

A Sino-Japanese Contest with Three Dimensions

The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Dispute Since the 2010 Collision Incident

At 00:50 on 9 June 2016 in the East China Sea, a frigate belonging to the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) entered the contiguous zone surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands on a course towards the islands' territorial waters.¹ While official vessels belonging to various People's Republic of China (PRC) agencies had entered both the islands' contiguous zone and territorial waters in the past, this was a first for a PLAN ship. A Japanese Self Defense Forces (JSDF) destroyer following the ship's movements hailed it, advising it without avail to change course. Meanwhile, in Tokyo, a team assembled inside the Prime Minister's Office's crisis management center to monitor the situation, and the PRC ambassador was summoned to the Japanese Foreign Ministry. In the early hours of the morning, Japanese Vice-Minister Saiki Akitaka received the PRC ambassador and demanded of him the vessel's immediate withdrawal. Albeit declining to formally accept this demand, the PRC ambassador conveyed that escalation was undesirable and he would report back to Beijing. The PLAN ship subsequently exited the contiguous zone at 03:10.² Unlike previous "white on white" engagements, involving the Japanese Coast Guard (JCG) and non-military PRC vessels, this incident held the potential of a dangerous "gray on gray" showdown; had the PLAN ship entered the islands' territorial waters, it is highly conceivable the Japanese government would have authorized the JSDF to employ force. Saiki would later reflect that there was real concern that night over the situation escalating into a serious confrontation between the PLAN and the JSDF.³

¹ The Japanese name for the islands is "*Senkakushotō*," while the PRC uses "*Diaoyudao*"; for the purposes of neutrality, this piece uses "Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands." A "contiguous zone," as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), consists of the waters not extending more than twenty-four nautical miles "from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured" in which states may "exercise the control necessary to (a) prevent infringement of its customs, fiscal, immigration or sanitary laws and regulations within its territory or territorial sea; [and] (b) punish infringement of the above laws and regulations committed within its territory or territorial sea." See: *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*, accessed on 9 July 2019 at: https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf

² This account is reconstructed from contemporary reporting and interviews with anonymous Japanese officials. For Japanese news reports, see: "Senkaku ni gunkan, mimei no kinpaku," [Chinese warship near Senkaku, early morning tension], *Asahi Shimbun*, 9 June 2016, Morning Edition, 2; "Senkaku setsuzoku suiiki ni Chūgoku gunkan," [Chinese warship in Senkaku contiguous zone], *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 9 June 2016, 1; "Senkaku setsuzoku suiiki ni Chūgoku gunkan," [Chinese warship in Senkaku contiguous zone], *Mainichi Shimbun*, 10 June 2016.

³ Vice-Minister Saiki Akitaka, author's interview, Tokyo, 14 July 2017. Subsequent analysis suggested the PLAN was not engaged in a planned provocation, but rather reacting to Russian warships transiting the contiguous zone from the south, returning to Vladivostok. See: "Chūgoku gunkan ga Senkaku shūhen no setsuzoku suiiki-hairi..." [Chinese warship enters contiguous zone around Senkaku...], *Reuters*, 9 June 2016. Some, however, suggested Sino-Russian collusion. See: "Senkaku setsuzoku suiiki ni Chūgoku gunkan," [Chinese warship in Senkaku contiguous zone], *Mainichi Shimbun*, 10 June 2016.

The tensions of that night reflect the stakes involved: intentionally or unintentionally, actions by either side could have sparked a spiral of military escalation involving the world's three largest economies. Consisting of five core islands and a number of other minor features, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are claimed by Japan, the People's Republic of China, and Taiwan.⁴ Although Japan has administered the islands since 1972—when the United States transferred control—and continues to maintain no dispute exists, its position has increasingly been challenged by PRC vessels in the islands' adjacent waters.⁵ The United States, while not taking a stance on the sovereignty of the islands, nevertheless has committed itself to come to Japan's defense should the latter be attacked in the exercise of its administrative control.⁶ The islands thus constitute a potentially dangerous flashpoint in East Asia, highlighted by a number of analyses as a possible trigger for armed conflict—if not even war—in the region.⁷

The core goal of this paper is to supply an evidence-based, theoretically informed account of recent developments in the contest over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. It draws upon primary and secondary source material in Japanese and Chinese, as well as extensive interviews in both countries. It argues that, objectively speaking—apart from the mere fact that the Senkaku/Diaoyu have a material existence—the particulars of the disputed islands are by and large irrelevant. Rather, it is a combination of interrelated developments set in motion in by an unplanned incident in the latter half of 2010 that largely explain how the dispute has become the flashpoint it is today.

More precisely, there are three primary dimensions to how this contest has unfolded. The first is a symbolic one. Since late 2010 the dispute has increasingly become a proxy for an array of latent and newly emerging intangible concerns, frustrations, resentments and anxieties on both sides. These have supplied the dispute significance and salience by raising the perceived stakes involved. The second dimension is a domestic one. The emergence of an active contest over the islands generated both opportunities and vulnerabilities within the domestic political sphere of each state. At key moments, these domestic dynamics have raised the profile of the dispute and added pressures on policymakers to take firmer action. And the third dimension is an interactive one. Here we can observe an ongoing positional struggle unfolding, in which actions taken by one side to improve its standing in the dispute elicits counter-measures from the other. This competitive dynamic continues to play out across a variety of fields and remains an ever-present source of further potential frictions.

What is more, while existing work has highlighted isolated developments in one or another of these dimensions, the argument advanced here points to the ways in which developments

⁴ This paper focuses primarily on Japan-PRC relations concerning the islands. Japan-Taiwan and PRC-Taiwan relations concerning the islands are outside the purview of this piece.

⁵ See Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Senkaku Islands Q&A," 13 April 2016. Accessed 5 April 2018 at: http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/senkaku/qa_1010.html

⁶ Mark Manyin, "Senkaku (Diaoyu/Diaoyutai) Islands Dispute: US Treaty Obligations," (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2016).

⁷ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 176-78; Michael McDevitt, "Senkaku Islands Tabletop Exercise Report," (Suffolk, Virginia: Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, 2017); Eric Heginbotham and Richard Samuels, "Active Denial: Redesigning Japan's Response to China's Military Challenge," *International Security* 42, no. 04 (2018): 148.

interacted across the three dimensions to exacerbate the dispute. In this case, various intangible apprehensions, preoccupations, and prejudices supplied fuel to and, in turn, were further nurtured by the rhetoric and actions of those seeking to profit in the domestic arena. The intertwining of broad, abstract concerns with domestic opportunism created pressures for more aggressive policies, pushing leaders to more actively pursue positional advantage. And the measures taken to these ends set the scene for further escalation, friction, and drama, enmeshing ever more actors, issues, and concerns. Developments in each dimension alternately fed into and fed upon the developments in the others.

This paper proceeds in six parts. First, it lays out the puzzle of escalation over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands since 2010. Second, it investigates arguments concerning the material value of the Senkaku/Diaoyu. Third, it examines the prior non-material significance of the islands. Fourth, it evaluates the possibility that leaders on either side actively sought to initiate the dispute for self-interested reasons. Fifth, it offers an alternative explanation, arguing for the significance of interrelated developments across three analytically distinct dimensions. It concludes by considering potential paths forward.

THE PUZZLE

Prior to 2010, the islands were a relatively peripheral issue in Sino-Japanese relations. In 2010, however, a PRC fishing trawler collided with JCG ships in the waters surrounding the islands, resulting in the Japanese detention of the ship and crew and arrest of the captain. This spiraled into a major diplomatic incident, as the PRC applied increasing pressure on the Japanese side for their return. Japan first released the ship and crew, and then eventually also the captain, whereafter tensions subsided. But in 2012, tensions reignited when—despite PRC objections—the Japanese government chose to pre-empt an initiative by a nationalist Tokyo mayor to buy several of the islands from a private owner by purchasing the islands itself; this unleashed a new round of conflict involving popular protests and official tensions. As Smith writes, “Until 2010, what had largely been perceived as a manageable difference between Tokyo and Beijing, of interest only to small groups of nationalist activists in both countries, had blown up into a major confrontation between the two states.”⁸

The 2010 collision and subsequent 2012 purchase thus marked decisive turning points in the nature of the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. This is particularly evidenced by substantial shifts in the official and popular salience of the dispute. Consider the attention paid the islands by the *People’s Daily*, the PRC’s official mouthpiece: only sixteen articles reference the islands in the five years before 2010 compared to three-hundred-twelve in the five years following.⁹ Alternately, in Japanese officialdom it is evidenced in parliamentary references: as one study demonstrates, 2010 marks a watershed for the islands’ salience within parliamentary debates, with mentions increasing many-fold over previous

⁸ Sheila Smith, *Intimate Rivals: Japanese Domestic Politics and a Rising China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 190.

⁹ Full-text search of *People’s Daily* articles for “钓鱼岛” comparing 2005-09-06:2010-09-06 to 2010-09-07:2015-09-07. For longer-term analysis showing a similar trend, see: Yasuhiro Matsuda, “How to Understand China’s Assertiveness since 2009: Hypotheses and Policy Implications,” *Strategic Japan—CSIS* (2014): 4.

years.¹⁰ As for the popular salience of the dispute, the Chinese search engine, Baidu, records few online searches for the islands in the five years prior to 2010; September 2010 sees a sudden burst in Chinese interest, subsequently dwarfed nearly six-fold by searches in 2012.¹¹ For Japan, Google Trends shows little interest in the years before 2010 as well; interest first shoots massively upwards in 2010 and then reappears in 2012.¹²

Although—seven years later—the salience of the dispute has subsided somewhat, the situation around the islands remains a far cry from the status quo ante. From 2012 onwards, official PRC maritime vessels have conducted regular incursions into the islands’ territorial waters, and official PRC aircraft have repeatedly appeared in the airspace above.¹³ In 2013, the PRC announced an Air Defense Identification Zone covering the airspace over the islands, raising the risk of aerial confrontations. Though there has been progress since then—most notably a maritime communication mechanism between the JSDF and PLA¹⁴—as well as more general upturn in the tone of relations, the space around the islands has also become more crowded and the possibility for serious conflict remains.

The above broadly tells us what happened, but not why. Looking to the existing literature on territorial disputes, one approach to seeking an explanation would ask what it is about the contested islands’ material value—be it strategic or economic—that has motivated such tensions. Another approach would be to interrogate the islands’ pre-existing non-material value—be it religious, ethnic, or historical. And a third approach would be to adopt a cynical perspective, investigating the potential of a “wag-the-dog” scenario in which the governments involved intentionally initiated the dispute to distract from domestic concerns or, alternately, gain bargaining leverage in other areas.

This paper examines each of these explanations in turn and finds them wanting. The material value of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands is at best questionable. Nor would it explain why tensions began in 2010; if anything, of late, estimates of the islands’ economic value have been

¹⁰ Yasuo Nakauchi, "Ryōdo O Meguru Mondai to Nihon Gaikō — 2010-Nen Ikō No Ugoki to Kokkai Rongi" [Territorial issues and Japanese diplomacy — Developments after 2010 and Parliamentary Debate.] *Rippō to chōsa* 342(2017): 3.

¹¹ Baidu Zhishu query for the PC search history for “钓鱼岛” See: <http://index.baidu.com/?tpl=trend&type=0&area=0&time=13&word=%B5%F6%D3%E3%B5%BA>, accessed 12 July 2018. Interestingly, closely tracking this was searches for “钓鱼岛地图” (Diaoyu Islands map) suggesting many were trying to locate the islands, see: <http://index.baidu.com/?tpl=trend&type=0&area=0&time=13&word=%B5%F6%D3%E3%B5%D8%CD%BC>, accessed 12 July 2018.

¹² Google Trends query for “尖閣” search history in Japan. See: <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=JP&q=尖閣>, accessed 7 August 2018. Interestingly, the most interest appears in November 2010, ostensibly due to the video scandal discussed below.

¹³ See: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Trends in Chinese Government and Other Vessels in the Waters Surrounding the Senkaku Islands, and Japan's Response,” 8 June 2018, accessed 26 June 2018 at: https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page23e_000021.html; Ministry of Defense of Japan, “China’s Activities Surrounding Japan’s Airspace,” accessed 26 June 2018 at: http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/ryouku/

¹⁴ “Japan, China launch maritime-aerial communication mechanism,” *Mainichi Shinbun*, 8 June 2018, accessed 27 June 2018 at: <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20180608/p2a/00m/Ona/002000c>

repeatedly adjusted downwards. Regarding non-material value, the islands are uninhabited and host no sites of major religious meaning; if there have been revisions to their perceived historical significance, these have arguably occurred as a function of post-2010 developments, not the reverse. And lastly, all available evidence suggests neither side was initially seeking escalation. The following three sections lay out these findings in detail; they leave post-2010 developments a puzzle.

MATERIAL VALUE?

A number of existing approaches explain territorial disputes according to the tangible benefits possession of a disputed territory can supply: these include strategic advantage, natural resources, control of trade routes, an increased population or tax base, or extra land to settle.¹⁵ Given that the islands are small and uninhabited, most existing material arguments have focused on their strategic or economic value.

STRATEGIC VALUE?

One argument for the islands' strategic value is that their possession would aid the PRC in breaking through the first island chain separating it from the Pacific Ocean or, respectively, assist Japan in preventing this.¹⁶ Precisely, the "first island chain" stretches from the Korean peninsula southerly across the Japanese Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, and beyond to the Philippines.¹⁷ The Senkaku/Diaoyu lie inside the island chain, northeast of Taiwan on the western edge of the Okinawa Trough.

