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The China-Japan Senkaku/Diaoyu Island Dispute: Strategic and Domestic Implications of the Conflict for the United States

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the China–Japan dispute over Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and its strategic importance as well as internal policy consequences for the United States. Following Realism—specifically the offensive/defensive split—this study assesses how the dispute impacts U.S. credibility on extended deterrence and stirs domestic political discourse regarding security policy. With qualitative document analysis as the main method, this research scrutinizes official utterances, treaty documents, think tank reports, and policy papers. It posits that the conflict acts as a litmus test for perceptions of alliance dependability vis-a-vis American Indo-Pacific grand strategy against a backdrop of escalating great power competition. The results highlight the contradiction between America’s claimed deterrent capability and growing regional power assertiveness with their security strategy in focus solar value US posture is actually underway.

INTRODUCTION Senkaku or Diaoyu Islands which are part of uninhabited islands in East China Sea have been a long term dispute. Though devoid of residents and lacking infrastructure, the islands hold immense symbolic importance due to their location near vital shipping lanes. There is rising tension between Japan and China Due to sparse resources along with Hydrocarbon reservoirs as well as geopolitical controversy. Previously limited to Japan and China, America also plays a role is due to its protective allied agreements between Japan (Noboru, 2023) . Thus, the need for cross border cooperation has turned these islands into hotbeds over territorial disputes.



Japan’s stance regarding the Senkaku Islands derives from an assertion of sovereignty post-1895, which Tokyo claims was a legal annexation of terra nullius (land without claim) (Yamamoto, 2024) . Ever since Japan regained administrative control through the Okinawa Reversion Agreement in 1972, Japan has considered the islands part of Okinawa Prefecture. Attributing any encroachment by Chinese vessels or aircraft as a direct challenge to Tokyo's sovereignty and an assault on the post-war international legal order reconstruction. The need to deter aggressive Chinese maritime policies has been increasingly highlighted in Japan’s defense white papers. This is not viewed only as a bilateral irritant but rather as an unsettling influence in the regional power equilibrium (Takahashi, 2023) . The more recent actions taken by the Japanese government—such as increasing SDF presence on southernmost Islands and reinterpreting Article 9—signal what is perceived as a growing agreement that Tokyo must shift its defense strategy to observe its sovereign claims and alliance obligations with Washington (Matsuda K. , 2024).

From the viewpoint of Beijing, the Diaoyu Islands are essential to national sovereignty and China’s maritime heritage reclamation. Chinese scholars believe that the islands were an unjust loss for China when they were ceded in the First Sino Japanese war, and more absurdly, that they should have been returned post WW2 under anti-imperialist policies (Wang, 2023). As such, these disputes represent China's efforts to reclaim its supposed preeminence as a maritime anchor. This policy is further demonstrated by the increased patrols around the islands and the enactment of the Coast Guard Law in 2021 which is aimed at exercising jurisdictional control

while stopping short of open military conflict (Li X. , 2023). Domestically, the CCP uses these claims to reinforce nationalist sentiments and consolidate legitimacy while framing sovereignty defense as one of China's core interests' inflexible constitutional tenets (Sun, Sovereignty, Legitimacy, and the CCP's Maritime Strategy, 2024) . Additionally, crucial sea lanes for importing energy resources intersect at these islands which elevate their relevance to China's security strategy.

Even though the U.S. does not take a stance on the islands' sovereignty, it accepts Japan's administrative control and has reiterated that Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty applies to the Senkaku Islands. This mixed approach, sometimes referred to as “strategic ambiguity,” helps Washington deter aggressive moves by China while still providing room for diplomacy (Brennan, 2024). The dispute over the East China Sea is an essential hub in the strategy for the U.S. Indo-Pacific region, which seeks to maintain unimpeded access to sea routes, prevent one-sided alterations to the existing order, and provide reassurance to allies in the region. There is a U.S. military base in Okinawa and regular joint military drills with Japanese forces as part of forward deterrence strategy. The CSIS and CFR think tanks have highlighted how responding with decisive force during these critical moments is essential to maintaining alliance cohesion throughout the Indo-Pacific region (Howard, 2023).

The strategic discussion concerning the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has focused on external relations, but from an American perspective, the dispute's impact on internal policymaking and external credibility remains largely unexamined. This study attempts to fill that analytical void by looking into the extent to which the conflict affects U.S. deterrence activity in the Indo-Pacific region and the coherence of the global alliance system—in addition to considering the overarching political narrative and security policymaking frameworks domestically. These factors are important within the context of rising maritime confrontation risks, a shift toward multipolarity in America's grand strategy pronounced tectonic shifts in global geopolitics. Employing realism—along its offensive and defensive variants—as a lens allows this study to offer an analysis grounded in theory regarding state conduct, strategic alliance commitments, and calibrated restraint exercised for balance without triggering destabilizing consequences.

Given these gaps, this research seeks to develop an integrated account of the three corners formed by US foreign relations and policies with China and Japan through the lens of Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute. It strengthens scholarly publications through empirical cases enriched by theoretical considerations while also serving policymakers who sail in rough waters of East Asian geopolitics.

Research Questions:

1. In what way does the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute affect the credibility of United States extended deterrence in the Indo-Pacific while shaping the stability of its global alliance system?
2. How has the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute influenced domestic political discourse and security policymaking in the United States?

