

# THE SENKAKU ISLANDS DISPUTE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PACIFIC ISLAND CHAINS

AMARJIT SINGH

After a strange water cannon duel in September 2012 between Taiwanese and Japanese patrol boats, the dispute over a group of islets called the Senkakus in Japan (Diaoyus in China, and Tiaoyutas in Taiwan) seemed to simmer down for a few weeks. However, a month later, China sent fishing and patrol boats to the vicinity of the disputed islands. The spat continued through 2013, with China regularly sending fishing vessels, surveillance and patrol aircraft, and coast guard ships. Japan responded by sending patrol boats of its own. On December 13, 2012, Japan scrambled eight F-15 jets after a Chinese surveillance aircraft entered the Senkaku air space<sup>1</sup>. This was obviously a test by China to gauge the Japanese response, which helped the Chinese plan for the next event. On January 11, 2013, China again sent in a Y-8 transport aircraft a little outside Japanese air space, but inside the Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) that triggers an automatic Japanese air patrol. Thus, as expected, the Japanese sent off F-15 aircraft to monitor the surveillance aircraft, but to their surprise, they found Chinese J-10 aircraft on

---

Dr. **Amarjit Singh** is Professor of Construction and Engineering Management at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu.

1. "Japan Protests About Chinese Airspace 'Intrusion' Over Disputed Islands," *The Guardian*, [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk), December 13, 2012.

**In September 2012, the Japanese national government entered into an agreement to outright buy the Senkaku Islands from the Kurihara family, the legitimate Japanese owners of the islands since 1970.**

their tail.<sup>2</sup> The Chinese had clearly planned this surprise for the Japanese. Other reports claimed that ten J-7s and J-10s had entered the ADIZ; in response, Japan dispatched its F-15s, but it is not clear if that was perhaps a separate event on January 11, 2013, media miscommunication, or Chinese misinformation.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the cat-and-mouse game between China and Japan lasted through the year and spilled into 2014 as national sentiments come to the fore on both sides.

In 2013, the two sides continued to send fighter planes into the area. A Chinese frigate locked weapons-targeting radar onto a Japanese destroyer. In October 2013, China declared that if Japan shot down any Chinese drones sent to the Senkakus, this would be considered an “act of war”. And in November 2013, China declared the Senkakus within its ADIZ. In February 2014, US intelligence reported the detection of road-mobile ballistic missiles close to the Senkakus. And in May 2014, the Chinese conducted naval exercises in the Western Pacific Ocean, partly to simulate a retake of the Senkakus, having telegraphed their intentions to do so in January 2013<sup>4</sup>. (Other military incidents have taken place as well, and this list is not comprehensive nor intended to be.)

In September 2012, the Japanese national government entered into an agreement to outright buy the Senkaku Islands from the Kurihara family, the legitimate Japanese owners of the islands since 1970.<sup>5</sup> Reportedly, behind this move, was the hawkish Governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, who with his

- 
2. “Uncharted Waters: Japan and China Scramble Fighter Jets in Island Dispute,” RT Question More, <http://rt.com/news/china-japan-diaoyu-senkaku-822/>, January 12, 2013.
  3. “Japanese F-15s Scrambled to Intercept PLA Jets in East China Sea,” *China Times*, <http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news>, January 11, 2013.
  4. “China to go Ahead With Naval Exercise Amid East China Sea Island Dispute with Japan,” <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/china-to-go-ahead-with-naval-exercise-amid-east-china-sea-island-dispute-with-japan/>, *CBS News*, January 31, 2013.
  5. “Japan Agrees to Buy Disputed Senkaku Islands”, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/japan/9521793/Japan-agrees-to-buy-disputed-Senkaku-islands.html>, *The Telegraph*, September 5, 2012.

anti-China leanings, did not hesitate to announce that he was inviting a confrontation with China.<sup>6</sup> This was open provocation as it stirred Chinese sentiments, and suddenly, an enraged China came out of its shell to claim jurisdiction over the Senkaku Islands. That China had not done so for one hundred years is noteworthy, since statutory time limitations are universal in any dispute over property. Moreover, it is intriguing why China should respond to what was basically an internal transfer of property within Japan, giving the impression that there is more to this war of words and show of force than a legally solid claim by China.

