The Diaoyu/Senkaku Dispute: From the 19th Century to 2026

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Abstract

This article aims to contribute to an informed discussion by providing a comprehensive and up-to-date analysis of the territorial dispute between China and Japan over a group of islands in the East China Sea, known as the Diaoyu Islands in China and the Senkaku Islands in Japan. It identifies and contextualizes the historical, legal, and political factors that have shaped the emergence and evolution of the dispute, as well as its current dynamics, including some of its implications for the Taiwan issue. The analysis also highlights the complexities that continue to hinder a peaceful and mutually acceptable resolution.

Keywords: Sino-Japanese relations; territorial disputes; East China Sea; Diaoyu; Senkaku; Taiwan; cross-strait relations.

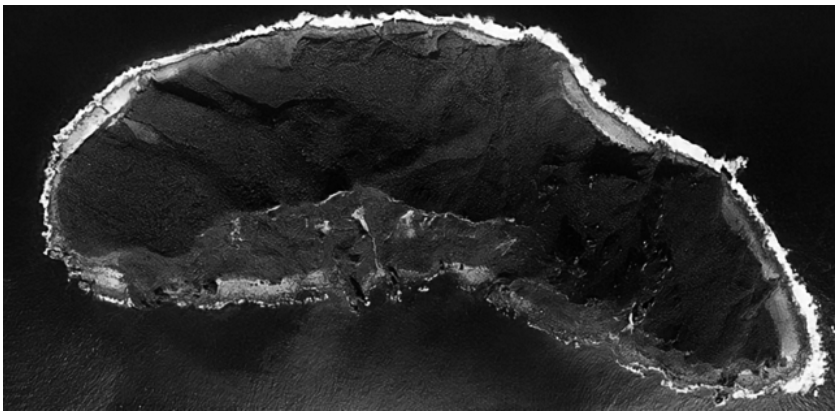
Resumo
A disputa Diaoyu/Senkaku: do século XIX a 2026

O presente artigo visa contribuir para uma reflexão fundamentada assente numa informação abrangente e atualizada acerca da disputa territorial entre a China e o Japão sobre um conjunto de ilhas no Mar Leste da China, apelidadas de Diaoyu na China e de Senkaku no Japão. Esta análise consiste na identificação e contextualização de vários elementos históricos, legais e políticos que conduziram à formação da disputa e aos seus contornos atuais, incluindo certas implicações para a questão de Taiwan, os quais tornam complexa uma resolução pacífica e consensual da mesma.

***Palavras-Chave**: Relações Sino-Japonesas; disputas territoriais; Mar da China Oriental; Diaoyu; Senkaku; Taiwan.*

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Aerial photo of the main Diaoyu/Senkaku Island[1].



This article[2] aims to provide context and a well-founded analysis of the dispute over the islands known as Diaoyu in China and Senkaku in Japan, including the historical, geographical, political, and legal factors that have led to the current state of this conflict. The article begins with a summary of the current state of the dispute and the importance of Sino-Japanese relations, then moves on to an explanation of its historical context, after which it outlines the legal arguments of both sides of the conflict and concludes with an update on recent developments, as well as a forward-looking perspective on the issue.

China and Japan are two neighboring countries with a long and complex shared history, with the origins of their relationship dating back about a millennium and a half. The continuing complexity of this relationship today and the potential developments that may occur in the future are of interest and importance not only to the two countries. They are the two largest economic powers on their continent, ranking first and second, respectively, in terms of economic size in Asia, and are the second and fourth largest economies in the world (Forbes India, 2024). In a military power *ranking*, they were classified as having the third and seventh most powerful armies in the world, respectively (Global Firepower, 2026). Based on these data, it is clear why Sino-Japanese relations attract attention and analysis not only in the context of East Asia or even Asia as a whole, but also in a global context. That is

1 Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Senkaku-uotsuri.jpg (Image usage required statement: "Made based on National Land Image Information (Color Aerial Photographs), Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism" (Japan).

2 This article is an updated and substantially expanded version of the literature review included in the book *Chinese and Japanese Strategic Narratives: The Diaoyu-Senkaku Dispute* (Silva, 2022), also by the author of this article.

why a territorial dispute between the two countries – which has been ongoing for decades and has escalated in recent years – deserves due attention.

On the one hand, the mutual cultural and economic contributions between the two countries are immense. It was through China that various cultural elements were introduced that have become important parts of Japanese identity, namely religious (such as Buddhism), culinary (*ramen*, *gyoza*), architectural and linguistic elements; the term *"kanji*" is used for the characters used in Japanese writing literally means "Han characters," a reference to their Chinese origin (Ng 2020, pp. 34 and 60). The construction of both the ancient Japanese capitals of Nara and Kyoto was inspired by the ancient Chinese capital of Chang'an (Dreyer, 2016, p. 11), etc. Modern Japanese cultural products, such as *manga* and *anime*, are also extremely popular in contemporary China and have influenced the style of Chinese media production itself (Wu 2021; Saito 2017). Currently, China is Japan's largest trading partner (Export Import Data A, 2025)[3] , while Japan is China's third-largest economic partner (Export Import Data B, 2025).