Literature Review:

The conflict over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has triggered an increase of academic and policy research, particularly since the renewed tensions in 2012. Researchers and strategy specialists from Japan, China, and the United States have studied the dispute, often through a realist framework. There seems to be a consensus among scholars that the conflict is not merely a bilateral sovereignty dispute; it symbolizes deeper competing regional dynamics and a multilateral shift in power politics in East Asia (Ratner, 2018)

From an American viewpoint, think tanks such as Brookings and CSIS have offered detailed analyses on how the dispute impacts U.S. alliance management and credibility of deterrence. O' Hanlon puts forward a case he terms "Senkaku Paradox," wherein he argues America tries to grapple with either overstepping or overly strategic inertia in action when treaty allies are threatened over what looks like trivial grass patches (O'Hanlon, 2019). Green, writing from CSIS, leans more toward the ambiguous yet reinforcing perception of alliances arguing that there's any assurance at all, emphasizing the need of ambiguity countered by strong deterrents against reckless provocations (Green, 202) . Meanwhile scholars like (Glaser& Funairole, 2022) seem to argue the other way suggesting the risk of crisis escalation is growing from assertive countermeasures due to increased U.S.-Japan joint military operations.

The analyses produced by institutions such as the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) and Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS) tend to approach the problem from the perspectives of national rejuvenation and maritime sovereignty. Chinese realist scholars claim that Japan's "nationalization" of the islands in 2012 marked a significant change to the regional equilibrium, providing justification for a more aggressive Chinese stance (Zhang, 2021). Some CHU-press analysts from SIIS maintain that China seeks to prevent China's rival powers from uncontested access to its waters as a fundamental strategy, thus viewing U.S. intervention as containment by proxy (Wu, 2020). Inside CICIR, it is common belief that between choking off China's peaceful rise and maintaining his own strategic advantage in Asia, Washington becomes more entangled in East China Sea's deadlock because of misinterpretations arising out of U.S.-Japan Security Treaty (Chen, 2023).

Scholarship from Japan, specifically the JIIA and NIDS, has also undertaken dispute analysis. Takahara characterizes China's maritime operations as efforts to normalize gray-zone aggression, while Okabe warns domestic political tides in Japan may produce reactive militarization which would destabilize regional deterrence dynamics (Okabe, 2020) (Takahara, 2021) . Realists at NIDS argue Japan's proactive security policies increase reliance on the U.S alliance system and are evidence of relativity countering China's activities in the East China Sea thus projecting Japan's power within classical 'balance-of-power' diplomatic framework (Sakurai, 2022).

Notwithstanding these significant contributions, core shortcomings continue to persist in the literature. To begin with, there is an absence of detailed examination concerning the domestic political consequences of the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute within American politics. Although much has been written about its geopolitical implications, few analyses focus on congressional politics, public sentiment, and the military-industrial complex and their cumulative impact on U.S. participation in the dispute. Furthermore, most realist interpretations appear to study either China or Japan in isolation instead of looking at all three as interrelated and pivotal factors in U.S. strategic thinking. It seems that a more encompassing realist approach is needed to capture the competitive relations and bilateral perceptions underlying actions taken concerning the East China Sea. Filling these gaps would provide actionable policy recommendations as well as sophisticated theoretical perspectives on great power dynamics in East Asia.

Realism and the East China Sea Conflict

Realism is one of the oldest and most impactful theories in international relations. It gives a clear perspective on the actions of China, Japan, and the United States regarding the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Realism assumes that international politics flows from an anarchic order—a system lacking a reputable central authority—and a relentless strive for power. This theory serves as a useful lens to analyze state motivations, perceptions of threats, alliance

formations, and policies on deterrence within East Asia. Essentially, realists view states enduring self-interested actors that operate within an governance vacuum unable to ensure safety. Such structural conditions force states to seek domination, security, and influence even if it means trading-off with other rivals. The disputed territories in East China Sea including the strategically positioned islands with rising nationalistic sentiments among bordering countries exemplify intruding conflicts where nationalism clashes with globalization; hence justifying realist arguments where survival hinges on unyielding dominance. Realism focuses on the human nature element in international relations, as explained by theorists like Hans Morgenthau. Following this line of thought, the Sino-Japanese discourse surrounding the islands appears to be more than a matter of strategic importance or resource exploitation: it ties into deep historical wounds, national pride, and the quest for recognition of stature. Japan's control over the islands through administrative means and its effort to fully integrate them into Japanese territory in 2012 demonstrates Tokyo's intent to project dominance while defending regional order and stability amidst ongoing challenges. The dispute is likewise framed within China's worldview of defiance against what Beijing considers an unjust post-war geopolitical arrangement with aggressive terms of dominion imposed on it. China's intensified maritime traffic surveillance as well as air defense identification zones expansion and coast guard activity corresponds with classical Realist perspectives concerning power projection through unapologetic demonstrations of authority tempered with state interest alongside dominant elite biases.

John Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism underscores a more structural and rivalry-driven interpretation of the conflict. In this case, states do not strive for mere survival; rather, they seek to dominate every region and secure absolute supremacy. China's actions in the East China Sea—including military modernization, persistent island circumnavigation, and confrontational rhetoric—can be viewed as efforts to cement control over its sphere of influence while displacing the United States as the primary power of contention in the western Pacific. From this perspective, China's maritime assertiveness aims at offensively changing the status quo rather than responding defensively or reactively. Taking 2013 ADIZ establishment over the islands as an example, strategically speaking, it can be seen as an effort to habitually disregard Chinese activity and expand the contours of acceptable conduct in dispute zones. Japan deepening security alignment with the United States; constitutional reinterpretation allowing collective self-defense; participation in forums resolving cooperative military drills demonstrates balanced counter response that Mearsheimer would argue is typical behavior for secondary powers responding to alliance domination that seek deter revisionist challengers.

