

Explaining China's Escalation over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands

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This article examines China's behavior in the dispute with Japan over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands. Before 2010, China adopted a low-key approach to the dispute. After 2010, however, China chose to escalate the dispute, first in response to Japan's detention of a Chinese fishing vessel in September 2010 and then in response to the Japanese government's purchase of three of the islands in September 2012. China escalated because Japan's actions challenged China's relatively weak position in the dispute. By escalating, China could counter Japanese actions and strengthen its position in the dispute. Since late 2013, the dispute appears to have stabilized. China's patrols within twelve nautical miles of the islands have strengthened China's position in the dispute, while Japan has refrained from developing the islands.

China's behavior in its dispute over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands with Japan presents a puzzle. Before 2010, China downplayed its claims and sought to delay any resolution of the dispute. China's claims were rarely mentioned in official media, and China took few concrete actions to press its position. Since 2010, however, China has asserted its claims vigorously. In September 2010, China responded with public threats after Japan seized a Chinese fishing vessel that had entered the territorial waters around the islands and then arrested its captain. In September 2012, following the Japanese government's purchase of three of the islands from a private Japanese citizen, China responded even more vigorously. China's foreign ministry unleashed harsh rhetoric and anti-Japanese protests occurred throughout the country, while China froze high-level political and diplomatic contacts and initiated regular patrols within twelve nautical miles of the islands.

This article seeks to explain the change in China's approach to the dispute over the Senkaku Islands since 2010. To do so, I employ a theoretical framework for examining when China chooses escalation in its territorial disputes (Fravel 2007, 2008). In this framework, a state's perception of the strength of its claim or bargaining position in a territorial dispute shapes incentives for escalation. A state's bargaining position is determined by the amount of the contested land that it controls and its ability to project military power over the entire area that it claims. When a state determines that its adversary's actions weaken its position in the dispute, the benefits of escalation to prevent any further decline can outweigh any costs that such action might entail. These costs can be magnified when the territorial dispute declines during

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periods of regime insecurity or instability at home, which increases the importance of signaling resolve abroad.

Historically, the strength of China's claim in the dispute over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands has been weak. China did not control any of the territory that it claims and, even with recent improvements in Chinese naval capabilities, has been unable to project sufficient power against Japan over the disputed islands. China's decisions to escalate in 2010 and 2012 are best explained as responses to perceptions of a decline in its position in the dispute and the need to resist what Beijing has viewed as new efforts by Japan to consolidate Japanese claims to the islands. In September 2012, the uncertainty surrounding the transfer of power at the 18th Party Congress gave China's leaders an additional incentive to respond harshly to Japan's purchase of three of disputed islands to signal strength externally during a period of political uncertainty at home.

The first section of this article reviews the dominance of China's delaying strategy in the Senkaku Islands dispute until roughly 2010. The next section examines China's reaction to the arrest of the Chinese fishing captain whose vessel entered the territorial waters around the islands in September 2010. The third section examines China's response to the purchase of three of the disputed islands by the Japanese government from a private citizen in September 2012. The final section considers the possibility that, paradoxically, China's actions in the dispute, especially the patrols within the territorial waters of the Senkakus, have created a new stability in the dispute by strengthening China historically weak position.

The Dominance of Delay: The Senkaku (Diaoyu) Dispute until 2010

The dynamics of the Senkaku Island dispute from the early 1970s until 2010 presents a puzzle. At first glance, one might expect this dispute to be fraught with tension and even violence. Territorial disputes often serve as proxies for broader conflicts of interests, especially between states that might be characterized as enduring or strategic rivals, such as China and Japan (Rasler and Thompson 2006). Although the Chinese–Japanese economic relationship has continued to deepen since the end of the Cold War, political relations have oscillated between periods of heightened friction and relative calm (He 2007; Bush 2009). At the same time, both sides see the islands as important real estate, endowed with strategic significance and economic value, increasing their willingness to use force in a territorial dispute (Huth 1996). China has also used force in other disputes over offshore islands, most notably over the Paracels in 1974 and the Spratlys in 1988 and 1994 (Fravel 2008). Finally, given the history of Japan's occupation of parts of China in World War II, one might expect territorial issues to be especially prominent as a source of friction between the two countries and that leaders on both sides might manipulate the matter to mobilize society, perhaps for diversionary ends (He 2007).¹

