hong Kong activists to land on the

163 “Shūin-sen kōyaku bunseki - gaikō TPP” [Lower house election analysis – diplomacy, TPP], *Yomiuri Shinbun*, Dec. 14, 2012, 11.

164 Adam P. Liff, “Japan’s Security Policy in the ‘Abe Era’: Radical Transformation or Evolutionary Shift?” *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (May 2018), <https://doi.org/10.15781/T29S1M35C>.

165 Susan Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); William Callahan, *China: The Pessimist Nation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Gries, *China’s New Nationalism*.

166 Anonymous interviews, Beijing, June 18–July 5, 2017; Manicom, *Bridging Troubled Waters*, 151; Bush, *The Perils of Proximity*, 79–80; Weiss, *Powerful Patriots*, 162–64.

167 Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 191.

168 “Wenjiabao zongli zai niuyue qianglie duncu rifang liji wutiaojian fang ren” [Premier Wen Jiabao in New York strongly presses the Japanese side for an immediate and unconditional release], *Zhongyang Zhengfu Menhu Wangzhan*, Sept. 22, 2010, http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2010-09/22/content_1707863.htm.

169 Weiss, *Powerful Patriots*, 160–88.

170 Weiss, *Powerful Patriots*, 182.

171 Weiss, *Powerful Patriots*.

172 McGregor, *Asia’s Reckoning*, 272–74; “Report 245/Asia: Dangerous Waters: China-Japan Relations on the Rocks,” International Crisis Group, April 8, 2013, 7–8, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/china/dangerous-waters-china-japan-relations-rocks>.

173 Uichiro Niwa, *Chūgoku No Dai Mondai [China’s Major Issues]* (Tokyo: PHP Shinsho, 2014), 143.

174 McGregor, *Asia’s Reckoning*, 279.

islands, even providing media coverage.¹⁷⁵ Several Japanese scholars have argued that political adversaries used the dispute to attack Hu and gain leverage in the leadership struggle, with some even suggesting the demonstrations were part of a plot by the subsequently deposed security chief, Zhou Yongkang.¹⁷⁶ Even if this was not the case, Hu likely was politically on his heels, with a close aide under fire for corruption.¹⁷⁷ Consequently, it is doubtful he could have tolerated letting the contest with Japan become an additional source of vulnerability.

Unsurprisingly, when Hu encountered Noda at an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation conference on Sept. 9, 2012, he strongly conveyed Beijing's objections. As Noda recalls, he approached Hu to give his condolences and offer support for a recent earthquake, but "not at all responding to that, what came back was '[we] absolutely cannot accept nationalization of the islands ...'"¹⁷⁸ Hu's warning did not dissuade Noda. The following day he announced the purchase of the islands. As the then-Japanese ambassador has observed, the timing "was a bit diplomatically rude."¹⁷⁹ For Hu, it was a clear attack on his authority.

For Hu's successor Xi, however, it presented an opportunity and a crucial trial. Xi was reportedly charged with heading a leading small group — a key policy body reporting to the Politburo — to respond to the Japanese purchase.¹⁸⁰ If true, this constituted an important test of his leadership abilities and offered Xi the chance to project strength in contrast to Hu. The safest course for him was arguably a harsh response, provided it did not escalate out of control. As there were already calls to increase patrols around the islands,

Xi could prove his mettle by supporting them, which apparently he did.¹⁸¹ Xi continued to take a hard line toward Japan in the years that followed, siding with the People's Liberation Army in 2013 — over objections from the foreign ministry — on the plan to establish an Air Defense Identification Zone over the disputed islands.¹⁸² The political logic makes sense: When he was first in office, Xi was embroiled in fierce domestic battles, most prominently the massive anti-corruption campaign that has become one of the defining elements of his rule. Taking a hardline stance prevented criticism, appealed to key constituencies in the military and security apparatuses, and bolstered his popularity as a strong leader. It would be two years before Xi would first meet Abe, and only after both sides had hammered out statements seemingly agreeing to disagree about the existence of a disagreement over the islands.¹⁸³

