

The China-Japan Conflict: The Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands Clash

By [Tanaka Sakai](#)

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Translation by Kyoko Selden

Introduction

Why did the Japan Coast Guard, on September 7th, arrest a Chinese fishing boat captain and detain his ship, setting off the most serious China-Japan conflict in decades? Investigative journalist Tanaka Sakai offers no definitive answer in the following historically-and geopolitically-informed analysis of the roots of the conflict. His detailed analysis of the China-Japan Fisheries Agreement and the implementation of this and other agreements, does show, definitively, that the Japanese action marked a striking departure from policies that have been in effect since at least 1978 when China and Japan resumed diplomatic relations and Deng Xiaoping crafted an agreement to defer action on competing claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands. Writing ten days after the incident, Tanaka observed that “The Senkaku Islands, along with the Nansha Islands and the Yellow Sea, has been upgraded to a world-level maritime dispute in which China and countries around it, with US support, confront one another.” He locates the incident, and its potentially far-reaching, even disastrous consequences, in the changing politics of Japan’s Democratic Party administration, and US policies pertaining to Japan, China and Korea. With the release of the Chinese captain, and with the US-ASEAN call for negotiation to assure the safety of shipping in the South China Sea, it is appropriate to revisit the incident and locate it within the broader parameters of the geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific. Mark Selden

On September 7 an incident occurred in which a Chinese trawler tried to shake off a Japan Coast Guard patrol boat that pursued it to investigate illegal operations at sea fifteen kilometers from Kubajima (Ch: Huangweiyu) of the Senkaku (Diaoyutai) Islands of Okinawa prefecture. After a collision, the captain and others were arrested by the Japan Coast Guard’s patrol ship for interfering with official duties. At the time, over 100 Chinese boats were fishing in the area.

Kubajima (Ch: Huangweiyu, “yellow tail island”), which is part of the Senkaku Islands, is controlled in practice by Japan, but China and Taiwan (Zhonghua Minguo) contest this. In Japan, long ago, the island was called Kōbi (yellow tail) island. China regards the Senkakus as a part of Taiwan province. Viewed from the Japanese side, the Chinese fishing boat entered Japanese territory (the area of the sea within twelve nautical miles of Kubajima, which is Japanese territory) and was fishing illegally. Thus Japan arrested it for interference with its duties in enforcing criminal law. However, viewed from the Chinese side, a Chinese boat, operating within Chinese waters off Taiwan, a Chinese territory, was arrested by the Japan Coast Guard, which is a foreign agency. (Viewed from Taiwan (ZHMG), the crew of a

fishing boat in its territorial waters, an area that is a part of Ilan prefecture, was arrested by the Japan Coast Guard). Link: [□□□□□□](#)

Taking advantage of this incident, the Japanese mass media has begun to treat people who recognize that there is a territorial question concerning the Senkaku Islands as unpatriotic. Renhō, a member of the DPJ cabinet who has Taiwanese (Chinese) blood, said that the “Senkaku Islands is a territorial issue,” setting off a big tumult as this view differed from the government line, causing Renhō to amend her statement.

A web article of the Sankei Shimbun reported on this incident satirically under the title “With a sweep she amends her speech.” This article, with unintended humor, comes with a tag “related topics, territorial issues.” [Link](#).

The Wall Street Journal carried an interesting article on September 12. Because the Journal is a rightist organ, one might have expected it to say that “Japan was right and China wrong.” But that is not the case. The article is called “The other China Sea flash point,” which follows the South China Sea Nansha Islands issue, about which Secretary of State Clinton interfered orally, angering China. The Senkaku Islands issue in the South China Sea has now also flashed. [The Other China Sea Flashpoint](#)

The Journal pointed out:

“A 1997 fisheries agreement allows both sides’ fishermen to operate free of regulation around the islands. So it’s not clear why the Japanese coast guard needed to stop the Chinese boat.

Tensions are still rising because the Japanese authorities have detained the Chinese captain, Zhan Qixiong, on suspicion of deliberately ramming the coast guard vessels. But Japanese ships have a history of aggressive maneuvers in this area, for instance sinking a Hong Kong protest vessel in June 1998 and a Taiwanese sport-fishing boat in 2008.”

Thus the journal is skeptical about what the government says, and is criticizing Japan behind the scenes.