Since 1949, however, China has never used armed force against Japan over the Senkaku Islands. China displayed force once, during the peace treaty negotiations in 1978.² The avoidance of armed conflict over the

1 This section draws on Fravel (2010).

2 In March 1978, LDP members of the Diet opposed the Sino–Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship and pressured publicly the Japanese government to link the treaty with a Chinese recognition of

islands is a major accomplishment because it is unexpected. Explaining state inaction or the absence of a particular outcome such as the use of force presents a challenge for social scientists. The core problem is that patterns of inaction or nonevents are likely to be overdetermined, consistent with multiple if not overlapping explanations. When a particular behavior is not observed, it is more challenging to identify those factors that vary with inaction. Nevertheless, there are four explanations for the absence of violent conflict in the Senkaku dispute since 1972.

The first and most important reason is deterrence. China has lacked the military means to execute a limited aims operation to seize and then defend the islands from any counterattack to retake them. Japan possesses the most professional and capable navy in East Asia (Lind 2004; Hughes 2009). More importantly, however, the U.S. alliance with Japan has deterred China from taking any armed action over the islands. Article V of the 1960 U.S.-Japan Mutual Defense Treaty includes the islands as territories under the administration of Japan. Therefore, any Chinese use of force over the Senkakus would run the very real risk of armed conflict with the United States, which China would prefer to avoid and thus deterring China from using military means in the dispute.

The continuous administration of the disputed islands by Japan during the period when their sovereignty has been contested is a second reason for the absence of escalation. Continuous administration or occupation by one state in a territorial dispute increases significantly the cost for the other side of using force, as the international community would view any use of force as a clear sign of revisionist behavior. Occupation by one side, in other words, reinforces the status quo bias of the international system. By contrast, although China did use force in the Paracels and the Spratlys, it seized islands and coral reefs that were claimed but not occupied by other states and vacant real estate (with the exception of Pattle Island in the Paracels). In disputes on its land border, China has not seized large amounts of disputed territory through the use of force, especially when contested territory has been occupied by other states. For example, in its 1962 war with India over disputed areas along its southwestern frontier, China withdrew to the line of control that existed before its offensive operations (Fravel 2008).

A third reason for the absence of escalation stems from the continuing competition between China and Japan for diplomatic influence within East Asia. For different reasons, both countries likely want to maintain reputations as constructive and benign powers in the region. Escalation or use of force over the Senkakus would tarnish that reputation for China. In particular, China's diplomatic strategy through the mid-2000s revolved around the concept of peaceful development and reassuring other states about the consequences of China's rise (Goldstein 2005). During this period, belligerence over disputed territories would signal to the region that a more powerful China might also be more aggressive, thus increasing suspicion and uncertainty about China's long-term intentions.

A fourth and under-examined reason is how both sides have sought to manage the dispute to avoid unwanted spirals of hostility and tension that might culminate in the use of force. Japanese efforts to limit access by Japanese citizens to the islands have helped to contribute to stability by

Japan's claims to the Senkakus. In April, a flotilla of Chinese fishing boats, some of them armed, appeared in the surrounding waters and lingered for a week, underscoring China's commitment to its claim while Chinese officials urged Japan not to raise the issue. See Tretiak (1978).

denying China a justification for allowing its citizens to land on the islands. In 2002, the Japanese government leased three of the islands that were privately owned, placing them under direct control of the state, and in February 2005 assumed control of a lighthouse built and maintained by the Japanese Youth League (Kyodo 2003; Jiji Press 2003; Yoshida 2005). Similarly, the Chinese government has sought to restrict the activities of its own citizens around the islands, especially after a group of activists landed on one of the islands in 2004 (Kyodo 2004, 2007).

