

*IIPS Japan Policy Commentary*

## **Growing Tensions within the East Asian Security Environment**

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In 2012, the hostility between Japan and China over the Senkaku Islands in Okinawa prefecture became more acute. While retaliation and tension between Japan and China had been escalating since the incident in September 2010 when a Chinese fishing boat slammed into a Japan Coast Guard patrol vessel, China stepped up activities designed to undermine Japan's effective control of the islands in 2012. Since September 2012, when the property rights of three of the islands transferred from the former private owner to the Government of Japan, vessels of the China Maritime Surveillance (海监) affiliated with China's State Oceanic Administration have frequently encroached on Japanese territorial waters, in addition to boats of the Fisheries Law Enforcement Command (渔政), affiliated with China's Ministry of Agriculture, which had regularly been appearing in the surrounding waters before this date. Then, on December 13, an aircraft of the China Maritime Surveillance invaded Japanese airspace for the first time ever.

On January 17, 2012, the *People's Daily*, the official organ of the Chinese Communist Party, declared for the first time that the Senkaku Islands were one of China's "core interests" (national interests over which there is no room for negotiation). This was followed in May by the first allusion by a senior Chinese official—Foreign Minister Wang Jiarui—to the islands as a "core interest." The reason for the sudden elevation of the Senkaku Islands' status to core interest would appear to be the rapidly growing importance of the islands to China's security strategy, rather than to the struggle over the oil and natural gas in the seabed surrounding the islands, as has been widely bruited (for the past 40 years, China has continually been claiming territorial rights over the natural resources beneath the East China Sea). The keen competition between Japan and China over the Senkaku Islands is not simply the result of problems in the bilateral relations between the two nations. Since China's security strategy and the structure of the geopolitical conflict between the USA and China underlie this issue, it needs to be understood within the context of the structure of international politics.

### **An international conference in Beijing on the eve of a new Cold War**

In mid-November 2012, the Xiangshang Forum was held in a hotel on the outskirts of Beijing. The China Military Science Society sponsored this international conference. This biennial international conference is devoted to the latest security issues and to analysis of the international situation, and is attended by invited researchers on security issues involving the major powers. Although billed as a "Track 2" (people-to-people) conference, it is essentially stage-managed by the Academy of Military Science and sponsored by the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The 2012 conference was attended by 34 researchers from 21 countries, including the USA, the UK, Germany, France, Japan, Russia, and India, as well as by 30 Chinese researchers from the PLA and research institutions such as Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and CICIR. The themes of the conference were: 1) changes in the security environment in the Asia-Pacific region and

the future course of events; 2) space and cyberspace—the new frontiers in security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region; and 3) methods for building mutual strategic trust in the Asia-Pacific region.

In his keynote address, General Liu Chengjun (刘成军) of the PLA Air Force offered constructive proposals, announcing that China is putting its new security concept of “mutual trust, mutual interests, equality, and collaboration” into practice, and that the nation wishes to better maintain stability in the Asia-Pacific region by building mutual strategic trust. In the closed-door sessions, however, the Chinese researchers expressed criticisms of a US Cold War mentality and of Japan’s approach to China, saying, “The US rebalancing strategy, which is dependent on old alliances and seeks to restore US leadership, will destroy mutual trust in the region”; “The main problem in the Asia-Pacific region is the changed nature of the US-China conflict, which is turning into a strategic game”; “The [mainly US] Cold War mentality is hindering the building of trust that would lead us to achieve shared security”; and “Japan is moving to the right politically. It should properly acknowledge its history and teach it to its citizens.”

The responses from the non-Chinese researchers included statements such as, “The rise of China and the US rebalancing strategy will bring about momentous changes in the strategic environment of the region”; “China’s maritime expansion in the Asia-Pacific region is aggravating the territorial disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea, stirring up nationalism and causing nations to engage in arms build-ups”; “In terms of national sovereignty, territorial disputes represent a zero-sum game”; and “With the demise of the Cold War, the era of ‘allies’ and ‘enemies’ came to an end. The suggestion that the USA harbors a Cold War mentality is erroneous.” Uncertainty was expressed over China’s stubborn attitude regarding maritime affairs, and doubts were put forward regarding China’s singular perceptions of foreign nations.