On the other hand, despite these positive aspects, there is also a history filled with rivalry, war, resentment, and pain. One of the earliest recorded instances of Japan going to war against another country was when Japan and China clashed in Korea (660-663 CE), with Japan supporting the Kingdom of Baekje and China supporting the Kingdom of Silla (the latter of which would emerge victorious and become the first kingdom to unify Korea). Since most Japanese wars in the following centuries were fought solely among the Japanese, it is noteworthy that two major exceptions to this rule before the modern era would involve China. The first exception was the Mongol invasion by the Yuan Dynasty of Kublai Khan, who ruled China at the time but failed in the attempt to expand his empire into Japan (Cartwright, 2019); the second was another war fought over the fate of Korea, in which the Japanese leader Hideyoshi attempted to conquer Korea, declaring plans to subsequently conquer China (a plan known as *Kara Iri*, literally "Entry into Tang"), although neither of these ambitions was realized by him (Hur, 2021). Finally, in 1894, a new war broke out over control of Korea; it is precisely the outcome of this war that lies at the root of the current territorial dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands.

To understand the so-called "First Sino-Japanese War", one must first understand the power imbalance between the two countries at the time. Sino-Japanese relations dated back at least to the fifth century (Fogel, 2009; Jacques, 2013; Dreyer, 2016), but the massive influx of European and American powers during the nineteenth century had a dramatic and irreversible effect on the East Asian nations. China and

3 Although the U.S. is also considered the biggest trading partner depending on the parameters chosen – namely, the specific year and whether or not the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region is counted as a separate trading partner from mainland China.

Japan responded differently to the threat posed by the West. While Japan took steps to emulate the Western colonial powers with such success that it would eventually establish its own colonial empire, China fell into disfavor and repeatedly failed to resist foreign intrusion in a series of collectively traumatic events between 1839 and 1949, later referred to as "the Century of Humiliation." This sequence of indignities inflicted upon China continues to influence, to this day, the way it interacts with the rest of the world, especially when it perceives its sovereignty to be threatened (Kaufman, 2011).

The Chinese regard the First Opium War (1839-1842), between China and the British Empire, as the beginning of the century of humiliation, and consider the end of the Chinese Civil War, with the victory of the Communist Party of China (CPC), as its conclusion. China's defeat in the Second Opium War (1856-1860) only made the situation worse. In the course of these wars, China was forced to make various concessions to foreign powers, including the loss of Hong Kong and the payment of heavy indemnities (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018). China realized that it had been drawn into a new international system in which the Western powers held the advantage, and although its rulers attempted some "self-strengthening" reforms, these ultimately proved insufficient to prevent the decline and fall of the Chinese imperial system. For this reason, it stands in contrast to the Meiji Restoration in Japan.

Japan did not have its own Opium Wars, but it did experience a similar "awakening": the arrival of the "black ships" led by American Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry in 1853. Perry's imposing ships, the implicit threats, and the demands imposed (namely, the opening of Japan to foreign trade) brought an end to three centuries of Japanese isolation and led to a revolution that centralized national power, with the emperor in the capital, and ushered in the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912), which modernized Japan in all areas: political, economic, technological, and social (Fujimoto, 2003). Japan's development as a modern nation-state enabled it to triumph over its former "mentor" when they met again on the battlefield in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), a war, once again, over control of Korea (Goto-Jones, 2009, pp. 42-51). The result was a complete Japanese victory; in the aftermath, Japan was granted control of Korea, Taiwan, and the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands (2009, pp. 63-66).

The disputed islands are collectively known as Diaoyu in Chinese (or Tiaoyutai in Taiwan, whose government also claims the islands), Senkaku in Japanese (or Yukubajima/Iigunkubajima in Okinawan dialects), and Pinnacle Islands in English. The territory consists of five uninhabited islands and three barren rocks located in the East China Sea.

Geographic location of the islands[4].



The Chinese claim is that the islands have been part of its territory for centuries. To that end, China cites what it considers to be credible evidence, such as: a) a book from the Ming Dynasty published in 1403 to demonstrate that China had already discovered and named the islands "Diaoyu" in the 14th century; b) Qing Dynasty records that referred to the islands as strategic coastal defense zones under Taiwan's jurisdiction; and even c) maps by English and French cartographers that depicted the islands as an extension of Taiwan. As such, China's position is that, in geographical, historical, and legal terms, the territory of the islands rightfully belongs to it (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2012; Sato and Chadha, 2022).

