

## Don't Forget About the East China Sea

By Michael Auslin

**T**he East China Sea may be the most strategic location in all of Asia. While the media and policymakers have paid considerable attention to the geopolitical significance of the South China Sea, the East China Sea deserves equal attention. Like the South China Sea, it is rife with contested territorial claims, larger military buildups among the principal players of the region and a geopolitical significance that impinges even more directly on long-standing U.S. security commitments. It is a nexus of competition between Asia's two great powers, China and Japan, and it is an area in which the United States plans to retain sufficient military presence to shape the maritime environment. Disruption of free navigation there would affect the economies of the three major countries in the region – China, Japan and South Korea – and could drag in Russia, which increasingly exports its natural resources through the East China Sea. Conflict in the East China Sea could trigger a tripwire effect, requiring the United States to increase the number of military forces that are forward stationed in Asia.

To date, a large U.S. military presence has minimized frictions among the major powers in the East China Sea. The United States should continue to uphold its commitments to security and stability in the East China Sea even as it operates with a smaller defense budget. Doing so will require building a force that can defend itself against China's increasingly sophisticated naval and air weapons, one that has better surveillance capabilities and one that is structured to respond quickly to any destabilizing actions in the waters shared by China, Japan, and North and South Korea.

### About this publication

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### Growing Geopolitical Stress in the East China Sea

For much of the post-World War II era, American attention has centered on Northeast Asia and, by extension, the East China Sea. Two of America's most important alliance partners, Japan and South Korea, are surrounded by its 1.25 million square kilometers of water. The East China Sea also creates a large maritime domain around Taiwan, to whose defense America has committed itself both morally and legally. In particular, after the triumph of Mao Zedong in 1949, concern over China as a Communist giant in the midst of a still-contested East Asia focused U.S. specialists on the triangular relationship among democratic Japan, the People's Republic of China and the United States in the East China Sea. For the United States, political and military concerns persisted throughout the Cold War, but economic considerations grew in importance when China and South Korea became major industrial powers and exporters. The trans-Pacific trade of both countries moves through the East China Sea (unlike Japan, where most exporters have direct access to the Pacific Ocean), and Japanese ships must use the East China Sea to reach major markets in China. From the major ports of Inchon and Pusan in South Korea, as well as from Fuzhou, Ningbo, Qingdao, Shanghai and Wenzhou in China, access to the Pacific Ocean passes through Japan's Ryukyu island chain, and the Miyako and Osumi Straits in particular.

Chinese strategic thinkers, for their part, see the Ryukyus as a potential barrier to Chinese access to the global commons. Concern about the Ryukyus also drives much of Chinese naval thinking about the First Island Chain concept (in which the countries on the eastern side of the Yellow Sea and East and South China Seas are seen as a natural geographical barrier between China and the Western Pacific). As a result, over the past two decades, China has built up its military with the aim of being able to overcome any barrier that would bottle up its forces near the continent. It has been developing capabilities to quickly subdue and control scattered islands, such as the Ryukyu chain, through a combination of missile attack, air bombardment and control of surrounding waters.

The geopolitical balance in the East China Sea differs from the balance in the rest of Asia, given the close proximity of major military powers with extensive naval and air capabilities. For all of its growing strengths, China is not the only, or even the major, player in the area. With U.S. Navy, Marine and Air Force units stationed throughout the Japanese archipelago, the Pentagon maintains a direct presence in the East China Sea that is more difficult to replicate to the south. Cooperating and training with these U.S. forces are highly skilled elements of the Japanese Maritime and

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Air Self-Defense Forces, not to mention the Japanese Coast Guard, one of the world's best equipped and best trained law-enforcement fleets. Japanese forces increasingly operate in the same water and air space as the People's Liberation Army (PLA), whose surface and subsurface fleets regularly move inside the geographical boundaries of the East China Sea and transit through the Ryukyu island chain into the western Pacific. Other nations with smaller navies also play a role in Northeast Asia's regional commons, including Russia, North Korea and South Korea. Indeed, Russia has signaled a desire to reconstitute its Pacific Fleet and significantly upgrade advanced

weapons systems in the Kuril Island chain, including attack helicopters, antiship cruise missiles and air defense systems.<sup>1</sup>

The confluence of all these powers operating in a bounded geographic space has, perhaps counterintuitively, limited the amount of friction among them. This is largely explained by the overwhelming dominance of the U.S. Navy in the region. Unlike the South China Sea, the East China Sea is not surrounded by smaller, weaker nations that Beijing can attempt to influence. Rather, as China's naval and air capabilities have grown, Chinese vessels have chosen to slowly probe the limits of how far they can operate in the East China Sea under the watchful eye of American and Japanese forces.

However, there are three reasons why China may begin to assert itself more actively in the East China Sea. First, given its desire to have accurate charts for transiting the Ryukyu chain into the Pacific, China has been mapping and exploring seabed areas around Japanese islands in the chain. From Japan's point of view, this is a security concern that also affects its exclusive economic zones (EEZs) in the Ryukyus. In the past two years, Chinese flotillas of 10 or more ships have transversed the Miyako Strait, continuing on to carry out naval exercises in the Pacific.<sup>2</sup> A half dozen instances of Chinese fishing boats or research vessels being intercepted by the Japanese Coast Guard in Japan's EEZs have raised Tokyo's concern over its ability to maintain control of its vast territorial waters.

