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Politicizing the Senkaku Islands: A Danger to Regional Stability

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TENSIONS SURROUNDING the Senkaku Islands have flared up again. In a speech in Washington DC in April 2012, Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara declared his intent to use Tokyo Metropolitan Government funds to purchase three islands of the five-island chain from the private citizen who owns them in order to protect them from China. Predictably, his statements invoked protests from China and Taiwan, which also claim sovereignty over the islands. Subsequently, donors in Japan contributed more than ¥1.3 billion (US\$16 million) to a fund for Tokyo to purchase the islands, essentially forcing the central government's hand and pushing it to take control of the situation. In July, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda attempted to do just that by declaring that the Japanese central government itself will purchase the Senkaku Islands. In doing so, Noda stated that the purpose of the nationalization of the islands would be to maintain them in a stable and peaceful manner. Not surprisingly, Noda's statement also drew criticism from China and Taiwan.

While tensions seemed to have died down after the last episode of Senkaku-related troubles in late 2010, antagonistic nationalism in Japan and China has continued to simmer in the background. And now the issue has been reopened. Beyond the sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands themselves, this nationalistic politicking has potentially broad ramifications for the US-Japan alliance, Japan-China relations, China's overall engagement with the region, and the response of other Asian countries to China's rise. The issue clearly requires careful management in order to maintain a stable regional security environment.

The Senkakus as a US-Japan Alliance Issue

The defense of the Senkaku Islands is a critical issue for the US-Japan alliance. Irrespective of the historical and legal intricacies, there is no doubt that the Senkaku Islands are covered under the US-Japan Security Treaty. After World War II, the United States took control of Okinawa, which included the Senkaku Islands. Since then, the US military has even used one of the islands

as a shooting range. Moreover, the Senkaku Islands were clearly mapped out and included as one of the US-administered territories that were returned to Japan as part of the reversion of Okinawa in 1972.

As tensions rise and the issue of the Senkaku Islands is further politicized, the strength of the US-Japan alliance will be put to the test. While US statements reconfirming that the Senkaku Islands are covered by the US-Japan Security Treaty—most recently by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2010—have been warmly welcomed by Tokyo, it will be important that the United States maintain a clear stance on the issue going forward.

As per the US-Japan Security Treaty, the United States is committed to defending Japan. In return for this security guarantee, Japan provides military bases in its territory for the United States, not just for the defense of Japan but also for the maintenance of international peace in the Far East. This arrangement has been of mutual benefit to both sides, keeping Japan secure while also being indispensable to the US forward deployment strategy. Any failure or perceived weakness in the US commitment to defend Japan, including the Senkaku Islands, would undermine the US-Japan Security Treaty and the very foundation of the alliance.

A Rising China's Changing Posture

Since 2010, there has been a change in China's foreign policy approach to the Senkaku Islands. In September of that year, China responded harshly to Japan's arrest of a Chinese fishing boat captain who rammed his boat into two Japan Coast Guard ships off the coast of the Senkaku Islands. The Chinese government unnecessarily upped the ante with a unilateral response that included arresting four Japanese employees of Fujita Corporation who were based in China on charges that they had photographed military facilities, canceling large-scale tourist trips between China and Japan, and suspending rare earth exports to Japan. Moreover, some Chinese officials have stated that protecting China's territory is a core interest, implying a willingness to use military force in the dispute over the Senkaku Islands. This represents a grave departure from the approach

espoused by Deng Xiaoping—which had been China's de facto policy prior to 2010—of shelving the issue for future generations.

This change in China's posture must be recognized in the context of China's rise. As China continues its rapid economic growth and increases its military capabilities, it is growing more self-confident on the global stage. There have been debates in China about how it should best utilize its newly realized power. In addition to China's change in posture on the Senkaku Islands, a broader shift in Chinese behavior is also evident in its increasingly assertive posture toward freedom of navigation issues and territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

The manner in which the United States and Japan respond to China's increasingly assertive posture regarding the Senkakus can be seen as a litmus test for the US pivot to Asia and will have spillover effects as the region grapples with the rise of China, the South China Sea territorial disputes between China and ASEAN countries, and freedom of navigation issues. Therefore, US and Japanese government consultations must take up adequate preparations to counter increasing Chinese assertiveness. Consultations with ASEAN and discussions on how US-Japan alliance policy toward the Senkakus will affect ASEAN countries' disputes with China and the region as a whole should also take place. At the same time, it is important to keep effective channels of communication open with China, stress the importance of diplomatic resolutions, encourage engagement with China, and bring China into the fold as a constructive regional stakeholder. For this reason, US-Japan consultations should also include the much broader subject of how we can best work together to enhance military confidence with China.

Defusing Antagonistic Nationalism

In Japan, public opinion polls indicate that nearly 70 percent of the population is in favor of Ishihara's proposal for the Tokyo government to buy the Senkaku Islands. However, this support may be based on a simplistic understanding of the issues at stake. Respondents have even cited farfetched

concerns that the private landowners could sell the islands to China.

Japan already has effective control of the Senkaku Islands, which have been on lease to the central government for the past 10 years. The plan to nationalize the islands, instead of their purchase by the Tokyo government, is consistent with Japan's traditional policy of maintaining control of the Senkakus in a quiet, low-key manner. Given the sensitivities involved, it is necessary for the Japanese government to take direct control of

the islands, rather than letting the Tokyo government or private citizens do so. At the same time, in order to minimize nationalistic confrontation, the Japanese government must go further in making a full explanation of its intentions regarding Senkaku policy.

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