



The territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands

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Author: Jon Lunn

Section International Affairs and Defence Section

The long-standing territorial dispute between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea has deepened since September 2012, with nationalist sentiment increasingly stirred up in both countries. Taiwan also claims the Islands.

The eight uninhabited islands and rocks are called the Senkaku Islands in Japan, the Diaoyu Islands in China and the Tiaoyutai Islands in Taiwan.

The islands lie to the southwest of Japan's southernmost Island, Okinawa, east of the Chinese mainland, and northeast of Taiwan. They are strategically important in terms of maritime navigation and shipping, natural resources, including fisheries and hydrocarbons, and for defence purposes.

This note provides brief background information about the dispute.

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1 Introduction

Eight uninhabited islands and rocks within an area of about seven square kilometres in the East China Sea have been the subject of the long-standing territorial dispute between the People’s Republic of China, Japan and Taiwan. They are called the Senkaku Islands in Japan, the Diaoyu Islands in China and the Tiaoyutai Islands in Taiwan.

The islands are situated southwest of Japan’s southernmost Island, Okinawa, east of the Chinese mainland, and northeast of Taiwan. The islands are strategically important in terms of maritime navigation and shipping, natural resources, including fisheries and hydrocarbons, and for military defence purposes.



Source: [RUSI](#)

2 The competing claims

In 2011, the periodical *History Today* published a useful [article](#) on the dispute which offers the following summary of the competing claims:

Since 1970 the People’s Republic of China, Taiwan and Japan have all put forward bold sovereignty claims over the islands, which are equidistant from Taiwan and the southwestern tip of the Ryukyus. According to Chinese sources the first mention of the

Senkaku/Diaoyu islands is in a 15th-century document now held at the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Early sources tended to mention only the islands' location on the voyage to the Ryukyus from China, but by the 17th century Chinese sources clearly named the maritime boundary between the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and the Ryukyus as the Heishuigou ('Black Water Trench'), an area of high turbulence which we now know marks the edge of the continental shelf. In 1720 Xu Baoguang, the deputy Chinese ambassador sent to confer the royal title upon the Ryukyuan king, collaborated with the local literati to compile the travelogue *Zhongshan Chuanxin lu* (Record of the Mission to Chusan), which demarcated the westernmost border of the Ryukyuan kingdom at Kume-jima south of the Heishuigou Trench. Deputy ambassador Zhou Huang likewise identified Heishuigou as the boundary in 1756 and later the envoy Li Dingyuan noted the practice of sacrificing a live goat or pig when convoys crossed the trench. In the late 19th century the reformer Wang Tao, who had had experience of travelling in Europe, responded to the Japanese annexation of the Ryukyus by referring to Japanese sources which listed the Ryukyus as a separate country in 1670. He argued that even though the islands were vassals of both China and the Japanese state of Satsuma, the former relationship was more formal; the conquest of an inner tributary (Ryukyus) by an outer tributary (Japan) of China was a cause for outrage.

In contrast Japan's argument largely ignored the historical position put forward in Chinese accounts. Claiming that the uninhabited islands were not occupied by any power, or *terra nullius*, Japan annexed the islands in 1895 shortly after its victory in the Sino-Japanese War. Japan claimed that the islands were 'discovered' in 1884 by Fukuoka merchant Koga Tatsushiro, who then applied to lease the land from the Japanese state. At the time, however, the interior ministry noted that it was still unclear as to whether the islands belonged to Japan, especially as there was detailed knowledge of the islands in Chinese and Ryukyuan writings, making Koga's claims of 'discovery' difficult to substantiate. Nonetheless a Cabinet decision in 1895 ruled that the islands should become part of Japan, which provided the basis for their inclusion in Japan's territories under the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1952 that concluded the Second World War in Asia, but at which neither China nor Taiwan were present.

From the Chinese perspective there is little substance to Japan's claims that the islands were not 'occupied', given that a fine distinction exists between 'uninhabited' and 'unoccupied'. Sources suggest that there are graves of Taiwanese fishermen on the island. Although US occupation authorities in Okinawa administered the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands from 1945 until 1972 and used them as a training base, the US government did not see the transfer to Japan of the right of administration over the islands as equivalent to the transfer of sovereignty, which it insisted was a matter to be resolved by the relevant parties. Realising that such an ambiguity existed, the Okinawa Legislative Assembly, still under US control at the time, passed a resolution in August 1970 which declared the islands to be part of Japan and its claims were backed up by the then foreign minister Aichi Kiichi in the National Diet. In the meantime Taiwan issued an official protest, followed before the end of the year by similar complaints voiced by official Chinese media.