In addition, China during this period avoided using the islands to mobilize society. Only twenty-nine articles with "Senkaku Islands" (*diaoyu dao*) in the title have appeared in *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*) between 1987 and 2005 (Fravel 2010, 154).³ Likewise, since the end of the Cold War, the Chinese government has restricted the number, scope, and duration of protests against Japan over this issue (Downs and Saunders 1998). Even in April 2005, when anti-Japan demonstrations occurred throughout major cities in China, the Senkakus dispute played only a minor role despite its potential utility in mobilizing support for the demonstrators' goals. Finally, although it has administered the islands since 1972, Japan has limited their development and use. Japan has not erected any military installations on the islands that might be viewed as threatening in Beijing. Japan's limited use of the islands is important because Chinese sources distinguish Japan's administration of the islands (sometimes described as "actual control" (*shiji kongzhi*)) and any potential or future Japanese "occupation" of the islands. By implication, occupation described as "qinzhan" or "zhanling" appears to refer to any permanent military use of the islands, especially for assets that could be used in a conflict over Taiwan (Du 2003; Gao 2006). Thus, although only by implication, these sources have highlighted what might be viewed as a red line for China in its dispute with Japan.

The 2010 Fishing Boat Incident

In 2010, tensions increased between China and Japan over the Senkaku Islands following the arrest and detention of a Chinese fishing boat's captain and crew. China viewed Japan's actions as challenging China's already weak position in the dispute. By moving to prosecute the Chinese captain for violating domestic laws, China viewed Japan as increasing the strength of its claim by taking unprecedented actions that demonstrated its sovereignty over the islands and territorial waters. In response, China countered with harsh rhetoric and ominous threats in order to secure the release of the captain.⁴

The Arrest of Captain Zhan

On September 7, 2010, the Japanese Coast Guard (JCG) observed the Chinese fishing vessel, *Minjinyu* 5179, operating roughly 7.5 miles northeast of the disputed islands. The JCG ordered the Chinese vessel to halt for inspection, but the Chinese vessel refused and sought to leave the area. JCG ships then moved to force *Minjinyu* 5179 to halt. While attempting to avoid the JCG ships, *Minjinyu* 5179 collided with two of them, causing some

3 The frequency of articles on the Senkakus is roughly one-tenth of those published on the Spratlys and an even smaller fraction of those concerning Taiwan.

4 For reviews of this episode, see Drifte (2013), Przystup (2012), Smith (2012), and Weiss (2014).

damage to the Japanese vessels. The captain and fourteen crew members were detained and taken to Ishigaki Prefecture.

On September 8, Japan formally arrested the captain. He was charged not with illegal fishing but with obstructing the official duties of a public official. The following day, his detention was extended by ten days. On September 13, the crew of the *Minjinyu* 5179 was released but they continued to detain the captain, whom Japan held responsible for the collision and for violating Japanese laws. On September 19, a local Japanese court extended the captain's custody for an additional ten days. On September 24, amid Chinese actions described below, the captain was released, though charges against him were not dropped.

China viewed the actions taken by Japan as weakening the strength of China's position in the Senkakus dispute for several reasons. First, in past incidents involving civilian ships that entered the territorial waters around the islands, the crews or activists were deported quickly, usually within forty-eight hours. Examples of past deportations involved activists sailing and landing on the Senkaku Islands in 2004 as well as foreign fishing boats operating in Japanese waters. This time, however, the crew was not deported expeditiously (Johnston 2013; Jimbo n.d.).