The US researchers stated that “in order to create mutual trust, you must understand other people’s differing perceptions and values. Within China, information from abroad is blocked. If you do not ensure freedom of information and do not have accurate information from the outside world, mutual trust will never materialize.” They also pointed out that disparities between the information available to the Chinese researchers in attendance and the information available to the foreign researchers in attendance would lead to strikingly different views of the security environment. Thus, the mood evoked a sense of the eve of a new Cold War between China and the other nations.

### **Responses regarding China’s “core interests (核心利益)” in East Asia**

At what point, approximately, in recent years did China begin to adopt a stubborn attitude in maritime affairs? As numerous Western (as well as Japanese) researchers have pointed out, this was in mid-2009, when China changed its strategy. In the 20 years following the reform and opening up (改革开放) in China, the nation firmly adhered to Deng Xiaoping’s foreign strategy of “hiding one’s talents and biding one’s time (养光韬晦有所作为).” However, at the ambassadorial conference held in Beijing in July 2009, President Hu Jintao advanced a new foreign strategy of “actively seeking concrete achievements, while steadfastly continuing to hide one’s talents and bide one’s time (坚持韬光养晦 积极有所作为).” At around this time, China’s intransigent attitude towards other countries began to emerge, and the expression “core interests” came into frequent use. Michael D. Swaine, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment in the USA, analyzed the frequency with which the term “core interest” had been used in articles published in the *People’s Daily*. He found that, while there had been 95 instances of the

use of this expression in 2008, there had then been a surge in usage, with 260 instances in 2009 and 325 in 2010. It was also during this period that senior Chinese government officials began to actively use this term. In March 2010, a senior Chinese official referred to the South China Sea as a core interest in talks with visiting US Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg. Following this, Dai Bingguo, a member of the State Council, used the expression in discussions with Secretary of State Clinton during the US-China security talks held in May 2010.

China began publicly referring to the Senkaku Islands as a “core interest” in the January 2012 article in the *People’s Daily* that was mentioned earlier. Then, in May 2012, in talks with Prime Minister Noda, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao stated that “Japan should respect China’s core interests” in reference to the Senkaku Islands, in addition to Tibet, the Uyghur region, and Taiwan. Signs of ill presage also began to be heard in China, arousing fears that this “core interest” might be expanding beyond the Senkaku Islands to include the Ryukyu Islands. For example, in an interview with China Radio International in July 2012, Major General Jin Yi’nan, the assistant head of the Strategic Studies Institute at the National Defense University, stated that “China should express its doubts regarding Japanese sovereignty over the Ryukyu Islands as a whole.” Major General Luo Yuan, the deputy secretary-general of the China Military Science Society, responded to a question from the *People’s Daily* by saying that “the Ryukyu Islands were formerly under the control of China—not Japan. Until the islands were plundered by Japan in 1879, the Ryukyu Kingdom was a sovereign state under the dominion of the Chinese Empire.”

### **The context of China’s security strategy**

What lies behind China’s increasing territorial assertiveness in the South China Sea and East China Sea? Over the course of the last 20 years, China’s military spending has increased by at least 10% almost every year. Military modernization has focused on increasing China’s strategic deterrence capability by modernizing the strategic missile command’s missiles (secondary artillery), modernizing the air force (in particular with next-generation fighter aircraft, early-warning and reconnaissance aircraft, and transportation aircraft), and modernizing the navy (in particular with surface vessels, submarines, and strategic nuclear-powered submarines that are capable of operating in deep waters). As part of this process, China has been seeking to achieve a balance with the USA in terms of nuclear weapons through the development and deployment (since 2008) of the DF-31A long-range ballistic missile, and the development and deployment of both the JL2 submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) and two new types of strategic nuclear submarine (SSBN)—the Tang class and the Jin class.