Defensive Realism suggests that states only seek enough power as is required for their survival. This view, put forth by Waltz, illustrates the perils of overreaction and the dangers of security dilemmas, where one state's defensive measures are interpreted as provocative by others resulting in an unnecessary escalation spiral. The U.S. response to the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute follows closely the guidance of defensive realism principles. While Washington has steadfastly stated that the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty applies to the islands, it has refrained from taking any position on sovereignty claims over them. Such ambiguity encourages deterrence while undermining provocation and sustains agility amid alliance fidelity. Washington's military posture in Okinawa with his forward stationed forces, including routine surveillance and joint exercises in the East China Sea honors regional stability and deterrent commitments without necessitating overt occupation or direct challenges to Chinese maritime.

Additionally, America's strategy embodies a more comprehensive balance-of-power framework as reflective of defensive realism. Through the AUKUS and Quad alliances, along

with missile defense investments, the United States seeks to maintain equilibrium in East Asia and strengthen its alliances without provoking open conflict. This is especially pertinent in the nuclear age where confrontation between great powers poses the risk of catastrophic escalation. The United States response to China's incremental advances near the islands—economic measures, intelligence sharing, limited military presence—can be seen as restrained purposeful expansion containment while avoiding regional destabilization.

The operational choices made by every participant in the conflict sustain the implications of realism theoretically. China's pattern of gradual, unyielding advances aligns with Realism's interpretation of "salami slicing"—tactical incrementalism which shifts strategy over time through seemingly insignificant changes. Japan's responsive behavior includes reinforcing coast guard fleets, constructing a military facility on Yonaguni Island, and sending strategic signals via annual defense white papers illustrating driving change through adaptive balance within a system under pressure. For the United States, realism clarifies purposeful strategic ambiguity coupled with forward deployment as well as alliance signaling to carefully manage the juxtaposition of deterrence versus provocation. These are not anomalies but deliberate decisions framed by a reality dominated by state survival, security, and balance of power.

The various forms of Realism assist in explaining the consistency in state conduct over different regimes and leadership transitions. While there may be changes in diplomacy, the fundamental forces of geopolitics remain unchanged. Thus, the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute is not simply a localized territorial dispute; it illustrates enduring realist power politics in East Asia. It shows how states calculate threats, forge alliances, project power, assert control, and vie for influence within a multipolar system. Realism—especially when adapted through a pluralist approach that includes both offensive and defensive reasoning—offers an important perspective on the strategic rationale and policy choices guiding China, Japan, and the United States as they navigate this evolving maritime conflict.

Methodology:

This research takes a domestic and strategic examination approach of the implications of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute with the United States by applying qualitative and exploratory methods. Considering the nature of this topic is geopolitical and security related, it is best to utilize qualitative methods in order to fully interpret the intricate blend of self-interest, alliance obligations, and diplomatic signaling at play. This research adopts an interpretivist epistemological framework which looks to explain actions undertaken by states, especially by the US, as influenced by historical stories, strategic cultures and alliance systems. The same framework gives room for interpreting labeled discourses on deterrence, sovereignty, strategy ambiguity which are central themes to the America's policies concerning the focal point of this dispute.

In this research, document analysis is the primary method used. It includes comprehensive examination of various types of primary and secondary documents like academic articles, policy documents, government publications, legal agreements, formal addresses, espousal strategy papers, and news reports from the archives. Special attention is given to the works produced by U.S., Chinese, and Japanese think tanks because they provide policy-centric insights which deepen the empirical context of the research. The integrated use of these materials helps to achieve a more complete understanding of the conflict while mitigating single-source bias which strengthens trustworthiness and accuracy.

Choosing Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute as a case study demonstrates some of the most interesting aspects on which disputes arise and are resolved. To start with, it acts as a strategic hot spot for the US, China and Japan—three major players in the Indo-Pacific theatre. Secondly, the case provides insight into how America’s policy of extended deterrence is applied – or not – under conditions of forever sovereignty conflicts and rising regional tensions due to multipolarity. Senkaku/Diaoyu also allows dominance of realism and its sub-variants as the primary framework in analyzing disputes over territory, alliances, and competition among powerful states. All these attributes bring together conflicting theories to make empirical examination more productive. The case also fosters conflicting theories through empirical analysis East versus West on theory-based, evidence-driven line.

In order to fulfill academic requirements for accuracy within a single discipline, source authentication using more than one method of verification is paramount. Such as through policy document verification involving Government statements, publications from various non-governmental organizations (think tanks), media coverage in general news outlets or specialized press journalism “theory”. While narrating different stories by NHK World Japan Japanese broadcaster considered tends toward Japan while CGTN China Tend toward China voice over. Thus, based on CNT–CTE ANOVA stated classification data evaluation does distinguish determinate reasoning strategy notorious political calculus systemic workflows governing means along structured global power dynamics.”

The analysis relies on secondary data obtained through documents and institutional outputs. In addition, although there is an attempt to include all points of view, there may be restrictions due to lack of language access or censorship from certain countries that could limit the diversity of approaches. Regardless these challenges, the rigorous design in qualitative methods is aligned with the objectives set for the inquiry and provided valuable insight into debates around maritime conflicts and American diplomacy.