Japan rejects this position. It acknowledges that most of the documents presented by China are genuine and that, in fact, it was China that named the islands. But it cites international law in asserting that neither the discovery of territory nor geographical proximity constitutes, in and of itself, evidence of territorial sovereignty. It also expresses skepticism, in particular, regarding conclusions based on maps, rejecting the notion that the depiction of the islands on maps constitutes proof that they belonged to the Chinese Empire. Consequently, Japan claims that, according to its government, surveys conducted a decade before the islands were incorporated into Okinawa Prefecture following the First Sino-Japanese War, the islands were *terra nullius* until the 19th century (i.e., they belonged to no one). Japan further emphasizes that these surveys, which legitimize its sovereignty over the islands,

4 Image adapted from Jackopoid (2013).

were conducted in accordance with standards deemed appropriate under international sovereignty laws (Sato and Chadha, 2022).

Notwithstanding the opposing positions maintained by China and Japan, it is generally accepted that the Treaty of Shimonoseki, signed in 1895 following the First Sino-Japanese War, consolidated Japan's control over the islands (Naarajärvi, 2017, p. 165).

After losing the First Sino-Japanese War, China's humiliation continued in various forms, such as with its defeat in the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901), in which China was defeated by a coalition of foreign powers, including Japan, and the long period of chaos that followed the 1911-1912 revolution, which overthrew the Chinese monarchy and established the Republic of China (Mitter, 2016, pp. 28-29).

With a weakened and divided Republic of China and a rising Japan, the stage was set for the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), which eventually became a theater of World War II. Given that this theater of war began before Germany's invasion of Poland, one could even argue that it was the true beginning of World War II (Sun et al., 2019).

Japanese aggression and the war crimes committed throughout this war remain fresh in the memory of the affected countries. The cruel events of the war (such as the "Nanjing Massacre" perpetrated by the Japanese) and the perception that Japan has never properly apologized for its role in them[5] continue to strain Japan's relations not only with China but also with other former victims of Japanese occupation, such as Korea (Murthy, 1982, p. 366). The outcome of the war is well known: Japan's imperial ambitions were brought to an end by its defeat and subsequent occupation by the United States, whereas China regained most of its lost territories and resumed its civil war (Goto-Jones, 2009, pp. 76-86). In 1949, the victorious Communist Party of China (CPC) proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), while the Kuomintang (KMT) government retreated to Taiwan, where it continued to operate under the official name of the Republic of China (ROC)[6]. This moment was seen as the end of the Century of Humiliation. However, the Century of Humiliation would continue to haunt the Chinese collective memory (Kaufman,

5 The core of the ongoing debate is not whether Japanese officials have apologized for Japan's actions during the war (they have done so multiple times), but rather whether the extent and sincerity of those apologies are sufficient. Authors such as Yamazaki (cited in Krebs, 2007) argue that Japanese apologies have been numerous and sincere in ways disingenuously downplayed by Japan's critics; critics such as Dahlstrom (2015) acknowledge the apologies but maintain they did not go far enough, particularly regarding legislative measures and the way those war crimes are portrayed in Japanese textbooks and media.

6 For the sake of simplicity and reflecting its common modern appellation, this article will continue to refer to the government of the Republic of China as Taiwan; the People's Republic of China will be referred to alternately as China (its common shorthand) or PRC (primarily to distinguish the two governments).

2011). In fact, this collective trauma was invoked in the context of the dispute over the islands, notably in 2012 in two articles published by China's largest state-run English-language newspaper, the *China Daily*:

– "Japan took control of the islands when China was distracted by domestic and foreign troubles in the late 19th century. But China is no longer the weak country it was then."
– "Long gone are the days when the Chinese nation was subject to bullying and humiliation from others. The Chinese government will not sit idly by watching its territorial sovereignty being infringed upon." (*China Daily*, in Silva, 2022, p. 43).

The temporary occupation of Japan by the United States in the postwar period was followed by a close alliance between the two countries, in which (partly due to restrictions related to World War II that prevented Japan from having a strong army of its own) Japan had to rely on U.S. troops to ensure its security (Goto-Jones, 2009, pp. 89-100). Although the United States does not officially take sides regarding the legitimacy of the claim to the islands, it has pledged to support Japan in the event of any armed attack on its territory (Manyin, 2016).

From the Chinese perspective, the origins of the current dispute lie in the period of Japanese occupation, specifically due to the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty. This treaty stipulates that the islands south of 29 degrees north latitude would remain under U.S. military control. This arrangement was made without consulting either the government of the PRC or that of the Republic of China (Taiwan), neither of which subsequently recognized U.S. administration of the islands as legitimate. When the U.S. occupation came to an end in 1972, administrative control of the islands was transferred to Japan, a move that both the PRC and Taiwan continue to regard as invalid.

A 1970 report, which highlighted the potentially abundant natural resources in the area around the islands, only served to complicate the situation (Naarajärvi, 2017, p. 165).

