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CHINA'S PERSPECTIVES ON THE MAJOR ISLAND DISPUTES IN  
THE EAST AND SOUTH CHINA SEAS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE  
US'S STRATEGIC REBALANCE TOWARD ASIA

by

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## **Biography**

COL Chew has held senior command and staff appointments in the Singapore Armed Forces. He commanded an operational group that develops and employs air power for integrated operations with the Army and Navy. In his last staff appointment, COL Chew was the Deputy Head of Air Operations in the Republic of Singapore Air Force in charge of operations planning and developing policies for operational training. COL Chew holds a Masters of Science in Management of Technology from Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a Bachelor of Science in Computer Science and Information Systems from the National University of Singapore. He also graduated from the German Command and Staff College.



## **Abstract**

Although China's economic rise has benefited the Asia Pacific region, its military rise has been a concern among its neighbors. The US in 2009 has decided to shift its strategic focus toward Asia so as to continue to maintain its influence in the region and secure its interests. The US's intention is to engage China to strengthen the regional security and prosperity. However, the US's effort in Asia could become counter-productive as its stronger presence could also embolden some regional countries to aggravate their island disputes with China. The escalation in tensions over the disputed islands between China and the regional countries could, in the worst case, drag the US to confront China, and affect the overall security and prosperity of the region. This research paper strongly suggests that the US pivot to Asia strategy must adopt a fine balancing act to prevent the US from being dragged into a direct confrontation with China over those disputed islands in the East China and South China Seas.

## **Introduction**

While China's economic rise is welcomed by the nations in the Asia Pacific region, its military rise is causing some concerns among its neighbors. The US recently decided to strategically rebalance toward Asia so that it can continue to maintain its primacy in the region and secure its interests. The approach the US has adopted is to enhance the security and prosperity for the region. However, the US's rebalance toward Asia may become counter-productive to its strategic intention if some regional countries embolden their claims to the islands disputed with China in East China and South China Seas. Heated territorial disputes between China and other Asian countries could become a source to force the US to confront instead of engage China, and therefore undermine regional security and economic prosperity.

Since the US shifted its strategic focus toward Asia in 2009, nations such as Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines, which have island disputes with China in the East China and South China Seas, have also started to step up their claims on the disputed islands and harden their postures against China over these disputes. China, on the other hand, sees these recent bolder claims from the Asia Pacific nations as serious challenges to its territorial sovereignty, and has thus responded with strong nationalistic sentiments, increasing claims over the disputed islands, and equally hard stance against the claimant nations. The heightened tensions and volatile situations that result from these escalations in the Asia Pacific region may spark accidental armed conflict between China and these claimant states.

This paper will argue that although the US's rebalance toward Asia is to enhance the regional security and prosperity, its stronger presence could embolden some Asian countries to intensify their claims over those disputed islands with China. The US must adopt a fine balancing act in order to prevent itself from being dragged into a direct confrontation with China,

while playing a positive role in ensuring regional security. The paper shows that China's perception of the recent developments in the island disputes has led it to adopt a harder approach against the claimant states. As a result, the island disputes have escalated and could have led to greater instability in the region.

### **China's Rise and US's Rebalance Toward Asia**

The first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed a robust Chinese economic growth that not only elevated China as the world's second largest economy but also lifted the economies of the Asia Pacific countries. However, a more economically powerful China also means that China's military capability and security interests have correspondingly expanded to fuel its economic growth. Although China has repeatedly declared its intention for a peaceful rise, its double-digit growth in defense spending and greater assertiveness in handling international relations have caused some concerns among the regional countries.

In view of the rapid economic and military rise of China and the corresponding increase in Asia's influence on global stability and economy, the US has started to shift its strategic focus toward Asia so as to better secure the US's continued security and prosperity. In the first decade of this century, the US has been busy with countering terrorism and conducting nation building in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> However, when the Obama Administration came into office in 2009, the US started to pay more attention to Asia and to make strategic moves to renew and revitalize its roles in this part of the world that is rapidly becoming more critical to the US's economic, diplomatic and security interests.<sup>2</sup>

Explaining the roles that the US will play in Asia, Hillary Clinton, the US Secretary of State, in 2011 stated that "at a time when the [Asia] region is building a more mature security and economic architecture to promote stability and prosperity, US commitment there is

essential.” She announced that the US “will help build that architecture and pay dividends for continued American leadership well into this century, just as [the US’s] post-World War II commitment to [build] a comprehensive and lasting transatlantic network of institutions and relationships has paid off many times over—and continues to do so.”<sup>3</sup>

Following the US’s announcement in November 2011 that it will make a “strategic pivot” (later rephrased as a “rebalancing”) toward Asia, the US started to systematically enhance its military presence and alliance in the Asia Pacific region.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, the US plans to move the majority of its warships to the Asia-Pacific region by 2020<sup>5</sup> and to expand its ballistic missile defense systems in Asia.<sup>6</sup> The US also stepped up its efforts to promote a coordinated trilateral military alliance with Japan and South Korea,<sup>7</sup> and started to strengthen its military cooperation with the Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore, and Australia.