Historical Context:

The territorial controversy regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has evolved significantly in the 20th and 21st centuries, and is woven into a deep historical and legal fabric. It began some time during the Qing Dynasty when China claimed sovereignty over the Diaoyu Islands, asserting that they have been part of Chinese territory since the Ming period due to imperial documents, navigational maps, and historical records governed by China. Still, Japan claimed the islands in 1895 through a cabinet decision made at the height of Sino-Japanese tensions, claiming they were unclaimed land ‘terra nullius’ despite existing Chinese claim (Zhao, 2021).

Legal disputes became even more difficult to navigate after World War II. Japan relinquished claims to several territories, including Taiwan under the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty, but the treaty was silent on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which created a zone of interpretive ambiguity. Importantly, China contesting its legitimacy as a legal framework for claiming sovereignty over the islands since it wasn’t a signatory to the treaty. The issue was further complicated by the Okinawa Reversion Treaty of 1972 between the United States and Japan. In this treaty, administrative control of Okinawa—and by extension, the Senkaku Islands—was transferred back to Japan. While Washington adopted a neutral position regarding sovereignty over the islands, it did assert that they were subject to U.S.-Japan Security Treaty and therefore conferred operational control to Tokyo while denying any legitimization of sovereignty claims (Sunohara, 2018) (Roy, 2022).

Tai (Komine, 2021)wan's stance, while frequently neglected, adds an additional layer to the conversation. The Taiwanese government argues that the Diaoyu Islands are integral to

Taiwan due to the island's historical proximity and the local fishermen's utilization of the area. Taiwan may not hold as much global influence as China or Japan, but it does show that the conflict is not solely between China and Japan. From time to time, Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has reiterated the claims and advocated for joint development which exhibits pragmatic resolution towards maritime conflicts (Lin, 2022).

The management of the Pacific post-war remains a contested issue remarkably shaped by America's influence in World War II. The United States' strategic interest during the Cold War period influenced several executive actions like giving Japan dominion over the islands while leaving sovereignty issues off the table. "We do not take a position on the ultimate sovereignty of the islands but we consider them to be under Japanese administrative control for security purposes" (Hornung, 2023). Statements from US foreign affairs officials and lawyers echo such unwilling legal maneuvers. The US being Japan's ally have caused longstanding tension with other Asian countries because America's non-deterministic decision regarding treaties gives them freedom to apply their East Asia defense policies without engaging in ownership disputes. As of now, there are no conclusive mechanisms to resolve disputes under international law, specifically the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Even though it sets out certain rules for establishing a territorial sea, exclusive economic zone (EEZ), or continental shelf, it does not provide a framework for dealing with overlapping claims other than bilateral or multilateral negotiations. The absence of adjudicative jurisdiction within UNCLOS concerning disputes over sovereignty perpetuates the reliance on and use of historical and political arguments. Furthermore, realists have argued that this legal uncertainty is more useful as a means to exercise power than as a way to settle disputes. From this perspective, international law is not an impartial mediator but rather becomes just another tool of state power and dominion (Li, 2020).

China's policy on the use of international sea law concerning the East China Sea is a classic case of realism. Beijing's declaration of the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in 2013, which includes the disputed islands, served as notice that China intended to reshape through force, if necessary, the legal balance of power in the waters purportedly "contested" by Japan. Policy analysts and scholars argue that such actions serve aligned with doctrine of state sovereignty and further national security interests, characterized as Japanese "provocations," such as Japan's nationalization of the islands in 2012 (Zhu, 2023).

The other side of this dispute has Japan basing its legal claim on administrative continuity and effective control. A set of experts argue that there had been no Chinese challenge until roughly the 1970s which implies some form of acceptance of Japanese dominion over it until self-serving interests after a UN report suggested possible hydrocarbon reserves over two decades later. Tokyo's blend of reliance on administrative control coupled with its haphazard historical timeline reflects gravitation towards effective occupation—the dominant principle for territorial claiming under international law (Matsuda, 2020).

The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute is situated in an interpretation of sovereignty and international law's function, shaped by post-war treaties. That context gives rise to a stagnant situation where geopolitical competition overshadows legal precision. The combination of U.S. non-involvement policy, Japan's claim to administrative rule, and China's narrative of history creates a triangular standstill. Legal instruments such as UNCLOS fail to settle the dispute which supports a Realist perspective: in issues regarding high politics and significant strategic interests, law tends to yield to power. The enduring nature of this dispute illustrates the lack of effective

frameworks provided by international law within a system characterized by anarchy and fierce competition over power as clashing nationalisms drive strategic political agendas.

A Triangular Analysis of the East China Sea Conflict

China

The conflicts between China and Japan about the ownership of Diaoyu islands (Senkaku Islands), are of particular importance to China considering that they intend to emerge as a global superpower. Fostering the image of having suffered from “a century of humiliation” allows Beijing to argue that Taiwan historically administered the islands, only to see them absconded by Japan after Sino-Japanese War in 1895 (Sheng, 2023). The ruling party, with intent to foment unconditional nationalism, links sovereignty with unfitting territory through uninhabited islands admitting that sovereignty over uninhabited islets directly helps in achieving greater geostrategic aspirations related to territorial influence and naval power (Chen J. &, 2022).