“Beijing is wary of being made to look soft on the Japanese by Taiwanese and Hong Kong activists, who periodically charter boats to the islands. So it’s no surprise that bursts of bellicose rhetoric occasionally emanate from the Foreign Ministry. However, China’s record of trying to smooth the waters is also creditable, starting with Deng Xiaoping’s visit to Japan in 1978 when he agreed to put the problem off for future generations to solve. Protesters from the mainland have been prevented from making their own pilgrimages. Precisely because it is so explosive, Beijing has reason to be fearful of blowback if it tries to exploit the issue.”

Senkaku and vicinity is beyond the scope of the fisheries agreement

The fisheries agreement, to which The Wall Street Journal refers, must be the Japan-China fisheries agreement, which was concluded in 1997 and took effect in 2000. However, according to my investigation, the agreement made no decision about regulating operations in the area of the sea around the Senkaku Islands. A research article written in Japanese and available on the web, also says of the 1997 Japan-China fisheries agreement, “Concerning

the Senkaku Islands and vicinity, compromise language took the form of establishing a provisional area of the sea. Within the provisional area, the fishing boats of either country can operate without permission from the other and either country has regulatory rights only over its own fishing boats.” However, according to my research, this too is inaccurate. [Link](#).

When I look at the text of the 1997 fisheries agreement (Agreement Between Japan and China Concerning Fisheries) article 7 defines provisional areas of the sea. However, those areas are limited to North Latitude 27 degrees and further North. The Senkaku Islands territorial sea located between North Latitude 25 and 26 is not included within the provisional areas of the sea. The North Latitude 27 line is about 100 kilometers North of the Senkaku Islands, and the exclusive economic waters near the islands (a radius of 200 nautical miles = 370 kilometers) to the north of this area is included in the provisional areas of the sea where Chinese and Japanese boats can operate freely. However, the sea around the Senkakus, where the Coast Guard captured a Chinese boat is outside the provisional areas of the sea. Link: [\[https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/2012/02/12_001.htm\]](#)

The East China Sea, north of North Latitude 27 degrees around the Senkaku Islands, to begin with, is outside the area specified in the 1997 Japan-China Fisheries Agreement; it is in the area excluded in Article 6 (b). Before 1997, fisheries agreements between China and Japan were concluded, for instance in 1955 and 1965. (This was before establishment of diplomatic relations, so it was a civil agreement.) In neither case is the area north of North Latitude 27 a target of the agreement. In other words there is no Japan-China fisheries agreement concerning the vicinity of the Senkaku Islands. Links [1](#), [2](#).

The Japan-China Fisheries Agreement was concluded because in the 1950s and 1960s Japanese fishing boats frequently operated close to or even inside the Chinese territorial seas of the East China Sea and Yellow Sea. China, which was then poor with low fishing technology, protested this Japanese random fishing. In 1958 China announced that it would enlarge its territorial seas from three to twelve nautical miles. But Japan, which was actively fishing near Chinese territorial seas, did not recognize that. China started to contest Japan’s position on the Senkaku Islands after the US designated the Senkaku Islands as part of Japanese territory (Okinawa, Japan) at the time of Okinawa’s reversion to Japan in 1972. When the China-Japan Peace and Amity Treaty was completed in 1978, on Deng Xiaoping’s proposal, China and Japan shelved the territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands. Link: [\[https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/2012/02/12_001.htm\]](#) 1958[9][5]

China, which subsequently achieved high-speed economic growth, wanted the fisheries and energy resources from the Senkaku Islands and East China Sea. It enacted a Marine Law in 1992, which included territorial rights over the Senkaku Islands. Chinese boats started fishing in the sea near the Senkakus. Also, gas field development in the East China Sea began. [Link](#).

The Japanese Coast Guard has been stationing patrol boats to track Chinese fishing boats around the Senkaku Islands, but it had never captured or arrested a Chinese boat, although it vigorously monitored boats from Taiwan and Hong Kong. In the Senkaku territorial sea, partly because of the agreement with Deng Xiaoping to shelve the territorial dispute between Japan and China, both countries adopted the attitude of avoiding conflict at the governmental level, even if political activists among the people demanded the protection of the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands. This time, however, the Japanese authorities captured a Chinese boat and arrested the captain. This is an epoch-making event that signifies a

reversal of policies toward China.