The combination of vulnerability and opportunity therefore pressured leaders in both countries to adopt a harder line. But numerous minor actors on both sides — too many to list here — also saw opportunity in the conflict. This extended beyond the many nationalist activists on both sides who mobilized for the cause — online and in the streets — and the tabloids supplying sensationalist reporting. The conflict also became the subject of pulpy books for the general public, ranging from the People's Liberation Army Rear Admiral Zhang Zhaozhong's *History of Disputed Islands* to former Japanese Coast Guard official Isshiki Masaharu's account of leaking the collision footage.¹⁸⁴ Conspiracy theorists also found an outlet, suggesting, for instance, that the 2010 collision

175 Christopher Cairns and Allen Carlson, "Real-World Islands in a Social Media Sea: Nationalism and Censorship on Weibo During the 2012 Diaoyu/Senkaku Crisis," *China Quarterly* no. 225 (March 2016): 23–49, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741015001708>; Weiss, *Powerful Patriots*, 198–205.

176 Kokubun et al., *Nitchūkankeishi*, 245–46; Kokubun Ryosei, *Chū Kuni Seiji Kara Mita Nitchūkankei* [Sino-Japanese relations from the perspective of Chinese politics] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2017), 223–24.

177 Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*, 23–24.

178 Noda, author's interview; see also, McGregor, *Asia's Reckoning*, 267–69.

179 Niwa, author's interview.

180 McGregor, *Asia's Reckoning*, 270–71; International Crisis Group, "Dangerous Waters," 7. Linda Jakobson, "How Involved Is Xi Jinping in the Diaoyu Crisis?" *The Diplomat*, Feb. 8, 2013, <https://thediplomat.com/2013/02/how-involved-is-xi-jinping-in-the-diaoyu-crisis-3/>. Michael Swaine, "Chinese Views Regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Dispute," *Chinese Leadership Monitor*, 41 (Spring 2013), 9–11, <https://www.hoover.org/research/chinese-views-regarding-senkakudiaoyu-islands-dispute>. The group is potentially the "Leading Small Group for the Protection of Maritime Rights and Interests," whose full membership is unclear, but it first appears in September of 2012 on the CV of at least one People's Republic of China cadre; see, "Liu Cigui, Jianli," *Difanglingdao ziliaoku*, accessed on Sept. 5, 2018, <http://ldzl.people.com.cn/dfzlk/front/personPage11962.htm>.

181 Andrew Chubb, "Assessing Public Opinion's Influence on Foreign Policy: The Case of China's Assertive Maritime Behavior," *Asian Security* 15, no. 2 (2019): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2018.1437723>.

182 Anonymous interviews, Beijing, June 18– July 5, 2017. See also, Feng Zhang, "Should Beijing Establish an Air Defense Identification Zone Over the South China Sea?" *Foreign Policy*, June 4, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/04/should-beijing-establish-an-air-defense-identification-zone-over-the-south-china-sea/>.

183 Adam P. Liff, "Principles Without Consensus: Setting the Record Straight on the 2014 Sino-Japanese Agreement to Improve Bilateral Relations," Working Paper, Nov. 8, 2014, http://www.adamphailiff.com/documents/Liff2014_PrinciplesWithoutConsensus.pdf.

184 Zhang Zhaozhong, *Shishuo Daozheng* [History of Disputed Islands] (Beijing: Beijing Chubanshe, 2014); Isshiki, *Nani Ka No Tame Ni*.

was a Chinese plot or that the death of a Chinese panda on loan to Japan was deliberate.¹⁸⁵ Jiun Bang, in her excellent work on nationalist kitsch, has mapped the myriad ways private entrepreneurs in both Japan and China capitalized on the dispute.¹⁸⁶ Merchandise included stickers, keychains, shirts, food, and even alcohol — one example being the 106-proof “Diaoyudao patriotic liquor” available in an artillery-shell-shaped flask. Private investors even sought to purchase the trawler from the 2010 collision to house a sarcastically named “Sino-Japanese Friendship Restaurant.”¹⁸⁷ In China, the conflict spawned videogames, from the cartoonishly racist “Protect Diaoyudao,”¹⁸⁸ to the more realistic “Glorious Mission,” which was designed by the People’s Liberation Army.¹⁸⁹ All served to further cement the dispute within the public sphere and raise its salience.