The diplomatic and legal *status quo* that emerged – and which persists to this day – was as follows: Japan, having *de facto* control of the islands, has not expanded its administrative control and denies the existence of the dispute altogether; on the other hand, China claims the islands but has neither taken Japan to an international court nor made any military attempt to seize control of the islands in a way that would provide Japan with a *casus belli* (Sato and Chadha, 2022).

The dispute remained largely dormant between the two governments for the rest of the 20th century; nevertheless, incidents occurred that exacerbated tensions, notably in 1978 and 1996, as will be explained in the next paragraph (Pacific Atrocities Education, 2019; SCMP Reporter, 2012; Council on Foreign Relations,

2024). It should be noted that, on the Chinese side, the first wave of the popular movement (led by civilians rather than official government members) to claim the territory of the islands – which would become known as the 保钓运动 (*Baodiao Yundong*, literally "movement to defend the Diaoyu Islands," commonly abbreviated to *Baodiao*), did not begin in territory controlled by the PRC, but rather in Hong Kong (then controlled by the United Kingdom), in Taiwan, and even among the Chinese community in the United States (Duan and Hao, 2025). Indeed, the perception that Taiwan had failed in its attempt to persuade its American ally to grant it control of the islands was used as a means of legitimizing the CPC government in the face of its KMT rivals in Taiwan, including in the eyes of various Chinese immigrants living abroad who supported the *Baodiao* cause (Eng, 2017, p. 4). This PRC strategy continues to this day, as will be expanded upon later here.

In 1978, about 100 Chinese ships sailed near the islands, and Japanese nationalists built a lighthouse on one of the islands. In 1996, several incidents occurred: on 14 July, members of the right-wing group *Japanese Youth Association* landed on one of the islets and built a lighthouse there, sparking a series of protests from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan; on 26 September 1996, Hong Kong activist David Chan drowned after jumping into the waters around the islands during a pro-China protest; on 29 September, tens of thousands of people gathered for a candlelight vigil in Hong Kong's Victoria Park to mourn Chan's death and protest Japan's claim to the islands; finally, on 7 October 1996, three activists from Hong Kong and Taiwan landed on the islands. These events placed particular pressure on the Chinese government because they occurred very close to the date of Hong Kong's handover in 1997; at an internal meeting, then-Chinese President Jiang Zemin declared that "the pro-Diaoyu movement in HK must not "degenerate" into "criticisms of and demonstrations against perceived Chinese inaction towards Japan," and "must not affect the territory's peaceful transition to Chinese rule" (*South China Morning Post* in Duan, 2018, p. 14). To this end, the PRC formally supported the Hong Kong protesters, praising them for their "patriotism," and organized a military exercise as a "warning" to Japan (2018, p. 13).

The events of this decade were significant for the development of the dispute. While on the Chinese side there was a public rapprochement between the PRC and the *Baodiao* civil movement, on the Japanese side the government "increased its *de facto* control over the islands" and officially recognized the lighthouse as Japanese state property. Outside these two countries, these events led to greater clarity on the part of the U.S. regarding its interpretation of the dispute and its security obligations within it; more specifically, the U.S. emphasized its support for the Japanese position and stated that its alliance with Japan includes the defense of the islands' territory, a move that paved the way for greater U.S. future involvement in the dispute (2018, p. 15).

The dispute escalated in 2010 when a Chinese fishing vessel collided with a Japanese coast guard patrol boat in the disputed area, and Japanese authorities detained

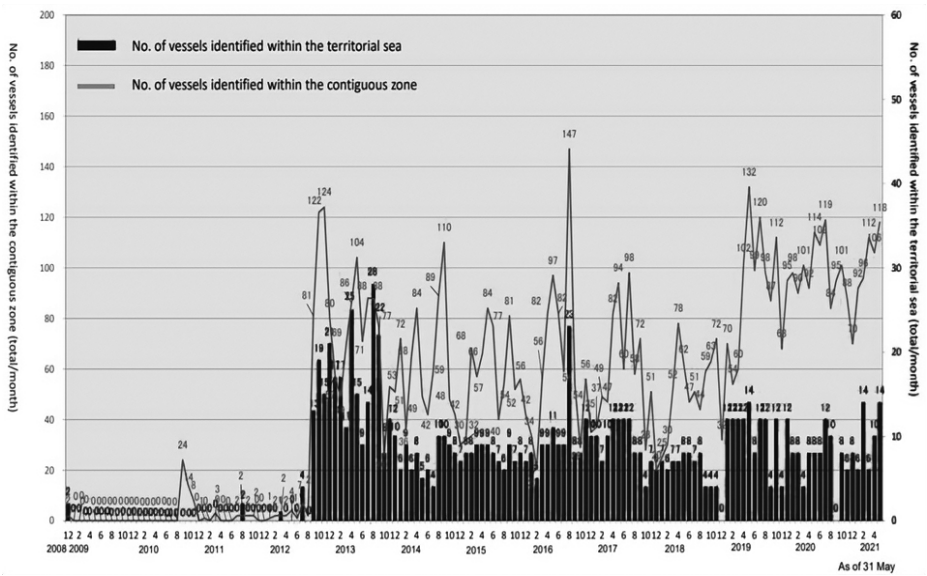
the captain of the fishing vessel for 17 days (Kolmaš, 2018). On the Chinese side, the detention sparked mass protests. In Japan, the governor of Tokyo (who will be the focus of the following paragraph) compared China to "gangsters", and the general narrative from the Japanese government and media was one of condemnation of China's behavior, which they portrayed as illegal and aggressive; this condemnation was harsher than it had been in the past. In response, China retaliated with criticism, sanctions, and protests organized by its citizens (Kolmaš, 2018).