But while nearer to the first island chain than the Chinese continental coastline, the Senkaku/Diaoyu are at their closest still at least 100km away from any feature in the chain.¹⁸ Consequently, even if the PRC possessed the Senkaku/Diaoyu, penetrating Japanese-held sections of the chain would still require PRC vessels to transit a considerable distance and pass through one of several bottlenecks, most prominently the Miyako Strait, between the Japanese islands of Okinawa and Miyako. These islands already house formidable Japanese military capabilities, including mobile, surface-to-ship missiles covering the strait's entrance and a

¹⁵ Paul Diehl and Gary Goertz, *Territorial Changes and International Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 14-18; Paul Diehl, *A Road Map to War: Territorial Dimensions of International Conflict* (Nashville ; London: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999), x-xi; Monica Duffy Toft, "Territory and War," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 187-89; Paul Hensel, "Contentious Issues and World Politics: The Management of Territorial Claims in the Americas, 1816–1992," *International Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (2001).

¹⁶ Li Ran, "Zhuanjia cheng riben kanzhong wo guo diaoyudao zhanlue jiazhi," [Experts claim Japan is focused on the strategic value of our country's Diaoyu Islands], *Renmin Wang*, 7 July 2012. Accessed 23 January 2017 at <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2012/0717/c115361-18534590.html>; Akimoto Kazumine, *The Strategic Value of Territorial Islands from the Perspective of National Security*, Review of Island Studies (2013). Accessed 23 January 2017 at: <https://www.spf.org/islandstudies/research/a00008/>

¹⁷ Toshi Yoshihara, "China's Vision of Its Seascape: The First Island Chain and Chinese Seapower," *Asian Politics & Policy* 4, no. 3 (2012).

¹⁸ Measured from Taisho-jima/Chiweiyu.

submarine sound surveillance system extending along the Ryuku archipelago.¹⁹ Apart from mobile, land-based missiles stationed across the chain, Japan can also deploy guided-missile patrol boats, submarines, and even mines to block critical passageways.²⁰ Correspondingly, Japan does not need control of the Senkaku/Diaoyu to obstruct PLAN movement through its portion of the first island chain. Therefore, as one analyst notes, to break through the chain the PLA would likely attempt capturing islands such as Miyako and Ishigaki for control of the strait between them.²¹ Certainly, Japan could do more to increase its defenses on these islands.²² But taking these islands remains a daunting task involving the long-distance transport of an invasion force, and PRC possession of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands would not markedly change that fact.

A second argument is that the islands would provide a platform for placing strategically useful assets—such as radar installations or missiles—closer to the other side and nearby sea lines of communication.²³ And yet such advantage would be marginal at best. For one, anything placed on the islands would be highly vulnerable. Only one of the islands has a surface area greater than a square kilometer, Uotsuri/Diaoyu Island, and at that only 3.6 km²²⁴—just “a bit larger than New York City’s Central Park.”²⁵ Accordingly, they offer scant space to hide assets or develop redundancies; in a conflict scenario, assets on the islands would offer easily identifiable targets unlikely to survive an opening salvo.²⁶ Moreover, the islands are relatively isolated: over 100km from either the nearest Japanese islands or Taiwan, more than 300km from the PRC mainland. Resupply under combat conditions would pose major logistical difficulties.²⁷ What is more, such capabilities can be placed elsewhere—to cite a former Japanese defense official, “you could get the same result from putting radar on the Senkaku as from putting it nearby on a ship, or, alternately, by flying AWACS [Airborne Warning And Control System] you could get information from farther away...”²⁸ Not only do ship-mounted and airborne capabilities have the advantages of mobility, the latter also have the advantage of higher altitude, providing a much farther radar horizon.²⁹ So while the strategic value of

¹⁹ Desmond Ball and Richard Tanter, *Tools of Owatsumi: Japan's Ocean Surveillance and Costal Defence Capabilities* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2015), 11, 103.

²⁰ Toshi Yoshihara, "Sino-Japanese Rivalry at Sea: How Tokyo Can Go Anti-Access on China," *Orbis Winter*(2015): 69-71.

²¹ Yoshihara, "China's Vision of Its Seascape," 306-07.

²² Heginbotham and Samuels, "Active Denial."

²³ Taylor Fravel and Alexander Liebman, "Beyond the Moat: The Plan's Evolving Interests and Potential Influence," in *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles*, ed. Saunders, et al. (Washington, DC: 2011), 53-54; Zhu Fenglan, "21 Shijichu De Riben Haiyang Zhanlue " in *Yatai Diqu Fazhan Baogao* ed. Zhang Yunling and Sun Shihai (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2006), 249.

²⁴ See: "The Senkaku Islands: Location, Area, and Other Geographical Data," *Review of Island Studies*, 27 February 2015. Accessed 23 January 2017 at https://www.spf.org/islandstudies/info_library/senkaku-islands/02-geography/02_geo001.html

²⁵ Manyin, "Senkaku (Diaoyu/Diaoyutai) Islands Dispute," 1.

²⁶ Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, US Airsea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia," *International Security* 41, no. 1 (2016).

²⁷ Anonymous interviews, Japanese Self Defense Force officials, Tokyo, April-May 2017.

²⁸ Anonymous interview, former Japanese Defense Ministry official, May 2017.

²⁹ Biddle and Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific," 23-24.

the islands is not zero, it is quite low—according to one former Japanese vice-admiral, “just junk rocks, no strategic value.”³⁰

Still, one could argue PRC behavior in the South China Sea (SCS)—fortifying tiny features with military hardware despite international condemnation—nevertheless demonstrates the value it places on such outposts. There are, however, several crucial differences. First, compared to the relatively isolated Senkaku/Diaoyu, PRC outposts in the SCS sit within a crowded cluster of contested features, where other claimants have already competitively established military footholds to cement their position.³¹ Second, while PRC assets at small SCS outposts are similarly vulnerable to U.S. attack, they nevertheless offer intimidating advantages against less well-equipped SCS competitors “whose navies barely rate as coast guards”³²; the Senkaku-Diaoyu would not grant such advantages vis-à-vis Japan, a more formidable adversary. Lastly, to date the PRC has only militarized features in the SCS it already had controlled for decades. Militarizing the Senkaku/Diaoyu, however, would require first expelling Japan and risking a wider conflagration with the United States. In this regard alone, the potential strategic value of the islands pales in contrast to the costs and dangers of such a confrontation, even assuming the PRC prevailed. Nor does preventing Japan from militarizing the islands stop the latter from shifting capabilities westward; Japan has already moved assets westerly by stationing a defense facility, complete with radar, to the south of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands on another island, Yonaguni.³³ All said, it is difficult to argue the marginal strategic benefit they would offer either side justifies the risk of war a contest over them might pose.

ECONOMIC VALUE?

But what of their economic value? A central factor is the potential 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) entitlements assumed to attach to these islands under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Given overlapping claims, two scholars have calculated potentially 19,800 square nautical miles of EEZ entitlements to be at stake.³⁴

Such entitlements are primarily seen as valuable due to a 1969 UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) report, which suggested the area “may be one of the most prolific oil reserves in the world.”³⁵ Importantly, the report failed to confirm actual reserves, only hypothesizing their existence given the area’s geological structure. Although at the time Taiwan and Japan (both claimants) entered into joint development negotiations, these ended in 1970 when the PRC voiced objections.³⁶ Since then—given the contested nature of the

³⁰ Retired Vice Admiral Yoji Koda, author’s interview, Tokyo, 19 April 2017.

³¹ Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative, “Occupation and Island Building,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/>.

³² Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes, “Five Shades of Chinese Gray-Zone Strategy,” *National Interest* 2017.

³³ Ball and Tanter, *Tools of Owatsumi*, 22-27.

³⁴ Victor Prescott and Clive Schofield, “The Maritime Political Boundaries of the World,” (2005): 436-39.

³⁵ Cited in: James Manicom, *Bridging Troubled Waters: China, Japan, and Maritime Order in the East China Sea* (Georgetown University Press, 2014), 43.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

area—there has been no exploratory drilling; the actual presence of petroleum reserves remains unsubstantiated.

This has not stopped speculation. One frequent figure appearing in PRC writings for the entire ECS is 109.5 billion barrels.³⁷ This figure, however, is of apparently dubious provenance, allegedly stemming from a 1969 *New York Times* article in which a Japanese official quotes findings from the ECAFE report; the report, however, contains no such a number.³⁸ Another common figure is 3-7 billion tons, purportedly offered by PRC experts in 1982 without any hard evidence.³⁹ Other similarly high PRC estimates exist, but as a U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) report notes, they remain without corroboration and “do not take into account economic factors relevant to bring them to production.”⁴⁰ In fact, one source within a major Chinese oil company confided that “inside the [Chinese] oil industry, you do not hear anyone making big claims about oil and gas around the islands these days, especially given the limited findings in other parts of the East China Sea.”⁴¹

And indeed, other recent estimates are more conservative. In 2006, one Japanese official estimated oil and gas reserves on Japan’s side of its self-proclaimed ECS median line (including potential Senkaku/Diaoyu entitlements) at approximately 500 million kilo-litres, equivalent to less than a year’s worth of PRC petroleum consumption at 2015 levels.⁴² The EIA estimates “proved and probable reserves” in the *entire* ECS at approximately “200 million barrels of oil” and “between 1 and 2 trillion cubic feet” of natural gas.⁴³ At 2015 PRC consumption levels, that equals just sixteen days’ worth of oil and between 55-100 days of natural gas.⁴⁴ In short, although potential oil and gas resources may have initially generated an interest in the islands decades ago, at present it remains at best unclear what reserves actually lie in the surrounding seabed, and recent estimates have tended to revise expectations significantly downward.⁴⁵

A second concern is fishing. At present, under a 1997 agreement, each side has agreed not to enforce its laws on the “nationals and fishing vessels” of the other in the waters twelve nautical miles beyond the islands. The friction is within the narrow twelve-nautical-mile bands of water surrounding the islands. The Japanese government claims these as territorial waters to

³⁷ See, for instance: Caihua Ma et al., “Diaoyudao Ziyuan Jiazhi Tanjiu ” [Study of the resource value of the Diaoyu Islands]. *Zhongguo Yuye Jingji* 6(2012): 126.

³⁸ See Lengcui Fei, “Diaoyudao Daodi Cangle Duoshao Shiyou? ,” [How much oil do the Diaoyu Islands really contain?]. *Qingnian yu Shehui* 11(2012): 34.; for the original, see: “Japan Will Press Efforts to Exploit Major Oil Find,” 1 September 1969.

³⁹ Qian Song, “Haiyang Shiyou--Shiyou Shengchan Zengzhang De Qianli Suozai ” [Offshore oil- the potential for growth in oil production]. *Zhongguo shiyou he huagong jingji fenxi* 02(2006): 46.

⁴⁰ U.S. Energy Information Administration, “East China Sea,” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2014).

⁴¹ Anonymous Interview, Beijing, July 2018.

⁴² Diet Session 164, Sangiin gyōsei kanshi iinkai, 24 April 2006. Calculated based on consumption figures provided by the U.S. Energy Information Administration. Accessed 12 February 2018 at <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/data/browser/>

⁴³ U.S. Energy Information Administration, “East China Sea.”

⁴⁴ Calculated based on consumption figures provided by the U.S. Energy Administration. Accessed 12 February 2018 at <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/data/browser/>

⁴⁵ Paul O’Shea, “How Economic, Strategic, and Domestic Factors Shape Patterns of Conflict and Cooperation in the East China Sea Dispute,” *Asian Survey* 55, no. 3 (2015): 555-56.

which the 1997 agreement does not apply,⁴⁶ and PRC fishing boats thus face being chased off by the Japanese Coast Guard (JCG) when approaching.⁴⁷ These waters, however, constitute only a small fraction of the disputed East China Sea EEZ area and, moreover, due to over-fishing in the general area, their fishing stocks have declined precipitously of late in line with broader ECS trends.⁴⁸ This decline, together with factors including increasing fuel costs for travel to the islands, has put off many local Japanese fishers from traveling to the islands.⁴⁹

A third potential source of economic significance is seabed mining, primarily of polymetallic manganese nodules or polymetallic sulfides.⁵⁰ But polymetallic sulfides and economically-viable concentrations of manganese nodules are generally limited to deeper waters, the former around underwater vents.⁵¹ In the ECS, the chief concentrations are in the depths of the Okinawa Trough, in the vicinity of undisputed Japanese islands in the Ryukyus.⁵² The shallower waters of the continental shelf floor surrounding the islands would thus appear to offer considerably less of potential value, while sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands would at best make only a minor difference for claims to what lies in deeper waters.⁵³

There is an even further wrinkle: settling the question of sovereignty over the islands still leaves unresolved the problem of how to divide the resources in and below their surrounding waters. Granted, under UNCLOS, the state with undisputed sovereignty over the islands would have claim to twelve nautical miles of territorial waters around each of the features above water at high tide. Many of the resources under dispute, however, lie outside these narrow confines. As one legal scholar notes, "The islands' value is almost entirely in the

⁴⁶ Nobukatsu Kanehara and Yutaka Arima, "New Fishing Order-Japan's New Agreement on Fisheries with the Republic of Korea and with the People's Republic of China," *Japanese Ann. Int'l L.* 42(1999): 27-28.