The Japanese government has said that it is natural to capture a boat that collided with its ship and that Chinese government anger is unjustified. The tone of the mass media in Japan is similar. And the Chinese side is unable to make a counter-argument because there was no one there except those concerned. It cannot say whether the Chinese boat or the Coast Guard ship was at fault in the collision. People's Daily simply states that, "in Japan it is reported that the fishing boat initiated the collision." Since the Chinese government can't argue about what happened at the time of collision, the Japanese claim passes. [Link](#).

The Senkaku territorial seas are beyond the scope of the Japan-China fisheries agreement, but there has been a diplomatic understanding since Deng Xiaoping, that China and Japan would not oppose each other over the Senkaku Islands. This time, however, Japan annulled the agreement and made a strong claim to territorial rights, involving arresting the Chinese fisherman on the basis of Japanese law. This surprised and angered the Chinese government.

After the incident, the Chinese authorities decided to dispatch fishery patrol boats which are under quasi-military authority in order to protect Chinese fishermen who operate around the Senkaku islands. For the first time, a situation has arisen in which Japan (the Coast Guard) and China (a quasi-military fishing patrol boat under the Department of Agriculture) confront each other at sea. This is a situation in which a battle could take place between China and Japan. A situation that did not exist for sixty-five years since the Asia-Pacific War, one in which Japan could again go to war, now looms. (Instead of the catch phrase "US-British demons" used during World War II, the threat of China will become the target of Japanese propaganda.) The Senkaku Islands, along with the Nansha Islands and the Yellow Sea, has been upgraded to a world-level maritime dispute in which China and countries around it, with US support, confront one another. Link: [XXXXXXXXXXXX](#)

The United States instigates Maehara with a belligerent policy (kōsensaku)

In the incident this time as reported in the Japanese mass media, the Japan Coast Guard properly controlled the illegal conduct of the Chinese fishing boat and the Chinese government is unwarranted in criticizing this. However, in the past, the Japanese authorities never captured or indicted a Chinese fishing boat, even if they chased them. The crucial point of this arrest and indictment drama is not the reaction of China or the conduct of the fishing boat. Rather, it is the active political will of the Japanese government to arrest and indict when it knows perfectly well that this will anger China. The important question is why the Japanese government now acts to anger China.

Writing this, I know that I will receive critical messages saying, "The previous Japanese response was wrong. For the first time, the Japanese government has taken a dignified attitude toward China. You are wrong to write in defense of the earlier Japanese stance." However, for me, what is important is not what is right. What is right totally differs between China and Japan. Both Chinese and Japanese people are inflamed by the agitation of the media and talk about good and bad. But talk about good and bad are obstacles that warp analysis.

To return to my story . . . Why does the Japanese government anger the Chinese government? What first comes to mind is the rollback of dependence on the US within political and bureaucratic circles, and within the Democratic Party. Under the Hatoyama

administration from fall 2009 to spring 2010, the Okinawan people came to oppose the US bases while the US itself was experiencing worsening financial problems and the Republicans in Congress were criticizing Obama saying that the US is spending too much money on bases outside the States. (This despite the fact that the US military-industrial complex is supported by the Republicans.) In the future, the second phase of the double dip recession will begin and the US government will have to take additional financial measures. An argument will then develop that the greater the financial debt, the more reason to withdraw US forces from Japan, Korea and Europe. Even in that kind of situation, however, if Japan and China are on the verge of going to war, the US military will not withdraw from Okinawa, and Japan's dependence on US groups that promote the Japan-US alliance (Ampo) will be able to prolong their life. [Senator Wants to Cut Overseas Base Construction](#)

Another idea is that, on the contrary, the US may be leading Japan and China into conflict. Taking advantage of the Cheonan incident in late March, the US sided with South Korea, heightened North-South tensions, and angered China as the protector of the North. The US also backed Vietnam, which is agitating over the conflict with China over the Nansha Islands. This Senkaku fishing incident is of the same type. The US is pressing Korea, Vietnam and Japan to construct a net encircling China.