In sum, there has been a clear domestic dimension to the significance of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Developments concerning the islands generated both opportunities for domestic political actors and private entrepreneurs and potential vulnerabilities for each country’s leadership. Those not in power had incentives to play up the drama and the intangible stakes of the contest for selfish ends — whether personal, ideological, or commercial. For those in power, the stakes of the contest — for better or worse — potentially included their own political fate. The overall impact domestically was to direct attention to the contest and exert pressure on policymakers to take ever stronger actions in response.

The Competitive Dimension

The 2010 incident — and the subsequent 2012 purchase even more so — sparked not just immediate retaliatory gestures but also a variety of concurrent forms of positional competition between the two countries. Akin to the security dilemma, in which actions by one side to improve its security render the other side less secure,

here actions taken to improve one side’s position in the dispute were detrimental to the other’s, thus eliciting counter-measures. Such positional competition did not just take military form, it also unfolded within the domains of public diplomacy, legal contestation, and even historical research. Through move and counter-move, a set of interactive dynamics emerged that even now continue to propel escalation of the dispute forward. The islands are thus also significant in that they became a concrete, enduring target for all these positional struggles.

Things began with the disagreements over the Japanese arrest of the trawler captain and the subsequent purchase of the islands, both of which generated strong reactions from both countries. In response to the latter, in particular, Beijing launched a “diplomacy of anger,”¹⁹⁰ expressing outrage, suspending meetings and exchanges, and taking various punitive measures. As one Chinese scholar writes, “to defend the sovereignty of the Chinese Diaoyu Islands, the Chinese government adopted a series of forceful countermeasures” ranging from sending maritime surveillance ships and aircraft into the area, to the official publication of basepoints and baselines around the islands, to even introducing daily televised weather forecasts for the islands.¹⁹¹ Beijing also permitted protests in over 200 cities, some involving violence and the destruction of stores, restaurants, and property associated with Japan.¹⁹² Japan, in turn, was host to various forms of activism, as well as protests and denunciations of China’s behavior.¹⁹³ Although the vehemence of these immediate reactions appears to have subsided, both states also took further measures to solidify their respective standing in the dispute, setting in motion various forms of positional competition that remain ongoing.

Military Competition

Perhaps the most prominent form of positional competition has been in the military — or

185 Nani Ka No Tame Ni, 49–50. McGregor, *Asia’s Reckoning*, 264.

186 Jiun Bang, “Commodification of Nationalism,” Unpublished Manuscript, (2017).

187 This was thwarted by the government. “Senkaku shōtotsu no Chūgoku gyosen wo nitchūyūkō no resutoran-sen ni?” [The Chinese ship from the Senkaku collision to be a Japan-China friendship restaurant?], *Searchina*, May 24, 2011.

188 “Baowei diaoyudao’ youxi xiajiahou, yansheng duoge shanzaiban” [After the ‘Protect Diaoyudao’ videogame took off, it spawned many imitations], *Renminwang*, July 12, 2012, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2012/0712/c1002-18499038.html>.

189 J. T. Quigley, “Diaoyu Island Assault,” *The Diplomat*, Aug. 2, 2013, <https://thediplomat.com/2013/08/diaoyu-island-assault-pla-designed-video-game-simulates-sino-japanese-conflict/>.

190 Todd Hall, *Emotional Diplomacy: Official Emotion on the International Stage* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 39–79.

