

The China Japan Dispute Over Diaoyu Islands: Historical Analysis

By [Dr. Chandra Muzaffar](#)

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Tensions are rising in the dispute between China and Japan over the Diaoyu Islands — 5 tiny islands and 3 rocks covering a mere 7 square kilometres in the East China Sea. It is unfortunate that this is happening especially when Chinese-Japanese economic ties have reached a new level since the end of last year with the two countries agreeing to use their respective currencies in their bilateral trade, instead of the US dollar.

To de-escalate tensions, Japan should make the first move. It was the Japanese government's purchase of three of the islands from the Kurihara family on 11 September 2012 that ignited the present crisis. That decision should be rescinded immediately.

In fact, Japan has been upping the ante on Diaoyu — which Japan calls the Senkaku Islands — for some time now. It will be recalled that on 7 September 2010 when a Chinese fishing boat collided accidentally with a Japanese patrol vessel near Diaoyu, the captain and the crew of the Chinese boat were detained by the Japanese Coast Guard for a few days. Though they were all released in the end, the incident revealed a new toughness on the part of the Japanese. The Chinese have been reacting to this and other such incidents.

What explains this new toughness? Some analysts attribute it partly to the growth of the Political Right in Japanese politics. Japanese economic stagnation for more than two decades and China's success in replacing Japan as the world's second most important economy have increased the influence of conservative nationalist forces in the country who are now targeting China. Impending elections within the ruling Democratic Party and the forthcoming General Election have also widened the berth for conservative politics.

It is also not a coincidence that the Japanese Right has become more vocal— especially vis-a-vis China— at a time when the United States is seeking to re-assert its presence and its power in the Asia-Pacific region. In the last couple of years, US political and military officials have on a number of occasions underscored the significance of US-Japan security ties. Even on the Diaoyu dispute, the US government, while professing to remain neutral, has through the Pentagon made it clear that the Japan-US Security Treaty would come into force in the event of a military conflict between Japan and China.

This stance has to be viewed in the larger context of the US's active military alignment with the Philippines in its recent clash with China over the Huangyan Island in the South China Sea and its support for Vietnam in its longstanding tiff with China over parts of the Spratly Islands and the Paracels. For both Japan and the US there may also be other reasons why the Diaoyu Islands are important. In 1968-9, a United Nations agency, it is reported, had discovered potential oil and gas reserves near Diaoyu. The US military, it is not widely known, also uses one of the five islands — Kuba— as a practice range for aircraft bombing.

Whatever the reasons for holding on to Diaoyu, Japan's claim to ownership is weak. There are books, reports and maps from the 15th century, during the period of the Ming Dynasty, that establish in no uncertain terms that Diaoyu is Chinese territory. The book *Voyage with a Tail Wind* and the *Record of the Imperial Envoy's Visit to Ryukyu* bear testimony to this. Even writings by Japanese scholars in the late 19th century acknowledged this fact.

The challenge to Chinese ownership of Diaoyu came from Japanese annexation of the Islands in 1894-5 following the first Sino-Japanese War. China under the Ching Dynasty was too weak to fight back and regain lost territory. But annexation through military force does not confer legitimacy upon the act of conquest. This is why when Japan was defeated in the Second World War the victors who included China and the US recognised that Diaoyu was Chinese territory. Both the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Declaration acknowledged this though for administrative purposes Diaoyu was placed under US control as part of its governance over the Ryukyu Islands. The US was then the occupying power in Japan following the latter's surrender.

However, when China was taken over by the Chinese Communist Party in 1949, the US changed its position and began to treat the Islands as part of Japan. The Chinese communist leadership protested vehemently. In 1971, the US Senate returned the Diaoyu Islands, together with Okinawa, to Japan under the Okinawa Reversion Treaty. Again, the Chinese government in Beijing objected, as did the Taiwan government which also regards the Islands as part of China. Since the normalisation of relations between China and Japan in 1972, both sides have agreed to allow their fisher folk to operate in the waters surrounding the Islands without resolving the issue of ownership. Of course, neither China nor Japan has relinquished even an iota of its claim in the last 40 years. Recent incidents have however forced this unresolved issue into the open.

Apart from taking the first step by abrogating its purchase of the Islands, as we have proposed, Japan should also come to terms with undeniable historical, legal and ethical facts. It must accept the irrefutable reality that the Diaoyu Islands belong to China. We realise that there are powerful vested interests that will not allow Japan to embrace this truth. Nonetheless, we should all try to persuade the Japanese government and the Japanese people that it would be in their best interest to do so. Governments in Asia should convey this message to Japanese elites through quiet diplomacy. Citizen groups throughout the continent should speak up in a firm and courteous manner. The media should play its role by laying out the arguments for an amicable resolution of the dispute which respects truth and justice.

Dr. Chandra Muzaffar is the President of the International Movement for a Just World (JUST), Malaysia,

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