Second, the unresolved Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands dispute is increasing tension between China and Japan. The islands, which lie just north of Taiwan, are claimed by China, Japan and Taiwan and have been administered by Tokyo since 1972. The waters off the islands contain trillions of cubic feet of natural gas in the seabed,

MAY 3, 2012

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*The Norikura*, right, a patrol boat belonging to the Japan Coast Guard's 9th regional headquarters, stopping a Chinese trawler in waters off Ishikawa Prefecture on August 5, 2011. The Japan Coast Guard seized it and another Chinese trawler and their captains for alleged illegal fishing in the Sea of Japan.

(The Associated Press)

as well as billions of barrels of oil. China and Japan have agreed to limited joint exploration and development of the oil and gas fields, but they continually dispute the larger question of sovereignty over the islands, and thus ultimate control of the natural resources. In the past year alone, Japan has dispatched its Coast Guard and Air Self-Defense Forces in 18 incidents after detecting Chinese inspection or patrol vessels, fishing ships and naval aircraft operating in areas surrounding the Senkakus. The most significant confrontation over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands occurred in the fall of 2010, after a Chinese fishing boat rammed a Japanese Coast Guard vessel and Japan arrested the captain of the boat. Over the following weeks, China retaliated by banning exports of crucial rare earth materials to Japan and arresting Japanese nationals in China, leading to a freeze in relations between Beijing and Tokyo. Suddenly, the danger of conflict over the Senkakus seemed less fanciful.

Third, Chinese perceptions of U.S. decline may be causing a greater willingness to probe U.S. and Japanese responses to increased PLA Navy deployments. Incidents such as the 2006 surfacing of a Chinese submarine behind the aircraft carrier *USS Kitty Hawk* and increased air operations near Japanese islands in 2011 have led to a growing concern over Chinese capabilities and intentions.<sup>3</sup> If Chinese leaders presume that the United States will not maintain its current presence or operating tempo over the next generation, it makes sense for China to stake wider maritime claims and increase its regional presence as early as possible. The overriding goal of breaking through the First Island Chain – to achieve the ability to deploy to China's "far

seas” – would be easier without an American naval presence, but China would still need to develop the capability to operate at distance and with precision in strategic waterways.

### **Policy Considerations**

Maintaining stability in the East China Sea requires many of the same policies used to keep peace in the South China Sea, such as a regular U.S. naval presence, constant intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) coverage, and regular training and exercises with regional navies. Yet the location of major U.S. and Japanese bases in or near the East China Sea means that crafting a strategy to maintain a credible force posture in the coming years may be easier to accomplish even in a budget-constrained environment.

The increased Chinese activity in the region means a greater need for multilayered ISR, from space and air systems to undersea listening nets, so as to have a better picture of Chinese force structure, operating patterns and potentially threatening missions. The United States should urge Japan to increase its ISR capabilities to supplement U.S. systems; some of these can be emplaced on islands in the Ryukyu chain.

A mix of U.S. and Japanese surface and subsurface forces should regularly transit the East China Sea, particularly along the Ryukyu chain, in order to maintain confidence in the alliance’s ability to visit isolated islands and be present when Chinese ships are passing nearby. In addition, the United States and Japan should create a rapid deployment force composed of smaller, high-speed destroyers and land-based air assets that can respond to confrontations on the high seas or even in the air.

Moreover, both Tokyo and Washington should aggressively push Beijing to adopt an Incidents at Sea agreement and to establish a crisis hotline, to minimize the likelihood of accidents spiraling out of control. If Beijing refuses, then the United States and Japan should emphasize that they will firmly protect their maritime interests from harassment by confronting Chinese forces that threaten peaceful ships or seek to intimidate operations on Japanese island territory. In addition, both countries should make clear that they will limit or suspend diplomatic relations with China and consider economic sanctions in response to aggressive behavior.

Much of the force structure to carry out this plan is already in place. Threats to cut the number of U.S. or Japanese forces, however, could reduce the ability of each country to conduct air and sea operations in the East China Sea. Long-term cooperation between the United States and Japan enables the two allies to plan for a more active and possibly assertive China, as well as maintain

stability and protect the sovereignty of Japan's archipelagic possessions. Maintaining a force that can protect itself from China's growing air and naval weapons, and that can rapidly respond to numerous possible contingencies, will require political focus that has been lacking in both capitals, however. Removing any doubts about the ability of Japan, the United States and allied partners to keep the peace in the region will further promote peace and prosperity in the world's most dynamic economic region.

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## ENDNOTES

1. See "Moscow Deploys Air Defense Systems, Helicopters to Kurils," RT.com, March 1, 2011, <http://rt.com/politics/russia-kurils-defense-missiles/>.
2. Edward Wong, "China Navy Reaches Far, Unsettling Region," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/15/world/asia/15china.html>.
3. Yoree Koh, "Japan Jet Scrambles Related to China Planes Tripled," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 14, 2011, <http://blogs.wsj.com/japanrealtime/2011/10/14/japan-jet-scrambles-related-to-china-planes-tripled/>.

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