191 Zhang, *Xin Zhongguo He Riben Guanxi Shi*, 300–01.

192 International Crisis Group, “Dangerous Waters,” 10–11; Weiss, *Powerful Patriots*, 160–218.

193 Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 224–28.

paramilitary — domain, whereby each side seeks advantage through acquiring and deploying relevant capabilities. Most strikingly, official Chinese vessels and aircraft have become a regular presence around the disputed islands, challenging Japanese control. Following the 2010 arrest of the Chinese trawler captain, Beijing successively sent a number of official vessels into the contiguous zone surrounding the islands. After the 2012 purchase, these increased markedly: Sixty-six patrols entered the islands' territorial waters over the subsequent year.¹⁹⁴ In the latter half of 2013, these stabilized into regular patrols two or three times per month,¹⁹⁵ and were accompanied by increasing Chinese air patrols as well.¹⁹⁶ The initial Japanese response was to shift half of its entire coast guard to the area surrounding the islands and keep up a constant pace of scrambling fighters to intercept approaching Chinese aircraft.¹⁹⁷

The longer-term response on both sides, however, has been a qualitative and quantitative increase in both the capabilities deployed in the immediate vicinity of the islands as well as the overall portfolio of capabilities that both sides possess. Beijing has steadily increased military spending and has also invested heavily in its paramilitary maritime forces.¹⁹⁸ Certainly, this is a trend that predates 2010 and involves a multitude of factors. But this spending includes capabilities that would be useful for a scenario involving the islands. Indeed, official Chinese ships appearing in adjacent waters have, of late, become larger and more militarily capable, with a number of Chinese navy vessels being repurposed as coast guard ships.¹⁹⁹ Correspondingly, Japan has increased its military spending and responded with a variety of measures, including the construction of new Japanese Self Defense Forces and Japanese Coast Guard facilities on nearby islands, the creation of a “dedicated Senkaku Territorial Waters Guard Unit”

to maintain a “24/7 presence” around the islands, a 50 percent increase in coast guard tonnage, and the creation of an amphibious force capable of retaking remote islands.²⁰⁰ Japan has also repeatedly sought U.S. support, receiving assurances that their defense agreement covers the islands and successfully seeking revisions to the bilateral defense guidelines so as to better respond to potential contingencies involving the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.²⁰¹

As each state seeks to materially defend or improve its position, the potential danger of the situation increases.

The overall consequence of the above developments is a much more crowded maritime environment coupled with a greater increase in the potential force both sides can bring to bear. As Adam Liff and Andrew Erickson note, “Despite ... the fact neither Beijing nor Tokyo *wants* conflict, the post-2012 operational status quo has significantly increased the possibility of even an unintended miscalculation or incident.”²⁰² There have been close encounters, including incidents in which Chinese military vessels have locked onto Japanese counterparts with fire-control radar and episodes of “mock dogfighting” between both sides in the air.²⁰³ As each state seeks to materially defend or improve its position, the potential danger of the situation increases.

194 Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 75,142–44; Fravel, “Explaining China's Escalation Over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands,” 32–33; Adam Liff, “China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations in the East China Sea and Japan's Response,” in *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, ed. Andrew S. Erickson and Ryan D. Martinson (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2019); “Trends in Chinese Government and Other Vessels.”

195 Liff, “China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations,” 9.

196 “China's Activities Surrounding Japan's Airspace.”

197 Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 143.

198 *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2018*, (Washington, DC: United States Department of Defense, 2018).

199 Liff, “China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations,” 13.

200 Adam P. Liff and G. John Ikenberry, “Racing Toward Tragedy?: China's Rise, Military Competition in the Asia Pacific, and the Security Dilemma,” *International Security* 39, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 73–78, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00176; Liff, “China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations,” 17–21; Christopher Hughes, “Japan's 'Resentful Realism' and Balancing China's Rise,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 9, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 144–45, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pow004>.

201 Manyin, “Senkaku (Diaoyu/Diaoyutai) Islands Dispute,” 6–8.

202 Adam P. Liff and Andrew S. Erickson, “From Management Crisis to Crisis Management? Japan's Post-2012 Institutional Reforms and Sino-Japanese Crisis (In)stability,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 5 (2017): 604, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1293530>.

203 Liff and Erickson, “From Management Crisis to Crisis Management?” 605. Although the Chinese government denies the radar incidents.