Second, the captain was charged with violating domestic Japanese laws by interfering with public officials carrying out their duties. The charge was likely levied because in the course of the chase, the captain refused to halt for inspection and damaged two JCG vessels. China viewed both actions as a change from past practice and reflecting a heightened resolve by Japan to demonstrate and assert its claims over the islands. In the past, Japan had not charged those it had detained within the territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands under domestic Japanese law, even when activists had ignored JCG orders to halt and landed on the islands. As a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman stated on September 9, "it is absurd, illegal and invalid that Japan applies its domestic law to Chinese fishing boats working in those waters, and absolutely unacceptable to China" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2010). Later in the dispute, on September 22, the foreign ministry stated that "It is a severe violation and flagrant challenge of China's territorial sovereignty for Japan to illegally detain Chinese fishermen and ships in waters off the Diaoyu Islands and insist on performing a so-called domestic judicial process involving the Chinese captain" (Xinhua 2010a).

Finally, in the course of the standoff, Japan challenged publicly China's position regarding the dispute over the islands. Japan's position is that there is no dispute over the islands. China's view is that a dispute exists, based on conversations between Chinese and Japanese leaders in the 1970s, but that the two sides agreed to shelve the dispute (Fravel 2012c). On September 21, Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara stated before the House of Representatives Security Committee that "it is not the case that Japan agreed with China [about this]" (quoted in Hagstrom 2012, 285). He was the highest ranking Japanese official to make such a statement. From China's perspective, Maehara's statement represented a hardening of Japan's position in the dispute and a reversal of an agreement to shelve the conflict between the two.

China's Escalates

From the captain's detention on September 7 until his release on September 24, China engaged in what Alastair Iain Johnston has described as

“systematic and relatively controlled” escalation (2013, 23), which occurred in three different ways (Przystup 2012). The first involved toughened rhetoric toward Japan amid demands for the release of the captain and the crew. As the crisis continued, China intensified both the level of rhetoric and the standing of messenger. China’s messages to Japan began with statements from the foreign ministry spokesman and culminated with threatening language from Premier Wen Jiabao. While in New York for a meeting at the United Nations on September 22, Wen stated that China would take “further measures” and Japan would bear “all the responsibility for consequences” if the captain was not released immediately and unconditionally (Xinhua 2010b). During this period, China summoned the Japanese ambassador six times, including by an assistant foreign minister, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi and State Councilor Dai Bingguo, who held a forty-five-minute midnight meeting with Ambassador Niwa on September 11 after the captain’s detention was extended for ten days.

Second, China postponed or cancelled several government exchanges and meetings with Japan. On September 10, the Chinese foreign ministry announced that it was suspending talks on developing natural gas in the East China Sea based on a 2008 “principled consensus” agreement. On September 15, China cancelled the five-day visit to Japan of Li Jianguo (Vice-Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress) for an exchange with the Diet. On September 19, following another extension of the captain’s detention, Beijing announced that all high-level exchanges would be frozen, including ministerial and provincial-level discussions, as well as talks on air links and coal (Page 2010). On September 21, for example, Beijing announced that Premier Wen Jiabao would not meet with Prime Minister Kan at the upcoming UN Summit in New York.

Third, China engaged in two coercive acts. On September 20, China arrested four Japanese nationals for allegedly entering restricted military space and videotaping military facilities (Kyodo 2010). A few days later, China may have started to slow or even halt the export of rare earth metals from China to Japan. The facts surrounding rare earth exports remain the subject of substantial controversy. Contemporary press reports at the time indicated that a slow-down of shipments had occurred (Bradsher 2010). Yet subsequent analysis of customs data from Japan does not show a clear slowdown or halt in the imports of these materials (Johnston 2013). As a result, although the perception of such an act is widespread, it is unclear whether or how it occurred. For example, Wen Jiabao’s statement occurred several days before the first reports of the rare earth export slowdown appeared.

After the captain was released, China’s behavior in the dispute changed, for reasons that are consistent with the factors motivating China’s harsh response. In particular, China began to increase the presence of government ships in the contiguous waters around the islands in order to strengthen its position in the dispute. On roughly a monthly basis, ships from the Fisheries Law Enforcement Command (FLEC, now part of the China Coast Guard) would conduct a patrol near the islands, though outside the twelve nautical mile territorial waters of the islands. Previously, China had not maintained a presence of government ships near the islands, an approach that China would use again in 2012 (Japan Coast Guard 2016).