The ensuing diplomatic dispute would be even more intense and exacerbated by one of Japan's most controversial nationalist figures: Shintarō Ishihara, governor of Tokyo from 1999 to 2012. As the leader of right-wing nationalist parties such as the Rising Sun Party and the Japan Restoration Party, even before 2012, his name was already associated with controversy for various reasons; he had been accused of xenophobia, misogyny, homophobia, militarism, and justifying the actions of the Empire of Japan against Asian countries such as Korea (Yamaguchi, 2022; Adelstein, 2022). However, in the context of the territorial dispute over the islands, it was his prior stance toward China – including actions such as denying the Nanjing Massacre, inviting the Dalai Lama and the President of Taiwan to visit Tokyo, and using the term "*Shina*," considered pejorative toward China in Japanese – that likely made his actions regarding the islands more concerning, both from China's perspective and from that of members of the Japanese government who wanted to avoid antagonizing China (Larimer, 2000; Adelstein, 2022).

In June 2012, Ishihara announced that the Tokyo Metropolitan Government would purchase three of the islands in order to protect them, while also hinting at the possibility of "developing" the islands – that is, building infrastructure to solidify Japanese control over them – a move that would further upset China (Eldridge, 2022). The Japanese government now found itself in a difficult situation: blocking the purchase would make it appear weak in the eyes of the domestic public, but allowing Ishihara to go through with the purchase (and possibly build infrastructure on the islands) would draw China's wrath. Meanwhile, both Chinese and Japanese nationalists carried out a series of increasingly provocative symbolic actions to defend their countries' sovereignty. Around the same time that Ishihara announced his intention to purchase the islands, dozens of Japanese activists (including lawmakers) landed on the islands; on 4 July, a fishing boat carrying Taiwanese activists entered the islands' waters and was detained by Japanese authorities; on 13 July, Chinese-Americans protested outside the Japanese consulate in Los Angeles; in August, 14 activists from Hong Kong landed on the islands and were also arrested by Japanese authorities; several prominent Chinese politicians (including those from Macau and Hong Kong) officially reaffirmed Chinese sovereignty over the islands (Hollihan, 2014b, pp. 85-87). The seriousness and potential consequences of the dispute were becoming increasingly clear.

Faced with growing pressure both domestically and internationally, the Japanese government opted for a solution it considered a compromise between the two nationalisms, announced on 10 September: it would purchase the islands itself and prevent the construction of any infrastructure on them, thereby attempting to address China's objections in a more diplomatic manner than Ishihara might have done. It turned out, however, that China was not impressed by the compromise; it only grew more enraged, and, just as in 2010, Japan was subjected to sanctions, boycotts (which reduced trade between the two countries), and protests (some of which were violent and resulted in the destruction of Japanese property). The Chinese government dispatched ships from the Maritime Surveillance Agency (MSA) to the waters surrounding the disputed area, bringing them dangerously close to U.S. and Japanese operational zones at a time when diplomatic relations were deteriorating (Hollihan, 2014a; Hafeez, 2015). September 2012 marked "the largest anti-Japanese protests since China and Japan normalized diplomatic relations in 1972" (SCMP Reporter, 2012).
Although the protests eventually subsided, they marked a turning point in the dispute, and the situation never returned to the previous status quo, as illustrated in the following chart:

Number of Chinese government vessels and other ships that entered Japan's contiguous zone or violated the territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands[7]



7 Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Available at: https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page23e_000021.html (Accessed: 16 July 2025).

The 2021 chart highlights two key points regarding the evolution of the presence of vessels in the area.

On the one hand, while 2012 saw an exponential escalation of tensions and confrontations beyond anything experienced in the previous decade, the record high number of Chinese vessels identified by the Japanese government within its territorial waters occurred the following year. On the other hand, following this peak, tensions persisted but entered a relatively stable phase. Although bilateral relations never returned to the relative "calm" of the previous decade, the dispute did not escalate to levels comparable to those observed in 2013 during the remainder of the 2010s. The principal exception was a temporary spike in the number of vessels entering the territorial waters in August 2016.

This stability was even considered "surprising" by some observers, such as Duan and Hao (2025).