The dispute over the islands is a time bomb, given the enormity of the stakes involved. Despite Japanese claims that Chinese and Taiwanese interests in the islands are guided primarily by the possibility of major oil deposits, there has been little constructive dialogue between the countries involved in the question of the recent disputes over ownership of the islands. This remains at the very centre of broader tension between China and Japan, with the Nanjing Massacre of 1937 a focal point. Japan's intransigent position on atrocities committed during the Second World War helps to fuel Chinese popular sentiment against it and makes the country an easy scapegoat for domestic discontent. Yet these days it is also easy to forget that China

was the underdog for much of the 20th century; even today China is less articulate on the global scene than Japan.

There has been recent public discussion about whether China and Japan might be willing to allow the dispute to be settled by the International Court of Justice. China has to date shown [no enthusiasm for using the ICJ](#) in relation to its numerous territorial disputes with other countries across Southeast and East Asia. Japan has offered to go to the ICJ to settle [a dispute with South Korea](#) over the Dokdo Islands. South Korea, the country in possession of the Islands, has refused. But, [as one commentator points out](#), in that case it is to Japan's advantage to do so. With regard to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, it is not nearly as clearly in its interests.

3 Timeline

In mid September 2012, the South China Morning Post provided a useful [timeline](#) for the dispute:

January 14, 1895:

The Japanese government formally [obtains control of the Diaoyu \(Senkaku\) Islands](#). Japan asserts the islands were not owned by anyone prior to their occupation while China maintains it has sovereignty over the island chain for centuries.

September 2, 1945:

Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands, as part of Ryukyu Islands, come under the US government's control after the surrender of Japan at the end of the second world war.

June 17, 1971:

The [Agreement between Japan and the United States of America Concerning the Ryukyu Islands and the Daito Islands](#) is signed between Japan and the US, returning the Senkaku Islands (as part of the Ryukyu Islands) to Japanese administration. This triggers the first anti-Japanese protests, led by Taiwan.

August 12, 1978:

The [Japan-China Peace and Friendship Treaty](#) is signed between China and Japan, in which the dispute over the isles is put aside for future resolution.

July 14, 1996:

Right-wing Japanese Youth Association members [land and build a lighthouse](#) on one of the islets, prompting a series of protests from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

September 26, 1996:

Hong Kong activist [David Chan drowns](#) after jumping into waters off the Diaoyu Islands during a pro-China protest.

September 29, 1996:

Tens of thousands of people gather for a [candlelight vigil in Victoria Park](#) to mourn David Chan's death and protest against Japan's claim of the islands.

October 7, 1996:

[Three activists from Hong Kong and Taiwan](#) land on the Diaoyu Islands.

March 24, 2004:

[Activist Feng Jinhua and six others](#) from China land on the Diaoyu Islands, the first time mainland activists successfully land on the islands.

September 7, 2010:

A Chinese trawler collides with Japanese patrol boats near the disputed islands and results in Japan [arresting the Chinese skipper, Zhan Qixiong](#). The incident prompts a major diplomatic dispute between the two countries.

August 14, 2012:

Hong Kong activists [reach the disputed islands by sea for the first time](#) since 1996, with seven activists disembarking onto the island.

August 19, 2012:

[Ten Japanese activists swim ashore](#) and raise Japanese flags on the island chain.

September 10, 2012

Japan's government says it has decided to [purchase the disputed islands](#) from a private Japanese owner in an effort, Tokyo claims, aimed at diffusing territorial tensions.

September 14, 2012:

Six Chinese surveillance ships [sail into waters around the Diaoyu Islands](#) to assert China's territorial claims and for "law enforcement", leaving after seven hours.

September 15, 2012:

[The biggest anti-Japanese protests](#) since China and Japan normalised diplomatic relations in 1972 are held in cities across China. The Japanese embassy in Beijing is besieged by thousands of protesters throwing rocks, eggs and bottles.