From a geopolitical perspective, the East China Sea is an important focal point within China's maritime security framework. China's control over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands would enable greater operational flexibility for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), increasing competition with American and allied naval presence in the First Island Chain (Li B. &, 2023). In line with this approach, China has increasingly escalated jurisdictional disputes employing its coast guard and maritime militia to assert sovereignty below the level of military conflict. Following the enforcement of revised China Coast Guard Law in 2021, Chinese vessels have stepped up patrols in contested waters under a new mandate to use force, heightening tensions on a regional scale (Sun, 2023).



Research conducted by Zhang from the China Maritime Studies Institute suggest that using non-military assets like the coast guard enables China to perpetrate “gray zone” coercion which slowly shifts the norm while avoiding direct confrontations with The United States or Japan (Zhang L. , 2023). Furthermore, these islands are located near critical maritime routes through which a large share of energy resources flows for imports into China. Thus, keeping control over these waters is vital not just for energy security but also aligns strategically as it promotes geographic independence for China.

Japan

Tokyo's national security and sovereignty concerns are deeply tied to the Senkaku Islands. Japan purportedly annexed the islands in 1895 claiming they were uninhabited, and later administered them as part of Okinawa Prefecture. The San Francisco Treaty with America alongside the Okinawa Reversion Agreement partially restored Japanese control over the islands—in a legally ambiguous manner concerning ownership (Koga, 2022).

Recently, Japan has stepped up spending for updated military defenses and equipment citing modernization motivations due to the lingering territorial disputes. The reinterpretation of Article Nine of the Constitution, which imposed severe limits on Japan's military actions also came into effect (Ishiba, 2023). A series of overwhelming defense white papers published by Tokyo have signaled a shift in government approach towards Japanese sovereignty – coming off as swift changes in diplomatic policies designed to strengthen self-defense (Tanaka, 2023) (Yamashita, 2023).

The Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) have increased aerial and maritime surveillance activities around the islands and started conducting joint military drills with the United States to enhance their readiness for operations (Sakurada, 2022). Japan's request for reassurance from Washington about Senkaku Islands being under Article 5 of the US-Japan Security Treaty shows Japan's dependency on US alliance. This has been granted by multiple U.S. administrations which worsens the strategic dependency between two allies.

The Sasakawa Peace Foundation, along with other Japanese think tanks, has commented that Tokyo needs to finely tune its deterrence strategy in order to avoid triggering an escalation while upholding sovereignty claims. In addition, Japan is highly dependent on international shipping that is complicated further by the need for navigable waters ringed by fishing resources.

United States

As for the United States, the strategic value of Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands does not derive from their intrinsic value but what they mean for alliance credibility and regional order. As a principal Indo-Pacific security guarantor, the U.S. views Japanese controlled areas as vital to their extended deterrence structure (Garrison, 2023). Not responding to aggression in the East China Sea would weaken the American alliance system not only in Japan but throughout the Indo-Pacific including South Korea, Philippines and Australia (Walton, 2022).

The presence of US forces in Okinawa and rest of Japan is crucial for preventing Chinese expansionism. American bases provide imperative capabilities such as swift deployment, surveillance coverage, and maritime strike ability that form the backbone of stability within this region (Kaplan, 2023). Furthermore, bilateral military exercises like “Keen Sword” and “Orient Shield” aim to bolster forwarding fighting capability through interoperability while showcasing determination to prospective aggressors. Washington's strategic posture simultaneously encompasses an element of tactical ambiguity. The U.S. has not taken a definitive position on the sovereignty of the islands, aside from affirming treaty obligations under Article 5. This form of ambiguity is purposeful, aiming to avoid either party gaining undue advantage while retaining diplomatic maneuverability (Richardson, 2023).

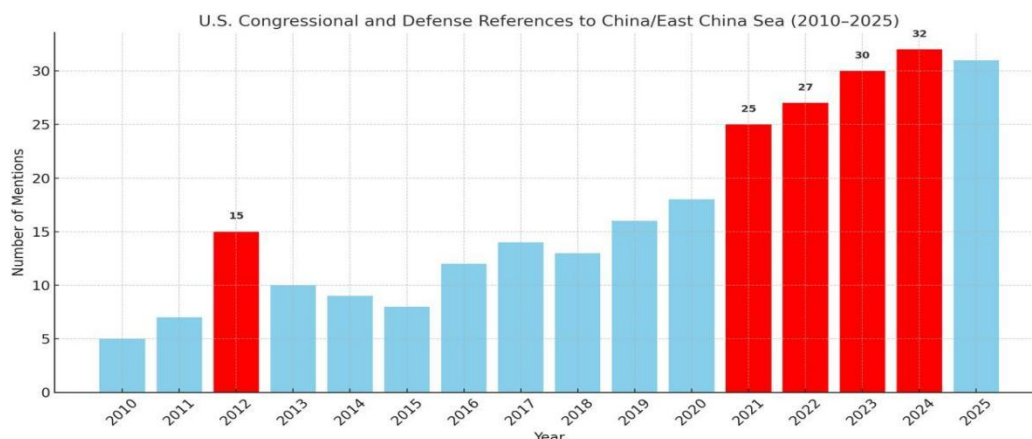
Nonpartisan policy and military affairs groups like the RAND Corporation and Center for a New American Security CNAS focused on advanced national security policy projects have posited that preserving credible deterrence goes beyond being militarily poised to respond. Countering China's aggressive narratives in regional forums requires diplomacy, economic resilience, and information supremacy (Hicks, 2022). Moreover, U.S. planners regard the East

China Sea as integral to their vision of a “free and open Indo-Pacific”, viewing the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute as a barometer for American strategic resolve within the region.

