



Asia Pacific Bulletin

EastWestCenter.org/APB

Number 205 | April 2, 2013

The United States: The Hidden Actor in the Senkaku Islands

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Akira Kato, Visiting Scholar at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “It is a little known fact that the privately-owned Kuba Island and Japanese state-owned Taisho Island, both part of the Senkaku Islands, are under the exclusive control of the US military.”

It is a little known fact that the privately-owned Kuba Island and Japanese state-owned Taisho Island, both part of the Senkaku Islands, are under the exclusive control of the US military. The Senkaku Islands—known as Diaoyutai to the Chinese—consist of five islands: Uotsuri, Kitakojima, Minamikojima, Kuba, and Taisho, and three smaller islets: Okinokitaiwa, Okinominamiwa and Tobise. The first three islands—Uotsuri, Kitakojima and Minamikojima—were originally owned by the Japanese Government until 1932, when ownership was transferred to a private Japanese citizen. In 2002, the Japanese government—under the leadership of the Liberal Democratic Party—decided to lease these three islands back from the private owner. The reasoning behind this decision was to prevent other actors from building or putting structures on them. Then in September 2012, the government—under the leadership of the Democratic Party of Japan—nationalized the three islands by purchasing them from the owner for around \$20 million.

The Japanese government made the decision to purchase the three islands after Shintaro Ishihara, then governor of Tokyo, announced his intention to purchase and develop them. At the time, some Japanese citizens criticized Ishihara for not also announcing his intention to purchase Kuba from its private owner. Ishihara explained that he was unable to purchase Kuba because the island, along with state-owned Taisho Island, is still under the exclusive control of the US Navy as outlined in the 1960 US-Japan Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA).

The Japanese Ministry of Defense, since 1972, has been leasing Kuba to the US military as a bombing range along with Taisho. Although both islands have not been used by the US military since 1978, and Article II (3) of SOFA states that “The facilities and areas used by the United States armed forces shall be returned to Japan whenever they are no longer needed for purposes of this Agreement”, they have not yet been returned to Japan. Neither Tokyo nor Washington has explained the reason why the islands are still allocated for use by the US military. Japanese citizens cannot land on either island without first obtaining permission from the US military. The fact that the United States still manages the two islands implies that the United States itself is another actor in the Senkaku dispute.

China’s Other Target: The United States

The Senkaku dispute is twofold: a territorial sovereignty issue between Japan and China, and an administrative rights one between China and the United States. The Senkaku Islands were occupied by the United States after World War II, and along with Okinawa were only returned to Japan in 1972 with administrative rights over the Senkaku islands granted to Japan, a move that was jointly criticized by China and

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“Meanwhile, Washington has maintained an ambiguous posture towards the territorial sovereignty issue because it does not want to be involved in regional territorial disputes, a consistent US policy.”

Taiwan. China vented its anger towards the United States in a white paper from the State Council Information Office published last September titled “Diaoyu Dao, an Inherent Territory of China” where it states that “The United States and Japan conducted backroom deals concerning the ‘power of administration’ over Diaoyu Dao.”

There is no doubt that the Senkaku Islands are indeed inherent territory of Japan based upon international law. China argues that old maps and documents from the Ming and Qing Dynasties are evidence for China’s territorial sovereignty over the islands based upon the belief that China was the first state to discover, name and secure the islands, thus making them Chinese sovereign territory. However, based upon that assumption, some Chinese believe that Admiral Zheng He discovered North and South America in 1421. However, who would accept that North and South America are Chinese sovereign territory based upon such a dubious claim? The historical, geological and geographical evidence presented by China cannot prove Chinese territorial claims over the Senkaku Islands in light of international law.

Meanwhile, Washington has maintained an ambiguous posture towards the territorial sovereignty issue because it does not want to be involved in regional territorial disputes, a consistent US policy. In turn, the Japanese public has long doubted if the US-Japan alliance covers the Senkaku Islands, partly because of the apparent US neutral position. However, a special envoy of four former officials including Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye was dispatched to Japan and China last December where reportedly Armitage denied this US neutrality policy regarding the islands under the terms of the US-Japan alliance. In this context, there is no doubt that the Senkaku Islands dispute is also a security concern for the United States.

Implications of the Senkaku Dispute for United States

The dispute over the Senkaku Islands has three broader implications for the United States: a power transition at the global level, a historical resentment of Japan at the regional level and an identity crisis of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) at the domestic level. From the global viewpoint, the Senkaku dispute is a part of a power struggle between the existing superpower—the United States—and the rising revolutionary power—China. As a militant Japan did in the past, dictatorial China is now challenging the existing global order which was created and is protected by the United States. China is beginning to test if the United States has the capacity to maintain the current global order through testing US resolve in regional disputes, including in the Senkaku Islands. There is no question that the United States has to address this issue directly with China.

At the regional level, the Senkaku dispute gives Chinese nationalists an opportunity to vent their resentment towards Japan which has existed ever since the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95. Looking back over the history of Japan and China, it is only in the last century that Japan surpassed China in terms of national power. Prior to that, China has traditionally been the regional superpower, and Chinese resentment towards Japan is understandable. This historical resentment towards Japan fuels Chinese nationalism, which the CCP fans to detract domestic attention away from failed internal policies.

Conclusion: A Struggle for China’s Spring

The fundamental cause of the Senkaku dispute lies in the fact that China is not a democracy. Europe experienced territorial wars only when one or both warring states were under the rule of tyranny, and today, the concept of a war between leading European states is almost inconceivable. The historical lesson is that not until China becomes a democracy will the dispute over the Senkaku Islands be resolved. The United States, as the leader of the free world, must encourage China’s evolution towards democracy.

The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington.

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