⁴⁷ Hirose Hajime, "Kaijōhoanchō Ni Yoru Senkaku Keibi No Rekishi " [A history of Japanese Coast Guard policing of the Senkaku]. *Sōsa kenkyū* 65, no. 9 (2016).

⁴⁸ Makomo Kuniyoshi, "Senkakushotō Ni Okeru Gyogyō No Rekishi to Genjō " [History and current state of Senkaku fisheries]. *Nippon Suisan Gakkasishi* 77, no. 4 (2011): 707; Tseng Katherine Hui-yi, *Lessons from the Disturbed Waters: The Diaoyu/Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands Disputes* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2015), 75-78. Given that fish generally do not pay attention to borders, this is not surprising.

⁴⁹ "Fuon'na ryōba/Senkaku" [Turbulent fishing grounds/Senkaku], *Ryuku Shinpo*, 1 March 2013, 3.

⁵⁰ Thomas Peacock and Matthew Alford, "Is Deep-Sea Mining Worth It?," *Scientific American* 318, no. 5 (2018); GP Glasby, "Deep Seabed Mining: Past Failures and Future Prospects," *Marine Georesources and Geotechnology* 20, no. 2 (2002): 165.

⁵¹ Nobuyuki Okamoto et al., "Current Status of Japan's Activities for Deep-Sea Commercial Mining Campaign" (paper presented at the 2018 OCEANS-MTS/IEEE Kobe Techno-Oceans (OTO), 2018).

⁵² Satoshi Ueda and Nobuyuki Okamoto, "Nihon Shūhen Kaiiki Ni Bunpu Suru Kaiteinessuikōshō No Kaihatsu Purojekuto No Gaiyō [The Overview of Project for Developing Seafloor Massive Sulfides in the EEZ of Japan (sic)]," *Journal of MMIJ* 131(2015).

⁵³ And this would depend on the PRC asserting an EEZ on the basis of sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which it has not yet done. A potential PRC claim on these resources, particularly those more northerly, would more likely be based on continental shelf entitlements. See: Mark J Valencia, "The East China Sea Dispute: Context, Claims, Issues, and Possible Solutions," *Asian Perspective* 31, no. 1 (2007): 139. For the Chinese claim, see: "Submission by the People's Republic of China Concerning the Outer Limits of the Continental Shelf beyond 200 Nautical Miles in Part of the East China Sea," United Nations Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea, 14 December 2012, accessed 2 April 2019 at: https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/chn63_12/executive%20summary_EN.pdf

offshore [200 nautical mile] EEZs that UNCLOS presumably attaches to them.”⁵⁴ And yet, it is far from certain an international court or arbitral tribunal would grant the Senkaku/Diaoyu EEZ entitlements. Specifically, to qualify for an EEZ or continental shelf entitlement, the features in question need to be capable of sustaining human habitation or economic life of their own.⁵⁵ Given the stringency with which the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling applied this requirement to the SCS—“the objective capacity of a feature, in its natural condition, to sustain either a stable community of people or economic activity that is not dependent on outside resources or purely extractive in nature”—it is questionable the small, uninhabited Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands would qualify.⁵⁶

Assuming, nevertheless, one or more of the Senkaku/Diaoyu features were found capable of generating EEZs, their entitlement might be granted only reduced effect or even wholly discounted due to a variety of factors including their relatively small size, lack of population and economic activity, and distance from other features.⁵⁷ Even if granted full effect, this would simply add one more competing claim on top of all the other potential EEZ and continental shelf entitlements which already extend from Taiwan, continental China, and the Japanese archipelago. Final maritime boundary delimitation would still require negotiation among the claimants or adjudication by a third party. As such processes are highly complex and unpredictable, the actual benefits from sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are very uncertain and possibly quite trivial. This also assumes such proceedings would even occur, yet as one legal scholar notes, “the unpredictability of litigation, the probable domestic illegitimacy of any adverse result, and the lack of any means short of force to enforce a judgement all work to discourage litigation or arbitration.”⁵⁸

Asked in 2016 if the islands have strategic or economic value, former Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda replied, “No, no, using all that petrol for patrols... I think it is a waste.”⁵⁹ Strategically, the islands are isolated, easily targeted, and attempting to militarize them would entail substantial risk for marginal advantage. The fishing stocks are in decline while potential petroleum reserves remain unconfirmed and have repeatedly been re-estimated downwards. Moreover, it remains uncertain what—if any—advantage sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands would provide in negotiations or judicial proceedings over the delimitation of maritime resource entitlements, should these ever even occur.

⁵⁴ Carlos Ramos-Mrosovsky, "International Law's Unhelpful Role in the Senkaku Islands," *U. Pa. J. Int'l L.* 29(2007): 931.

⁵⁵ See Article 121, *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*, accessed on 9 July 2019 at: https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf

⁵⁶ Permanent Court of Arbitration Press Release, “The South China Sea Arbitration (the Republic of the Philippines V. The People’s Republic of China)” (The Hague 2016); Manyin, "Senkaku (Diaoyu/Diaoyutai) Islands Dispute:," 1.

⁵⁷ Clive Schofield, "One Step Forwards, Two Steps Back? Progress and Challenges in the Delimitation of Maritime Boundaries since the Drafting of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea," in *30 Years of UNCLOS (1982-2012): Progress and Prospects*, ed. Xue and White (Beijing: China University of Political Science and Law Press, 2013).

⁵⁸ Ramos-Mrosovsky, "International Law's Unhelpful Role in the Senkaku Islands," 907.

⁵⁹ Former Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, author’s interview, Tokyo, 10 July 2017.

Nevertheless, one could argue it is perceptions—not the actual value—that matter, and policymakers may still be driven by perceived material aims. For instance, retired Major General Luo Yuan claims the islands are “treasure islands” and have “great geostrategic significance.”⁶⁰ But we should be careful in taking such publicly presented rationales at face value, particularly when coming from PRC hawks active in public affairs.⁶¹ In truth, if the PRC’s aim is stationary military outposts in the ECS, it has easier options. In fact, having already built several oil and gas rigs in the ECS to the north, abutting the Japanese-delineated median line, the PRC could erect further structures more southerly, along its side of the median line near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and adjacent important sea lanes. Such rigs can host radar and missile emplacements; indeed, the Japanese side has already accused the PRC of installing military-use radar on its northerly rigs.⁶² If the PRC desires a tripwire between Japan and Taiwan, these could serve the purpose.

Alternately, if the driving motive is economic, joint development offers considerable gains over the status quo without the risk of costly conflict. In actuality, this may be the only feasible option for Japan, as underwater topography is unfavorable to unilateral Japanese development of what is likely to be natural gas.⁶³ The Japanese government has itself admitted as much.⁶⁴ Ironically, running a pipeline to the Chinese coast is far more feasible.⁶⁵ One might argue it still makes sense for Japan to defend its claim in order to prevent the PRC from taking all the spoils. But the PRC has already on multiple occasions proposed joint development while shelving the sovereignty issue.⁶⁶ Admittedly, such cooperation would require ironing out many details. And yet, there are successful precedents: in 1974 Japan and the Republic of Korea agreed to jointly develop highly anticipated petroleum deposits in waters where both shared overlapping claims (and subsequently found little of value).⁶⁷

It is extraordinarily difficult to prove a negative. Yet, if the core motives for escalating the contest over the islands were material, we should have expected the protagonists to act in ways that maximize advantages or gains in these categories. That we have not, and the salience of

⁶⁰ Yuan Luo, "Diaoyudao Bu Shi Wuzuqingzhong De 'Huangdao'" " *Huanqiu Shibao*, 4 September 2012 2012.

⁶¹ Andrew Chubb, "Propaganda, Not Policy: Explaining the PLA's Hawkish Faction (Part One)," *China Brief* 13, no. 15 (2013)

⁶² Ankit Panda, "A New Chinese Threat in the East China Sea? Not So Fast," *Diplomat*, 23 July 2015 2015.

⁶³ Rongxing Guo, *Territorial Disputes and Seabed Petroleum Exploitation: Some Options for the East China Sea* (Brookings Institution Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies, 2010), 9, 19; Manicom, *Bridging Troubled Waters*, 154.

⁶⁴ “Sekō keizai sangyō daijin no kakugigo kishakaiken no gaiyō” [Press conference with METI Minister Sekō after Cabinet Meeting], Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry, 13 September 2016.

Accessed 12 February 2018 at <http://www.meti.go.jp/speeches/kaiken/2016/20160913001.html>

⁶⁵ Guo, *Territorial Disputes and Seabed Petroleum Exploitation*, 19; Manicom, *Bridging Troubled Waters*, 154.

⁶⁶ Reinhard Drifte, "The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Territorial Dispute between Japan and China: Between the Materialization of the "China Threat", " *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, no. 32 (2013): 26.; Diet Session 164, Sangiin gyōsei kanshi iinkai, 24 April 2006.

⁶⁷ Clive Schofield and Ian Townsend-Gault, "Choppy Waters Ahead in “a Sea of Peace Cooperation and Friendship”?: Slow Progress Towards the Application of Maritime Joint Development to the East China Sea," *Marine Policy* 35, no. 1 (2011): 28-29.

the dispute has increased even while the islands' economic value has been revised downward, suggest other things at work.

NON-MATERIAL VALUE?

Another potential approach, also drawn from the literature on territorial disputes, would be to examine pre-existing non-material factors, such as the historic or religious significance of the contested space, or the ethnic heritage of its population.⁶⁸

The actual disagreement between Japan and the PRC over the islands, however, is of relatively recent provenance, beginning when the PRC first publicly challenged Japanese sovereignty with its own claim in 1971.⁶⁹ Before that, the islands had a relatively trivial existence: they had no religious or historic significance of note, no Chinese had ever lived there, and a Japanese fish-processing factory that existed before the war had long been abandoned. At the time the PRC raised its claim, the islands were uninhabited, with several leased to the United States for target practice. Strikingly, in 1972, when Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka brought up the islands with PRC Premier Zhou Enlai during normalization negotiations, Zhou's response was, "Because oil has emerged, that is why this is a problem..."⁷⁰ It is therefore difficult to argue the islands possess any distant historical lineage of value.

Even today the islands remain nothing more than small, isolated, uninhabited features without any population, meaningful infrastructure, or sites of major religious or historical significance. Certainly, a critic might simply retreat to saying that territory is an issue of national sovereignty; regardless their history, once both sides laid claim the islands became a core national interest.⁷¹ Additionally, one could also point to the overlapping claims to the islands held by Taiwan and the PRC, thus linking the issue to the larger question of national unification. But even if we were to grant this, we are still faced with a problem of explanation: these are static factors, and the former fails to explain why certain territories may be valued more than others while both are mute on the question of how the willingness to risk conflict over a territory changes over time.

And there is important historic variation, particularly between the pre- and post-2010 periods. Prior to 2010 both sides adopted a delaying strategy vis-à-vis the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.⁷² Indeed, in 1972 Zhou stated he did not want to discuss the dispute,⁷³ and in 1978 PRC leader

⁶⁸ Diehl and Goertz, *Territorial Changes and International Conflict*, 19-20; Toft, "Territory and War," 189.

⁶⁹ Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China, "Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaobu shengming (1971 nian 12 yue 30 ri) [Chinese People's Republic Foreign Ministry Statement (1971 Decemeber 30)]." Accessed 5 April 2018 at:

<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/diaoyudao/chn/flfg/zcfg/t1304543.htm>

⁷⁰ Akira Ishi et al., *Nitchu Kokkou Seijouka, Nitchu Heiwa Yuukou Jouyaku Teiketsu Koushou* [[Concluding Negotiations for Sino-Japanese Normalization, the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship] (Tokyo: Iwanami, 2010), 68.

⁷¹ Alessio Patalano, "Seapower and Sino-Japanese Relations in the East China Sea," *Asian Affairs* 45, no. 1 (2014): 37.

⁷² Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁷³Ishi et al., *Nitchu Kokkou Seijouka, Nitchu Heiwa Yuukou Jouyaku Teiketsu Koushou*, 68.

Deng Xiaoping suggested shelving the issue for the next generation to solve.⁷⁴ Neither actively sought to raise the dispute and were responding to it having been touched upon by the Japanese side. And while the Japanese side never publicly acknowledged—and multiple times denied—shelving the dispute, in practice both subsequently worked to minimize the issue while Japan continued exercising administrative control.⁷⁵

Admittedly, there were points of friction. In 1978, when members of the ruling Japanese Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) criticized their leadership for not leveraging Treaty of Peace and Friendship negotiations to get the PRC to cede their claim, hundreds of PRC fishing ships appeared near the islands.⁷⁶ The PRC central government, however, later described the incident as “accidental,” generating speculation that this was the result of internal PRC divisions over the treaty.⁷⁷ In 1992, the PRC passed a Law on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone explicitly specifying the Senkaku/Diaoyu as PRC territory. This move was reportedly fiercely debated internally and done under pressure from the military.⁷⁸ But as both sides were more focused on the Japanese Emperor’s upcoming visit, there was limited fallout.⁷⁹ In 2008, official PRC ships entered the territorial waters around the islands for the first time.⁸⁰ In light of other high-level efforts to improve relations at the time, including a Sino-Japanese ECS joint development agreement—concluded despite internal PRC opposition—conjecture attributed this to dissenting hardliners.⁸¹

More prominently, however, it was small activist groups on both sides that generated problems. Already in the 1970s, the dispute galvanized “Protect the Diaoyu” groups in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United States; in Japan, various nationalist groups had also rallied to the cause, the most prominent being the Nihon Seinensha.⁸² Attempts by these actors to land on the islands, or alternately—in the case of Nihon Seinensha—advance the cause by building and registering lighthouses, constituted an ongoing irritant, particularly in the 1990’s.⁸³

⁷⁴ Masato Tomebachi, *Senkaku Wo Meguru “Gokai” Wo Toku* [Resolving misunderstandings surrounding the Senkakus] (Tokyo: Nihon Kyōhōsha, 2016), 92; Lili Zhang, *Xin Zhongguo He Riben Guanxi Shi* [History of Relations between Japan and the new China] (Shanghai: Renmin Chubanshe, 2016), 146.

