

Smart Q&A
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Navigating a Sea of Troubles:
U.S. Alliances and Maritime Disputes in East Asia

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Interviewee

Thomas U. Berger

In recent years, maritime disputes in East Asia have become increasingly frequent in the region as countries strongly assert their sovereignty on disputed islands. EAI Fellow Professor Thomas U. Berger of Boston University discussed on the nature of maritime disputes in the region and the impact this will have on U.S.-China relations for the future. The following is a summary of the main points from the interview.

Q1: Are maritime conflicts in the region driven mainly by nationalism or are there other factors involved?

A1: "The rise of nationalism in the region, which is fueled by different factors, hugely complicates diplomatic efforts to deal with these issues.... for policymakers to compromise on these issues."

- While nationalism plays a strong role, it should be viewed together with geo-strategic and geo-economic factors. The geo-strategic area relates mainly to the rise of China, in particular its naval power. Since 1945, the United States has had naval domination which has helped to manage the disputes. This has changed though as a result of China's naval growth, particularly its anti-access/area denial strategy that has implications for the way in which these disputes have emerged again. The geo-economic factor relates to the growing economic power in the region. Maritime areas that may be rich in resources are likely to become a new battleground amongst competing economic interests. Despite the fact though that both the geo-strategic and geo-economic factors are difficult challenges, they are more manageable compared to nationalistic drivers.
- Nationalism helps to explain the persistence of maritime disputes in East Asia. It increases the volatility of the disputes as it makes likely the chance that local commanders may act without central approval. Nationalism also creates more complicated problems as it becomes difficult for policymakers to reach a compromise.

This product presents a policy-oriented summary of the Smart Q&A.

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Q2: To what extent do these maritime disputes have an impact upon alliances in the region?

A2-1: "The problem of the alliance dilemma is very much involved in the maritime disputes."

- The alliance dilemma of entrapment or abandonment clearly manifests itself in regional maritime disputes. For the United States, it fears that it may become entrapped in a conflict due to the actions of one of its allies, while the allies fear being abandoned by the United States if it wishes to avoid becoming involved in a wider conflict, particularly with China. As the United States maintains a position of strategic ambiguity with regards to the issue of sovereignty in the disputes, the alliance dilemma issue will continue to be of concern.

A2-2: "This U.S. position of neutrality may not prove sustainable in the future."

- The U.S. position of neutrality or strategic ambiguity toward the maritime disputes will not be sustainable in the long-run. With China's rise and military growth among countries in the region, the potential for conflict will escalate. Due to these increased dangers between China and U.S. allies, the United States will have to clarify its position on these disputes. For the long-term though, a regional strategic dialogue that includes China could also go some way toward easing tensions. Such a platform should seek to overcome the misunderstanding between countries on maritime issues that can so often lead to conflict.

Q3. Some scholars have predicted that the South China Sea would become a potential flashpoint between China and the United States. Will Beijing and Washington be able to manage their relationship?

A3-1: "There is a lot of room for accommodating with China, and a lot of desire to do so and avoid a conflict."

- To avert future conflict over maritime issues between the United States and China, it is crucial for Washington to make clear to Beijing that it does not seek to contain China's rise. This is supported by the fact that throughout the last decade, the United States has been mainly helping China. Furthermore, policymakers in both countries believe that there is still a lot of room for accommodation between the two sides.

A3-2: "We need to understand this problem (maritime disputes) as being multidimensional."

- The balance of power in the region needs close attention in trying to manage maritime issues, but it is more crucial to understand how maritime disputes in the region involve multiple factors. Still, nationalism in both China and the United States as well as among countries in the region remains the main concern in regards to any potential conflict between the two countries. Policymakers must undertake efforts to contain these nationalistic passions so that they do not take over the national agenda. At the same time, efforts must be undertaken to strengthen and clarify the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea regime in line with the growing and competing economic interests of countries in the region.

About the Interviewee

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Professor Thomas U. Berger is an Associate Professor of International Relations at Boston University. (BA, Columbia College; PhD, Massachusetts Institute of Technology). His specialization includes German and Japanese politics, international relations and comparative government in East Asia, political culture. Thomas Berger joined the Department of International Relations at Boston University in 2001. Previously, he taught for seven years at the Johns Hopkins Department of Political Science in Baltimore. He is the author of *Cultures of Antimilitarism: National Security in Germany and Japan* and is co-editor of *Japan in International Politics: Beyond the Reactive State*. His articles and essays have appeared in numerous edited volumes and journals, including *International Security*, *Review of International Studies*, *German Politics and World Affairs Quarterly*.