Public Diplomacy

However, the ongoing, interactive material competition is not the only one in play. Positional jockeying has also unfolded in the realm of public diplomacy, with each country appealing for support internationally. As the conflict proceeded, Beijing became particularly active in broadcasting its position — mobilizing diplomats to author op-eds in foreign newspapers, encouraging demonstrations abroad, releasing a new white paper, and creating a multi-language pamphlet for international distribution.²⁰⁴ Kitagami Keiro, an aide in Noda's administration, recalled Noda presenting him the Japanese-language version of the pamphlet, saying, "one of my friends visited China for business purposes and they gave him this. ... We have to give our side of the argument."²⁰⁵ Consequently, Japan began producing its own pamphlets and videos, and diplomats were given orders to respond where possible — at the United Nations, at international conferences, and in the opinion pages of major foreign newspapers.²⁰⁶ At times, this bordered on the absurd, as when Chinese and Japanese diplomats in Britain traded public accusations as to which was more akin to Voldemort, the villain from the Harry Potter books.²⁰⁷ The core message each country endeavored to convey, however, was more serious. Beijing sought to portray Japan as an unrepentant, militaristic challenger to the post-World War II order, while Tokyo sought to portray itself as upholding a rules-based order in the face of broad Chinese revisionism in both the East and South China Seas.²⁰⁸

Legal and Historical Contestation

The public diplomacy campaigns intersected with two other domains in which Sino-Japanese positional struggles were unfolding: those of legal contestation and historical scholarship. Legal imperatives, in particular, can have quite pernicious effects, motivating competitive "displays of sovereignty" to avoid any sign of acquiescence and to counter every move made by the other side.²⁰⁹ In particular, this has driven contests between Chinese and Japanese vessels over jurisdictional control in the waters off the islands. Legal argumentation also incentivizes each side to promote self-serving interpretations while denying any legitimacy to the position of the other, reinforcing a sense of self-righteous victimization. As noted above, the Japanese legal claim contends the islands were *terra nullis* and that, for decades, it exercised effective control with Chinese consent, while Beijing argues its legal claim on the basis of prior discovery and the Japanese conditions of surrender in 1945.²¹⁰ Discrepancies between these justificatory histories feed the impression that each side's national cause is just and the other's is duplicitous. Thus, as both countries seek to legitimate their claims, they become cemented in positions ever less amenable to compromise.

To supplement their legal claims, both countries have also resorted to competitive historical documentation and research. Each side has sought to support its position with historical maps, documents, and sympathetic scholarship.²¹¹ History has also been marshalled to fortify domestic support through historical exhibitions and updated textbooks.²¹² Historical argumentation can work in destabilizing ways,

204 "Diaoyu Dao, an Inherent Territory of China"; "China Publishes Pamphlet on Diaoyu Islands," *Beijing Review*, Sept. 21, 2012, http://www.bjreview.com.cn/special/2012-09/21/content_485502.htm.

205 Kitagami, author's interview.

206 Kitagami, author's interview; Linus Hagström, "The Sino-Japanese Battle for Soft Power: Pitfalls and Promises," *Global Affairs* 1, no. 2 (2015): 129–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2015.990798>; Pugliese and Insisa, *Sino-Japanese Power Politics*, 103–27. "Japanese Territory: Reference Room," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, accessed Sept. 10, 2018 at: https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/senkaku/page1we_000012.html.

207 Tyler Roney, "The Sino-Japanese Voldemort Wars," *The Diplomat*, Jan. 9, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/01/the-sino-japanese-voldemort-wars-chinas-doomed-pr-battle/>.

208 Hagström, "The Sino-Japanese Battle for Soft Power"; Pugliese and Insisa, *Sino-Japanese Power Politics*, 103–27.

209 Ramos-Mrosovsky, "International Law's Unhelpful Role in the Senkaku Islands," 906; Paul O'Shea, "Sovereignty and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Territorial Dispute, Working Paper 240," (Stockholm: EJIS Stockholm School of Economics, 2012).