Having taken a stand on territorial matters, at first, it appeared that it was going to be exceptionally difficult for China to disavow or change its stand, especially after the Communist Party had stoked national sentiments to a boil. The issue is unlikely to be forgotten for the foreseeable future. A negotiated settlement of the status of these islands is unlikely, as neither side will relinquish its claim for the simple reason of geo-political power.<sup>7</sup>

However, since January 2014, China has decreased the number of the military excursions, adventures, and tests. This coincided with the coming to power of Xi Jinping, first as party general secretary and chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) in January 2014, and later as president in May 2014. Evidently, China has completed its preliminary “testing of the waters” and show of strength, and felt satisfied at the result. However, the fervent remilitarisation of Japan under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is probably something that China did not account for. China had stirred a hornet’s nest, and was staring down a barrel of enormous economic and military consequences. Japan is not an “India” that is wary of using military

**A negotiated settlement of the status of these islands is unlikely, as neither side will relinquish its claim for the simple reason of geo-political power.**

---

6. “Tokyo Governor Risks Chinese Outrage with Disputed Island Construction Plan,” <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/japan/9588601/Tokyo-governor-risks-Chinese-outrage-with-disputed-island-construction-plan.html>, *The Telegraph*, May 2012.

7. Ken Dilanian, “U.S. Defies China, Sends Bombers into Disputed East China Sea Zone,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 2015; interesting information on the topic is also available at “Senkaku Islands Dispute,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Senkaku\\_Islands\\_dispute](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Senkaku_Islands_dispute), Wikipedia. Accessed by author on March 2015.

**In November 2013, the US Senate recognised Japanese administration of the Senkakus and opposed the use of force. This was crafted as a direct statement to China to not use force against Japan.**

power to counter an aggressive China. Though India feels its military power is restricted, being less than that of China, Japan's military power is also less, but it seems to be ready to face the challenges head-on.

A war between the world's largest and third largest economies will impact the world as much as it will adversely affect the economic status of China and Japan.<sup>8</sup> The USA shall probably be the most affected for the \$104 billion a year it exports to China and \$66 billion a year to Japan.

Moreover, notwithstanding China's overseas media campaigns that have been savvier than Japan's, the sympathies of the powerful Western world are projected to side with Japan rather than China. In November 2013, the US Senate recognised Japanese administration of the Senkakus and opposed the use of force.<sup>9</sup> This was crafted as a direct statement to China to not use force against Japan. If the West could impose sanctions on Russia, a superpower, it may not be hesitant to impose sanctions on China if it were to embark on an ill-conceived venture. Further, an adverse impact on China's economy may be just as well for China's enemies.

In a survey conducted by Gerron NPO and *China Daily* in August 2013, it was discovered that 92.8 percent of the Chinese people had a negative (unfavourable) impression of Japan, while 90.1 percent of all Japanese thought likewise about China.<sup>10</sup> These numbers simply reveal that the two populations are heavily polarised and distrust each other. The implication is that the two groups are entrenched in their positions, so a negotiated peace will be hard to come by, if at all. In September 2012, riots in China had led to the closure of Japanese plants. Chinese public sentiments had been

---

8. "The Economic Impact of a War Between Japan & China", <http://www.silverdoctors.com/the-economic-impact-of-a-war-between-japan-china/>, Silver Doctors, February 20, 2013.

9. Ibid.

10. The Genron NPO, "The 9th Japan-China Public Opinion Poll," [http://www.genronnpo.net/english/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=59:the-9th-japan-china-public-opinion-poll&catid=2:research&Itemid=4](http://www.genronnpo.net/english/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=59:the-9th-japan-china-public-opinion-poll&catid=2:research&Itemid=4), August 13, 2013; quoted in Saturo Nagao, "Japan-India Military Partnership: India is the New Hope for Asia," *CLAWS Journal*, Winter 2013.

so aroused that Chinese shop owners were rude, and refused to sell goods to Japanese tourists.<sup>11</sup> As a result, Japan is already slowly moving its plants and machinery to Indonesia and Philippines, which will see Japanese economic losses in the situation considerably mitigated while adversely affecting Chinese exports.<sup>12</sup> The gain of those countries will be China's loss, while Japan is likely to come out even.

China's comprehensive military power is more than that of Japan's,<sup>13</sup> but Japan's industrial and technological power is formidable. What Japan doesn't have by way of population – as China does – Japan has by way of technology and its well-known national culture of quality and product excellence. The downside to Japan's industrial power is that Japan must get its minerals from overseas, while China is more self-reliant. Under a Chinese naval blockade, Japan's industrial power stands to be squeezed.<sup>14</sup> But this assumes that the United States will stand by idly. While analysts have opined that the USA will stand by if China invades Taiwan, Japan is not in the same basket, as it is vitally important for US security, maintaining the American military presence in East Asia. Moreover, the American policy-makers prefer to support Japanese-style democracy on moral principles than they do Chinese Communism that doesn't guarantee freedom of speech or religion.