⁷⁵ Tomebachi, *Senkaku Wo Meguru “Gokai” Wo Toku* 16-17, 79-97; Taylor Fravel, “Explaining Stability in the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Dispute,” in *Getting the Triangle Straight: Managing China-Japan-US Relations*, ed. Kurtis Kokubun, and Wang (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2010).

⁷⁶ Daniel Treiakh, “The Sino-Japanese Treaty of 1978: The Senkaku Incident Prelude,” *Asian Survey* 18, no. 12 (1978).

⁷⁷ Ibid., 1243; Hirose Hajime, “Kaijōhoanchō Ni Yoru Senkaku Keibi No Rekishi ” 114-16; Ryosei Kokubun et al., *Nitchūkankeishi* [History of Sino-Japanese Relations] (Tokyo: Yuhikaku Aruma, 2014), 133.

⁷⁸ Mori Kazuko, *Nitchū Hyōryū* [Sino-Japanese Drift] (Tokyo: Iwatami Shinsho, 2017), 89, 215.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 90; Kokubun et al., *Nitchūkankeishi*, 179-80.

⁸⁰ Richard C. Bush, *The Perils of Proximity: China-Japan Security Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 74-75.

⁸¹ Mori Kazuko, *Nitchū Hyōryū*, 208-11. Miyamoto Yūji, former Japanese ambassador to the PRC (2006-2010), author’s interview, Tokyo, 12 May 2017. Importantly, this also resulted in a strengthening of the Japanese security operations around the islands. See: Bush, *The Perils of Proximity*, 74-75.

⁸² Jinxing Chen, “Radicalization of the Protect Diaoyutai Movement in 1970s-America,” *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 5, no. 2 (2009); Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 127-34, 212-17.

⁸³ Erica Strecker Downs and Phillip C Saunders, “Legitimacy and the Limits of Nationalism: China and the Diaoyu Islands,” *International Security* 23, no. 3 (1999); Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 127-34;

Additionally, in 2004, after multiple attempts, members of the PRC based “Chinese Federation for Defending the Diaoyu Islands” first landed on one of the islands. Here, the Japanese government simply repatriated the Chinese activists back to the PRC; the PRC, for its part, prevented further attempts by the group to travel to the islands.⁸⁴ On the whole, both the Japanese and PRC governments repeatedly worked to contain the impact of their activists, in the case of the PRC by suppressing coverage and organized protests, in Japan by refusing official recognition and seeking to limit their activities.⁸⁵

All in all, Japanese policy prior to 2010 could be summarized with the words of Japanese Foreign Minister, Sonoda Sunao: “eschew provocative, propagandizing behavior... only carefully, calmly do what is necessary for domestic political needs...”⁸⁶ The PRC policy, in turn, could with few exceptions be summed up in PRC Vice Premier Gu Mu’s words: “[the Diaoyu Islands] have always been Chinese territory... we can temporarily shelve the sovereignty issue. Let the later generations resolve it.”⁸⁷ Downs and Saunders argue that in the past this policy to contain the dispute was due to concerns about the impact on bilateral economic relations.⁸⁸ But while one could posit a subsequent decline in Japan’s economic significance given PRC growth, as recently as 2017 Japan still ranked the PRC’s third largest export destination and second largest import partner, as well as a key investment partner.⁸⁹ And Fravel, writing in 2010, also noted a series of other reasons we should expect both sides to avoid conflict: the deterrent effect of U.S. commitments, the desire by both to maintain a regional reputation as “constructive and benign powers,” and the prior ability of all sides to manage the dispute.⁹⁰ Given all these countervailing factors, an explanation is needed for why we see such a substantial change from 2010 onwards.

INTENTIONAL CONFLICT?

A third potential explanation would be that the confrontation was intentional. One conceivable reason for deliberately provoking an escalation of the dispute by either side would be to distract from internal issues and improve the domestic popularity of the leadership, a position commonly advanced under the rubric of “diversionary war theory.”⁹¹ Another possibility is that it demonstrates, as Wiegand has argued, an intentional effort at “issue linkage” in which

Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 116-18.

⁸⁴ Shi Jiangtao, “Protesters barred from Diaoyu mission,” *South China Morning Post*, 20 July 2004, 5.

⁸⁵ Weiss, *Powerful Patriots*, 120-25; Downs and Saunders, “Legitimacy and the Limits of Nationalism.”

⁸⁶ Tomebachi, *Senkaku Wo Meguru “Gokai” Wo Toku* 81.

⁸⁷ Zhang, *Xin Zhongguo He Riben Guanxi Shi* 153.

⁸⁸ Downs and Saunders, “Legitimacy and the Limits of Nationalism.”

⁸⁹ CIA World Factbook, East and Southeast Asia: China, 2017, accessed on 13 March 2018 at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ch.html>

⁹⁰ Taylor Fravel, “Explaining Stability in the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands Dispute,” *Getting the Triangle Straight: Managing China–Japan–US Relations*, Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution 159(2010).

⁹¹ Tir, “Territorial Diversion.”

the PRC sought to use “the islands dispute as bargaining leverage to gain concessions from Japan on other disputed issues.”⁹²

All available evidence, however, suggests the initial collision was neither planned nor welcomed by either side. The trawler’s captain was reportedly intoxicated when arrested, and thus unlikely an agent.⁹³ While initially feted upon returning, he was subsequently forbidden further fishing and subjected to a soft house arrest.⁹⁴ The PRC government was also restrained at first; although protesting to the Japanese ambassador and canceling visits and ECS joint-development negotiations, in the first week after the arrest it suppressed protests and conveyed through back channels, “Somehow, please just get this settled without a fuss.”⁹⁵ Only after the Japanese side decided to extend the detention of the fishing captain despite releasing the ship and crew did the PRC escalate measures: PRC Premier Wen Jiabao publicly pressed for the captain’s release, reports emerged of an alleged PRC embargo on rare earth exports to Japan, and the PRC detained four Japanese citizens.⁹⁶ Nothing here suggests a PRC conspiracy or reactive opportunism. In actuality, the PRC was likely responding to an initially perceived loss: the Japanese side had asserted their domestic law in the waters around the islands.⁹⁷

Neither would this seem to be a clever plot planned by the Japanese side. Maehara Seiji, the Japanese minister in charge of the JCG at the time, subsequently claimed to be following an “arrest manual” inherited from a previous administration.⁹⁸ Even if Maehara did see a chance to assert Japanese jurisdiction, little preparation was made for what to do afterwards. The Kan Naoto administration was left scrambling for ways to contain the damage, fearful of being forced to pay the political price for intervention in the legal process to end the incident.⁹⁹

⁹² Krista Wiegand, *Enduring Territorial Disputes: Strategies of Bargaining, Coercive Diplomacy, and Settlement* (University of Georgia Press, 2011), 98.

⁹³ Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 190.bid.

⁹⁴ “Senkaku oki shōtotsu jiken no chūgokujin senchō ga “jitaku nankin” jōtai, shutsugyo mo kinshi” [The Chinese captain from the Senkaku sea collision under ‘house arrest,’ also forbidden to fish], *Searchina*, 24 May 2011.

⁹⁵ Citing a Japanese official, Tsuyoshi Sunohara, *Antō: Senkaku Kokuyū-Ka [Secret Battle: The Senkaku Nationalization]* (Tokyo: Shinchō bunko, 2013), 23.

⁹⁶ Alastair Iain Johnston, “How New and Assertive Is China’s New Assertiveness?,” *International Security* 37, no. 4 (2013): 23-26; Linus Hagström, “‘Power Shift’ in East Asia? A Critical Reappraisal of Narratives on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Incident in 2010,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5, no. 3 (2012): 282-83. Johnston disputes the embargo using Japanese import data. This, however, overlooks the pervasive “quasi-smuggling” on the PRC side—many 2010 rare earth exports were not classified as such when leaving the PRC but registered in Japanese import data upon arrival. See: Nabeel Mancheri and Marukawa Tomoo, “Rare Earth Elements,” in *ISS Contemporary China Studies* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Institute of Social Science, 2016), 159-60. At the time, multiple Japanese firms did report sudden stoppages, and PRC officials reportedly confirmed the embargo to U.S. counterparts privately. See: Richard McGregor, *Asia’s Reckoning: The Struggle for Global Dominance* (Penguin UK, 2017), 265. The evidence, however, remains inconclusive at best. Michael Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, ed. Studies (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 85-90. On the detention of Japanese nationals, see: Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 191; Hagström, “‘Power Shift’ in East Asia?” 281. Hagström suggests the timing could be coincidental.

⁹⁷ Taylor Fravel, “Explaining China’s Escalation over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands,” *Global Summitry* 2, no. 1 (2016).

⁹⁸ Maehara, author’s interview.

⁹⁹ Sunohara, *Antō*, 16-17, 36.

Facing increasing PRC pressure, a Japanese foreign ministry delegation gave a presentation to the local prosecutor's office, ostensibly at the latter's request.¹⁰⁰ The following day, the prosecutor announced the captain's release. As Maehara himself admits, the handling of the situation was a "mishmash (JP: *chūtohanpa*)."¹⁰¹

Notably, both sides sought to right the relationship subsequently. Kan met with Wen on the side-lines of a summit in October, where both agreed to promote a mutually beneficial strategic relationship, and when the triple disaster of 3/11 struck Japan in 2011, the PRC expressed condolences and provided aid in an effort to improve relations.¹⁰² Preparations thus began to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of Sino-Japanese normalization. As Kan's successor, Noda Yoshihiko recalls, in 2011 he "had no premonition" that the Senkaku-Diaoyu Islands would again become a problem.¹⁰³

Consequently, when in April 2012 the mayor of Tokyo, Ishihara Shintaro, proposed purchasing the islands, it was a development unwelcome on both sides. Ishihara was well-known as a right-wing nationalist; there were concerns he would provoke the PRC and "Sino-Japanese relations would enter an extremely dangerous state."¹⁰⁴ To contain the situation, the new Noda administration began quietly exploring the possibility of preemptively buying the islands. Behind the scenes it also reached out to PRC officials, arguing it was better for the Japanese government to hold title to the islands, and initially the Japanese government thought it might be making headway in gaining tacit PRC acceptance of this point.¹⁰⁵ The hope was to surreptitiously transfer the islands' ownership without publicity. This plan failed, however, when in July a Japanese newspaper made the story front page news and Noda was forced to publicly announce his intentions.¹⁰⁶ Compounding the damage, this announcement also coincided with an important wartime anniversary. Even still, the PRC only began meaningfully escalating its response in mid-August, suggesting it too had initially wished to handle the issue quietly. But despite the apparent initial intentions of both sides, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands subsequently became a highly salient flashpoint. The puzzle remains as to why.

THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF THE SENKAKU/DIAOYU ISLANDS DISPUTE

In examining the evidence, three dimensions of the dispute emerge as significant in explaining how it has developed into the flashpoint it is today: the symbolic, domestic, and interactive dimensions of the conflict. Developments in each were set in motion by the collision incident and further exacerbated by the 2012 Japanese purchase of the islands.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 39-43.

¹⁰¹ Maehara, author's interview.

¹⁰² Sunohara, *Antō*, 49; Zhang, *Xin Zhongguo He Riben Guanxi Shi* 299.

¹⁰³ Noda Yoshihiko, former Prime Minister, author's interview, Tokyo, 5 September 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Sunohara, *Antō*, 173-83, 253-55.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 189-91.

THE FIRST DIMENSION: SYMBOLIC

Surveying what was written and said in both countries about the islands, it quickly becomes clear that the dispute rapidly came to implicate much more than their immediate, tangible value. Scholarship has long suggested international politics to be populated with a variety of intangible concerns. State actors care about reputations, status, prestige, and honor within the international community.¹⁰⁷ In some cases, these are an end in themselves—for instance, satisfying a need for esteem or constituting an element of national identity; in others, a means to an end, such as increased international deference.¹⁰⁸ In further instances, the pursuit of intangibles—such as reputation—may even stem from mistaken beliefs about the effects that this will have on others.¹⁰⁹ Such concerns may be particularly salient for state actors who believe their standing not to reflect their due, or alternately, perceive their status and prestige to be slipping away. Apart from such global concerns, intangible concerns may also be part of how certain relationships are narrated and perceived. These include not only particular fixations with relative status and hierarchy vis-à-vis significant others, but also historical resentments and grievances, stories of unrectified humiliations and betrayals, even mutual suspicions and prejudices.¹¹⁰

Even before 2010, Sino-Japanese relations had suffered various episodes of contention over intangible issues. In the early 2000s, the history issue loomed large. In particular, Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's annual visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, where fourteen Japanese Class A war criminals are enshrined, were an especial irritant—by the end of his administration the top PRC leadership refused to even meet with him.¹¹¹ This was exacerbated among other things by disputes over textbook content and ongoing wartime compensation issues.¹¹² The official PRC position was that Japan was not taking the proper attitude towards history; for many on the Japanese side, the PRC was also responsible for

¹⁰⁷ Allan Dafoe et al., "Reputation and Status as Motives for War," *Annual Review of Political Science* 17(2014); Thazha V Paul et al., *Status in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2014); Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to US Primacy," *International Security* 34, no. 4 (2010); Barry O'Neill, *Honor, Symbols, and War* (University of Michigan Press, 2001); Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); Reinhard Wolf, "Respect and Disrespect in International Politics: The Significance of Status Recognition," *International Theory* 3, no. 1 (2011).