210 "Senkaku Islands Q&A"; "Diaoyu Dao, an Inherent Territory of China."

211 "Commissioned Research Report on Archives of Senkaku Islands," Office of Planning and Coordination on Territory and Sovereignty, Cabinet Office, Japan, accessed Sept. 10, 2018, https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/ryodo_eg/report/senkaku.html; "Diaoyu Dao: The Inherent Territory of China," National Marine Data and Information Service, accessed Sept. 10, 2018, <http://www.diaoyudao.org.cn/en/>.

212 "Shenyang '9-18' lishibowuguan: jiang zengjia diaoyudao shishi zhanlan neirong" [Shenyang 9-18 history museum: will increase content of Diaoyu Island historical exhibit], *Renminwang*, Sept. 15, 2012, <http://japan.people.com.cn/35467/7949966.html>; "Ryōdo shuken tenji-kan hōmupēji" [National Museum of Territory and History Homepage], Japan, accessed Sept. 11, 2018, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/ryodo/tenjikan/>; "New Chinese Textbook Lays Claim to Senkakus, Dates Start of War with Japan to 1931," *Japan Times*, Sept. 1, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/09/01/national/new-chinese-textbook-lays-claim-senkakus-dates-start-war-japan-1931/>; "Japanese Textbooks Toe Government Line on Disputed Islands," *Nikkei Asian Review*, April 7, 2015, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Japanese-textbooks-toe-government-line-on-disputed-islands>.

however. For example, in 2013, two Chinese scholars published a piece in the *People's Daily* arguing not only that the Diaoyu Islands belonged to Taiwan, but that even Japanese claims to the Ryukyu Islands had a troubled history.²¹³ According to one of the authors, the goal was to point out, "If one says that the Ryukyus in early history were not part of Japan, what evidence does Japan have to prove that the Diaoyu Islands are Japanese territory[?]"²¹⁴ Ostensibly intended to discredit Japanese claims to the islands as "inherent territory," in Japan, the essay was interpreted much more ominously, with conservative papers proclaiming, "not just the Senkaku, China's blatant intention to seize all of Okinawa has become visible."²¹⁵ The article only provided further confirmation of Chinese malevolence to hawks in Japan arguing that the islands were just the first domino.

In short, the islands have also grown in significance as the focus of ongoing positional competition across a variety of domains. They act as a concrete object for both sides to continue to struggle over. As each side has mobilized its diplomats, soldiers, scholars, and lawyers for their respective efforts, the result has been ever hardening positions and more points of friction within Sino-Japanese relations. Even after the immediate tensions subsided, these various forms of competition have continued to unfold, shaping mutual perceptions and setting the stage for further tensions. Perhaps most crucially, these different forms of competition appear to be taking on lives of their own irrespective of the original value of the stakes involved. Indeed, it is, in general, not the place of those tasked with achieving positional advantage to question the aims — only to find the best way to execute their mandate.

Thinking in Three Dimensions

The recent increase in significance of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has three key dimensions. The first is the symbolic dimension, which consists of the expanding, intangible stakes that were projected onto the islands and elevated their prominence. The second, the domestic dimension, encompasses the ways in which the islands became a political football, generating increased internal pressure on leaders on both sides to take firmer measures. And the third is the competitive dimension, which refers to the role the islands have played as an object of various positional struggles that continue to unfold. Even as the relationship has now taken an apparent turn for the better, various forms of positional competition are still operative and a collision at sea or in the air could easily set off a new round of tensions.