**The downside to Japan's industrial power is that Japan must get its minerals from overseas, while China is more self-reliant. Under a Chinese naval blockade, Japan's industrial power stands to be squeezed.**

- 
11. The author heard of this first hand from a small Chinese roadside shop owner during a visit to Dalian when China's first aircraft carrier was being launched.
  12. Cathy Rose Garcia, "More Japanese Firms Seen Moving from China to PH," <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/business/10/08/13/more-japanese-firms-seen-moving-china-ph>, September 10, 2013.
  13. Nation Ranking, <https://nationranking.wordpress.com/category/national-power-index/>, 2011.
  14. Japan was aware of this even before World War II, which is why it built a powerful naval fleet. That Japan lost the battle in the Pacific to USA was a matter of touch-and-go. At the bombing of Pearl Harbour, Japan failed to unleash its third wave of airplanes for bombing, which was planned to attack stores, repair facilities, and oil tanks. Had it succeeded with that third wave, the setback to the USA would have been significant. As a consequence of that, the Battle of Midway would have been different, if it would have taken place, and the outcome also different. That could have changed the history of the Pacific War.

## LEGAL HISTORY OF THE SENKAKUS

Japan occupied the Senkakus in 1895 after a Japanese government survey indicated the islands were uninhabited. There were no records that the islands had ever belonged to China, and Japan erected a marker in January 1895 to formally incorporate the islands into the territory of Japan. Moreover, these islands were not part of any territory ceded to Japan by the Chinese Qing dynasty in May 1895 that may have recognised the Daioyus as formerly belonging to China. Thus, the Senkakus did not appear on the list of occupied territories that Japan had to renounce after its surrender in World War II, and China did not bring up at that time the claim that the Daioyus belonged to China. However, according to the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951 between the allied powers and Japan, the Senkakus were among those given over to the US Administration,<sup>15</sup> which were subsequently reverted to Japan per the 1971 agreement between Japan and the USA that recognised the Senkakus as Japanese territory.

Though 49 countries signed the 1951 treaty, including countries such as Iraq and Iran that had seen action during World War II, India, for instance, refused to sign, though invited to do so. India asserted that the treaty limited Japanese sovereignty and national independence. Thus, India was taking a stand in favour of the fallen nation against what it considered to be white racist dominance and supremacy. China and Taiwan were not invited owing to the civil war raging between the countries, and the USSR raised numerous objections on the nature and premise of the treaty.<sup>16</sup>

The People's Republic of China (PRC) published statements in August and September 1951 denouncing the Treaty of San Francisco as illegal and urging nations not to recognise it. As a major victim of Japanese aggression, it was upset at Japan's general exclusion from the negotiation process, not realising that the rest of the world was having difficulty understanding which was the legitimate government of China – the Nationalists or

---

15. "San Francisco, Peace Treaty of 1951," <http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/San+Francisco,+Peace+Treaty+of+1951>. Accessed on March 2015.

16. Ibid. Also available at "Treaty of San Francisco," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty\\_of\\_San\\_Francisco](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_San_Francisco). Accessed on March 2015.

Communists.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the PRC claimed that the Paracel Islands, Spratly Islands and Pratas Islands were actually part of China.<sup>18</sup> However, the treaty did not even address the Paracel and Spratly Islands, while the Pratas Islands were given over to the United Nations. Hence, the PRC's statements were obviously meaningless and construed as out of context to the 1951 Treaty. The PRC did not as much as raise the issue of the Senkakus, though the USSR vaguely alluded to the treaty as violating the rights of China to Taiwan and "other" islands. Notwithstanding the objections by the PRC, the PRC actually benefited from this treaty by repossessing Japanese occupied assets in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia, even though the Chinese outwardly denounced it. The very fact that they accepted the terms of the treaty to repossess assets in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia implies in common law that their actions were construed as acceptance of the treaty. In 1974, China occupied the Paracel Islands when the USA was on its way out from Vietnam.

Taiwan signed its own peace treaty with Japan in 1956, known as the Treaty of Taipei.<sup>19</sup> This treaty gave special recognition to the people of Pescadores Islands as nationals of Taiwan because these islands, between Taiwan and China, were specifically ceded to Japan by the Qing dynasty in 1895. Once again, while acknowledging the Treaty of San Francisco, there was no mention or argument over the status of the Senkakus. The claim by Taiwan over the Senkakus did not come until the early 1970s, when Chiang Kai Shek was made to believe there may be oil in the region. Subsequently, as the claims heated up, and China claimed everything over Japan that Taiwan claimed, both the PRC and Taiwan began to claim that the Treaty of San Francisco did not determine the ultimate sovereignty of the Senkakus

---

17. Refer to Seokwoo Lee, "The 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty with Japan and The Territorial Disputes in East Asia," *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal Association*, <https://digital.law.washington.edu/dspace-law/bitstream/handle/1773.1/748/11PacRimLPolyJ063.pdf?sequence=1>. Accessed on March 2015.