The 2012 “Nationalization” of Three Islands

Following the purchase of three of the disputed islands by the Japanese government in September 2012, China swiftly escalated its approach in the dispute. If China’s response in 2010 can be viewed as an effort by China to signal resolve to defend its weak claim, China’s actions in 2012 represented an effort to improve the strength of China’s claim without crossing the threshold of armed force. In addition to sharp rhetoric, China drew base-lines around the islands and initiated patrols by maritime law enforcement vessels within the territorial waters of the islands. By contrast, before September 2012, Chinese government vessels had entered the territorial waters around the islands on only four occasions. Through these and other actions, China challenged Japan’s claim much more directly than ever before, effectively creating a new status quo in the dispute (Fravel 2012a).⁵

The Path to Nationalization

After the September 2010 incident, China used civilian maritime law enforcement vessels to increase its presence in the waters around the islands. Vessels from the FLEC sailed to the islands approximately once a month. Most of the time, they loitered in waters beyond Japan’s twelve nautical mile territorial waters around the islands. On three occasions, however, Chinese government ships did enter into these waters in August 2011 (two vessels from the Bureau of Fisheries Administration), March 2012 (one China Marine Surveillance vessel), and July 2012 (three vessels from the Bureau of Fisheries Administration) (Japan Coast Guard 2016).

In April 2012, the conservative governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, launched a public campaign for the Tokyo municipal government to purchase three of the islands owned by a private Japanese citizen. Ishihara claimed that the central government was not doing enough to protect the islands, an argument which resonated easily because of the increased presence of Chinese government ships near the islands after the 2010 incident. After one billion yen was raised, Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda faced a tough decision: whether to let the islands fall into the hands of an unpredictable, conservative, and hyper-nationalist politician (Shintaro Ishihara) or to buy the islands in the hopes of neutralizing them.

Noda announced the Japanese government’s decision to purchase the islands on July 7, 2012. Unfortunately, this was the anniversary of the 1937 Marco Polo Bridge incident that commemorates Japan’s bid to conquer China in World War II. Even though Noda argued that central government ownership would be stabilizing, China opposed the move. It was seen as not only a further exercise of Japan’s sovereignty over the islands, but also as strengthening Japan’s claim by bringing more of the islands under the direct control of the Japanese government.

Over the course of the summer, the United States attempted to dissuade Japan from going ahead with the purchase. According to Kurt Campbell, who was then Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, the United States gave “very strong advice not to go in this direction.” Moreover, Campbell noted that, “Even though we warned Japan, Japan decided to go in a

5 For a detailed review of this episode, see Weiss (2014, 189–218).

different direction, and they thought they had gained the support of China, or some did, which we were certain that they had not" (Kyodo 2013).

Nationalization and China's Bargaining Position

China viewed the actions taken by Japan to purchase the three islands as a clear challenge to the strength of China's claim. First, China viewed the purchase, incorrectly from a legal perspective, as strengthening Japan's claim to the islands, thus further weakening China's poor position. By bringing the three islands under direct government control, Japan was seen as enhancing its control over the contested features. Similarly, the phrase "nationalization" (*guojiahua*, 国家化) carried connotations of upgrading national control or sovereignty over the islands. Although some in Japan believed that China would accept the purchase, by August it was clear that Beijing opposed the move. As a sign of its displeasure, Beijing did not block mainland-based activists from sailing to the islands on August 15 (Weiss 2014). On September 9, during the APEC meeting in Vladivostok, Russia, President Hu Jintao personally appealed to Prime Minister Noda, not to go through with the purchase. Two days later, the purchase was finalized, creating a considerable loss of face for Chinese leaders.