Japan's Self-Defense Forces and the US are planning to conduct a US-Japan Joint Military Exercise in December around the Senkaku and Yaeyama Islands, which are located off the coast of the Eastern shore of Taiwan, on the premise that China might invade Taiwan from the East. They will take the Chinese navy as the hypothetical enemy in exercises intended to practice preventing a Chinese invasion with a joint US-Japan force. A similar US-Japan military exercise already occurred in August in Okinawa and Kyushu. When you think about this kind of activity and the arrest and indictment of the Chinese fisherman, it appears that the US was leading Japan into hostility toward China. [US, Japan to hold exercise to recapture disputed isles](#)

The Wall Street Journal carried an article which suggests that, having won the Democratic Party leadership election, Kan should reinforce the alliance with the US. [Link](#).

That Japan talked the US into hostility toward China is not inconceivable. But considering the fact that the US is broadly cooperating with South Korea and Vietnam, and the difficulty of Japan cunningly leading the US, which is adopting a noncommittal (aimai) strategy of being both enemy and friend with regard to China, it is difficult to imagine that Japan would be able to take the initiative to lead the US. The Japanese government must have been paying attention to the situation of the last several years in which England and Israel tried to move the US and failed.

In case the US leads Japan to become hostile toward China, the person with the greatest potential as an agent for Japan is the new Foreign Minister Maehara Seiji, who has controlled the Coast Guard as Minister of Land and Transport and also has good connections with US policymakers. In the new cabinet, Maehara becomes Foreign Minister, which means that Japan is likely to become more hostile toward China. It may be that the US pressed Prime Minister Kan to appoint Maehara to the post. Okada resisted the change, but ordered by Kan, he stepped down and, in his place, the pro-US dependence Maehara became Foreign Minister.

Since last fall, the Foreign Ministry has been treated coldly by Hatoyama and Ozawa. Not only Japan's Ambassador to China, but even the Ambassador to the US, were people who

were not Foreign Ministry bureaucrats. The Foreign Ministry, the head temple of pro-US dependence, is likely to be resuscitated immediately by Maehara's appointment as Foreign Minister. Meanwhile, Ambassador to China Niwa Uichiro, who was the first non-government appointee as Ambassador, may be asked to step down at an early point. Maehara, in response to the US military-industrial complex, may maneuver Prime Minister Kan, who is noncommittal, and may, like a young military officer, forge blatantly belligerent anti-Chinese policies one after another and be praised by the mass media with its pro-US dependence perspective. Thus the Kan administration may become virtually the Maehara administration. If Maehara agitates (sendō) cleverly, he could become the next PM.

The US Prods Japan to Challenge China After China Becomes Strong

In that Maehara is a handsome young leader being manipulated by the US, and may be made to challenge belligerently and self-destructively neighboring non-US big powers, he might be called Japan's Sakaashvili. Links [1](#), [2](#).

Like President Sakaashvili of Georgia, who came to an impasse after being instigated by the US to go to war with Russia and being defeated, the new strategy of Maehara and other pro-US dependent leaders of being hostile to China will be difficult to sustain. The US, which backed both of them, must help China continue to buy US Treasury Bonds. US Treasury Secretary Geithner, while criticizing China for failing to strengthen its currency, says that it's not good to overly criticize China because American industries have to profit in Chinese markets. So he opposes Congressional attempts to launch a US-China trade war by passing a law imposing economic sanctions on China. [Link](#).

The US continues to negotiate with China even as it confronts China and lets American industry earn money in China. However, Japan's new anti-Chinese policy differs from American strategy, which is flexible and dextrous. It may result in Japanese industry being sanctioned by China while Japan follows the US in being hostile toward China, thereby being used by the US as its frontline soldiers, to the extent that it cannot withdraw when the US withdraws, even as US industries still continue to profit in China.

South Korea under President Lee Myung-bak, when instigated by the US over the Cheonan Incident, raced ahead with the theory of North Korea guilt on scant evidence, but when repulsed by China and Russia, it tried reconciliation with North Korea only to fall into greater political confusion. This is a precedent of failure from being used by the US as frontline soldiers.

When the neo-cons rose in the US, Maehara was called Japan's neo-con. The US neo-cons have a profound strategy. If Maehara actually was a neo-con, this would be ok, but he is probably a neo-con puppet. Instigated by the US and having the US even prepare a path for him to rise to power, he may take power one day. But in the end, the ladder may be removed by the US before he realizes it and he will come to an impasse, taking the country along with him as a fellow traveler.