The beginning of the current decade (the 2020s) can also be considered the start of a new phase in the territorial dispute, marked by two events: the decision by the Ishigaki municipal government to change the name of the islands' administrative zone in 2020; and, with more severe military implications, the 2021 decision to place the Chinese Coast Guard under the command of the People's Armed Police and thus authorizing it to use military force.

In 2020, the Ishigaki City Council (from the Okinawa Prefecture) changed the name of the administrative subdivision to which the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands were attributed, from "Tonoshiro" to "Tonoshiro Senkaku." The municipality officially justified this decision as a measure to avoid administrative confusion, given that another area bears a similar name (Kyodo, 2020); however, contradicting this explanation, Taiwanese media (including Taiwan's largest news agency, 中央通訊社/Central News Agency/CNA) reported on a telephone conversation between the mayor of Ishigaki (Yoshitaka Nakayama) and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Center in Naha[8], during which a different explanation was provided. According to the CNA report, the center reportedly cautioned Yoshitaka that, although it was a municipal decision, it could have negative implications for friendly relations between Taiwan and Japan; Yoshitaka reportedly responded that "the cause [of this decision] stems from the frequent entries and exits of Chinese government vessels into the waters around the Diaoyu Islands, as well as the expulsion of Japanese fishing boats (about 30 cases last year [2019] and already 10 since the beginning of

8 The centers designated as "Taipei Economic and Cultural Centers" function as the administrative equivalent of Taiwanese embassies or consulates in countries that do not officially recognize its government (which currently includes all countries in the world except for 12: Belize; Guatemala; Haiti; Paraguay; Saint Kitts and Nevis; Saint Lucia; Saint Vincent and the Grenadines; Eswatini; the Marshall Islands; Palau; Tuvalu; and the Vatican).

this year [2020]), which provoked a strong reaction from the local population, leading to the reopening of this old case as a form of retaliation"[9] (CNA, 2020). Regardless of whether the Ishigaki City Council's original official justification was credible or not, it is unlikely that protests from Taiwan or the PRC – which were predictable given the highly contentious nature of the dispute – would not have occurred. Zhao Lijian of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticized the measure for "seriously provoking China's territorial sovereignty" (Tuan, 2024, p. 80).

In Taiwan, however, the response was more divided. Although, at the local level, both major parties in the Taiwanese municipality of Yilan (to which, according to Taiwan's claims, the islands belong) condemned the name change (with particular support from local fishermen, who consider the islands their traditional fishing grounds) and retaliated by renaming the island region "Toucheng Diaoyutai," on the national stage, there was less consensus. The KMT, as the opposition party, pressured President Tsai Ing-wen (from their main political rival, the Democratic Progressive Party) to visit the islands and "take all necessary measures" to defend Taiwan's sovereignty; Tsai, on the other hand, while agreeing that the islands belong to Taiwan, opted for a more conciliatory approach and proposed the joint development of the islands together with the other governments (Chang, 2020).

Taiwan's response to this event is a microcosm illustrating the different Taiwanese perspectives on the issue of the "Tiaoyutai" islands. The emergence of a democratic multiparty system in Taiwan in the 1990s gave rise to political polarization between the "blue coalition" led by the Republic of China's founding party (KMT), and the "green coalition," led by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The blue coalition is considered more conservative, more closely associated with a Chinese identity, more compatible with the PRC's "one country, two systems" framework for Taiwan and China, and more willing to maintain friendly relations with the PRC. The green coalition is considered more progressive, more closely associated with a Taiwanese identity, more comfortable with the idea of Taiwan as an independent nation (some of its members even support a formal declaration of independence), and more cautious toward the PRC (and closer to PRC's rival countries such as the U.S. and Japan). Consequently, the KMT takes a more assertive stance on the issue of the disputed islands, while the DPP, although generally also maintaining that the islands belong to Taiwan, is more reluctant to directly confront Japan, and its supporters even accuse the focus on the dispute of being an attempt by the PRC to promote Chinese identity and unification between Taiwan and the PRC. In fact, members of the Green Coalition who are explicitly in favor of formal independence – such as former Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui – reject even Taiwan's claim to

9 Translated from Chinese.

the islands and support the Japanese position. For its part, the PRC views Taiwan's less assertive stance with disapproval as part of a process of de-Sinicization and separatism, just as it views comments on the islands by figures such as Lee Teng-hui as attempts to attract attention and support for the separatist cause (Duan, 2018, p. 11).