In addition to the weakening of China's claim, China escalated its approach in the dispute for a second reason. Historically, China has used force in territorial disputes when faced with challenges to its claims during periods of heightened regime insecurity. This combination of declining claim strength in the dispute and regime insecurity is volatile, giving China's leaders an even greater incentive to escalate to show resolve (Fravel 2008). At such moments, China's leaders believe that an opposing state may be attempting to take advantage of China's domestic woes, calculating that a domestically distracted leadership would be less likely to escalate in response. In addition, in China's more open media environment, China's leaders may fear that a weak or feckless response to an external challenge, especially from Japan, could increase popular discontent.

Japan's move to nationalize the islands, and the final decision to go ahead with the purchase, occurred during a delicate period in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) political calendar, namely, the preparations for the 18th Party Congress that would select a new generation of top leaders. The period was delicate due to ongoing negotiations and disagreements over the composition of the Politburo, the party's top decision-making body. The negotiations intensified during the summer of 2012 (Lim 2012). Of course, the debate within the party was not publicized, but nevertheless it indicated a period of insecurity for top leaders and gave China even more reason to respond vigorously to the nationalization when it occurred.

From Beijing's perspective, Japan's purchase of the three islands appeared to be designed to exploit the uncertainty within the highest levels of the leadership. Ishihara's announcement of his intention to purchase the islands came just days after Beijing suspended Politburo member Bo Xilai from all his positions in the CCP. This was arguably the biggest upheaval in elite Chinese politics in more than two decades, before the 2014 investigation of Zhou Yongkang. Diplomatic positions hardened as China's economic growth slowed much faster than expected, an increasing source of worry for Beijing's leaders. Then Japanese Premier Noda announced his decision to buy the islands on the July anniversary of the 1937 Marco Polo Bridge

incident, which raised the salience of the dispute and placed it within a greater historical context of Japanese–Chinese relations. Finally, the sale was completed just days before the anniversary of Japan’s invasion of Manchuria on September 18, 1931.

A final and related factor was China’s simultaneous involvement in maritime disputes. For reasons unrelated to the situation in the East China Sea, China had escalated its approach to the South China Sea in April 2012, when it chose to confront the Philippines over Scarborough Shoal. Over the following months, China also challenged Vietnam when China elevated the administrative structure of the Paracels and Spratlys to a prefectural level city and invited foreign oil companies to invest in exploration blocks that overlapped with Vietnam’s in the central part of the South China Sea (Fravel 2012b). As a result, China’s positions in these disputes became interdependent. The importance for China to signal resolve in both has increased.

China Escalates

China responded in a broad-based manner to the purchase of the islands. China’s goals were to demonstrate that it rejected Japan’s claims to sovereignty and to strengthen its own claim, short of using armed force to seize contested territory. First, China issued a rare government statement announcing the drawing of baselines around the islands (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012b). Previously, because of the dispute, China did not draw these lines around the Senkaku Islands when it issued its national baselines in 1996.

Second, China began to conduct regular patrols within twelve nautical miles of the islands to assert its claim to sovereignty over the islands. In addition, the presence of Chinese ships within the contiguous zone between twelve and twenty-four nautical miles of the islands increased considerably. As can be seen in figure 1, China has conducted a total of sixty-six patrols

