

## Summary

This is a summary of a presentation given during the First United States-China Relations Forum on January 25, 2016.

This summary does not reflect any official position by EAI.

East Asia Institute  
#909 Sampoong B/D  
158 Eulji-ro,  
Jung-gu,  
Seoul 04548,  
Republic of Korea

© EAI 2016

[www.eai.or.kr](http://www.eai.or.kr)

# United States-China Relations Forum: Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Dispute

Presentation by Ui Seon Kang and Bo Yeon Kim  
Discussion by Gahee Cho and Hyeonseong Park

The Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute has long plagued Sino-Japan relations. The conflict dates back to the war between the two countries in the closing years of the nineteenth century as Japan's power eclipsed that of the traditional Asian powerhouse China. Now the tables are turning again and a rising China has been more assertive of late about demanding back control over the islands which, according to China, it conceded unfairly during the peace treaty which ended the Sino-Japanese War. The issue is further complicated by the presence of the U.S. which has pledged to defend the islands as a part of its mutual security treaty with Japan, thus making the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands a potential flashpoint in the U.S.-China relationship. Here we will try to outline the positions of both countries and then offer predictions on how this issue may progress in the future.

### The U.S. Position

The U.S. does not take a position on the ultimate sovereignty of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and the U.S. expects China and Japan resolve this matter through peaceful means such as dialogue, rather than actions that raise tensions. However, the scope of U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security includes the islands. This point has been mentioned several times. For example, in April

2014, President Obama reiterated that Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation Security "covers all territories under Japan's administration, including the Senkaku islands" and that "historically they have been administered by Japan." He went on to say that the U.S. and Japan "do not believe that they should be subject to change unilaterally." Moreover, Obama stated that U.S. "doesn't take a position on final sovereignty determinations with respect to Senkakus" and "the United States' position is that countries should abide by international law." During the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in May of 2014, the position of U.S. regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands was emphasized and China's unilateral declaration of the ADIZ in the East China Sea including the Japanese-administered Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands was mentioned. The U.S. Secretary of Defense reaffirmed that the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands are covered under the mutual defense treaty between U.S. and Japan.

The U.S. has also been positively evaluating Japan's new defense policies as they have offered needed assistance to the U.S. effort to rebalance to Asia. The U.S. state department added in October 2014 that Japan's new policy regarding collective self-defense "promotes regional peace and stability." These statements and positive evaluations eventually led to the revising of the Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation which contains language that many view as a new China containment policy.

## China's Position

China argues that the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands were first discovered by China in the 1400s and were part of China's territory for a long time before western imperialism reached East Asia. The Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute started in 1895 when both the Qing dynasty and Meiji government signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki. China has argued that this treaty was one of the treaties forced upon it by foreign powers because Japan used its victory in the Sino-Japanese war to make China sign the treaty. In 2010, the dispute severely worsened since the U.S. agreed in the Okinawa Reversion Treaty to include the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the territory determined to be Japan's area under the U.S.-Japan security treaty. Japan eventually purchased the islands, and the U.S. clearly declared that the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands are historically administered by Japan.

The Chinese government position can be summarized into several points. First, China emphasizes its sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. China condemns the purchase of the islands as an illegal act, and also frequently references historical evidence, documents, and literature. Second, China wants to solve this issue in a peaceful way through dialogue, negotiations, and meetings with Japan. Third, even though China promotes peaceful ways to solve this issue, China will respond will respond in other manners such as the establishment of the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone.

## Looking Forward

In the short term, it is likely that the U.S. will continue to refrain from a definite stance over the sovereignty of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

Additionally, since the revising of the Guidelines, the U.S. has not expressed their views regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. It is likely that they will continue to be mum about the issue. In long-term, the U.S. will promote resolution of the dispute through peaceful dialogue rather than any actions that raise tensions. If China does make any sort of military provocation in the region, it is unlikely that the U.S. would make a simultaneous military response despite the language of the Guidelines since the U.S. recognizes the importance of China to the global economy along with peace and security.

China, on the other hand, will likely keep pursuing direct dialogue/peaceful way with Japan to solve the issue of the legal status of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, but also at the same time China will keep creating tensions to show its earnest belief that it has sovereignty over the islands. And if Japan does not manage these tensions properly, China might engage in small scale military provocations. In the long-term, since China is interconnected with Japan diplomatically and economically, China will not forcefully retake or provoke the area. China will not make a large move due to U.S.-Japan defense cooperation, but China will take concrete measures to protect its sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

## Discussion: China's Assertiveness Escalating?

There are more than historical grounds China is mainly basing its assertions on. For one thing, China is taking a more assertive position because the Chinese government now considers the issue as one of its "core interests", which are nonnegotiable subjects. Until recently, China's "core interests" only referred to Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang. But with the rise of China's economic, military and diplomatic status, China began to raise its voice over other sovereignty issues in

other regions as well, and the term was redefined to include the South China Sea and other sovereignty issues.

Additionally, China's assertive actions are a reflection of nationalism which was aggravated after Japan's nationalization of the islands. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) could not ignore this nationalistic sentiment, especially given that it cannot guarantee the legitimacy of its ruling system due to the failure of delivering high economic growth. Consequently, the CCP had to reflect the nationalistic voice into its action within the dispute.

Therefore, as long as China considers the disputed islands as one of its "core interests" and the CCP does not ignore the nationalistic voices among its citizens, China will maintain its assertive position and continuously make efforts to expand its influence in the disputed area. As China constantly demonstrates its assertiveness, the United States will try to counter China's influence in cooperation with Japan since the islands are of strategic concern for U.S. as well as are for China. But the U.S. and Japan will be hesitant to make a military response that could lead to a major war because they acknowledge the interdependent characteristics of their relationship with China and the harmful consequences of confrontation. In conclusion, small incidents over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands may occur occasionally but the possibility for the direct armed conflict is low.

#### **Discussion: What is the Underlying Cause?**

The Senkaku/Diaoyu Dao island issue may be of relatively lower importance when we discuss the relationship between Japan and the U.S. or Japan and China. It seems there can be another problem which contains more fundamental importance rather than Senkaku/Diaoyu Dao island issue

because, for the U.S., sufficient space to solve this problem does not exist currently. Even though the U.S. firmly supports Japan both politically and militarily, it is still difficult for a third party to intervene in a sovereignty issue.

Also, if underlying interests were separated from the position of each party, the reason they could not reach an agreement would be seen much more clearly. For example, the position of Japan in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Dao island sovereignty issue and Japan's will for militarization should be separated. Besides all countries have emphasized the necessity of negotiating a peaceful solution, and what makes negotiation process work properly is knowing the other's underlying interest. Therefore, I think negotiations between the countries will progress if they specify their interests separately.

The meaning of Japan's collective self-defense or attempts to amend Article 9 of the Japanese constitution made by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government could be an alternative topic to be discussed because it changes the solution of problem related to Japan. In principle, the right of Japan to be belligerent is not recognized. In other words, Japan cannot consider 'war' to be a solution to problems.

—— Ui Seon Kang is a graduate of Seoul National University's Graduate School of International Studies with a focus on Korean studies. Boyeon Kim is a recent graduate of the University of California - Berkeley where she studied peace and conflict studies. Gahee Cho is a graduate student at Sookmyung Women's University and studies global security and cooperation. Hyeonseong Park is an undergraduate student at Korea University studying business administration.