American neo-cons are hidden proponents of multipolarization. They have the effect of making the US and its allies (Britain, Japan, South Korea, Israel) destroy themselves by means of radical policies that overemphasize military affairs, with the result that the BRIC nations of Brazil, Russia, India and China, and other developing countries, are able to act freely in a multipolar world, even to make a new world order in which the economic development of developing countries transforms the world. It is very dangerous to become a

puppet of the neo-cons (outwardly, a friend). If Japan wants to maintain dependence on the US as long as possible, rather than the Maehara belligerent strategy, it would be better to use the traditional strategy of “pretending not to be there (inai furi)” or “to be incapable (munō).” That way, Japan does not have to be led to self-destruction. It’s better to stop going to extremes, clumsily, and simplistically (ippon-yari ni) and to be forced to unconditionally surrender naked when the approach fails.

From the start, if Japan were challenging China, it should have stopped doing so several years ago when China was still economically and militarily weak. In reality, the US was then putting on the brakes so that Japan would not be hostile to China. But now that China has begun to be strong, and the US is just minutes from collapsing, the US is encouraging Japan to challenge China.

Intention to Protect Taiwan Turns Taiwan Anti-Japanese

There’s one more thing. Taiwan under Guomintang rule is irritated by Japan’s opposition to China. Japan and the US carry out military exercises in the name of protecting Taiwan from Chinese invasion. But Taiwan itself is conducting joint military exercises with China for search and rescue in a friendly manner in the Taiwan straits. China is conducting joint military exercises for search and rescue activities with Central Asia, Russia, India and so forth, with whom China has become friendly in recent years, as part of a military reconciliation strategy. China’s honeymoon with Taiwan toward future friendly relations is beginning. [Link](#).

Taiwan is on its way to being absorbed by China. At the same time, Taiwan is allowed to earn money in the Chinese market, and to conclude FTAs with Southeast Asian countries, which are coming within the sphere of Chinese influence, and is provided by China with a situation in which it will not be economically stressed having entered under China’s umbrella. In such a situation, Japan reinforces opposition to China around the Senkaku Islands only 200 kilometers from Taiwan and it is planning a US-Japan military exercise on the pretext of protecting Taiwan from Chinese aggression. The Taiwanese government is irritated at Japan, but it is also trying to avoid having Taiwanese go to the Senkakus to protest. [Link](#).

At the same time the Guomintang must be smiling thinking, “this will lead to uniting Chinese and Taiwanese public opinion against Japan and corner the pro-Japan, anti-China Democratic Progressive Party.”

In the past, the Communist Party and Guomintang, for the sake of resistance against Japan, twice entered a united front. In future, if Japan belligerently claims territorial rights to the Senkakus, and if the anti-Japanese movement intensifies in both China and Taiwan over Diaoyutai recovery, then the atmosphere promoting the third CCP-Guomintang united front may surface and their consolidation will be strengthened. Taiwan independence forces anticipate that and worry about it. [EDITORIAL: The KMT, CCPs Third United Front](#)

By the time that the United States can no longer be anti-Chinese due to its own financial crisis and collapse of the dollar, and it then abandons Japan and moves away from control of the Far East, Taiwan may have been taken in by China, Korea may move toward North-South conciliation and a pro-China position, and Southeast Asia may have settled under China’s umbrella. As to Japan, after being abandoned by the US while still taking the position of opposing China, I am too heavy-hearted to want to discuss the matter.

This is a translation of an article [日本語](#) that appeared in [Tanaka News](#) on September 17, 2010 with a follow-up story on September 21, 2010.

Tanaka Sakai is the creator, researcher, writer and editor of Tanaka News (www.tanakanews.com), a Japanese-language news service on Japan and the world.

Tanaka Sakai's new book is [中国の領土主権と海洋権益の衝突](#)

[The Day Japan Breaks with "Subordination to the US": Amidst the Multipolarizing New World Order](#)

Kyoko Selden is a translator whose works include Japanese Women Writers. Twentieth Century Short Fiction, Kayano Shigeru's [Our Land Was a Forest](#), Honda Katsuichi's [Harukor: Ainu Woman's Tale](#) and [The Atomic Bomb: Voices From Hiroshima and Nagasaki](#). An Asia-Pacific Journal associate, she taught Japanese language-literature at Cornell University. She translated this article for The Asia-Pacific Journal.

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