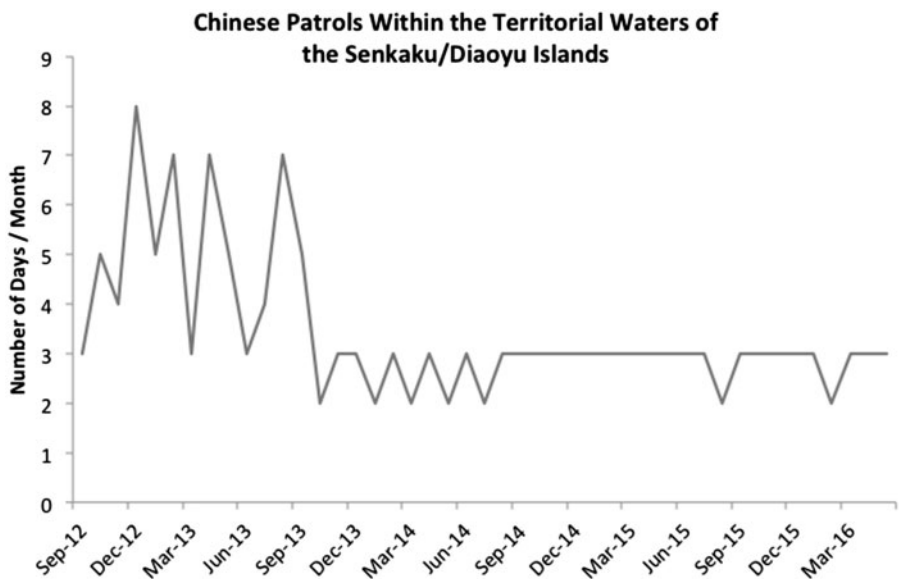


Figure 1 Chinese patrols within the territorial waters of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands

Source: Japan Coast Guard (2016).

within the territorial waters of the islands between September 2012 and September 2013, or roughly five times per month. On average, Chinese ships also entered the contiguous zone twenty times per month.

Third, over the weekend from September 15 to September 18, 2012, China allowed anti-Japanese demonstrations over the islands to occur throughout the country, including in first-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong.⁶ Although news reports indicated that the demonstrations were “guided” in Beijing, the national scope of the demonstrations was unprecedented (Weiss 2014; Wallace and Weiss 2015). In some cases, Japanese businesses were vandalized, and during this period Japanese car sales fell by 50 percent.

Fourth, Chinese diplomats also used uncommonly harsh and undiplomatic language. At one point, a senior official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs described Japan’s purchase of the three islands “like an atomic bomb dropped on China” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012a).

Finally, China levied specific demands. Most importantly, it demanded that Japan acknowledge the existence of a dispute. China also demanded that the two countries either engage in joint administration of the islands or cease patrols within the territorial waters of the islands, either of which would have required Japan to acknowledge a dispute and concede to China. Japan refused to accede to those demands. Instead, Japan insists on holding high-level talks without preconditions; namely, without acknowledging the presence of a dispute over the island. China opposed holding such talks until unless its demands were met, especially regarding the recognition of the dispute.

In late 2012 and early 2013, two incidents occurred that threatened to increase tensions. On December 13, 2012, a surveillance plane from the China Marine Surveillance force (now part of the new China Coast Guard) entered the airspace over the Senkaku Islands, prompting Japan to scramble several fighter jets in response (Tabuchi 2014). In late January 2013, a People’s Liberation Army–Navy frigate reportedly illuminated a Japanese destroyer with its fire-control radar roughly 100–200 km northwest of the disputed islands (*Asahi Shimbun* 2013). Neither action, however, has occurred again. It remains unclear whether these were deliberate attempts to escalate the dispute, as they appeared to be isolated events not linked to other Chinese actions or statements about the dispute.

The other significant action taken by China was the establishment of the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in late November 2013. The announcement surprised many states in the region. Moreover, the announcement contained ominous language that “emergency defensive measures” would be used for planes that did not identify themselves (Xinhua 2013). China’s rules for the ADIZ also indicated that China may have been seeking to control the airspace within the zone because it required all planes entering the Zone to file flight plans with China even if they were not on a bearing toward the mainland. Although China worked hard over the coming weeks to clarify how it would manage its ADIZ, the perception in the region was of China asserting its claims at the expense of its neighbors (Swaine 2013).

6 In 2010, the protests that occurred after the release of the captain occurred in second-tier cities (Weiss 2014).

New Stability in the East China Sea?

Although the dispute between China and Japan over the islands remains unresolved, a new stability appears to have formed since late 2013. Based on the framework explaining escalation in territorial disputes used in this article, the regularization of China's patrols within the twelve-mile limit around the island has improved China's position in the dispute and thus reduced incentives for further escalation. The continued modernization of the People's Liberation Army-Navy has increased China's ability to project military power over disputed islands, further strengthening China's position. At the same time, Japan has refrained from any actions such as developing infrastructure on the islands, which might spark a Chinese response.