The intertwined strategic interests of these three powers give rise to unresolved critical issues regarding maritime strategy, terrorism challenges Taiwan relations with Beijing and identity concerning the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands—and all three shall continue taking claim over them without any further development into a peace deal further aggravating circumstances in broader Indo-Pacific region surrounding volatile flashpoint turning into turn unstable and unpredictable Indo-Pacific security architecture geopolitics collide.

Domestic Political Aspects:

United States: The dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the domestic politics of the United States are particularly noteworthy. From Conflict of Interest to Compromise: Understanding the Effects of Cultural Attributes (1989) explains that branches of Congress had long lobbied to shape policies pertaining to diplomacy and military relations. There has always been bipartisan legislative activity and resolutions reaffirming American commitments set forth in the U.S.-



Japan Security treaty which states confrontation with Japan's claimants including China would pose critical threats to U.S. interests (Levine, 2023). This form of congressional mobilization illustrates a more holistic view which interprets the Sino Japanese clash as a challenge posed on American dominance in managing international order instead of a unilateral fight for sovereignty. In parallel, a Congressional-supported campaign toward industry-funded anxiety regarding military readiness has long existed. Predictable patterns from both defense contractors and Pentagon planners have led to calls for increased deployment and upgrades to bases in Japan and Guam claiming that geopolitical shifts require preemptive deterrence (O'Hare, 2023). Such institutional support shapes strategic culture within the United States leading not only to region-specific spending on hypersonic weaponry, but also actively investing in missile defense systems and maritime surveillance over places like the East China Sea.

Public discussions in the United States increasingly regard China as a geopolitical rival, an attitude that has been exacerbated by media coverage of Chinese aggressiveness in historical disputes with regional neighbors. This narrative is bolstered by major think tanks like the Hoover Institution and American Enterprise Institute, which contribute to political dialogue concerning domestic security and international confidence in the United States (Fields, 2023). As such, there is greater expectation from these policymakers to demonstrate U.S. resolve which limits diplomatic movement and further entrenches a hardline stance even when core U.S. interests in the Senkaku Islands are minimal.

Japan

Japan's domestic politics are fused with its position of the Senkaku Islands as overlapping discussions of sovereignty, national identity, and constitutional selfhood collide here. The controversy has fueled arguments regarding the change of constitution at Article 9 which limits military involvement of Japan through Self Defense Forces (JSDF). There is a strategic shift within ruling Liberal Democratic Party towards domestic nationalism which seeks seat at global stage and utilizes Senkaku discourse for more assertive posture on territorial defense (Kojima, 2023).

Within the context of internal politics, rightist parties and nationalist leaders have utilized the controversy to forward their ideals of defending history and opposing Chinese oppression. These ideas appeal to some members of the Japanese electorate who regard the islands as symbols representing Japan's postwar pacifism and its imperative to reclaim an assertive defensive posture (Nakamura, 2023). Meanwhile, centrists and left-leaning parties have refrained from taking a hard position and instead advocated for a resolution through diplomacy.

Civic activism in Japan has also become increasingly aware of the incursions into Japanese waters near the islands. Public demonstrations as well as petitions have forced politicians into adopting harder stances, thus shifting further away from political compromise. Research institutes like the Tokyo Foundation for Policy Research have warned about the threat produced by "reactive nationalism" influencing policy making, especially concerning sovereignty disputes (Asano, 2022). The combination of these factors has resulted in an increase in JSDF activities within Okinawa and intensified maritime patrols aimed at consolidating Japan's administrative control over these territories while simultaneously escalating the issue within national political discourse.

China

In China, the domestic political order rests upon the narrative of nationalism with regard to national integration being a sacred socio-political tenet. For decades, the CCP has used the controversy around Diaoyu Islands to bolster internal cohesion and project itself as a "defender" of territorial integrity and historical grace. Subsequent administrations, and most especially Xi Jinping's, have woven maritime sovereignty assertions into the more overarching 'China dream' of rejuvenation which fuels Beijing's assertiveness in its regional relations (Liu, 2023).

The role of Chinese media and education has been pivotal in molding public perception regarding these islands. Through controlled channels, Japan is often characterized as a revisionist adversary associated with the negative legacy of Japan's empire. Within this "controlled" environment that lacks factual basis, politically sensitive propositions are deemed traitorous. Recent studies from SIIS indicate that polled sentiments within China significantly place limits on foreign policy spending flexibility and reservations forcing the CCP into aggressive postures even when strategically prudent (Zhou, 2023).

In addition, the domestic security apparatus in China is crucial to the conflict as it utilizes civilian resources like fishing vessels and maritime militias to extend China's presence in the vicinity of the islands. These quasi-state entities fulfill both external and internal functions by showing determination towards Japan and America while concurrently defending the CCP's narrative about upholding national sovereignty among Chinese citizens (Xu, 2023). Such approaches reflect the need to address internal party politics, particularly when there is a change in leadership or an economic slump.

Regional and Global Impacts: East China Sea Escalation Dynamics

The Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute exemplifies a quintessential “flashpoint dilemma,” situating gray zone coercion on the edge of violence (Cronin, 2024). The Japan Coast Guard’s Expanded Rules of Engagement and China’s 2021 Coast Guard Law both grant permissive use of force, raising the risk of unintentional conflict (Huang, 2023). RAND simulations predict that even a localized clash would stimulate reciprocal anti-ship missile and air asset deployments within a 72-hour window, ensnaring American forces stationed in Okinawa into any ensuing spiral-gateway conflict (Neumann, 2023). From Beijing’s perspective, the deployment of U.S. F-35 squadrons stationed in the Ryukyus seems to choke reaction windows which aggravates “use-it-or-lose-it” decision-making heuristics increasing inadvertent escalation (Su, 2024). For its part, Tokyo has deployed rapid response amphibious units to Ishigaki and Miyako islands, which China interprets as purposeful forward posture anticipatory preparation for preemptive occupation. Realists view the entire East China Sea as one single geopolitically volatile region replete with unresolvable security dilemmas where crisis management is barely institutionalized.