Unquestionably, the three-dimensional account outlined here draws significant inspiration from existing, process-focused strands within the literature on territorial disputes. First, it echoes approaches that highlight the symbolic dimension of territorial disputes, including concerns about rivalry, reputation, and symbolic entrenchment.²¹⁶ But it does not promote any one concern — such as reputation — over the others, arguing that a multiplicity of intangible concerns have simultaneously been in play, including prejudices, moralized judgments, status issues, and resentment. Second, it builds on work that stresses the importance of the domestic dimension.²¹⁷ But it does not treat these dynamics as necessarily more pronounced in democracies,²¹⁸ nor does it focus only on the domestic coalitions that involvement in these disputes engenders.²¹⁹ It additionally highlights how a wide variety of actors — journalists, academics, activists, and even economic opportunists — participated in elevating the domestic salience of the dispute. Lastly, it resonates with work that explores the interactive nature of disputes in terms of positional competition — whether this involves argumentation

213 Zhang Haipeng and Li Guoqiang, "Lun maguantiaoyue and diaoyudao wenti" [Discussing the Treaty of Shimonoseki and the Diaoyu Islands Question], *Renmin Ribao*, May 8, 2013, 9.

214 "Renminribao kan wen zhiyi liuqiu guishu" [The People's Daily publishes an essay questioning the ownership of the Ryukyus], *Zhongguo guangbowang*, accessed Sept. 11, 2018, http://china.cnr.cn/xwwgf/201305/t20130510_512557847.shtml.

215 "Chūgoku no Okinawa ronbun" [China's Okinawa essay], *Sankei Shinbun*, May 10, 2013, 2.

216 Hassner, "The Path to Intractability"; Barbara Walter, "Explaining the Intractability of Territorial Conflict," *International Studies Review* 5, no. 4 (December 2003): 137–53, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3186399>; Colaresi et al., *Strategic Rivalries in World Politics*; Monica Toft, "Indivisible Territory, Geographic Concentration, and Ethnic War," *Security Studies* 12, no. 2 (2002): 82–119, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410212120010>.

217 Sumit Ganguly and William Thompson, *Asian Rivalries: Conflict, Escalation, and Limitations on Two-Level Games* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

218 Paul K. Huth and Todd L. Allee, "Domestic Political Accountability and the Escalation and Settlement of International Disputes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 6 (2002), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2F002200202237928>.

219 Stacie Goddard, "Uncommon Ground: Indivisible Territory and the Politics of Legitimacy," *International Organization* 60, no. 1 (January 2006): 35–68, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818306060024>.

or militarization — but broadens the focus to include the arenas of international public diplomacy, legal rationalization, and historical research.²²⁰

Beyond this, however, it is crucial to note that none of the developments outlined above played out in isolation. Quite the contrary. At various times, when one facet of the islands' significance increased, the other dimensions were affected as well. The island's growing symbolic significance, for instance, rendered them more attractive for use as a domestic political football. Indeed, a variety of substate actors in the domestic realm — politicians, journalists, online commentators, demonstrators, even businesses producing nationalist kitsch such as "Diaoyu Beer," sporting the exhortation to "drink the Diaoyu, strengthen your patriotism!"²²¹ — leveraged the symbolic import of the islands to their own ends. But at the same time, the symbolic meaning of the islands also grew in return as a result of their activism. Ishihara, in particular, was a key protagonist in this regard, stoking concerns that "before we know it, Japan could become the sixth star on China's national flag."²²²

The rising symbolic and domestic stakes attached to the islands, in turn, increased the weight of demands on policymakers to take firmer measures, both in the waters around the islands and in the arena of international public opinion. These actions, however, set in motion their own escalatory, interactive dynamics, generating additional points of friction. The *People's Daily* article on the "unresolved" status of Okinawa mentioned above is a prime example of this — an escalation in the realm of historical argumentation that provided ammunition to Japanese hawks while exacerbating more general Japanese concerns over China's intentions. Moves such as this only served to further heighten the symbolic and domestic import of the islands.

Conversely, while counterfactuals are always problematic, there exists a strong logical argument that were one to have stripped away any one of these dimensions of the islands' significance, events might have played out quite differently. Without the ineffable anxieties, frustrations, and resentments that became symbolically attached to the islands, the islands would arguably have been less salient a political issue for domestic opportunists to exploit. Here, too, Ishihara looms especially large. Had he not been able to leverage the issue for sizable donations and public

support, his threat to purchase the islands would have lacked credibility. Without the domestic significance of the islands as a source of political vulnerability — whether for the beleaguered Democratic Party of Japan government or during the troubled leadership transition in Beijing — both governments would have perhaps had more room to delay, downplay the issue, or seek alternative courses of action. Lastly, without the significance of the islands as a concrete and enduring focal point of positional jockeying that continues even now on multiple fronts, the potential risk of new cycles of conflict involving the islands would be significantly reduced.

