The five, uninhabited islands known as Senkaku to the Japanese and Diaoyu dao to the Chinese, lay only 170 km from Okinawa and Taiwan, and 380 km from mainland China. Both parties claim historical evidence as legitimizing ownership of the territories; however due to different interpretations of history and recent events, the dispute has taken a new and potentially dangerous face. The dispute over the sovereignty of the island chain opened a forum for plenty of other issues between China and Japan including the Exclusive Economic Zone borders in the East China Sea, security concerns, economic interests, and historical grievances. Since 2012 the situation has worsened, when China took a more assertive stance on the island issue by sending in vessels and aircraft, as well as establishing a Chinese air defense identification zone which included the territory of the islands. The clash between the two, great, regional powers, worries many of China's neighbors, and puts US regional leadership and credibility as an alliance partner to the test.

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1 Reinhard Drifte. THE SENKAKU/DIAOYU ISLANDS TERRITORIAL DISPUTE BETWEEN JAPAN AND CHINA: BETWEEN THE MATERIALIZATION OF THE "CHINA THREAT" AND JAPAN "REVERSING THE OUTCOME OF WORLD WAR II"? University of Newcastle
**Background**

On January 14th, 1895, Japan took effective control of the Senkaku islands in a period when it was supposedly no-man’s land. It has been in uncontested control of the islands ever since. It wasn’t until a 1969 U.N. -related report revealed, that the islands might hold reserves of oil and gas, which lead the People’s Republic of China to claim the islands just two years later.²

Both sides use different interpretations of historical events and use them as validation for their ownership of the islands. It is also important to note, that the Treaty of Shimonoseki, signed in 1895, did not specify whether the Senkaku islands were included in the Taiwan group (presumably belonging to China), or the Okinawa group (belonging to Japan) of islands.³

The Chinese claim that the islands were unfairly taken from them, since they discovered them first. The historical evidence that China is referring to, is based on a claim that it had discovered the islands and had been around them since the 1400’s, a time before Western imperialism reached East Asia. At the time the region had a different legal structure, with China being in the center of the world. During the Meiji period, Japan had embraced the western international system, which was contrary to the Asian world order.⁴

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² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
The Chinese claim is that the islands were taken from them by the Japanese at an odd, transitional period in Asia. The circumstances themselves are also contested, since it occurred towards the end of the Sino-Japanese War, once China sent out its peace feelers to Japan. When China officially surrendered in 1895, the Treaty of Shimonoseki was signed; however the Meiji government did not include any mention of the Senkaku islands\(^5\). The Treaty stated that Japan shall have the island of Formosa (currently Taiwan) and all the islands that pertain to Formosa. The PRC, which considers Taiwan as part of its territory, believed that the Senkaku islands were a part of Formosa\(^6\).

Even though the treaty allowed Japan to claim the islands, the Meiji did not go public with the incorporation of the islands or placed markers on any of them until 1969. Furthermore, when the Meiji government decreed its new territory with the extension of Okinawa in 1896, it too did not include any mention of the Senkaku islands\(^7\).

In 1978, once the two parties normalized their diplomatic relations, a bilateral fishing agreement was signed, postponing the discussion of the rightful owner of the islands for future generations\(^8\).

\(^{5}\) Ibid.
\(^{6}\) [Link](http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2013/12/economist-explains-1 Dec 3rd 2013)
\(^{7}\) Ibid.
\(^{8}\) Reinhard Drifte. THE SENKAKU/DIAOYU ISLANDS TERRITORIAL DISPUTE BETWEEN JAPAN AND CHINA: BETWEEN THE MATERIALIZATION OF THE “CHINA THREAT” AND JAPAN “REVERSING THE OUTCOME OF WORLD WAR II”? University of Newcastle
Current Prospects and Escalation

In September 2010, a Chinese fishing vessel entered the territorial waters of the Senkaku islands where it was immediately engaged by the Japanese Coast Guard. Like with every other issue between Japan and China, this time we have also heard two different accounts describing the event. The Japanese CG reported that the Chinese fisherman (known to be volatile, aggressive and drunk) rammed his boat into the blockade intentionally. The Chinese report blames the CG vessels for the collision.

In these situations it is important to know who instigates these events, because it can give us a better idea of whether or not this may happen again, or if steps will be taken to make the situation even worse. The intrusion of Chinese fishing vessels is not only a problem for Japan, but also the Republic of Korea. In fact, only 3 months later after the event near the Senkakus, a different fisherman collided with the South Korean Coast Guard, effectively destroying his vessel and drowning as a result.

In 2013, China has taken more unilateral steps undermining international law by improperly drawing baselines around the Senkakus, as well as stating that the islands are of great interest to the People’s Republic of China. This is occurring in addition to the paramilitary presence that China tries to maintain.