Connections with Taiwan Strait, Korean Peninsula, and South China Sea

Disputes have implications for a region's security far beyond its immediate geography. For instance, in the Taiwan Strait, People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) strategists now regard the Senkaku corridor as an approach toward blockading Taiwan straits which causes Taiwan to synchronize surveillance operations with the Japan Maritime Self Defense Force (Lin C. &, 2023). On the Korean Peninsula, there is concern in Seoul that U.S. shifting of resources towards an East China Sea theater might weaken extended deterrence southward into Pyongyang; Asan Institute thus advocates a “contingency-sharing” approach among all U.S. allies to counter alliance coasting (Kim, 2024). In the South China Sea, Beijing uses justifications provided by actions taken around the Senkakus to step up her patrols around Second Thomas Shoal and enforces what she terms a consistent policy of “historical rights” which complicates diplomacy within ASEAN (Nguyen, 2023). These diverse cross-theater entanglements illustrate quite distinctly realist claims about balance-of-power systems: one area of maritime tension creates instability elsewhere which forces friends and foes alike to hedge across multiple theaters.

The Balance of Power, the US, ASEAN and alliances architecture

This dispute heavily impacts the changing framework of monolateral conjugal arrangements like Quad and AUKUS. For Canberra and New Delhi, the enduring tension in the East China Sea justifies the logic of technological collective edge—illustrated by the AUKUS undersea surveillance network project—meant to counter Chinese creeping expansionism within the first and second island chains (White, 2024). Japan's crisis -centered political vision has enabled them to mobilize Japan as a “northern fulcrum” which completes a stereoscopic four-dimensional quad maritime surveillance system from Malacca Strait to Japan basin (Sakamoto, 2023). At the same time, scholars from China's National Institute for South China Sea Studies warn that increasingly rigid coalitions could invoke a counter-entente response composed of Sino-Russian naval exercises in the Sea of Japan and Philippine Sea that would accelerate bloc polarization (Zhang Y. , Counter-Entente Dynamics: Sino-Russian Naval Cooperation in Response to AUKUS, 2024). The challenge for Washington becomes preserving alliance coherence without closing off diplomatic exits. Preserving ambiguity on sovereignty while reiterating Article 5 assurance coverage to Tokyo creates tension. Simply put through international relations theory - constructivism - U.S. extended deterrence credibility vis-a-vis Senkaku/Diaoyu “contest” acts as a ‘credibility crucible’.

To maintain a positive balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region while preventing escalation, an ideal approach has a calibrated blend of forward defense, multilateral capacity-building, and crisis-hotline arrangements.

Recent Developments (2023–2025)

Increase in Chinese Maritime Activity:

From 2023-2025, there has been an increase in Chinese maritime activities operating along Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and surrounding waters as a result of the enforcement of Coast Guard Law of 2021. This law allows China Coast Guard (CCG) to alarmed foreign ships which cross “jurisdictional waters” and therefore merging civilian enforcement with military provocation. Analysts from the China Ocean Policy Institute claim that patrols around Diaoyu Islands have become more intensive, estimating almost 100 breaches in 2023 alone (Ma & Liu, 2024). Participation by CCG vessels suggests that these intrusions are not only crossing legal borders but also testing Japanese and American diplomatic limits as they stand ready to counter deepening Chinese influence over the region or are prepared to enforce strict responses on any intruding parties. With this shift comes heightened tensions within US-China relations from their joint China-Japan friendship period (Wang, 2024).

Additionally, China's academic and popular literature as well as official statements have increasingly justified the use of force at sea to protect sovereignty and maritime interests. As pointed out by Li in 2024, the Institute of Strategic Studies at East China Normal University argues that these actions reflect a calculated long-term strategy to justify Chinese dominion over the waters. The attempts avoid direct warfare, but rather represent an indirect approach to enforce control over the disputed waters.

Japan's Defense Posture and Military Integration with the United States of America:

Japan issues new defense white papers on this matter marking 2023 and 2024 for Japan's increased attention towards china's maritime activities considering them more dangerous. Addition of section disorderly and insensible order was added in covering Chinese actions around Senkaku Islands while adding stronger terms claiming from ‘persistent egregious’ insisting breach upon international law whilst pushing for enhanced military readiness integrated cross-domain action (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2024). Japan also proposed new defense strategy labeled ‘comprehensive deterrence’ which aims interconnecting japan-self navy forces with united states/Canadian allies self-defense forces.

The recent “Keen Edge” and “Resilient Shield” exercises have incorporated newer domains of space-based surveillance and electronic warfare. These activities are intended to enhance the synergy of conducting limited operational battles at sea (Fujimoto, 2025). Japanese Self-Defense Forces created rapid deployment units on Yonaguni and Ishigaki islands, effectively setting up forward operating bases near the contested area.

