

# BULLETIN

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## China–Japan Tensions Over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands

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*The recent tensions between China and Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands (Japan's government announcement about purchasing three of the disputed islands) are harsher than previous incidents two years ago. It seems that the reason for the increasing tensions is an internal political rivalry in Japan. The PRC's rough response to the "nationalisation" of the islets (e.g., dispatching surveillance vessels to the islands), which was inevitable, especially on the eve of the once-in-a-decade leadership succession, and anti-Japanese sentiments in China, could destabilise the situation in the region and deteriorate bilateral relations and economic cooperation.*

Unresolved territorial claims in the Asia-Pacific region have intensified in recent months. One of the most acute involves China, Taiwan and Japan, and concerns the Diaoyu (in Chinese) or Senkaku (in Japanese) islands. Located in the East China Sea about 170 km northeast of Taiwan and 400 km west of Okinawa, the uninhabited islands have been the subject of dispute since the 1970s, when it was revealed that the area is most probably rich in offshore oil and natural gas deposits (and has abundant fishing grounds). Furthermore, as the islands lie on a major trade route in the East China Sea, control over the islands ensures the safety of routes, including the transportation of raw materials from Australia, Africa and the Middle East. The recent dispute shows, however, that Diaoyu/Senkaku also play symbolic roles in national pride and can be used as a tool to inflame tensions during internal upheaval, the rise of nationalist sentiments or as demonstrations of power.

**Recent Developments.** The trigger for the recent conflict was an announcement by Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara in April this year that he intended to purchase three Senkaku islands that were privately held. He expressed on several occasions his concerns about Japan's security and territorial integrity because of China's increasing power and also advocated white-washing Japan's role during wars with China. Known as an extreme rightist politician, Ishihara is perceived in China as a "trouble-maker".

Responding to Ishihara's plan, in mid-August, activists from Hong Kong went to the islands, and some of them were arrested by Japanese police. Additionally, Japanese activists, including politicians, went to the islands with Japanese flags. Aware of the increasing tensions with China after the Ishihara's announcement (since a Chinese reaction was more than certain), the Japanese government decided to purchase the islands to prevent Ishihara from doing so. This step was interpreted as a way to placate China and to assure Beijing that the islands would not be purchased by the extremist politicians and that no military equipment would be installed there. On 10 September, the Japanese government announced a deal with the owners of the islands to purchase them. In China, this decision ignited public protests, which at first were muted by official media to prevent an increase in nationalist sentiment in the PRC.

China demanded that Japan's government prevent local authorities from buying islands and did not perceive the central government's decision to purchase the three islands as a placatory step. Hence, the PRC called Japan's decision as "nationalisation" of the islands, and declared it to be illegal, underlining its stance that the Diaoyu Islands have belonged to China "since ancient times". The Chinese MFA repeatedly described the Japanese actions as unilateral, illegal and invalid. In line with the Chinese position, Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou stated that "Taiwan makes no compromises regarding the sovereignty over the Diaoyu Islands". In reaction to the purchase

announcement, China dispatched surveillance vessels (and more than a thousand fishing boats) to the islands, raising speculation about the possibilities it might use military means to resolve the conflict. Beijing also announced postponing a ceremony to mark 40 years of diplomatic relations with Japan.

**Reasons.** It seems that one of the reasons for reigniting this Sino-Japanese dispute is connected with an internal rivalry in Japan between political parties. The opposition, particularly the conservative and rightist politicians who present a tough position on China, uses the disputes about the islands as a tool in domestic politics to highlight the weakness of the current government in resolving economic and foreign policy problems and to raise nationalist sentiments in Japan. The internal power struggle has intensified recently ahead of the probable early elections to the lower house of parliament (i.e., the government has promised the opposition a new election in exchange for supporting bills to decrease public debt) and a leadership election within the ruling Japanese Democratic Party (JDP) in which Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda would like to demonstrate he is an effective and assertive leader (last week, Noda was re-elected as JDP leader). Despite the intra- and inter-party friction about using nationalist sentiments to gain public support and present Japan's assertive "face", it seems that the central government does not fully control the situation because of the actions of local authorities. Under these circumstances, the government is forced to attempt to calm tensions and placate Beijing, which instead is infuriated.

The response by the Chinese government to the "nationalisation" of the islands was much harsher than expected and is strongly connected with distrust of Japan's intentions, which is rooted in still unresolved historical disputes. China is highly sensitive about its sovereignty and territorial integrity, remembering its "national humiliation" by Western powers and Japan in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As a rising economic, political and military power, China feels it is strong and can react to such problems with a more assertive approach. Additionally, it seems that one of the factors for China's tough response was the fact that the PRC is on the eve of the once-in-a-decade leadership succession, and not only outgoing but also future Chinese leaders would like to show their determination to defend China's core interests. It seems that the public pressure connected to negative perceptions of Japan and Chinese nationalism—a result of patriotic education—also were important reasons for the relatively abrasive Chinese reactions to the Japanese initiatives.

**Consequences and Prospects.** Despite efforts by Chinese authorities to mute them, anti-Japanese sentiments in China are still quite strong. This situation indicates the growing role in China of the internet and social networking websites (e.g., Weibo, a Twitter-like platform). Recent anti-Japanese riots undermine China's image, increasing suspicions of the PRC's development of the country and influence on bilateral economic cooperation.

Some well-known Japanese companies declared they were suspending production in the PRC, and a downturn in tourism has also been noticed. Chinese tourists are big spenders in Japan. Chinese travel agencies cancelled or stopped offering trips to Japan, which could mean losses for the Japanese tourist industry, especially during the one-week PRC holidays starting 1 October, when many Chinese normally travel.

Nevertheless, there are the first signals of attempts to defuse the tensions. Some Japanese companies have resumed production in China. Premier Noda has admitted to miscalculations over the dispute and the Japanese vice foreign minister went to China to discuss the recent events, though the Chinese MFA statement released after the meeting was relatively tough. Both sides decided, however, to maintain consultations.

Sino-Japanese tension is not the only hot issue in the region. In recent months, Asia-Pacific is becoming an area of increasingly heated territorial disputes and rising nationalist sentiments, which combined could seriously destabilise the region. They include the Japan and South Korea dispute over the Takeshima/Dokdo islands; Japan-Russia tensions over the Kurile Islands, and territorial claims involving the PRC, Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei and Malaysia in the South China Sea over the Spratly and Paracel islands and Scarborough Shoal. It may be assumed that the source of the heightened frictions in the region stems from the rivalry between China and the U.S., so the possibility of further disputes is very high.

The recent developments in Asia-Pacific could have a negative impact on the EU, as the region is an important economic partner. The tensions could be a critical moment for the EU to re-think and modify its policy towards Asia and to increase its diplomatic presence in the region. The EU, which (unlike the U.S.) is perceived in Asia as a civilian and soft power player, could become, for example, a promoter and provider of rapprochement models (along the lines of the German-Polish, German-French models) that have been successfully implemented in Europe.