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9 “Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands” http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/senkaku.htm
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
around the islands, for example by locking weapons-targeting systems on a Japanese vessel in January 2013, or by sending in marine surveillance ships within the territory of the islands $^{12}$.

There have also been plenty of public statements made by both sides, including Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during his campaign trail on Okinawa’s Ishigaki island. He made clear statements that there will be absolutely no discussion about Japan’s sovereignty over the Senkaku island chain: “The Senkakus are an inherent part of Japan’s territory in terms of history and international law and there is no territorial dispute” - he stated ahead of an upcoming national election $^{13}$. The statements made by Mr. Abe met an immediate response from the Chinese Foreign Ministry expressing dissent and supposed Japanese violation of Chinese sovereign territory. Once again the point of reference being historical records from the Ming dynasty, claiming the islands as part of Chinese maritime defense $^{14}$.

The little island chain is a lot more important to both sides than it may seem. It’s not only about historical grievances, or fishing zones; rather, it’s about who will dominate the South China Sea in the upcoming decade. Some thinkers in China believe that if the PRC gets its way on the issue, it will be one step closer to becoming a serious regional power in the Asia Pacific; however if the U.S. supports Japan as legitimized by the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation, China’s goal will not be met $^{15}$. Part of the PRC’s grand strategy is to become a maritime power, which currently has the U.S. - Japan alliance on top and dictating the rules. Many voices from the Chinese military and the government want this to change to a more favorable, Beijing dictated maritime order $^{16}$.

$^{12}$ Ibid.
$^{13}$ Ibid.
$^{14}$ Ibid.
$^{15}$ Ibid.
$^{16}$ Ibid.
Implications for the U.S.

As an ally to Japan and many other countries in the Asia-Pacific who are feeling uncomfortable due to the island dispute, the U.S. has a duty to assist Japan in defending its claimed, sovereign territory. Earlier this year, when President Barack Obama was visiting Japan, he clearly outlined that the U.S. would assist Japan if China used force to take the islands. Furthermore a U.S. Marine commander stationed in Japan stated that his forces would assist the Japanese in retaking the islands, should the PRC land troops on them 17.

These statements make it clear that Washington’s involvement in Asia, as a part of the “pivot” or “rebalance” is just the beginning. As stated in the Mutual Cooperation and Security Treaty, the United States is bound to militarily assist its ally, Japan, in defending its sovereign territory from any third party; however the ultimate goal is to achieve a peaceful resolution to the conflict 18. A large part of the U.S. pivot to Asia is to maintain peace and stability, and not contain a rapidly developing China; however the Chinese remain skeptical. With improved American missile defense being equipped on Japanese ships, as well as new strategic deployments in Australia, Guam and Singapore it is understandable why the PRC would feel coerced.

Already we see Tokyo working on expanding its submarine fleet from sixteen to twenty four, attempting to exploit the Chinese navy’s current lack of investment in anti-submarine warfare capabilities 19. With the U.S. facing severe cutbacks in the military, it has made clear that its allies will have to start putting

18 Ibid.
in more work themselves. Promises of reinterpreting Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which would undoubtedly increase military spending, will force Beijing to start developing defensive capabilities\textsuperscript{20}. By participating in unprecedented amphibious training exercises with Australian forces on U.S. soil, the U.S. - Japan Alliance is becoming stronger than ever, and as a result are preparing to maintain the maritime status quo in the Pacific\textsuperscript{21}.

**Conclusion**

Since both parties believe the other side is taking actions to somehow weaken the other’s interests, a large portion of the conflict is created by misperceptions, which can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy\textsuperscript{22}. By looking at history there are some tools that can be used to prevent any further escalation of the conflict between China and the U.S.-Japan alliance.

For instance, restraint from commencing actions that can be seen as hostile by the other side, can aid in building a baseline for trust\textsuperscript{23}. This would be followed by actions of reciprocity, meaning following the actions of the other party to calm tensions, rather than exploiting a new loophole created by trust. Thirdly, transparency helps the process, by letting the other side know that positive gestures are not a sign of conspiracy or further exploitation. Lastly, resilience can provide a safety net that can bring the process back to the beginning in order to prevent conflict escalation\textsuperscript{24}.

Since China views the issue of the Senkaku islands as an internal dispute, like others, it is completely non-negotiable. Furthermore only complete and absolute victory is considered a success. The same goes for Japan, which doesn’t even recognize the dispute as legitimate and completely ignores the existence of an issue\textsuperscript{25}. Both sides are fundamentally convinced that they own the islands, and use their own interpretation of historical evidence, interpreted differently.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
through the passage of time, and international law after World War II as evidence of ownership. Without a significant diplomatic compromise, the military patrols will continue potentially escalating the dispute.  

26 Ibid.