Conclusion

In many ways, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands have played the role of what the famous British film director Alfred Hitchcock labeled a "MacGuffin" — an object that the protagonists of a narrative find themselves struggling to obtain. For instance, "in crook stories it is always the necklace and spy stories it is always the papers."²²³ For Hitchcock, the attributes of the MacGuffin were more or less irrelevant. The MacGuffin was only important because it gave the main characters something to fight over, thus driving the plot forward and rendering the film compelling. In Hitchcock's words, "the logicians are all wrong in trying to figure out the truth of a MacGuffin, since it's beside the point. ... To me, the narrator, [it is] of no importance whatever."²²⁴ Similarly, the argument here is that asking after the "truth" of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, in terms of their prior strategic, economic, or historic value, is not of much analytical use. Rather, we should look to the roles they play in the larger story. They are significant within Sino-Japanese relations as a symbol, a domestic political football, and an object of various forms of ongoing positional competition.

The purpose of this article has been to provide an evidence-based, theoretically informed account of how and why the contest over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has turned into what it is. The three-dimensional approach taken here may apply to other disputes to greater or lesser degrees as well, and this could offer an interesting avenue for future research. But it should also be noted that the

220 Goddard, "Uncommon Ground"; Hassner, "The Path to Intractability"; Vasquez, *The War Puzzle Revisited*, 110, 424–25.

221 "Diaoyudao pijiu," [Diaoyu Islands Beer] Lecuntao.com, <https://www.lecuntao.com/shop/item-362723.html>.

222 Yuka Hayashi, "Ishihara Unplugged," *Wall Street Journal*, May 29, 2012, <http://on.wsj.com/19sZwZl>.

223 Fred R. Shapiro, *The Yale Book of Quotations* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 360–61.

224 François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 192.

contest over the islands is distinctly characterized by being initially unwelcome by both sides and seemingly detached from the actual, tangible stakes involved. Given the potential dangers implicated in this dispute, making sense of it is an important task in and of itself. Moreover, understanding the dynamics at work can help inform how we consider potential paths forward.

That said, there is no erasing the past. The politicized nature of the dispute means the options available for reversing the developments of the past several years are quite limited. However, one could endeavor to call public attention to the limited tangible worth of the islands. Taking into account both the tremendous value of stable economic and political relations between Japan and the People's Republic of China, not to mention the massive potential damage even a minor armed clash over the islands might produce, the concrete value of the islands pales in comparison, especially in light of their relative unimportance for individual citizens' lives and livelihoods. Framing the dispute in this manner would create political incentives to contain or shelve the conflict and work to detach the islands from the intangible significance they have come to accrue. But at the same time, there are parties on either side who might strongly push back against such attempts — and indeed, a number of China hawks already have²²⁵ — thus rendering this option decidedly difficult.

And while recent efforts to set up crisis communication mechanisms are to be welcomed, more needs to be done to decrease the possibility of dangerous incidents in the vicinity of the islands. One avenue would be an agreement to mutually reduce or limit deployments to the area coupled with the explicit understanding that this would alter neither side's legal position. Even better, declaring the islands and their territorial waters a mutually recognized nature sanctuary would offer good reason to keep ships out of the vicinity.²²⁶ Currently, however, this option is unlikely to find much domestic support in either country.

Whatever measures are taken, the eventual goal should be to return the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands to the periphery of Sino-Japanese relations. After all, despite the swirl of anxiety and resentment, political struggles and intrigue, and contests for military and diplomatic advantage, at the center of this dispute lies just a set of uninhabited rocks — rocks of questionable substantive value at that. 🏰

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Photo: [Al Jazeera English](#)

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