Starting in late 2013, the frequency of Chinese patrols within twelve nautical miles of the islands decreased. Before October 2013, China had conducted as many as four patrols per week within the territorial waters. Between October 2013 and March 2014, the frequency of patrols dropped to one every few weeks (Fravel and Johnston 2014). As shown in figure 1, the reduction of patrols since October 2013 has been stable and persisted to the present day. China reduced pattern of patrolling has been described as the "3-3-2" model: three patrols a month, with three ships and for two hours (Funabashi 2016). Although the patrols maintain a certain level of pressure on Japan, they do not represent an effort by China to further escalate the dispute. Paradoxically, the maintenance of regularized patrols reduces such incentives because they have improved China's position in the dispute. The one exception would be that within the past year, China has started to use some of its largest and most capable coast guard vessels in these patrols.

A year after the reduction in patrols started, China and Japan normalized relations that had been frozen after the purchase of the islands. In November 2014, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and President Xi Jinping met for about twenty minutes and reached agreement on "four points" in the relationship. Although little substance was discussed, the meeting of top leaders from both countries reflected the increased stability in the dispute and opened the way for ministerial and working level interactions to resume or increase between the two sides.

This new situation, in which both sides conduct patrols within the territorial waters of the islands, could be relatively stable. By conducting these patrols and establishing a presence within the territorial waters of the islands, China has strengthened its claim and can assert some degree of symbolic administration of the waters around the islands. China's position in the dispute is stronger than before, which reduces the value of using armed force in the future, especially given the likelihood of direct U.S. intervention if an armed conflict occurred. Of course, such stability depends on the actions taken by Japan around the islands. To date, the government of Japan has not taken actions to use or develop the islands in ways that Beijing would view as a violation of its sovereignty claims.

This renewed stability, however, could still unravel. One potential source of instability would be the actions of private citizens, Chinese or Japanese, who either seek to enter the waters around or to land on the islands. A conflict could occur in an effort by both sides to protect their own citizens and to prevent others from landing on the islands. Fortunately, both Japan and China have a positive track record of managing the potential of escalation in the dispute, which suggests that such episodes could be contained.

A second potential source of instability would be the increasing presence of naval vessels in the East China Sea, which will occur as the Chinese navy continues to modernize. In early June 2016, for example, a Chinese naval vessel entered the contiguous zone around the islands for the first time. Although the action did not violate international law, it heightened concerns about China using its naval vessels to assert its claims to sovereignty (Nakazawa 2016).⁷ In the absence of formalized crisis management measures, which remain under negotiation, the higher volume of naval vessels from both sides could increase the odds of an incident occurring at sea, such as the radar lock-on incident in early 2013. If such incidents occurred near the disputed islands, strong pressures for escalation could be created if the naval activity was seen as linked with the assertion of sovereignty claims.

Conclusion

China's approach to its dispute with Japan over the Senkaku (Diaoyu Islands) changed significantly in 2010. Before then, China adopted a low-key approach and rarely pressed its claims beyond statements in official media. After 2010, when Japan detained a Chinese fishing vessel that had entered the territorial waters around the islands, China shifted to a more escalatory approach. This attitude continued in response to Japan's purchase of three of the disputed islands in 2012. China's perception of its position in this dispute, which has historically been weak, best explains the shift from delay to escalation. Japan's detention of the fishing vessel and purchase of the islands challenged China's weak position, creating incentives for China to escalate in response, and culminating with patrols within the territorial waters of the islands. Since late 2013, however, the dispute appears to have stabilized. The patrols have strengthened China's position in the dispute, thereby reducing the need to escalate further. Whether this stability can be maintained will be a central factor in the evolution of China-Japan relations.

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7 The Chinese vessel may have entered the contiguous zone after a Japanese naval vessel entered the zone while the Japanese ship was shadowing three Russian naval vessels. From China's point of view, the Japanese vessel violated a tacit agreement that neither side would send naval vessels into the contiguous zone (Nakazawa 2016).

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