18. "China's Maritime Disputes", Council of Foreign Relations, 2013, [http://www.cfr.org/asia-and-pacific/chinas-maritime-disputes/p31345#/?cid=otr-marketing\\_use-china\\_sea\\_InfoGuide](http://www.cfr.org/asia-and-pacific/chinas-maritime-disputes/p31345#/?cid=otr-marketing_use-china_sea_InfoGuide); useful information can also be obtained at "South China Sea Islands," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South\\_China\\_Sea\\_Islands](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_China_Sea_Islands).

19. Treaty of Peace Between the Republic of China and Japan, full text available at <http://www.taiwandocuments.org/taipei01.htm>. Accessed on March 2015.



**The Senkakus have always been considered a part of the known region of Okinawa, also known as the Ryukyu Island chain. This is important in the current context because Okinawa is a central US military base.**

by virtue of its omission from the San Francisco Treaty, nor did the signing of the Treaty of Taipei with Japan imply that Taiwan was giving up its claim on the Senkakus (a claim that did not exist before the early 1970s).<sup>20</sup>

While China has apparently pointed to historical maps revealing that the Daioyus belong to China, the validity of those maps is under question, partly since no one else has those maps. There has been no excavation or archaeological discovery in the Daioyus to support the Chinese claim, but there is evidence to the contrary that those islands were never inhabited, exploited, or harvested by China.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, there is some history of the Okinawan Islands and other nearby islands in relation to China. The Senkakus have always been considered a part of the known region of Okinawa, also known as the Ryukyu Island chain. This is important in the current context because Okinawa is a central US military base. According to legend, in 221 BC, people from a Chinese mission first settled in Okinawa. For several centuries up to 1590, Okinawa was for all practical purposes an independent kingdom. Its people were fishermen and traders, exchanging goods and trade with all eastern nations, coming all the way to the Kingdom of Bengal. Over the 15th century, Okinawa had very strong trade ties with China, including paying tribute to Chinese overlords in Fujian province. As a result, and because of the peaceful nature of the Okinawans, the Chinese emperors came to think of the Okinawans as “loyal subjects.” The early part of the 16th century saw the Portuguese lay waste to Malacca, after which the Okinawans retreated from their trade activities in Southeast Asia and

---

20. “The World and Japan Database Project, Database of Japanese Politics and International Relations”, Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo, <http://www.ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/~worldjpn/documents/texts/docs/19520428.T1E.html>. Accessed on March 2015.

21. Refer Shannon Tiezi, “Japan and China Spar Online Over Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands,” *The Diplomat*, January 8, 2015.



relied upon China for support and protection against the invading Europeans.<sup>22</sup>

But, in 1590, the Japanese Shogunate, with an aim at controlling Asia, demanded that Okinawa stop paying a tribute to China and pay a heavier tribute to Japan instead. The Okinawans relented, but trade with China was allowed to continue, especially because it brought a good tribute to Japan. However, Okinawa played both China and Japan and continued to pay tribute to China. When Cmdr Matthew Perry of the US Navy briefly occupied Okinawa in 1853, a scared Okinawa sought help from a weak China. Even the King of Hawaii, Kameameha III, pleaded Okinawa's case to the Chinese. This arose from the influence of tens of thousands of Okinawan migrant labourers who had settled in Hawaii to work on the sugar fields there. But soon after Perry left, Japan annexed Okinawa in 1879 in punishment for its turning to China. Since then, Okinawa, except for several post-war years under the American Administration, has been a part of Japan.<sup>23,24</sup> Therefore, as far as the agreements and legal language of modern nations go, Okinawa and the Senkakus are part of Japan, even though Okinawa once paid tribute to China. In many respects, China seeks to claim territories that once paid tribute, or possibly belonged, to China, without accepting the changing realities in the millennia and centuries in between.<sup>25</sup> If the International Court of Justice had to rule on a trade dispute between Japan and China concerning either the Ryukyu or Senkaku Islands, it would likely base

**As far as the agreements and legal language of modern nations go, Okinawa and the Senkakus are part of Japan, even though Okinawa once paid tribute to China.**

---

22. "Narrative of an Empty Space," *The Economist*, December 22, 2012.

23. George Kerr, "Ryukyu Kingdom and Province Before 1945," National Academy of Sciences, National Research Council, Washington, D.C., 1953; it is also generally interesting to read "History of the Ryukyu Isles," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_the\\_Ryukyu\\_Islands](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Ryukyu_Islands).

24. Refer Reiko Teshiba, "Suspended in Time: Okinawa's Continuing Struggle," Swarthmore College, <http://www.swarthmore.edu/writing/suspended-time-okinawas-continuing-struggle>, 2002. Accessed on March 2015.