¹⁰⁸ Dafoe et al., "Reputation and Status as Motives for War," 382-83.

¹⁰⁹ Shiping Tang, "Reputation, Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict," *Security Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005); Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Cornell University Press, 2010); Daryl Press, "The Credibility of Power: Assessing Threats During the 'Appeasement' Crises of the 1930s," *International Security* 29, no. 3 (2005).

¹¹⁰ Reinhard Wolf, "Resentment in International Relations" (paper presented at the ECPR Workshop on Status Claims, Recognition, and Emotions in IR, Mainz, March, 2013); Khaled Fattah and Karin Fierke, "A Clash of Emotions: The Politics of Humiliation and Political Violence in the Middle East," *European Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 1 (2009); Paul Saurette, "You Dissin Me? Humiliation and Post 9/11 Global Politics," *Review of International Studies* 32, no. 3 (2006); Richard Herrmann et al., "Images in International Relations: An Experimental Test of Cognitive Schemata," *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (1997).

¹¹¹ Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 59; Ming Wan, *Sino-Japanese Relations: Interaction, Logic, and Transformation* (Stanford University Press, 2006), 260.

¹¹² Caroline Rose, *Sino-Japanese Relations: Facing the Past, Looking to the Future?* (Routledge, 2004).

cynically playing up history and exaggerating the threat of Japanese militarism.¹¹³ Indeed, in a 2010 poll, the majority of Chinese respondents blamed a lack of Japanese historical consciousness, while Japanese respondents primarily blamed PRC anti-Japanese education.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, the history controversies played out primarily in the realm of rhetoric and, occasionally, also protests—not military planning. The flare up of the islands dispute, however, supplied these struggles over history a concrete object of contest.¹¹⁵

Precisely, the official Japanese position is that the islands were *terra nullis* when declared Japanese territory in 1895. In the decades following, China did not challenge Japanese use, and neither did it object to U.S. administration of the islands after the war. From the Japanese perspective, the 1971 PRC claim thus appears suspiciously close to the publication of the ECAFE report suggesting petroleum deposits.¹¹⁶ In this view, by claiming historical title the PRC was duplicitously inserting itself into the game retroactively when it appeared there was material gain to be had, again twisting history to its own political ends.¹¹⁷

The official PRC position, however, is that China first discovered and administered the islands and that Japan only secretly incorporated them after gaining the upper-hand in the 1894-1895 Sino-Japanese War. The islands were thus Japanese spoils of war, ceded with Taiwan, and therefore subject to return under the 1945 terms of the Japanese surrender. But they were not returned, and the PRC was excluded from the 1951 peace treaty process; therefore, in 1971, as the United States prepared to transfer the islands to Japanese, the PRC made its position clear.¹¹⁸ In this reading, Japan is again white-washing past aggression and distorting history, and has “rejected and challenged the outcomes of the victory of the World Anti-Fascist War.”¹¹⁹

Granted, these diverging historical arguments existed previously, and were known to activists and specialists. With the conflict thrust into the limelight, however, the islands became implicated in the larger “history problem” for the wider domestic publics on both sides, with all the perceptions of bad faith that entailed.

The islands dispute became more than just history wars by other means, however; it also came to invoke larger moral principles. On the PRC side, this is exemplified by the sudden burst post-2010 in *People’s Daily* references to islands as “sacred” (shensheng) and Japan as

¹¹³ Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 95-96; Karl Gustafsson, “Recognising Recognition through Thick and Thin: Insights from Sino-Japanese Relations,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 51, no. 3 (2016).

¹¹⁴ Tokyo-Beijing Fōramu, “Dai 6-kai nitchū kyōdō seronchōsa” [The Sixth Japan-China Joint Attitude Survey], accessed at <http://tokyo-beijingforum.net/index.php/survey/6th-survey> on 10 August 2018.

¹¹⁵ For detailed analysis, see: Reinhard Drifte, “The Japan-China Confrontation over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands—between “Shelving” and “Dispute Escalation”,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 12, no. 30 (2014).

¹¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Senkaku Islands Q&A,” 13 April 2016, accessed at https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/senkaku/qa_1010.html, on 9 August 2018.

¹¹⁷ The common Japanese term is “ato dashi janken”—entering a game of paper-rock-scissors after the other side has shown its hand. See: Tomebachi, *Senkaku Wo Meguru “Gokai” Wo Toku*, 6.

¹¹⁸ The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “Diaoyu Dao, an Inherent Territory of China,” September 2012, accessed at: http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/08/23/content_281474983043212.htm on 10 August 2018.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

“stealing” (*qiequ*) them.¹²⁰ Neither was the language of theft lacking in Japan, where as one Japanese commentator notes, the logic took the following pattern: a “[the islands] may be stolen” victim-consciousness is evoked, triggering an instantaneous “we cannot let [them] be stolen” reflexive response.”¹²¹ Certainly, if as both insist, the islands are their “inherent” territory,¹²² the other cannot but have criminal intent.

This erupted against the larger backdrop of the relationship, one where the PRC was seen on both sides as increasingly overshadowing Japan politically, economically, and militarily.¹²³ Notably, 2010 was the year the PRC’s GDP surpassed Japan’s, becoming second only to the United States.¹²⁴ Consequently, within Japan, the PRC’s conduct crystallized fears of how a stronger PRC might behave in the future: bullying and ignoring the rules, using its military and economic might to assert its prerogatives in the region and beyond.¹²⁵ Indeed, as Smith notes, in Japan the 2010 incident earned the title “Senkaku shokku [shock],” as it demonstrated how a “hostile” PRC might behave.¹²⁶ Some in Japan even began suggesting a domino logic: “If we give them Senkaku, next it will be giving over Yonaguni Island or even the main island of Okinawa...”¹²⁷ These concerns, in turn, resonated with poll results revealing poor popular perceptions of Chinese more generally, likely assisted by recent negative press concerning poisoned food imports and tourist behavior, but also suggesting possible racist undertones of longer lineage within certain parts of the population.¹²⁸ On the eve of the collision, only small percentages of Japanese reported viewing Chinese as peaceful, altruistic, or trustworthy, and majorities in earlier polls had described Chinese as greedy, nationalistic, and rude.¹²⁹ All this further echoed with and bled into larger anxieties over Japan’s place in the world given its declining population and internal malaise.¹³⁰

For the PRC, however, Japanese behavior belied the notion that other states would accord China greater respect in line with its growing strength. The inverse logic of the Chinese axiom

¹²⁰ Chisako Masuo, “Lun Zhongguo Zhengfu Guanyu “Diaoyudao” Zhuzhang De Fazhan Guocheng ” [The Development Process of Chinese Official Discourse on Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands].

Contemporary Japan and East-Asia Studies 2, no. 2 (2018): 17.

¹²¹ Takashi Okada, *Senkaku Shotō Mondai: Ryōdo Nashyonarizumu No Miryoku* [Senkaku Islands Problem: The Attraction of Territorial Nationalism] (Tokyo: Sososha, 2010), 3.

¹²² Both even use the same word, 固有 (Japanese: *koyū*, Chinese: *guyou*)

¹²³ Giulio Pugliese and Aurelio Insisa, *Sino-Japanese Power Politics: Might, Money and Minds* (Springer, 2016); Michael Yahuda, *Sino-Japanese Relations after the Cold War: Two Tigers Sharing a Mountain* (Routledge, 2013), 39-63.

¹²⁴ Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 21. This was mentioned repeatedly in interviews on both sides.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 189-236; Shogo Suzuki, “The Rise of the Chinese ‘Other’ in Japan’s Construction of Identity: Is China a Focal Point of Japanese Nationalism?,” *The Pacific Review* 28, no. 1 (2015); Hagström, “Power Shift’ in East Asia?” 275-80.

¹²⁶ Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 189.

¹²⁷ Okada, *Senkaku Shotō Mondai*, 3.

¹²⁸ Yuko Kawai, “Deracialised Race, Obscured Racism: Japaneseness, Western and Japanese Concepts of Race, and Modalities of Racism,” *Japanese Studies* 35, no. 1 (2015).

¹²⁹ Tokyo-Beijing Fōramu, “Dai 6-kai nitchū kyōdō seronchōsa” [The Sixth Japan-China Joint Attitude Survey], accessed at <http://tokyo-beijingforum.net/index.php/survey/6th-survey> on 10 August 2018; Pew Research Center, “China’s Neighbors Worry About Its Growing Military Strength,” (Washington, DC: Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2006), 4.

¹³⁰ Hagström, “Power Shift’ in East Asia?” 292.

“those who are backwards will be beaten,”¹³¹ is that great powers should receive greater deference. For PRC officialdom, however, Japan evinced no such deference: obstinately refusing to acknowledge the dispute, unilaterally abrogating their implicit agreement to shelve the issue, and repeatedly and flagrantly disregarding its warnings.¹³² In the words of a PLA General, “Japan should view these warnings very clearly, today’s China is different from the China of the past...”¹³³ The China of the past may have been preyed upon due to its weakness, but the strong China of today deserved to have its wishes respected. That Japan did not do so spoke to larger suspicions in China that Japan “cannot acknowledge any other Asian country, cannot accept any other Asian country’s development, believes Japan should stand eternally at the head of the Asian powers.”¹³⁴ And this corresponded to more general views recorded in polls: large majorities of Chinese respondents perceived Japanese as arrogant, nationalistic, and violent.¹³⁵

For both sides, the islands thus became a symbol of something larger. In the words of a former high-ranking Japanese defense official, “it is not a struggle over economic interests... it is not something that would affect the military balance, and so what is left is honor—it is a nationalistic symbol.”¹³⁶ Similarly, a former Japanese vice admiral states that the islands “are a kind of psychological symbol... politically and psychologically we cannot allow China to take them.”¹³⁷ Former Japanese ambassador Miyamoto frames the stakes even more poignantly: “We consider giving them up, what will they do next, does Japan really want to be a part of China, dominated by Chinese influence? ...If Japanese lose the guts to defend the Senkaku, we become, ‘Yes, I follow your orders, China, king...’”¹³⁸

Alternately, multiple Chinese interviewees in academia and at thinktanks also privately conveyed the island’s value to be neither strategic nor economic, but primarily symbolic and political.¹³⁹ As one scholar noted, the islands are worthless, but one cannot say this for the issue is too emotional. He continued, “The islands are emotionally important. They are just a few rocks, but we cannot back down. Japan took the islands when China was weak.”¹⁴⁰

In short, following the 2010 collision, the dispute over the islands quickly became about much more than the islands themselves—they became concrete proxies in larger morally- and emotionally-charged struggles over history, reputation, recognition, victimization, and status.

¹³¹ “Luohou jiu yao ai da.” See: Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Univ of California Press, 2004), 50-51.

¹³² Guo Jiping, “Diaoyudao shi zhongguo lingtu, tiezheng rushan,” [The Diaoyu Islands are Chinese territory, the mountain-high evidence is ironclad]. *Renmin Ribao*, 12 October 2012, 3-ban. (Guo Ping being the pseudonym for authoritative foreign affairs commentaries.)

¹³³ Yinan Jin, *Shijie Dageju Zhongguo You Taidu* [The grand international setup, China has an attitude] (Beijing: Beijing Lianhe Chuban Gongsi, 2017), 66.

¹³⁴ See: Wang Fan, *Daguo Waijiao* [Great Power Diplomacy] (Beijing: Beijing Lianhe Chuban Gongsi, 2016), 279.

¹³⁵ Pew Research Center, “China’s Neighbors Worry About Its Growing Military Strength,” 4.

¹³⁶ Yanigisawa Kyōji, former Assistant Chief Cabinet Secretary for National Security (2004-2009), author’s interview, 24 May 2017.

¹³⁷ Koda, author’s interview.

¹³⁸ Miyamoto, author’s interview.

¹³⁹ Anonymous interviews, Beijing, 18 June-5 July 2017.

¹⁴⁰ Anonymous interview, Beijing, June 2017.

There is thus an important symbolic dimension to this dispute, one which is responsible for elevating the islands significance and salience, and thereby raising the perceived stakes involved.