As the US’s strategic shift toward Asia is happening at a time when some of the regional countries are concerned with the implications of China’s rise to the regional security, and is accompanied by major announcements to increase the US’s military presence and alliances in the Asia Pacific region, the US’s rebalance toward Asia has been perceived more popularly as a strategy to counter China’s military expansion and stronger assertiveness in the region.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, in June 2012, Leon Panetta, the US Secretary of Defense, rejected this perception and clarified that the US’s effort to renew and intensify its involvement in Asia is “fully compatible with the development and growth of China,” and that the “increased US involvement in this region will benefit China as it advances [the] shared security and prosperity for the future.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Island Disputes in the Asia Pacific Region**

A potential risk that could derail the US’s efforts to rebalance toward Asia is the island

disputes in the Asia Pacific region. Over the last two years, the island disputes between China and its neighbors in the Asia Pacific region have not only re-surfaced but have also intensified. As a result, these disputes have now become an increasing threat to the security and prosperity of the region and the world.

A close examination of the island disputes between China and its neighbors in the Asia Pacific region reveals that there are two main dynamics present in these contests. The competing claims for the islands in the South China Sea (SCS) are affected by the first dynamic, which pertains to the difficulty in resolving island disputes among nations. According to Rodolfo Severino, as it is “most difficult to appear to be making compromises” on territorial sovereignty issues, it is “almost impossible to resolve” them.<sup>10</sup> Southeast Asian countries have recently stepped up their claims and started to challenge China more boldly over the disputed islands. As China sees assertions from other nations over the islands as challenges to its territorial sovereignty, these recent bolder claims have in turn provoked stronger nationalistic sentiments among the Chinese and led to harder official responses from China. Nevertheless, despite the more audacious assertions and stronger sentiments provoked, China seems to be open to setting aside its differences with the claimant nations and working with them on common strategic interests and challenges.

In comparison, the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea is affected by both the territorial sovereignty dynamic as well as the deeply entrenched historical animosity between China and Japan arising from the two Sino-Japanese wars in 1894-1895 and 1937-1945. As a result, Japan’s recent bolder claims over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands have not only sparked stronger nationalistic sentiment but also triggered more violent anti-Japanese protests in China. Together these feelings have also led to the



Chinese government's adoption of a harder response against Japan. The more aggressive postures adopted by both China and Japan have in turn led to the rapid escalation and volatility of the dispute, thus making it even more difficult for both countries to set aside their differences and work on common strategic interests.

### **Background of the Island Disputes**

To better understand the dynamics and China's perspectives of these island disputes, one would need to examine the background of these contests. Before the mid-1990s, the island disputes in the SCS went through a period of escalation where claims and counter claims from China and the regional countries occurred periodically. This escalation was fuelled by what Ralf Emmers called the "territory-power nexus." The "convergent relationship" of this "territory-power nexus" transformed the energy issue/factor into a source of conflict among the contesting nations.<sup>11</sup> As China's claims over the disputed islands in the SCS are based on its long historical associations with these islands, counter claims by regional countries are viewed by China as unacceptable challenges to its territorial sovereignty and would provoke strong nationalistic sentiment and sharp responses from the Chinese.

However, in the mid-1990s, China realized that its assertive behavior in the SCS was counter-productive, as it was fuelling fears of a "China threat." As such, China began in 1995 to adopt greater flexibility in its diplomatic efforts to address the disputes.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, a combination of joint schemes to conduct pre-exploration of the natural resources around the disputed islands and the lessening of the "China threat" brought about a neutralization of the dispute between China and the Southeast Asian nations.<sup>13</sup>

Another initiative that helped to neutralize the disputes was the effort by China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to develop the Declaration on the Conduct of

Parties (DoC) in 2002. Under this declaration, claimant nations are "to resolve their territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means, without resorting to the threat or use of force, through friendly consultations and negotiations by sovereign states directly concerned."<sup>14</sup>