25. If China were to let other nations employ the same arguments as applied by China, Mongolia would have the right to claim half of all of China. Hence, there is some illogic in China's claims.

its decision on the Ryukyus and Senkakus belonging to Japan, part and parcel.<sup>26</sup>

### MILITARY PICTURE

Though the dispute gained centre-stage after the possibility in the 1970s that there may be petroleum deposits around the Senkakus, the reality today is different. The military and geo-political picture is clearly more important than the legal and economic angles. National greed and power projection invariably appear to carry more weight than any other issue. The legal and historical angles to the dispute are merely a ruse, a means for China to assert itself.<sup>27</sup> The reason is simply one of naval power projection that China finds fundamental to its self-identity: its emergence as a nation that will never be bullied again. The scars of the humiliation by the West in the 19th century forcing its population into opium addiction, and the rape and humiliation by the Japanese in the early part of the 20th century, have not faded.

The modernisation of China's navy began in the early 1980s under the leadership of Premier Deng Xiaoping and China's navy chief, Lu Huaqing, who envisioned three stages to its development.<sup>28</sup> The modernisation was both aggressive and massive. The first stage was to modernise so as to prevent attacks on its littoral coastline, which required developing a brown-water navy; the second was to build up defensive capabilities up to the first island chain, which required the development of an effective green-water navy; and the third is to create offensive control over the second island chain, which will place China's navy quite firmly in the blue-water category. These island chains are discussed in the following sections.

---

26. Reinhard Drifte, "The Japan-China Confrontation over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands – Between "shelving" and "dispute escalation," <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-japan-china-confrontation-over-the-senkakudiaoyu-islands-between-shelving-and-dispute-escalation/5393760>, Global Research, July 28, 2014.

27. A car shuttle driver in the Philippines, and engineers in Vietnam have communicated with the author that China is displaying expansionist tendencies, not to mention hundreds of articles and commentaries in media around the world.

28. Refer Nikolaos Diakides, "An Assessment of China's Defense Strategy in the Post-Cold War Era – What Role for Bilateral Defense Cooperation with Russia, Piraeus, , [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1638214](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1638214), December 2009.

### **FIRST ISLAND CHAIN**

The first island chain contains all the islands southwest and northeast of Japan that are under Japanese protection; this first chain encompasses the Sakhalin and Kurile Islands held by Russia, and the Spratly Islands claimed by the Philippines and other nations. More precisely, the first island chain consists of the Kurile Islands, the Japanese Archipelago, Bonin Islands, Ryukyu Islands (which include Okinawa and the Amami, Miyako and Yaeyama Island groups), and Taiwan—all the way to the Malay Peninsula and Vietnam, the northern Philippines, and Borneo (Fig. 1). It is a vast territory included within the chain that China logically thinks is important for its power projection; the economic factor of ocean resources within the first island chain is only secondary to China's wish to exercise control in its vicinity – to have breathing space and strategic depth. However, the military perspective of these islands is vital for Japan and the United States as well, and this places those powers in direct confrontation. For instance, the USA has major military bases in Okinawa that it is unwilling to relinquish; losing its base in Okinawa will make its base in Guam in the second island chain more vulnerable to Chinese invasion. Thus, the US cannot afford to lose Guam under any circumstances, so pivotal is the first island chain for US force projection in North and East Asia.

But the first island chain is necessary for China to prevent US aircraft carriers and carrier groups from coming too close to the Chinese coast to launch effective operations. The farther away US aircraft carriers are from the Chinese coast, the less effective US aircraft are against attacks on mainland China. China apparently learned a lesson when US President Clinton sent two aircraft carrier battle groups to Taiwan during the Sino-Taiwan dispute in 1998. The Chinese realised they had little by way of surface-to-ship missiles to stop the US show of power, and they also realised that the US could easily threaten all the coastal cities of China by their aircraft carrier force. Hence, keeping the USA at a distance from

**The first island chain is necessary for China to prevent US aircraft carriers and carrier groups from coming too close to the Chinese coast to launch effective operations.**

the first island chain can greatly help China in the event of a war with Taiwan.

Thus, naval power is of primary importance to China in its quest to emerge as a nation without rivals. In terms of a military strategy, this is a well-thought out and well-reasoned Chinese plan. Conversely, it makes perfect sense for Japan to hold on to the chain of islands to its southwest, since any concession to, or encroachment by, China will only escalate as the years go by, eventually threatening the Japanese mainland.