THE SECOND DIMENSION: DOMESTIC

In examining post-collision developments, it is equally impossible to ignore the domestic dynamics the contest set in motion in both countries. Much has been made within the international relations literature of “outbidding,” whereby domestic political actors seek to raise their profile and political chances by playing hawk.¹⁴¹ The conflict over the islands supplied an opportunity *par excellence* for outbidding. Advocating harsher measures, domestic political entrepreneurs were able to differentiate themselves from their competition by playing to popular hawkish biases.¹⁴² But other actors also sought to profit. Numerous media actors—print, television, and online—also aimed to capitalize on the contest, feeding its drama to generate sales and advertising revenue. So too did nationalist activists, who latched on to the contest to advance their agenda, as well as specialist pundits, for whom it was an opportunity to enjoy the limelight and seek funding. Private actors even exploited the situation to peddle nationalist kitsch.¹⁴³

That said, for the main the core leaders managing the territorial contest, it was a constant source of vulnerability, which domestic opponents could leverage for attacks on a domestic playing field that was not fully level. Not holding power, political opponents were at liberty to criticize without offering solutions or, alternately, propose tactics that play well domestically regardless their international ramifications. Importantly, the conflict also erupted at a difficult time for the leadership of both sides. In Japan, a new party without previous ruling experience had assumed power. In the PRC, a leadership struggle was underway. The conflict thus created vulnerabilities for those in power and provided ammunition for their critics.

On the Japanese side, the ruling DPJ quickly came under fire for its handling of the 2010 crisis, in which the captain was released following PRC pressure. Hagström has chronicled how policymakers, elites, and the press viewed the episode: “a diplomatic defeat,” “caved in to pressure,” “a humiliating retreat,” “a fiasco.”¹⁴⁴ Above all, the DPJ was attacked as “spineless.”¹⁴⁵ Even the Japanese ambassador in Beijing came under fire for submitting to late night PRC summonses.¹⁴⁶ The opposition also called for the DPJ to release JCG footage of the incident to clarify who was at fault. Chief Cabinet Secretary Sengoku argued the video was evidence and could not be made public, but this was ridiculed as deferring to PRC sensibilities while the latter spread untruths.¹⁴⁷ Consequently, a JCG official with access to the video and

¹⁴¹ Michael Colaresi, *Scare Tactics: The Politics of International Rivalry* (Syracuse University Press, 2005):20, 29-35

¹⁴² Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon, "Hawkish Biases," in *American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear: Threat Inflation since 9/11*, ed. Thrall and Cramer (New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁴³ Jiun Bang, *The Business of Nationalism [Unpublished Manuscript]* (2018).

¹⁴⁴ Hagström and Jerdén, "Understanding Fluctuations in Sino-Japanese Relations," 276-79.

¹⁴⁵ Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 208.

¹⁴⁶ Niwa Uichiro, *Pekin Retsujistu [Scorching Beijing Days]* (Tokyo: Bungei Shunju, 2013), 15.

¹⁴⁷ Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 206.

angry with DPJ behavior thus leaked the footage.¹⁴⁸ The leak—far from ending the incident—ignited new controversy over DPJ control of its own officials.¹⁴⁹ The overall effect was a blow to the DPJ. As one DPJ parliamentarian relates, after 2010, “we were in a different political climate... much of the criticism, or even I would say hatred towards the DPJ stems from that, that we were seen as being weak... almost having a collusive relationship with the Chinese.”¹⁵⁰

This, in turn, set the stage for 2012. By announcing his plan to purchase the islands, Tokyo mayor Ishihara cast himself as defending the national interest where the DPJ had failed: “The government should buy them, but it doesn’t. Tokyo will defend the Senkaku.”¹⁵¹ Ishihara was known for his antipathies towards the PRC—frequently referring to it with the derogatory term “shina.” But this was also a political opportunity. As Noda observes, “he was the mayor of Tokyo, but after that he founds a new party, and becoming ambitious towards national politics, he may have been looking for something with which to appeal to the public...”¹⁵² On the back of 2010, appeal it did; one early poll showed 69% support for Ishihara’s plan.¹⁵³ The LDP followed, adding the purchase of the islands to their manifesto.¹⁵⁴ Ishihara quickly amassed a large number of public donations worth 1.4 billion yen, both increasing his leverage and making it difficult to back down.¹⁵⁵ Ishihara was also quite cavalier about the risks. Speaking privately with Noda, he suggested even if the PRC was provoked to military action things would be fine, because “if it involves conventional forces, the JSDF would win.”¹⁵⁶

Fearing a Tokyo purchase, the Noda government thus entered into a covert contest with Ishihara to buy the islands, initial hoping the PRC government would be amenable to its efforts. Certainly, the Japanese government may eventually have sought ownership regardless so as to control their use; but Ishihara accelerated their timeline, limited their options, and brought unwanted publicity.¹⁵⁷ Complicating matters, the islands’ owner was dilatory and fickle, and a minor drama unfolded as both sides sought to curry his favor.¹⁵⁸ Even after winning the owner’s agreement to sell, the Japanese government worried he might change his mind. As events progressed, the Japanese side also came to believe the PRC would object irrespective of the timing and thus it would be better to finish with buying the islands before the upcoming

¹⁴⁸ Masaharu Isshiki, *Nani Ka No Tame Ni* [For something] (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbun Chuban, 2011), 87.

¹⁴⁹ Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 207-09.

¹⁵⁰ Kitagami Keiro, Japanese Parliamentarian, author’s interview, Tokyo, 6 June 2017.

¹⁵¹ Sunohara, *Antō*, 78.

¹⁵² Noda, author’s interview. On Ishihara’s political ambitions, see also: Okada, *Senkaku Shotō Mondai* 16-20,104.

¹⁵³ “Gaikō, kiki kanri’ seronchōsa kekka” [Diplomacy, crisis management poll results], *Shizuoka Shinbun*, 18 June 2012, 2.

¹⁵⁴ Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 224.

¹⁵⁵ Approximately 15,000,000 USD. “Senkaku kifu-kin jōto” [Transfer of Senkaku donation money], *Sankei Shinbun*, 7 September 2012, 1.

¹⁵⁶ Noda, author’s interview.

¹⁵⁷ Nagashima Akihisa, Special Advisor to Noda for Foreign Affairs and National Security (2011-2012), author’s interview, Tokyo, 19 July 2017.

¹⁵⁸ Sunohara, *Antō*.

PRC leadership transition. Hence the rush to purchase.¹⁵⁹ All the same, the vehemence of the PRC response exceeded expectations.¹⁶⁰

Even with the purchase completed, the islands remained a prominent domestic political issue. In the September LDP leadership race—playing out against the backdrop of violent Chinese protests—all candidates but one advocated increasing Japan’s “effective control of the islands.”¹⁶¹ Chief among these was Abe Shinzō, the victor, who proposed solidifying Japanese control by building a small harbor or structure to house officials on the islands.¹⁶² He continued a hawkish line going into the December lower house elections, attacking the DPJ for “three years of diplomatic failure”;¹⁶³ the LDP won, making Abe prime minister. In office, Abe has maintained a firm position, which arguably has played to his advantage as he has sought to increase Japanese defense spending and loosen legal restrictions on the JSDF.¹⁶⁴

Domestic dynamics within the PRC are opaquer, but internal political pressures also appear to have been at work. Scholars have long noted the significance of relations with Japan to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, this being a domain of particularly strong nationalist emotions.¹⁶⁵ Nevertheless, prior to the 2010 collision, the Hu-Wen administration had been actively working to improve relations with Japan, reaching a controversial agreement to jointly develop oil and gas resources in the East China Sea. The agreement attracted internal criticism and at the time was pushed through despite objections from various maritime security actors.¹⁶⁶ The Japanese arrest of the fishing captain put Hu and Wen in a difficult position as it suggested their concessions were for naught; not surprisingly, the joint agreement was an early casualty of the 2010 confrontation.¹⁶⁷ Wen, in turn, became the face of PRC criticisms of Japan, sharply attacking the arrest as “eliciting the anger of all Chinese at home and abroad.”¹⁶⁸

The collision also elicited domestic protests, although these were officially restrained.¹⁶⁹ Interestingly, in 2010 Chongqing was both one of the earliest sites of anti-Japanese protest and one of the last, with the latter occurring after the PRC government had begun officially

¹⁵⁹ Noda, author’s interview.

¹⁶⁰ Noda, Nagashima, author’s interviews.

¹⁶¹ Smith, *Intimate Rivals: Japanese Domestic Politics and a Rising China*, 234.

¹⁶² “Jimintōsōsaisen - shin sōsai ni Abe moto shushō” [LDP presidential election – new president, former PM Abe], *Mainichi Shinbun*, 27 September 2012.

¹⁶³ “Shūin-sen kōyaku bunseki - gaikō TPP” [Lower house election analysis – diplomacy, TPP], *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 14 December 2012, 11.

¹⁶⁴ Adam Liff, “Japan’s Security Policy in the “Abe Era”: Radical Transformation or Evolutionary Shift?,” *Texas National Security Review* (2018).

¹⁶⁵ Susan Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); William Callahan, *China: The Pessimist Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Gries, *China’s New Nationalism*.

¹⁶⁶ Anonymous interviews, Beijing, 18 June-5 July 2017; Manicom, *Bridging Troubled Waters*, 151; Bush, *The Perils of Proximity*, 79-80; Weiss, *Powerful Patriots*, 162-64.

¹⁶⁷ Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 191.

¹⁶⁸ “Wenjiabao zongli zai niuyue qianglie duncu rifang liji wutiaojian fang ren” [Premier Wen Jiabao in New York strongly presses the Japanese side for an immediate and unconditional release], *Zhongyang Zhengfu Menhu Wangzhan*, 22 September 2010, accessed at: http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2010-09/22/content_1707863.htm on 4 September 2018.

¹⁶⁹ Weiss, *Powerful Patriots*, 160-88.

discouraging protests.¹⁷⁰ This protest was apparently tolerated by local authorities, given that calls for protest had “circulated days in advance and drawn international media coverage.”¹⁷¹ Although unclear at the time, we now know the then Communist Party Secretary of Chongqing, Bo Xilai, was engaged in a fierce political struggle for a top leadership position, with one of his tools an unorthodox campaign to foster mass popularity. That Bo might have sought to leverage the conflict for political gain is not unconceivable—it would have played well to his populist credentials while putting pressure on the center.

Bo Xilai eventually fell in 2012—embroiled in a drama involving the murder of an expat. This drama, along with the larger leadership succession struggle within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) prior to the 18th Party Congress, unfolded in parallel to the contest over the islands instigated by Ishihara. Bluntly, the Japanese purchase came at a very difficult time for Hu and Wen.¹⁷² As the then Japanese ambassador recounts, from July 2012 onwards “to stop the nationalization the Chinese side had repeatedly been sending the message ‘The Party Congress is in November, this will be an extremely large problem’.”¹⁷³ The exact details of the leadership struggle remain a mystery—including Xi Jinping’s sudden disappearance in September, officially due to a “back injury.”¹⁷⁴

What is clear, however, is that a considerable hardening of the PRC position vis-à-vis Japan occurred in mid-August, following a CCP leadership conference in Beidaihe. Online censorship of nationalistic posts concerning the islands dropped precipitously starting 18 August, and in mid-August PRC authorities became more permissive towards nationalist activities, allowing demonstrations and attempts by Hong Kong activists to land on the islands, even providing media coverage.¹⁷⁵ Several Japanese scholars suggest political adversaries used the dispute to attack Hu and gain leverage in the leadership struggle, with some even suggesting the demonstrations were part of a plot by the subsequently deposed security chief, Zhou Yongkang.¹⁷⁶ Even if not the case, Hu likely was politically on the back foot, with a close aide under fire for corruption.¹⁷⁷ Consequently, it is doubtful he could have tolerated letting the contest with Japan become an additional source of vulnerability.

Unsurprisingly, when Hu encountered Noda at an APEC conference on 9 September, he strongly conveyed PRC objections. As Noda recalls, he approached Hu to convey condolences and offer support for a recent earthquake, but “not at all responding to that, what came back was ‘[we] absolutely cannot accept nationalization the islands...’”¹⁷⁸ Hu’s warning did not

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 182.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² McGregor, *Asia's Reckoning*, 272-74; International Crisis Group, "Dangerous Waters," (2013), 7-8.

¹⁷³ Uichiro Niwa, *Chūgoku No Dai Mondai [China's Major Issues]* (Tokyo: PHP Shinsho, 2014), 143.

¹⁷⁴ McGregor, *Asia's Reckoning*, 279.

¹⁷⁵ Christopher Cairns and Allen Carlson, "Real-World Islands in a Social Media Sea: Nationalism and Censorship on Weibo During the 2012 Diaoyu/Senkaku Crisis," *The China Quarterly* 225(2016); Weiss, *Powerful Patriots*, 198-205.

¹⁷⁶ Kokubun et al., *Nitchūkankeishi*, 245-46; Kokubun Ryosei, *Chū Kuni Seiji Kara Mita Nitchūkankei* [Sino-Japanese relations from the perspective of Chinese politics] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2017), 223-24.

¹⁷⁷ Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*, 23-24.

¹⁷⁸ Noda, author's interview; see also, McGregor, *Asia's Reckoning*, 267-69.

dissuade Noda; the following day he announced the purchase of the islands. As the then Japanese ambassador observes, the timing “was a bit diplomatically rude...”¹⁷⁹ For Hu, it was a clear assault on his authority.