The key to ensuring its nuclear-deterrence capability against the USA is the survivability of China’s second-strike capability in the form of its long-range ballistic missiles on both land and sea. The former Soviet Union ensured its second-strike capability by stationing SSBNs in the Sea of Okhotsk and turning it into a sanctuary of SSBNs closely protected by aircraft carriers, missile cruisers, nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs), and long-range bombers. China seems to be following the old Soviet deterrence strategy. It is considering the deployment of SSBNs in the South China Sea, which is sufficiently deep for submarines, and is establishing a new submarine base on the island of Hainan. In order to turn the South China Sea into a sanctuary of SSBNs, China will have to ensure that it controls the maritime region between the first island chain (which comprises the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the Philippines, and the outer periphery of the South China Sea) and the second island chain (which runs from the

Ogasawara Islands to Guam), thereby blocking the US navy from approaching from the Pacific Ocean.

Aside from the issue of deterrence, it must also be remembered that, from a geopolitical standpoint, the South China Sea and East China Sea represent a buffer zone that is key to China's security. Looking back over Chinese history, the Chinese Empire was always threatened by enemies invading from inland (the north), while, in modern times, the menace to China has always come from major powers who would attack from the seas. The Soviet Union ensured its security with a buffer zone consisting of Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Mongolia. In the same way, China considers it to be essential to its security to maintain naval supremacy in the South China Sea and East China Sea in order to protect the coastal regions that are the engine of its growth (and its soft underbelly).

It is from this perspective that China has, in recent years, adopted its "anti-access/area denial" (A2/AD) strategy to protect the South China Sea, Taiwan, and the East China Sea from incursion by the US navy's military might in times of emergency, and has accelerated its military modernization in line with this strategy.

In pursuit of this security strategy, the Chinese navy will have to advance beyond the first island chain and out into the Pacific Ocean in order to maintain naval supremacy. In doing so, it will have to sail through the waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands and pass the Sakishima Islands. In fact, during the past three years, the Chinese navy has repeatedly sailed through the Miyako Strait to conduct exercises in the western Pacific Ocean. As the gateway to the Miyako Strait, the Senkaku Islands are emerging as a key strongpoint that could play a decisive role in the A2/AD strategy.

### **The US reaction**

The US plan against this consists of a countervailing strategy based on the "Air-Sea Battle" concept for breaking down China's A2/AD strategy, as revealed in the USA's *National Defense Strategy* published in January 2012. This *National Defense Strategy* was preceded by the "rebalancing strategy" that was announced by the Obama administration in the autumn of 2011 and which signaled a US return to the Asia-Pacific region. In keeping with traditional geopolitical thinking, the backbone of the rebalancing strategy resides in the strategic view that, in order to forestall the rise of a superpower that might come to hold sway over the Eurasian continent, there should be unfettered access to the rimland (coastal regions) of Eurasia from the seas—the so-called "freedom of the seas." This US freedom of the seas and the Chinese security strategy of maintaining a maritime buffer zone by means of A2/AD are in diametric opposition to one another.

Within this overarching strategic conflict, China's military modernization and uncompromising attitude towards other nations have resulted in a security dilemma that invites antagonistic strategies on the parts of the countries involved, with the result that a diplomatic resolution to the issue of the Senkaku Islands—caught in the vortex of this wider strategic conflict—appears further away than ever.

(1) In an article in the *People's Daily* on November 17, 2011, Yang Wenchang, the president of the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, stated that President Hu Jintao had emphasized the phrase "seek concrete achievements." On December 26, 2011, Deputy Chief of Staff Ma Xiaotian, the chairman of the China Institute for International Strategic Studies, stated that, in order to ensure an advantageous security environment, China should carry through the strategy of "actively seeking concrete achievements, while steadfastly continuing to hide its talents and bide its time."

(2) Michael D. Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior, Part One: On "Core Interests," *China Leadership Monitor* 34, February 22, 2011.

- (3) “Chinese nationalists eye Okinawa,” *Financial Times* web edition, July 23, 2012.
- (4) Luo Yuan, “Do Ryukyu Islands belong to Japan?”, *People’s Daily* online, July 27, 2012.
- (5) The 2008 edition of *China’s National Defense* and materials from a Ministry of Defense conference on defense policy (April 2010).
- (6) For more details, see the author’s own “Trends in the East Asian Security Environment,” Jun Osawa, *IIPS Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 1, October 2010.

