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Between a rock and a hard place > Senkaku islands dispute triggers Chinese nationalist backlash

With anti-Japanese demonstrations in numerous Chinese cities, some media have already been pondering the possibility of war breaking out between the two countries. China cannot afford to let nationalism get out of hand, as it could easily turn into voices of resistance against the government.

The incidents were triggered by a dispute concerning the uninhabited Senkaku islands (Diaoyu in Chinese), situated 190 km northeast of Taiwan and 410 km west of Okinawa in Japan. The small group of rocks has morphed into a long-lasting thorny issue in Japan-China relations. What is at the heart of the dispute, and why does it arouse such strong emotions?

The question of to whom the Senkakus belong is central to the dispute, but the actual importance of the islands is limited. They are located in strategically significant waters near key sea lanes, the area is said to be rich in fish, and possibly contains oil and gas reserves. Nevertheless, if the issue were only about natural resources, China and Japan could reach a peaceful solution. But for China the issue is one of principles.

Japan, China and Taiwan (as the seat of the government of the Republic of China) consider the Senkaku islands to be part of their territory. Rule over the Senkakus can only be ascertained from 1895 onwards, when Japan took control of the islands after the Sino-Japanese War. At the same time, Japan also occupied Taiwan. After the Second World War, the US Occupation Forces ruled Okinawa

and the Ryūkyū islands. When the US returned the islands to Japan in 1972, both the US and Japan considered the Senkakus to be part of the Ryūkyū islands. China and Taiwan refused to recognize this interpretation. The island dispute has weighed on Japan-China relations ever since.

From the Chinese and Taiwanese perspective alike, the prime grievance lies in the fact that Japan, which has not sufficiently apologized for wartime atrocities, is still in control of an area it appropriated unrightfully. For decades, Chinese education has emphasized the suffering caused by the Japanese. It is therefore hardly surprising that the Chinese react strongly to what they perceive as insults on the part of Japan. As Japan's defeat forms a substantial part of the Communist Party's heroic narrative, it comes as no surprise that the Chinese authorities do not want to interfere too strongly in the demonstrations by their citizens. Nationalism is a powerful resource for the Party at a time when there are signs of slowing economic growth.

Nationalism is a powerful political force influencing foreign policy in Japan as well. In April, Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara announced his plan to use public funds to purchase the Senkakus from the

family who de facto owned the islands. In an effort to maintain the status quo and contain the tensions with China, the Japanese government bought the islands. This did not have the intended outcome, even if from the Chinese perspective a purchase by the government is preferable to Ishihara carrying out his plans, given the latter's distrust of China and strong nationalist ideas.

The second principle concerns sovereignty. In China, issues relating to the state's borders are very sensitive. The Communist Party regards it as one of its greatest accomplishments that it prevented China from being carved up by colonizers, including Japan. Maintaining the unity of the state is vital and a source of legitimacy for the Communist Party. Compromising on the Senkaku issue would be seen as a sign of weakness, which the party cannot afford.

A third principle is closely related to the second one. The biggest and so far unresolved challenge regarding Chinese unity is the Taiwan issue. The Communist Party has made it clear that reunification is one of China's core interests and the only acceptable outcome in the dispute with Taiwan. If China were to relinquish its claims to the Senkakus, it could be interpreted

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as China weakening its claims over Taiwan. Although this chain of logic seems arbitrary, it is nevertheless strong enough to restrict the freedom of movement of the Chinese leadership.

Thus the Chinese government reaps what it has sown. A strong anti-Japanese stance is not in its interests, but it cannot afford to show weakness either. The government was obliged to allow Hong Kong activists to head for the Senkakus, because otherwise hundreds of fishing ships would have sailed to the islands to protest against Japan. When the Japanese government announced that they were to purchase the islands, the Chinese government reacted by sending patrol vessels to the islands, and by formally defining the Territorial Sea Baselines (TSB) for the islands, an act which is the prerogative of the state in actual control of a territory.

The media portray the situation in a worrying light. But the alarm bells are not ringing anywhere yet. The US is not eager to take a clear stance on the issue, choosing instead to caution both countries to resolve the dispute in a peaceful way. Solving the issue through diplomatic means indeed seems the most constructive approach. The Senkaku dispute has dragged on for

a long time already and will not be solved quickly. However, during previous incidents the parties to the dispute have not allowed the situation to escalate so that it would endanger regional security, and they will not allow that this time either.

China cannot afford to let nationalism get out of hand, as demonstrations always carry the risk of evolving into voices of resistance against the government. Furthermore, Beijing does not want to jeopardize economic relations: Japan is China's third most important trade partner. For Japan's stagnant economy, the Chinese market is of central importance. For both China and Japan, a stable mutual relationship and a peaceful regional environment are prerequisites for being able to focus on more pressing domestic issues. Perhaps the governments of both countries should embrace former Finnish President J. K. Paasikivi's adage: One cannot change geography.

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