For Xi Jinping, Hu’s successor, however, it presented an opportunity and a test. Xi was reportedly charged with heading a leading small group—a key policy body reporting to the Politburo—to respond to the Japanese purchase.¹⁸⁰ If true, this constituted an important trial of his leadership ability, and offered Xi the chance to project a strong visage in contrast to Hu. Consequently, the safest course most probably was a harsh response, provided it did not escalate out of control. In particular, there already existed calls to increase patrols around the islands, and by supporting these Xi could demonstrate his mettle.¹⁸¹ Xi also persisted with a hardline towards Japan into the years following, siding with the PLA in 2013 over foreign ministry objections to establish an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the disputed islands.¹⁸² The political logic makes sense: Xi was initially embroiled in fierce domestic battles, most prominently the anti-corruption campaign; a hardline stance prevented criticism, appealed to key constituencies in the military and security apparatuses, and bolstered his popularity as a strong leader. It would take two years for Abe to first meet Xi, and this only after both sides had hammered out statements seemingly agreeing to disagree about the existence of a disagreement over the islands.¹⁸³

The combination of vulnerability and opportunity thus created pressures for leaders on both sides to adopt a harder line. But as noted above, numerous minor actors on both sides—too many to list here—also saw opportunity in the conflict. This extended beyond the numerous nationalist activists on both sides who mobilized—online and in the streets—for the cause and the tabloids supplying sensationalist reporting. The conflict also became the subject of pulpy books for the popular market, ranging from PLA Rear Admiral Zhang Zhaozhong’s *History of Disputed Islands* to former JCG official Isshiki Masaharu’s account of leaking the collision footage.¹⁸⁴ Conspiracy theorists also found an outlet, suggesting, for instance, that the collision was a PRC plot or that the death of a Chinese panda on loan to Japan was

¹⁷⁹ Niwa, author’s interview.

¹⁸⁰ McGregor, *Asia’s Reckoning*, 270-71; International Crisis Group, “Dangerous Waters,” 7. Linda Jakobson, “How Involved Is Xi Jinping in the Diaoyu Crisis?” *The Diplomat*, 8 February 2013, accessed on 5 September 2018 at: <https://thediplomat.com/2013/02/how-involved-is-xi-jinping-in-the-diaoyu-crisis-3/>; the group is potentially the “Leading Small Group for the Protection of Maritime Rights and Interests,” whose full membership is unclear, but it first appears in September of 2012 on the cv of at least one PRC cadre: see “Liu Cigui, Jianli,” *Difanglingdao ziliaoku*, accessed on 5 September 2018 at: <http://ldzl.people.com.cn/dfzlk/front/personPage11962.htm>

¹⁸¹ Andrew Chubb, “Assessing Public Opinion’s Influence on Foreign Policy: The Case of China’s Assertive Maritime Behavior,” *Asian Security* (2018): 14.

¹⁸² Anonymous interviews, Beijing, 18 June-5 July 2017; see also, Feng Zhang, “Should Beijing Establish an Air Defense Identification Zone Over the South China Sea?” *Foreign Policy*, 4 June 2015, accessed on 5 September 2018 at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/04/should-beijing-establish-an-air-defense-identification-zone-over-the-south-china-sea/>

¹⁸³ Adam Liff, “Principles without Consensus: Setting the Record Straight on the 2014 Sino-Japanese ‘Agreement to Improve Bilateral Relations’,” (Working Paper, November 8, 2014. Available at http://www.adamphailiff.com/documents/Liff2014_PrinciplesWithoutConsensus.pdf, 2014).

¹⁸⁴ Zhang Zhaogong, *Shishuo Daozheng* [History of Disputed Islands] (Beijing: Beijing Chubanshe, 2014); Isshiki, *Nani Ka No Tame Ni*

deliberate.¹⁸⁵ And Bang, in her excellent work on nationalist kitsch, has mapped the myriad ways commercial actors in both Japan and China capitalized on the dispute.¹⁸⁶ Merchandise included stickers, keychains, shirts, food, and even alcohol—one example being the 106-proof “Diaoyudao patriotic liquor” available in an artillery-shell-shaped flask. Private investors even sought to purchase the trawler from the 2010 collision to house a sarcastically-named “Sino-Japanese Friendship Restaurant.”¹⁸⁷ In China, the conflict also spawned videogames, running from the cartoonishly racist “Protect Diaoyudao”¹⁸⁸ to the more realistic, PLA-designed “Glorious Mission.”¹⁸⁹ All served to further cement the dispute within the public sphere and raise its salience.

In sum, there was also a clear domestic dimension to this dispute, whereby developments concerning the islands generated a combination of opportunities for domestic entrepreneurs and potential vulnerabilities for the leadership. The former had incentives to play up the drama and intangible stakes of the contest for parochial ends—be they personal, ideological, or commercial. For the latter, the stakes of the contest—for better or worse—were seen to include their own political fate. The sum impact domestically was to direct attention to the contest and exert pressures on policymakers to take ever stronger actions in response.

THE THIRD DIMENSION: INTERACTIVE

The collision additionally set in play interactive dynamics between the two sides. Both the Japanese arrest of the captain and subsequent purchase of the islands elicited strong reactions. In response to the latter in particular, the PRC launched a “diplomacy of anger,”¹⁹⁰ expressing outrage, suspending meetings and exchanges, taking various punitive measures—as one Chinese scholar writes, “to defend the sovereignty of the Chinese Diaoyu Islands, the Chinese government adopted a series of forceful countermeasures,” detailing a long list of actions ranging from sending maritime surveillance ships and aircraft into the area, to the official publication of basepoints and baselines around the islands, to even introducing daily televised weather forecasts for the islands.¹⁹¹ The PRC also permitted protests in over 200 cities, some involving violence and the destruction of stores, restaurants, and property associated with Japan.¹⁹² Japan, in turn, was also host to various forms of activism, as well as protests and

¹⁸⁵ *Nani Ka No Tame Ni* 49-50. McGregor, *Asia's Reckoning*, 264.

¹⁸⁶ Jiun Bang, “Commodification of Nationalism” (Unpublished Manuscript), (2017).

¹⁸⁷ This was thwarted by the government. “Senkaku shōtotsu no Chūgoku gyosen wo nitchūyūkō no resutoran-sen ni?” [The Chinese ship from the Senkaku collision to be a Japan-China friendship restaurant?], *Searchina*, 24 May 2011.

¹⁸⁸ “‘Baowei diaoyudao’ youxi xiajiahou, yansheng duoge shanzaiban” [After the ‘Protect Diaoyudao’ videogame took off, it spawned many imitations], *Renminwang*, 12 July 2012, accessed on 5 September 2018 at: <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2012/0712/c1002-18499038.html>

¹⁸⁹ J. T. Quigley, “Diaoyu Island Assault,” *The Diplomat*, 2 August 2013, accessed on 5 September 2018 at: <https://thediplomat.com/2013/08/diaoyu-island-assault-pla-designed-video-game-simulates-sino-japanese-conflict/>

¹⁹⁰ Todd Hall, *Emotional Diplomacy: Official Emotion on the International Stage* (Cornell University Press, 2015), 39-79.

¹⁹¹ Zhang, *Xin Zhongguo He Riben Guanxi Shi* 300-01.

¹⁹² International Crisis Group, “Dangerous Waters,” 10-11; Weiss, *Powerful Patriots*, 160-218.

denunciations of PRC behavior, although the most strident of these came from actors not in power.¹⁹³

But even after these subsided, the contest has persisted in having an interactive dimension. The interactive dimension is here defined as the space of move and countermove, within which the various actors who see their task as defending or improving their respective state's position in the dispute continue to operate across a variety of domains. Akin to the security dilemma, in which actions by one side to improve its security render the other side less secure, here actions taken to improve one side's position in the dispute are detrimental to the other's, thus eliciting counter-actions.

Possibly the most prominent is the military—or para-military—aspect of this competition, whereby each side seeks advantage through acquiring and deploying relevant capabilities. Most strikingly, the PRC has become a regular presence around the islands, challenging Japanese control. Following the 2010 arrest, the PRC successively sent a number of official vessels into the contiguous zone surrounding the islands. After the 2012 purchase, these escalated markedly: sixty-six patrols entered the islands' territorial waters over the subsequent year.¹⁹⁴ In the latter half of 2013, these stabilized into regular patrols two or three times per month.¹⁹⁵ These were accompanied by increasing PRC air patrols as well.¹⁹⁶ The initial Japanese response was to shift half of its entire Coast Guard to the area surrounding the islands and keep up a constant pace of scrambles.¹⁹⁷

The longer-term response on both sides, however, has been a qualitative and quantitative increase in both the capabilities deployed around the islands and held more generally. The PRC has kept up a steady pace of increasing military spending and has also invested heavily in its paramilitary maritime forces.¹⁹⁸ Certainly, this is a trend that pre-dates 2010 and involves a multitude of factors; but this spending includes capabilities useful for a scenario involving the islands, and, indeed, PRC ships appearing in adjacent waters have of late become larger and more militarily capable, with a number of PLAN vessels being repurposed as coast guard ships.¹⁹⁹ Correspondingly, Japan has increased its military spending and responded with a variety of measures, including the construction of new JSDF and JCG facilities on nearby islands, the creation of a “dedicated Senkaku Territorial Waters Guard Unit” to maintain “24/7 presence” around the islands, a fifty-percent increase in JCG tonnage, and the

¹⁹³ Smith, *Intimate Rivals*, 224-28.

¹⁹⁴ Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 75,142-44; Fravel, "Explaining China's Escalation over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands," 32-33; Adam Liff, "China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations in the East China Sea and Japan's Response," in *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, ed. Erickson and Martinson (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018 Forthcoming). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Trends in Chinese Government and Other Vessels in the Waters Surrounding the Senkaku Islands, and Japan's Response."

¹⁹⁵ Liff, "China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations in the East China Sea and Japan's Response," 9.

¹⁹⁶ Ministry of Defense of Japan, "China's Activities Surrounding Japan's Airspace."

¹⁹⁷ Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 143.

¹⁹⁸ Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2018," (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018).

¹⁹⁹ Liff, "China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations in the East China Sea and Japan's Response," 13.

creation of a JSDF amphibious force capable of retaking remote islands.²⁰⁰ Japan has also repeatedly sought U.S. support, receiving assurances their defense agreement covers the islands and revisions to the bilateral defense guidelines so as to better respond to potential Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands contingencies.²⁰¹

The overall consequence is a much more crowded maritime environment coupled with a greater increase in the potential force both sides can bring to bear. As Erikson and Liff note, “Despite... the fact neither Beijing nor Tokyo *wants* conflict, the post-2012 operational status quo has significantly increased the possibility of even an unintended miscalculation or incident.”²⁰² And there have been close encounters, including incidents in which PRC vessels locked on to Japanese counterparts with fire-control radar and “mock dogfighting” between both sides in the air.²⁰³ As each side seeks to materially defend or improve its position, the potential danger of the situation increases.

But the ongoing material competition is not the only one in play. Simultaneously, positional competition has also unfolded in the realm of public diplomacy, with each appealing for support internationally. As the conflict proceeded, the PRC became particularly active in propagating its views—mobilizing diplomats to author op-eds in foreign newspapers, encouraging demonstrations abroad, releasing a new white paper, and creating a multi-language pamphlet for international distribution.²⁰⁴ Kitagami, an aide in Noda’s administration, recalls Noda presenting the Japanese version of the latter pamphlet, saying, “one of my friends visited China for business purposes and they gave him this... We have to give our side of the argument.”²⁰⁵ Consequently, Japan began producing its own pamphlets and videos, and diplomats were given orders to respond where possible—at the United Nations, at international conferences, and in the opinion pages of major foreign newspapers.²⁰⁶ At times, this bordered on the absurd, as when Chinese and Japanese diplomats in Britain traded public accusations as to which was more akin to Voldemort.²⁰⁷ The core messages, however, were more serious. The PRC sought to portray Japan as an unrepentant, militaristic

²⁰⁰ Adam Liff and John Ikenberry, “Racing toward Tragedy?: China’s Rise, Military Competition in the Asia Pacific, and the Security Dilemma,” *International Security* 39, no. 2 (2014): 73-78; Liff, “China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations in the East China Sea and Japan’s Response,” 17-21; Christopher Hughes, “Japan’s ‘Resentful Realism’ and Balancing China’s Rise,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 9, no. 2 (2016): 144-45.

²⁰¹ Manyin, “Senkaku (Diaoyu/Diaoyutai) Islands Dispute,” 6-8.

²⁰² Adam Liff and Andrew Erickson, “From Management Crisis to Crisis Management? Japan’s Post-2012 Institutional Reforms and Sino-Japanese Crisis (in) Stability,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 5 (2017): 604.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 605. Although the PRC denies the radar incidents.

²⁰⁴ The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “Diaoyu Dao, an Inherent Territory of China,”; “China Publishes Pamphlet on Diaoyu Islands,” *Beijing Review*, 21 September 2012, accessed 10 September 2018 at: http://www.bjreview.com.cn/special/2012-09/21/content_485502.htm

²⁰⁵ Kitagami, author’s interview.