Within a few days of the Senkaku incident on September 23, 2012, the USA and Japan conducted a joint exercise for the defence of islands in the southwest chain.<sup>29</sup> Though this exercise was planned many months earlier, it sent a clear signal to China: the USA will intervene militarily in the defence of those islands that were once administered by the USA and are now under Japanese governance. The US takes seriously any change to the status quo in North Asia – especially because it threatens to overturn its own 60-year dominance of the Pacific all the way to the East China Sea. US military doctrine is predicated upon keeping wars away from its own shores – that is why it never gave up its options in Europe and the Western Pacific after World War II. The Western Pacific is currently ably supplied by the USA through the fortresses of Okinawa, Guam, and Hawaii, and through the alliances with the Philippines, Japan, Indonesia, and Australia; further, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand guarantee the sovereignty and integrity of Malaysia and Brunei.

After China and Japan began their dispute over the Senkakus, Taiwan sending its own fleet of fishing and coast guard vessels to assert its claim actually served to quieten the situation for a while by convoluting things. Who would now fight whom in this triangular competition where each has two opponents? Neither party wishes to fight two opponents in a triangular conflict, and China certainly did not imagine that Taiwan would enter the fray at that juncture. However, Taiwan will not rake up a military conflict with China (which China knows), and this has

---

29. "U.S., Japan Train for Island Defense", *The Wall Street Journal*, Japan <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444083304578013692399658834.html>, September 24, 2012.

emboldened China to take the lead in aircraft incursions into the Senkaku air space and ADIZ.

## SECOND ISLAND CHAIN

The second chain of islands covers the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, the Philippines, and from Palau down to Irian Jaya—a stone's throw from Australia (Fig. 1). By obtaining naval power up to the second island chain, China would be able to have full sway over the Western Pacific. This dream of China is one that Japan implemented in World War II, giving Imperial Japan access to vast natural resources in Southeast Asia to run its military machine. China, in turn, apparently wishes to be recognised as the unrivalled power in its eastern “backyard” – and indeed, the entire East China Sea, South China Sea, and Philippines Sea are considered by China as its “backyard,” —as if they do not comprise its neighbours’ backyards as well.<sup>30</sup>

The importance of Guam as the US centrepiece of the second island chain is one reason why the US will not wish to see China encroach on any island of the first island chain, because any island in the first island claim is a stepping stone to the second one. If China were to take control of the Senkakus, the fear among the Japanese and Americans is that it would probably install various anti-ship and ballistic missiles there, which would more easily threaten the USA’s primary base in the region – Guam.

Of course, Chinese missiles in the Senkakus will also more easily threaten Taiwan, and more specifically, Taipei, which is at the northern end of Taiwan<sup>31</sup>. Thus, China could aim to lob missiles at Taiwan from two directions. A Chinese presence at Senkaku will make it easier for China to attack and take remote Okinawan islands, such as Yonaguni and Inomote, which are presently difficult for Japan to defend at such enormous distances from its mainland and air bases.

---

30. “Is the South China Sea China’s Backyard?,” <http://www.212s.com/?p=2672>, *Anything New York*. Accessed April 2015.

31. With missiles in the Senkakus, China can launch rockets at Taipei from two directions – one from the Chinese mainland, and the other from the northeast. Hence, this will thin the defences of Taiwan.

**The capture of islands in the third island, chain requires not only a blue water navy, but a superior blue water navy. China appears to be slowly but surely grinding along on its long march to superiority.**

Again, when a nation gives an inch, it should be afraid it could lose a yard or a mile. Thus, the loss of the Senkakus would threaten Japan with the fear of losing Okinawa next. This is a battle where China's hatred for Japan, and China's eagerness for dominance in the East China Sea, can allow no inch of Japanese territory to be left undefended. At this moment, history and revenge must be cast aside – realism and survival are important – and Japan is not going to roll over for China.

### THIRD ISLAND CHAIN

The third island chain arguably runs in an arc from Wake Islands to Midway, then on to the Hawaiian Islands, Kiribati, Western Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands. This is the arc captured by the Japanese during World War II (except for Hawaii), and from which they were beaten back, island by island. Anybody owning these islands owns the Pacific, so to speak. The capture of islands in the third island, chain requires not only a blue water navy, but a superior blue water navy. China appears to be slowly but surely grinding along on its long march to superiority.

While the focus of China and the world presently remains on the first island chain, which carries a direct threat on to the second island chain, the long-term implications for the might of the USA extend to the third island chain that includes Hawaii<sup>32</sup>. The Pacific might of the USA is centred in Hawaii, and the Pacific Command of the USA, headquartered in Hawaii, alone has the largest navy and air force of the world. During World War II, Adm Yamamoto realised this and, therefore, superbly planned the Pearl Harbour attack, which probably failed because the Japanese admiral in charge of the invasion did not launch the third wave of aircraft from his aircraft carriers, thereby scuttling the mission and escaping, before US

---

32. Saurav Jha, "China's 'Third Island' Strategy," *MPR: World Politics Review*, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/4893/chinas-third-island-strategy>, January 6, 2010.

submarines could locate the fleet. History has proved that cowards who run away get caught in their own fear in the end, as eventually happened to the Japanese fleet off Midway Island.