Thus, given the situation in Ishigaki in 2020, although President Tsai Ying-wen reiterated that the disputed islands belong to Taiwan, her party's foreign policy – which is more focused on a united front with Japan in the face of pressure from the PRC – has moderated its stance on the dispute. For its part, the KMT – whose former leader (Ma Ying-jeou, Tsai's predecessor as president of Taiwan) had promoted a rapprochement between Taiwan and the PRC in the face of Japan – criticized Tsai's stance as "weak" (Chang, 2020). As previously mentioned, the PRC has capitalized on these internal disagreements within Taiwan and the sentiments of Taiwanese citizens with a stronger Chinese identity – who felt more resentment toward Japan – to position itself as a defender of the sovereignty and dignity of the Chinese people everywhere, even offering to send patrol boats to protect Taiwanese fishermen in the disputed areas. It can therefore be understood that the PRC's interests in the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands are not merely related to the territory of the islands themselves, but extend beyond it, intersecting with the issue of Taiwan; the defense of sovereignty over the islands may also serve as a mechanism to legitimize the CPC in the eyes of the Taiwanese and to weaken the pro-independence position and its alliance with Japan (Duan, 2018, p. 12).

Given that this aspect lends even greater importance to the dispute in the eyes of the PRC, the PRC's decision in January 2021 to place the China Coast Guard (CCG) under the jurisdiction of the People's Armed Police (PAP) becomes even more understandable. To fully comprehend the significance of this development, one must consider that it occurred – not coincidentally – following a series of other reforms undertaken by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the end of the previous decade to centralize power directly in his own office of the President of China/General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. Specifically, while the PAP has always been a paramilitary organization – established in 1982 with the primary objective of maintaining domestic order and the secondary objective of, when necessary, serving as a support force for the People's Liberation Army (PLA, the CPC's main military branch) – it was, however, also an organization of a semi-civilian nature, with its leadership shared between the (civilian) State Council, and the Central Military Commission (CMC). Between 2017 and 2018, Xi Jinping placed the PAP entirely under the control of the CMC[10] (Wuthnow, 2019). In other words, with

10 Since the 1990s, every President of China has also simultaneously served as the president of the CMC.

the integration of the CCG into the PAP in 2021, the PAP took on an undeniably military character and was effectively authorized to use military force in the waters claimed by the country, including the waters surrounding the disputed islands (Kotani, 2026). The Japanese government criticized the law that enabled this development, arguing that it contains "problematic provisions in terms of their inconsistency with international law. Sources of inconsistency include, among others, ambiguity as to geographical areas the CCG Law applies and how the rules governing the use of weapons are implemented" (Ministry of Defense of Japan, n.d.). Implicit in this criticism is the idea that, due to ambiguous maritime jurisdictions, the authorization granted to CCG patrol boats to use armed force to attack Japanese vessels they deem to be in violation or to compel them to undergo inspection will inevitably lead to further conflicts in the disputed areas (Kotani, 2026).

Still in 2021, Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi reaffirmed in an interview the idea of a "red line" around the islands and their maritime zones, which Japan would not allow China to cross, assuring that Japan was in the process of "working to expand its self-defense forces by increasing weapons and equipment, including the addition of F-35 fighter jets, converting warships into aircraft carriers, and building destroyers, submarines, and new missile developments"; he admitted, however, that Japan did not yet have the capacity to fully keep pace with China's military budget increases (Nguyen, 2024, p. 80; Lendon and Essig, 2021).

These tensions continued to escalate in the following years. In 2023, Chinese government vessels set a new record by operating in the contiguous zone on 352 of the year's 365 days (Takahashi, 2024).

That record was surpassed again in 2024, with 355 consecutive days, and in 2025, with 357 consecutive days (Takahashi, 2026). According to Tuan (2024, p. 80), "Chinese military aircraft also approached this area many times, forcing Japan to dispatch fighter jets to keep watch".

Although it has not gone so far as to build artificial islands near the disputed islands (as was the case in the South China Sea disputes with Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam), China has been constructing artificial buoys in the area, which were discovered in 2016, 2018, 2023, and 2024; according to Japanese sources, these buoys violate international law by entering Japan's Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), are connected to satellites to which they transmit information (intended to facilitate the operations of Chinese patrol boats), and have been equipped with "automatic identification systems (AIS) and a complex array of cameras, sensors, antennas, satellite transponders and other devices possibly for collecting and transmitting data on foreign vessels' movements, water temperature, ocean currents, weather, etc." (Kurosaki, 2025; *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2023).

It is not surprising that China refused to remove these buoys when Japan demanded it, arguing that they were lawful under international law; but it may be surprising

that China did eventually remove some of the buoys on one occasion (albeit under the pretext that they had already served their purpose and could never have been considered illegal under international law). An analysis of the reason behind this decision may shed light on the future development of this dispute. The buoys were removed in February 2025, the month following Donald Trump's return to power and during the brief tenure (from October 2024 to October 2025) of Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishida, who was known (and, domestically, criticized) for his more conciliatory approach toward China. On the one hand, Shigeru's diplomacy yielded a few gestures of apparent goodwill from China, such as the lifting of the ban on seafood exports to China and increased cultural and tourism exchanges. On the other hand, Donald Trump's return to power and the uncertainty it caused may have been seen as an opportunity to alienate Japan from its traditional ally in favor of China. At the same time, an interest in stable trade relations with Japan would be of significant importance to a China "faced with a flattening domestic economy and the looming threat of U.S. tariffs" (Aoyama, 2025).