²⁰⁶ Kitagami, author’s interview; Linus Hagström, “The Sino-Japanese Battle for Soft Power,” *Global Affairs* 1, no. 2 (2015); Pugliese and Insisa, *Sino-Japanese Power Politics*, 103-27. “Japanese Territory: Reference Room,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, accessed 10 September 2018 at: https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/senkaku/page1we_000012.html

²⁰⁷ Tyler Roney, “The Sino-Japanese Voldemort Wars,” *The Diplomat*, 9 January 2014, accessed 10 September 2018 at: <https://thediplomat.com/2014/01/the-sino-japanese-voldemort-wars-chinas-doomed-pr-battle/>

challenger to the post-WWII order, while Japan sought to portray itself as upholding a rules-based order in the face of broad PRC revisionism in both the East and South China Seas.²⁰⁸

This campaign intersected with two other arenas in which Sino-Japanese positional struggles were unfolding: those of legal contestation and historical scholarship. Legal imperatives, in particular, can have quite pernicious effects, motivating competitive “displays of sovereignty” to avoid any sign of acquiescence and counter every move by the other side.²⁰⁹ In particular, this has driven contests between PRC and Japanese vessels over jurisdictional control in the waters off the islands. Legal argumentation also incentivizes each side to promote self-serving interpretations while denying any legitimacy to the position of the other, reinforcing a sense of self-righteous victimization. As noted above, the Japanese legal claim contends the islands were *terra nullis* and that for decades it exercised effective control with Chinese acquiescence, while the PRC argues its legal title on the basis of prior discovery and the Japanese conditions of surrender in 1945.²¹⁰ Discrepancies between these justificatory histories feed the impression the national cause is just and the other duplicitous; thus, as both seek to legitimate their claims, they become enmeshed in positions ever less amenable to compromise.

Supplementing the legal claims is a resort to competitive historical documentation and research. Each has sought to support its position with historical maps, documents, and sympathetic scholarship.²¹¹ And history has also been marshalled to fortify domestic support through historical exhibitions and updated textbooks.²¹² Historical argumentation can work in destabilizing ways. For example, in 2013 two Chinese scholars published a piece in the *People's Daily*, arguing not only that the Diaoyu Islands belonged to Taiwan, but that even Japanese claims to the Ryukyu Islands had a troubled history.²¹³ According to one of the authors, the goal was to point out “If one says that the Ryukyus in early history were not part of Japan, what evidence does Japan have to prove that the Diaoyu Islands are Japanese territory[?]”²¹⁴ Ostensibly intended to discredit Japanese claims to the islands as “inherent

²⁰⁸ Hagström, “The Sino-Japanese Battle for Soft Power.”; Pugliese and Insisa, *Sino-Japanese Power Politics*, 103-27.

²⁰⁹ Ramos-Mrosovsky, “International Law's Unhelpful Role in the Senkaku Islands,” 906.

²¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Senkaku Islands Q&A,”; The State Council of the People's Republic of China, “Diaoyu Dao, an Inherent Territory of China.”

²¹¹ “Commissioned Research Report on Archives of Senkaku Islands,” Cabinet Office, accessed 10 September 2018 at: https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/ryodo_eg/report/senkaku.html; “Diaoyu Dao: The Inherent Territory of China,” National Marine Data and Information Service, accessed 10 September 2018 at: <http://www.diaoyudao.org.cn/en/>

²¹² “Shenyang ‘9-18’ lishibowuguan: jiang zengjia diaoyudao shishi zhanlan neirong” [Shenyang 9-18 history museum: will increase content of Diaoyu Island historical exhibit], *Renminwang*, 15 September 2012, accessed 11 September 2018 at: <http://japan.people.com.cn/35467/7949966.html>; “Ryōdo shuken tenji-kan,” [National Museum of Territory and History], accessed 11 September 2018 at: <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/ryodo/tenjikan/>; “New Chinese textbook lays claim to Senkakus,” *The Japan Times*, 1 September 2017; “Japanese textbooks toe government line,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, 7 April 2015, accessed 11 September 2018 at: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Japanese-textbooks-toe-government-line-on-disputed-islands>

²¹³ Zhang Haipeng and Li Guoqiang, “Lun maguantiaoyue and diaoyudao wenti,” [Discussing the Treaty of Shimonoseki and the Diaoyu Islands Question], *Renmin Ribao*, 8 May 2013, 9.

²¹⁴ “Renminribao kan wen zhiyi liuqiu guishu” [The People's Daily publishes an essay questioning the ownership of the Ryukyus], *Zhongguo guangbowang*, accessed 11 September 2018 at: http://china.cnr.cn/xwwgf/201305/t20130510_512557847.shtml

territory,” in Japan the essay was interpreted much more ominously, with conservative papers proclaiming, “not just the Senkaku, China’s blatant intention to seize all of Okinawa has become visible.”²¹⁵ The article only provided further confirmation of PRC malevolence to hawks arguing in Japan the islands were just the first domino.

In short, there is an important interactive dimension to this dispute consisting of positional competition across a variety of domains. As each side has mobilized its diplomats, soldiers, scholars, and lawyers, the result has been ever hardening positions and the further generation of ongoing sites of friction within Sino-Japanese relations. Even after the immediate tensions subsided, these competitions have continued to unfold, shaping mutual perceptions and setting the stage for further outbreaks of tension. Perhaps most crucially, such positional competitions appear to be assuming lives of their own irrespective of the original value of the stakes involved. Indeed, it is generally not the place of those tasked with achieving positional advantage to question the aims, only to find the best way to execute their mandate.

THINKING IN THREE DIMENSIONS

There are three significant dimensions to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute as it has unfolded since late 2010. The symbolic dimension consists of the expanding, intangible stakes that were projected onto the islands and elevated their significance. The domestic dimension encompasses the increased internal pressure on leaders on both sides take firmer measures. And the interactive dimension denotes the positional competition that has continued to unfold and remains a potential source of dangerous frictions.

Unquestionably, the three-dimensional account outlined here draws significant inspiration from existing, process-focused strands within the literature on territorial disputes. First, it echoes approaches that highlight the symbolic dimension of territorial disputes, including concerns about rivalry, reputation, and symbolic entrenchment.²¹⁶ But it does not promote any one concern—such as reputation—over the others, arguing that a multiplicity of intangible concerns were simultaneously in play, including prejudices, moralized judgements, status issues, and resentments. Second, it builds on work that stresses the importance of the domestic dimension.²¹⁷ But it does not treat these dynamics as necessarily more pronounced in democracies,²¹⁸ nor does it focus only on the domestic coalitions involvement in these disputes engender.²¹⁹ Beyond this, it additionally highlights how a wide variety of actors—journalists, academics, activists, and even economic opportunists—participated in elevating the domestic salience of the dispute. Lastly, it also resonates with work that focuses on the

²¹⁵ “Chūgoku no Okinawa ronbun” [China’s Okinawa essay], *Sankei Shinbun*, 10 May 2013, 2.

²¹⁶ Hassner, “The Path to Intractability.”; Barbara Walter, “Explaining the Intractability of Territorial Conflict,” *International Studies Review* 5, no. 4 (2003); Colaresi et al., *Strategic Rivalries in World Politics*; Monica Toft, “Indivisible Territory, Geographic Concentration, and Ethnic War,” *Security Studies* 12, no. 2 (2002).

²¹⁷ Sumit Ganguly and William Thompson, *Asian Rivalries: Conflict, Escalation, and Limitations on Two-Level Games* (Stanford University Press, 2011).

²¹⁸ Paul Huth and Todd Allee, “Domestic Political Accountability and the Escalation and Settlement of International Disputes,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 6 (2002).

²¹⁹ Stacie Goddard, “Uncommon Ground: Indivisible Territory and the Politics of Legitimacy,” *International Organization* 60, no. 1 (2006).

interactive dimension in terms of positional competitions—be they involving argumentation or militarization—but expands these to the arenas of international public diplomacy, legal rationalizing, and historical research.²²⁰

Beyond this, however, it is crucial to note that none of the developments outlined above played out in isolation from what was happening in the other dimensions. Quite the contrary, at various times developments in one dimension played key roles in fueling what was occurring in the others. For instance, the actions across a variety of sub-state actors in the domestic dimension—politicians, journalists, online commentators, demonstrators, even businesses producing nationalist kitsch such as “Diaoyu Beer – strengthen your patriotism!”²²¹—simultaneously leveraged and heightened the significance of the dispute in the symbolic dimension. Ishihara, in particular, was a master at this, stoking concerns that “before we know it, Japan could become the sixth star on China’s national flag.”²²² Both the growing symbolic stakes and the actions of domestic players increased the weight of demands on policymakers to take firmer measures, be they in the waters around the islands or the arena of international public opinion. These, however, set in motion their own escalatory dynamics within the interactive dimension that generated additional frictions. And the latter, in turn, produced further intangible concerns and resentments, as well as additional incidents for domestic entrepreneurs to exploit. The *People’s Daily* piece is a prime example of this—an escalation in the realm of historical argumentation—that provided ammunition to Japanese hawks while exacerbating more general Japanese concerns over PRC intentions. Even as the relationship has now taken an apparent turn for the better, the positional competitions are still operative and a collision at sea or in the air could easily set off a new round of tensions. Indeed, it is by viewing the interaction of developments across all three dimensions as operating in mutually exacerbating ways—both feeding into and feeding upon one another—that we are able to provide the most comprehensive explanation of what has occurred.

Conversely, while counterfactuals are always problematic, there exists a strong logical argument that were one to strip out developments in even one of these dimensions, events could have played out quite differently. Deprive political entrepreneurs of the ineffable anxieties, frustrations and resentments that populated the symbolic dimension and the islands would have arguably been less potent a domestic political resource to exploit. Here, too, Ishihara looms especially large, for had he not been able to leverage the issue for sizable donations and public support, his threat to purchase them would have lacked credibility. Excise the developments in the domestic dimension—whether attacks on the DPJ in Japan or the troubled leadership transition in the PRC—and either side would conceivably have had more room to delay, downplay the issue, or seek alternative courses of action. Lastly, eliminate the positional jockeying in the interactive dimension that continues even now on multiple fronts and the potential risk of new cycles of conflict involving the islands would be significantly reduced.

²²⁰ Goddard, “Uncommon Ground”; Hassner, “The Path to Intractability: Time and the Entrenchment of Territorial Disputes.”; Vasquez, *The War Puzzle Revisited*, 110, 424-25.

²²¹ “Diaoyudao pijiu,” accessed 10 March 2019 at: <http://www.dyd519.com/diaoyudaopijiu/>

²²² Yuka Hayashi, “Ishihara Unplugged,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 May 2012, accessed 5 September 2018 at: <http://on.wsj.com/19sZwZI>

CONCLUSION

In many ways, within the story above the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands have played the role of what the famous British film director Alfred Hitchcock labeled a MacGuffin—an object that the protagonists of a narrative find themselves fighting over. For instance, “in crook stories it is always the necklace and spy stories it is always the papers.”²²³ For Hitchcock the attributes of the MacGuffin were more or less irrelevant, rather it was the plot dynamics the contest over it set in motion that made the film. In Hitchcock’s words, “the logicians are all wrong in trying to figure out the truth of a MacGuffin, since it’s beside the point... To me, the narrator, [it is] of no importance whatever.”²²⁴ Similarly, the argument here is that asking after “truth” of Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands—be it in the form of their prior strategic, economic, or historic value—is of less analytical use than seeking to understand what might be analogously described as the three intertwined plot lines set in motion by the 2010 collision.

The purpose of this piece has been to provide an evidence-based, theoretically informed account of how and why the contest over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has unfolded in the manner that it has. The three-dimensional approach taken here may conceivably apply to other disputes to greater or lesser degrees as well, and this offers an interesting avenue for future research. But it should also be noted that the contest over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands is distinctly characterized by being one initially unwelcome to both sides and seemingly detached from the actual, tangible stakes involved. Given the significance and potential dangers implicated in this dispute, making sense of it is an important task in and of itself. Moreover, understanding the dynamics at work here can help inform how we consider potential paths forward.

That said, there is no erasing the past, and the politicized nature of the dispute means the options available for reversing existing developments are quite limited. One could endeavor to call public attention to the limited tangible worth of the islands. Taking into account both the tremendous value of stable economic and political relations between Japan and the PRC, not to mention the massive potential damage even a minor armed clash over the islands might produce, the concrete value of the islands pales in comparison, especially in light of their relative importance for individual citizens’ lives and livelihoods. Framing of the dispute in this manner would create political incentives to contain or shelve the conflict and work to detach the islands from the intangible significance they have accumulated. But at the same time, there exist parties on either side who might strongly pushback against such attempts (and indeed, a number of PRC hawks already have), thus rendering this option decidedly difficult.

And while recent efforts to set up crisis communication mechanisms are to be welcomed, more needs also be done to decrease the possibility of incidents around the islands. In this regard, one potential measure could be an agreement to mutually reduce or limit deployments to the area coupled with the explicit understanding this would alter neither side’s legal position. To

²²³ Fred R. Shapiro, *The Yale Book of Quotations* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 360-61.

²²⁴ François Truffaut et al., *Hitchcock* (Simon and Schuster, 1985), 192.

wit, declaring the islands and their territorial waters a mutually-recognized nature sanctuary would offer reason to keep ships out of their vicinity.²²⁵ Currently, however, this option is also unlikely to find much domestic support in either state.

All the same, whatever measures both sides take, the eventual goal should be to return these islands to the periphery of Sino-Japanese relations. For in the final analysis, despite all the surrounding swirl of anxieties and resentments, political struggles and intrigues, and contests for military and diplomatic advantage, at the center of this dispute lies just a set of uninhabited rocks, and rocks of questionable substantive value at that.

²²⁵ Reinhard Drifte, "Moving Forward on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Issue: Policy Context and Policy Options," *Kokusai-hō gaikō zasshi [International Law Diplomacy Journal]* 113, no. 2 (2014): 67-68.