Hawaii is much too important for the USA from its military perspective. Inasmuch as the first island chain corresponds to China's green water navy and the second island chain to its blue water navy, the third island chain corresponds to China's supremacy in the world. Like Iran's claim to process uranium as an international right, China claims it has a right to have a blue-water navy. That is fine so long as no one else feels threatened<sup>33</sup>. At present, every nation in the East Pacific and Southeast Asia, not to mention India and Australia, and then Canada and the USA, feels threatened by the Chinese show of arms and rapid military production, which is becoming more sophisticated and modernised by the day. The USA and its allies in East Asia are unnerved by the numerous territorial claims made by China.<sup>34</sup>

China has already made inroads into the third island chain. It has invested heavily in Western Samoa, and has a submarine base in Fiji. A very large amount of infrastructure expansion in underdeveloped Western Samoa has been fully funded by the Chinese. In fact, Western Samoa has

**Hawaii is much too important for the USA from its military perspective. Inasmuch as the first island chain corresponds to China's green water navy and the second island chain to its blue water navy, the third island chain corresponds to China's supremacy in the world.**

33. For instance, Iran has to date not retracted the statement of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2006, wherein he said, "This regime occupying Jerusalem must vanish from the page of time" (Refer Robert Mackay, "Israeli Minister Agrees Ahmadinejad Never Said 'Israel Must be Wiped off the Map,'" *The New York Times*, [http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/17/israeli-minister-agrees-ahmadinejad-never-said-israel-must-be-wiped-off-the-map/?\\_r=0](http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/17/israeli-minister-agrees-ahmadinejad-never-said-israel-must-be-wiped-off-the-map/?_r=0), April 7, 2012). In fact, as recently as April 18, 2015, in spite of the prospect of a nuclear deal and the lifting of sanctions against it, Iran marked its Army Day parade with a float displaying a banner proclaiming "Death to Israel, US," instead of disavowing the threats made by their former president (Refer to "Iran marks Army Day with cries of 'Death to Israel, US'," <http://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-marks-army-day-with-cries-of-death-to-israel-us/>, *Times of Israel*, April 18, 2015).

34. Mark Landler, "With Russia, as With China, Unnerved U.S. Allies Seek Reassurances," *New York Times*, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/20/world/europe/another-set-of-wary-allies-seeks-us-reassurance.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/20/world/europe/another-set-of-wary-allies-seeks-us-reassurance.html?_r=0), March 19, 2014.



**China has already made inroads into the third island chain. It has invested heavily in Western Samoa, and has a submarine base in Fiji. A very large amount of infrastructure expansion in underdeveloped Western Samoa has been fully funded by the Chinese.**

been enjoying an economic boom of late owing to Chinese investment. China has also made gifts to Western Samoa and Tonga that both have happily accepted. It can be asked, what does China want from making so many gifts? The difference between the USA and Japan providing gifts to countries and China offering gifts is in their posturing. And, both Japan and the USA have democratic governments, while China's is veiled in secrecy, which frightens many. In the case of Fiji, with which many Indians would like to have good relations because of the large Indian population, China has made more inroads than India.

The military government of Fiji has placed systemic restrictions on the rights of Indians, thus, putting pressure on Indian-origin settlers to emigrate to New Zealand, Australia, Malaysia, and the USA. Thus, it was in consideration of the strategic drift of Fiji, and an effort to ease the political onslaught on the Indian settlers, that Narendra Modi made a stopover there during the G-20 meeting in Australia in 2014.

China is already in a power game with the USA and all its neighbours. This is further evidenced by President Barack Obama's initiative to strategically and militarily engage the Southeast Asian nations with an aim to check the concerns about China's claims over territorial waters.<sup>35</sup>

## **POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Thanks in part to the Chinese nationalism and the North Korean ballistic missile tests, a nationalistic government under Shinzo Abe came to power in Japan in elections of December 2012 and December 2014. Mr. Abe's victory was in part owing to his promise to take a hardline stance against China and North Korea. This means that Japan will probably choose to rearm itself as

---

35. Gwenn Robinson, "Obama to Spearhead Southeast Asia Push," *Asia-Pacific*, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/7c7daa92-2fb5-11e2-ae7d-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2JxLTY6D9>, November 16, 2012.

a nation. Japan has already been quietly building up a formidable navy and a credible defence air force. Now, it will only augment its efforts because its national honour is at stake.<sup>36</sup>

Abe now seeks to develop close economic and defence strategic partnerships with Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam to contain an aggressive China.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, Japanese naval collaboration with India has seen an increase in the recent years. Moreover, Japan was the first country outside the subcontinent that the new Indian Prime Minister,

Narendra Modi, visited after being elected last April. This was a show of unity with, and preference for, Japan over China, in addition to the desire to attract Japanese investment. After years of letting the USA take the lead in its military matters, Japan now realises that, while it can rely on the USA to some extent in defence matters, in the end, it must fend for itself.