This economic point can be seen as supporting the analysis of authors such as Duan and Hao (2025, pp. 66-69), who – rejecting the notion (proposed by some observers of China) that the PRC adopts a more aggressive stance toward other countries to distract its population during times of internal crisis – argue that, on the contrary, given how much economic growth and prosperity matter to its legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens, it is precisely during times of internal difficulty that it needs to rely on trade stability. This need will motivate the PRC to moderate its foreign policy toward its neighboring trading partners; conversely, periods of economic growth and internal stability will have been accompanied by greater assertiveness toward its neighbors. Duan and Hao (2025, pp. 60-62) attribute to this dynamic the reason that, for example, the PRC reduced its support for the civilian protesters of the *Baodiao* movement; in contrast to the controlled and premeditated actions by government agents (i.e., boat patrols, buoys, etc.), the *Baodiao* activists likely appeared too unpredictable and volatile.

Without removing, but rather adding, complexity to this dynamic (not only on China's side, but also because economic concerns will be a motivating factor for Japan), leadership changes in both countries will always have the potential to affect the dispute. It has already been mentioned how Xi Jinping altered the role of the CCG, which was used as justification for a larger defense budget on the Japanese side; and how Kishida's diplomacy encouraged greater Chinese restraint. Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi – who, years before taking office, was already known for openly regarding China as "a threat" requiring the strengthening of Japan's defense – not only quickly reversed the conciliatory tendencies of her immediate predecessor Kishida, but also went even further than expected. In October 2025, amid growing tensions between the PRC, the United States, and Taiwan, Takaichi stated

that a military escalation in Taiwan would be "an existential threat" that could justify the mobilization of the Japanese armed forces. Despite her clarification that the comment should not be understood as a change in Japanese policy toward China and that she would not make similar hypothetical comments again, these remarks represented a departure from the strategic ambiguity of past Prime Ministers. Much as China's furious reaction a decade before during the nationalization of the islands, China retaliated with harsh criticism and economic sanctions (Fukuta and Sakaki, 2025). To date, Sino-Japanese relations have not yet recovered to the level they were at before the comments on Taiwan, which implies that tensions regarding the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute will not subside anytime soon; the opposite tendency is more likely.

Two other aspects could influence the future of the dispute and thus should be mentioned. First, the Taiwan issue and the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue are now difficult to entirely separate. This is not only because of implications/reactions to Takaichi's comment, nor solely because of Taiwan's internal political divisions regarding the islands and how the PRC might take advantage of them, but also for geographical reasons: "The Senkaku/Diaoyu lie within the strategic first island chain stretching from Japan through Taiwan and the Philippines. The string of islands is controlled by U.S. allies and contains the expansion of China's growing naval power." (Howe, 2026). More specifically, in the event of a military confrontation between Taiwan and the PRC that would draw the U.S. and its allies into the conflict, control of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands would serve as a link in this "first island chain" intended to act as a countermeasure against China in such a scenario (Lema et al., 2025).

Second, in February 2020, U.S. President Joe Biden stated that "US security guarantees apply to Japan's administration of the disputed Senkaku Islands" (Harding, Sevastopulo, 2020); in other words, a military maneuver by China within the disputed territory could trigger direct military conflict between China and the U.S.; Biden made a similar statement again in 2024 (Feng, 2024). His successor, Donald Trump, reaffirmed this position in 2025 in a joint statement with Prime Minister Ishiba (The White House, 2025).

The long-term impact of these factors, as well as the outcome of the dispute and the future of Sino-Japanese relations in general, remain to be seen. On the one hand, despite the growing military presence near the islands, tensions have not yet resulted in the use of direct force. Analysts such as Professor Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi view China's strategy as one of "patience" without direct confrontation; they will continue to increase pressure on the Japanese side, which in turn will continue to resist this pressure despite its relatively limited response capabilities (Ryall, 2024). In 1978, Deng Xiaoping told Japanese Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda: "There's probably insufficient wisdom to resolve this issue in our generation, but with the next generation likely to be wiser than us, they will probably be able to find some

resolution to the issue" (Ikeda, 2013). Although tensions have escalated since then, and an official statement of this kind regarding the conflict is unlikely in the current context, there may nevertheless be merit in the idea that the conflict will remain relatively static in its current form until future generations are able to resolve it.
On the other hand, in 2021, the former NATO Supreme Commander identified the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands as one of four *hotspots* where a war between China, the United States, and their respective allies could break out (Stavridis, 2021).
How likely is it that this spark could trigger a Third Sino-Japanese War – or, in the most pessimistic scenario, a Third World War? It is to be hoped that heads will remain cool, that the well-being of people and the economic and cultural benefits between the two countries will be considered more important than control over a few uninhabited islands, and that the risk of a conflict capable of dragging not only the two countries back into war but also the rest of the world will continue to be viewed as too high a price to pay.

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