

## **The Senkaku Dispute and the US-Japan Security Treaty**

by Yoichiro Sato

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During the last two years, Japan has experienced major setbacks in each of its three territorial disputes with neighbors – the Senkaku/Daiyutai Islands dispute with China/Taiwan, the Takeshima/Dokdo dispute with the Republic of Korea, and the Northern Territories/Kurile islands dispute with Russia. Although Japan's relative decline as an economic power and political turmoil under Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) governance laid the ground for the bold assertion of claims by Japan's neighbors, each dispute is qualitatively different from the others. The Senkaku dispute in particular requires a slight but immediate and carefully calibrated revision to US policy. Failing to do so risks emboldening China to militarily occupy the islands. The new reality of a China-occupied Senkakus would force the United States into having to weigh its alliance with Japan against a war over the islands. The US should instead act proactively through diplomatic preemption.

The Senkaku dispute differs from the other two by the fact that Japan retained administrative control of the islands since 1972. Of the three, the US-Japan Security Treaty only applies to the Senkaku case, because the United States (1945-1971) is the only party that interrupted Japan's administrative control of the Senkaku Islands since 1895. (Japan lost administrative control over Takeshima and the Northern Territories to the ROK and the USSR/Russia, respectively, despite Tokyo's continuing claims of sovereignty.) At the same time, in the Senkaku dispute like that of Takeshima, the US takes no position on the question of sovereignty.

US neutrality on the Takeshima dispute is understandable because both Japan and the ROK are US allies. On the Northern Territory dispute, US diplomatic support for Japan's claim is understandable because of their alliance, despite the absence of US military action against Russia's illegal occupation. On the Senkaku dispute, the US is torn by (1) its alliance with Japan and Japan's effective control of the islands, (2) the claim by Taiwan (another US security partner), and (3) the claim by the PRC, with which it concurrently has growing economic relations and military rivalry.

Japan increasingly sees its military alliance with the US as a key ingredient of its security policy and has upgraded its contributions to the alliance in regional and global security roles. In return, Japan expects a greater US commitment to Japan's territorial defense. The trend from the 1970s to 1990s, when Japan upgraded security roles across territorial, regional, and global security domains, has reversed. Japan, as during the lead-up to the revised security treaty of 1960, sees itself

insufficiently resourced even for self-defense in the 21<sup>st</sup> century regional security environment. A vulnerable Japan sees ambiguity in the US position on the Senkaku dispute and expects clearer US support. Giving Japan this assurance is necessary for anchoring the alliance on solid ground.

Despite the US rhetoric that the alliance applies to "all areas under the Japanese administration," Japan sees a loophole in the US position. Because Japan has been asked by the United States to shoulder "primary responsibility" for its territorial defense, a growing number of Japanese believe that the US commitment to retaking the Senkakus if Japan loses administrative control to an invasion by China would be unavailable. A parallel analogy can be drawn to Japan's northern defense doctrine during the Cold War, in which Japanese strategists believed that the US might trade gains in Europe with a partial Soviet occupation of Hokkaido.

The United States is seemingly in a catch-22, where making a clearer commitment to defense of the Senkakus would antagonize China, while not making this commitment would both embolden China and isolate Japan. However, creative linkages with other bilateral and regional issues would create gains for the US. For example, concessions from Japan on the basing issues would be made easier in return for a clearer US commitment to the defense of the Senkakus. Seeing Japan get a clearer US commitment, Southeast Asian parties in the South China Sea disputes could be steered toward suspending their preference for limiting freedom of navigation in their claimed EEZs, which the US opposes.

Careful consideration must be paid to Taiwan, however. PRC and Taiwan make similar arguments about Chinese use of the Senkakus pre-1895. US support for Japan's sovereign claim to the Senkakus is not necessary at this time, as it would be a diplomatic loss to Taiwan. The US stance on the Senkakus can simply but specifically be phrased against any attempt by military means to alter the status quo of Japanese administration of the Senkakus. Furthermore, this should be done in conjunction with a reward for Taiwan via other means. Without weakening the US "understanding" of the "one China" principle, the US can express its support for and commitment to the defense of democratic governance of Taiwan, through which Taiwan can decide its own future.

US policy on the Senkaku dispute is perceived as ambiguous by its primary ally, Japan. This perceived ambiguity needs to be clarified to keep the US-Japan alliance solid. While China's increasing assertiveness is destabilizing and needs to be deterred with a clearer message from the United States, carefully crafted language is needed not to undermine Taiwan's position. A clearer US commitment can then be traded for other US diplomatic gains in the region.

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