Unwittingly or otherwise, China has raised the spectre of a situation that it actually fears most – a militarily-resurgent Japan. Now that China has “tested the waters” of what Japan will do in the event of a battle or war, would China go to war against a Japan that is prepared to take on the Chinese challenge?

In the end, every nation’s future depends on the will of its leaders. If Japan stays nationalistic for a long period, China’s hopes to dominate Japan will be minimised. In fact, it is likely that China will anger and exasperate Japan to the point where Japanese politics will shift towards the nationalistic right. The number one and number three economies of the world going to war is a big event in world affairs, but is not an unknown one. If war is thrust on them due to internal or external processes, neither country is likely to recoil into its shell. China will press on to avenge its past

**Abe now seeks to develop close economic and defence strategic partnerships with Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam to contain an aggressive China.**

36. Martin Fackler and David E. Sanger, “Japan Announces a Military Shift to Thwart China,” [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/02/world/asia/japan-moves-to-permit-greater-use-of-its-military.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/02/world/asia/japan-moves-to-permit-greater-use-of-its-military.html?_r=0), *The New York Times*, July 1, 2014.

37. “Shinzo Abe Snubs China on First Trip Abroad,” *The American Interest*, <http://blogs.the-american-interest.com/wrm/2013/01/15/shinzo-abe-snubs-china-on-first-trip-abroad/>, January 15, 2013.

**The Senkakus are a stepping stone to Okinawa, which has major US bases. In turn, Okinawa is a stepping stone to mainland Japan, the thought of which shakes the nerves of the Japanese.**

humiliations and redeem itself in its own eyes, while Japan will press on to maintain its national honour. For the present, it appears that the dispute over the Senkakus will remain simmering. Over this period, China may draw up plans to take the Senkakus while conducting more naval exercises for the same, but Japan will use this period to enhance its military power.

#### **SUMMARY**

China and Japan are locked in a geo-political gambit that will draw in the USA. But a clash between these major economic powers is sure to upset the world economy, much more than the hostilities of the West with Russia over Crimea and Ukraine. China's ambitions to build a superior blue water navy that spans the Pacific is a direct punch in the face of the USA's control of the Pacific. This may or may not be a welcome move for the future of the world, but it surely sets up for great power rivalry. Moreover, the East Asian countries are already wary and suspicious of China's moves to claim vast swathes of ocean spaces and islands, including the major island of Taiwan.

The Senkakus are a stepping stone to Okinawa, which has major US bases. In turn, Okinawa is a stepping stone to mainland Japan, the thought of which shakes the nerves of the Japanese. The Senkaku Islands also enable China to install missiles that can threaten Taiwan, not to mention that China will be closer to capturing the southernmost Japanese islands of Yonaguni and Inomote where Japan has little projection of military power. And yet, this is only Step 2 of the plan, where the first island chain represents a green water navy.

The second island chain represents China's blue water navy, but here it comes head to head with the USA's formidable base in Guam that the USA can ill-afford to lose due to its own strategic perspective, and doctrines of preservation. If this fortress falls, the USA would be on the back foot, from where Hawaii would be threatened. Finally, power over the third island

chain represents China's superior blue water navy and total dominance of the Pacific.

In the end, if China fails to accept the sound legal judgment of the international community that allots the Senkakus to Japan in the legal system of modern nation states, which would be inevitable from all legal projections of international law,<sup>38</sup> the possibility of a war between Japan and China depends entirely on the will of the leaders of those two nations. Of late, however, China's provocative actions have decreased from the level of 2012 and 2013. Yet Japan cannot afford to back down, because every inch yielded to China will embolden China for a yard. Nevertheless, China may wish to surge forward for its ever-expanding resource needs and to avenge the bruises to its ego by the Japanese and the West in the past century and a half. For China, to kill two birds with one stone is an attractive proposition – for which Japan needs to be on eternal guard. The reality of the situation hovering around the Senkakus, which affects the second and third island chains, is much too profound to let the first bastion fall. Hence, Japan will lock horns with China in the foreseeable future on the matter of the Senkakus, and the USA will aim to continue attending to its guard in the Pacific, creating increasing inter-power rivalry and gamesmanship in the East China Sea and the Pacific.

---

38. Drifte, n. 26.

Fig. 1: First and Second Island Chains



Fig. 2: Third Island Chain