September 16, 2012

[Anti-Japanese protests break out](#) in dozens of mainland cities for a second day. In some cities peaceful protests turn violent as protesters clash with policemen, attack Japanese made cars and smash up Japanese restaurants.

September 17, 2012

Some major Japanese firms such as Toyota and Honda [temporarily shut factories and offices](#) across China.

September 18, 2012

[Two Japanese activists land on the Diaoyu Islands](#) while widespread anti-Japanese protests have been held across China at the anniversary of Japan's invasion of Manchuria.

The following addition brings the timeline up-to-date:

November 2012

Press reports indicate that Chinese boycotts of Japanese products are having a serious affect on trade, including Japanese car sales in China. It is also claimed that Chinese government vessels have made 12 forays to the maritime waters close to the Islands since Japan bought them in September.

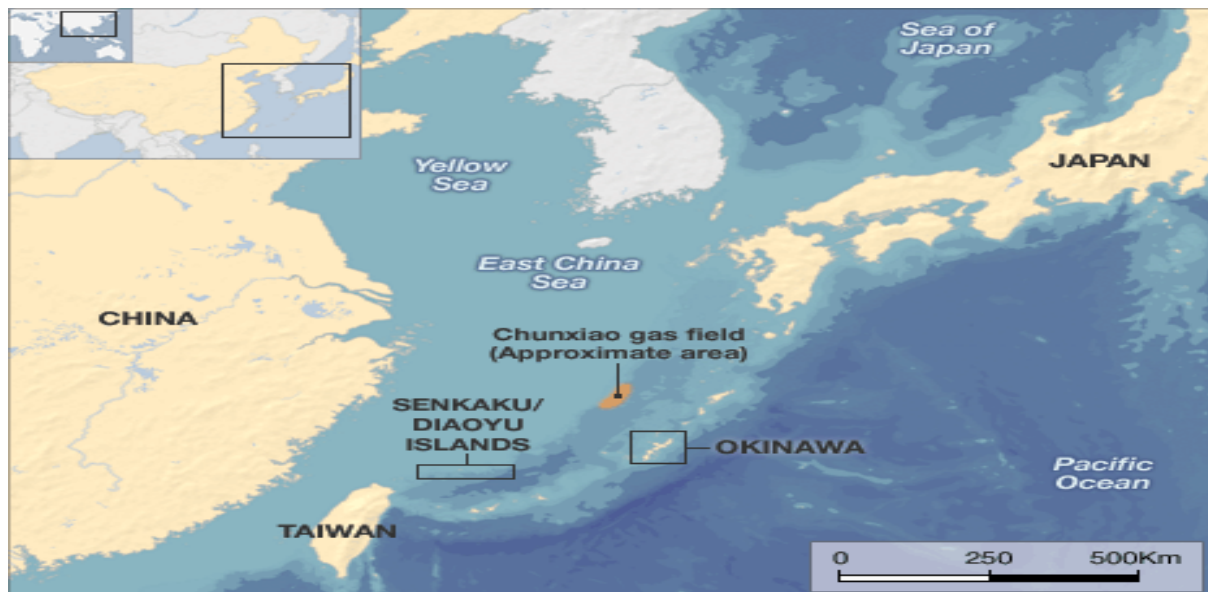
4 The maritime boundary dispute between China and Japan in the East China Sea

China and Japan have also been unable over a prolonged period to agree their maritime boundary in the East China Sea. A 2012 [assessment](#) has described China's strategy in this part of its "maritime periphery" as follows:

Beijing has not altered its existing strategy in the East China Sea arena, choosing instead to defer settlement and engage in political and diplomatic negotiation while defending its existing claims to disputed territory.

Many believe that a crucial element in this wider dispute, but also over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, is the hydrocarbon potential of the surrounding East China Sea.

A recent BBC Online [article](#) provides a useful map, which shows that the oil and gas fields in dispute are not far to the northwest of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands:



5 Additional reading

S. Hickie and K. Jayakumar, "[Domestic drivers of the Senkaku/Diaoyu confrontation](#)", Open Briefing, 24 October 2012

S. Joshi, "[Growing pains: The Sino-Japanese naval dispute in context](#)", *RUSI.org*, September 2010

P. Dutton, "[Carving up the East China Sea](#)", *Naval War College Review*, Spring 2007

US Energy Information Administration, [The East China Sea](#)