U.S. Diplomatic Actions and Oversight from Congress:

U.S. engagement has remained consistent; devoid of any major shifts aside from strategic signaling and reaffirming statements. In multiple remarks spanning from 2023 to 2025, the U.S. Department of State emphasized that Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty applies to the Senkaku Islands, a claim consistently made in bilateral talks and annual defense dialogues (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Moreover, closed door sessions held by the Senate Armed Services Committee on the East China Sea focused on increased spending towards Indo-Pacific forward deterrence, including advanced ISR—intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance—capabilities.

As a part of the U.S. military framework, the Hudson Institute emphasizes these developments showcase both the policy consistency and preparedness of operations for deterrence, albeit there

is a warning that some miscalculation could lead to a regional conflict spiral (Reynolds, 2025). Thus, the collection period between 2023 and 2025 marks an acceleration convergence of some sort of military, legal and diplomatic resources in attempts dealing with but not solving the Senkaku/Diaoyu conflict thereby cementing its role as a volatile pivot within U.S.-China-Japan triad relations.

Policy Recommendations:

Increasing military presence and Joint-Interagency exercises

To maintain credibility and prevent escalation in the East China Sea, the U.S. needs to sustain and adapt its forward military (FM) posture. This includes improving joint operational capability (JOC) with Taiwan and other regional partners through regular trilateral exercises with Japan where possible. Moreover, Keen Sword 2024 should be enriched with scenario-specific wargaming augmentation on maritime crises and gray zone tactics (Baldor, 2024). The U.S. line-of-sight assets stationed at Okinawa supported by prepositioned logistical support on Guam provide an ideal rapid response triage hub, critical to both offensive realism and defensive realism strategies. With regards to Chinese missile threats, as argued by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, increasing the footprint of operational bases would provide greater force posture flexibility as well a reduced vulnerability that need to be surveilled at (Krepinevich, 2023).

Diplomatic Strategy: Ambiguity Coupled with Reassurance

Strategic ambiguity must be preserved within baseline diplomacy to ensure there is no escalation over Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. As Washington reaffirms the applicability of Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty concerning the defense of the islands, it should refrain from taking explicit stand on sovereignty claims that both sides brutalize aggression and avoid entrapment simultaneously. At the same time, institutionalizing a trilateral crisis management mechanism, among the US, Japan, and China, can provide rapid pathways for de-escalation reducing chances of accidental conflict (Funabashi, Rebuild Japan Initiative Foundation). The quiet diplomacy and backchannel communication during the managed U.S.-China friction period have expanded towards defensive realists aiming at conflict mitigation which does not entail conceding strategically meaningful ground.

Enhancing Technological Tools and Maritime Domain Awareness

The United States Should focus on aiding Japan's coast guard as well as defense ministry concerning 'real-time' maritime domain awareness (MDA) using AI based unmanned systems. Establishing an East China Sea intelligence sharing network will prove vital towards monitoring gray zone incursions thus denying adversarial claim to deniability advantage (Tsuruoka, 2024). Investment into space-based surveillance systems as well as underwater sensors need to increase in importance towards planning within the Pentagon considering persistent ISR coverage of intel, surveillance or reconnaissance has strategic value.

Engagement through multilateral platforms such as UNCLOS, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the Quad should be utilized to counter attempts at changing the status quo unilaterally. Although the U.S. does not endorse UNCLOS, its international maritime law policies enable it to champion the defender of order as a non-signatory (Medcalf, 2023). Think tanks like NIDS from Tokyo and CICIR from Beijing proposed that track-2 dialogues could serve as confidence-building measures (Zhou J. , 2024).

These revisions demonstrate balancing and threat mitigation approaches in realism theory. They are paramount to maintaining continental stability while simultaneously preserving

American leadership in Indo-Pacific security during intensifying competition between superpowers.

Conclusion:

The disagreement regarding the Senkaku or Diaoyu Islands highlights the unique and changing challenges that the United States faces within its planned strategy overreach in the Indo-Pacific region—a region experiencing power shifts, strategic uncertainty, and competing nationalistic fervors. Utilizing a realist perspective, specifically through offensive and defensive realism lenses, this piece focuses on key strategy issues such as balance of power considerations, deterrence theory, alliance politics, and maritime security dilemmas. The enduring disputes illustrate weaknesses in America's extended deterrence framework coping with China's gray zone strategies of low-level coercion coupled with Tokyo's more assertive post-WWII stance on military activities constitutional reinterpretations under strengthened Japan nationalism. In addition to this international dispute, an intense debate has emerged within U.S. policy-making circles over the sustainability of these military commitments relative to other regions of focus; this controversy centers around perceptions about America's standing as a guarantor of security within allied states institutionalized by mutual defense treaties. Although unpopulated and geographically constrained, symbolically they are a litmus test for American resolve on facing revisionist attempts challenging the status quo while defending alliance system cohesion hinged on Article 5 folly—China is testing Japan's claimed sovereignty over those islands without control acknowledging Beijing's pretentious claim of 'indispensable' regional leadership authority crossed militarization lines for territorial ambitions.

Realist theory looks into how fear, security dilemmas, and power projection work together in this trilateral relationship. It also reveals how there isn't any long-term framework for resolving conflict and peace in the region. This imbalance means that most of the Indo-Pacific is strategically unbalanced where so-called enduring peace solutions rely on temporary deterrent substitutions. Having said that, the Senkaku/Diaoyu conflict acts not only as a flashpoint for geopolitical rivalry but also as a gauge for how effective U.S. grand strategy has been implemented, how strong alliance frameworks are, and how well Realism explains changes in global power relations.

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