Although the DoC eases tensions, it falls short of a legally binding code of conduct as nations could not agree on where a code would apply with regard to the disputed territories. As such, although the situation in the SCS has been neutralized, skirmishes among the claimant states continue to persist and the conditions remained fragile, dynamic and "possibly volatile."<sup>15</sup>

Two other reasons also contributed to the continued skirmishes and fragility of the situation. First, the rapid rise of the economies of China and the Southeast Asian countries in the last decade has strengthened the regional countries' resolve to ensure that their continued security and prosperity are not hindered by unilateral claims and actions by any state over the disputed islands. Second, the recent advent of advanced deep-sea oil exploratory technology, that allows the exploration of the natural resources in the South China Sea, has also accentuated the need for regional countries to assert their rights over the disputed areas, so that they can start to exploit the available resources in the region.

Besides the territorial disputes in the SCS, China also contests with Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. Beyond the nationalistic dynamics present in challenges to territorial sovereignty, the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands is also affected by a deeply entrenched animosity between China and Japan. This enmity is caused by China's views that the Japanese occupation of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands is not only a grave violation of its territorial sovereignty, but also an unjust and outstanding act from World War II by Japan against China. There are three key reasons for this view.

The first reason concerns the historical ownership of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and whether these islands were ceded by China to Japan after the Sino-Japanese War in 1895. Japan claims that it took over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in 1895 after it had assessed the islands to be "terra nullius." China on the other hand, claims that it has indisputable rights over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, as it has exercised valid jurisdiction over the islands for several hundred years before the Japanese "discovered" them and the islands were an important fishing ground administered by the province of Taiwan.<sup>16</sup> China asserts that when it lost the Sino-Japanese War in 1895, Formosa (Taiwan) with all its islands, including the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, was ceded to Japan under the unequal Treaty of Shimonoseki. Japan countered that the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands were not part of Formosa or its affiliated islands and thus were not ceded to Japan.

Second, Japan claims that the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands were not included in the territory which it renounced after World War II. However, China states that international legal documents such as the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation provide that Japan must unconditionally return the territories it has "stolen" from China. China highlights that these documents also clearly define Japan's territory, which by no means includes the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. In China's view, Japan's occupation of Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands constitutes a challenge to the post-war international order established by such legal documents as the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation, and seriously violates the obligations Japan should undertake according to international law.<sup>17</sup>

Third, Japan claims that China did not regard the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands as part of Taiwan and had never challenged the inclusion of the islands under the administration of the US in the Treaty of San Francisco in 1951. Japan also claims that the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands were

included in the area for which the administrative rights were subsequently reverted by the US to Japan in accordance with the Okinawa Reversion Agreement in 1971. Conversely, China claims that the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands were not placed under the trusteeship established by the Treaty of San Francisco. It states that the US arbitrarily expanded the scope of the trusteeship to include the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, which are China's territory, and later "returned" the "power of administration" of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands to Japan under the Okinawa Reversion Agreement in 1971.<sup>18</sup>

Given the deep animosity, China and Japan when normalizing relations and concluding the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1978, reached an important understanding and consensus on "leaving the issue of Diaoyu/Senkaku [Island] to be resolved later."<sup>19</sup> The leaders of these two nations were able to come to this conclusion as they were acting in the larger interest of their bilateral relations. However, the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands began to heighten and escalate again from 1990 with repeated claims and counter claims from both sides. The situation de-escalated only after Sino-Japanese relations improved in late 2006<sup>20</sup> and since then, there were occasional incidents and standoffs between China and Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

### **Recent Developments of the Island Disputes**

Although the island disputes between China and its neighbors had largely de-escalated by late 2006 with only occasional skirmishes, the contests began to intensify and escalate again following the US's shift in focus toward Asia since 2009. The US stated in 2010 that it "has a national interest in [the] freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons and respect for international law in the South China Sea."<sup>21</sup> In addition, the US also declared its strategic rebalance toward Asia in 2011. Following these announcements, the countries in the

Asia Pacific region seem to be emboldened by the US assurance and have stepped up their claims and engaged in greater brinkmanship against China over the disputed islands. Four such incidents illustrate how the more audacious assertions from these nations have in turn provoked much stronger nationalistic sentiments and more aggressive responses from China.

In the first incident, a Chinese fishing trawler was involved in a collision with Japanese Coast Guard patrol boats near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in September 2010. When China's repeated demands for the release of the captain of the trawler were refused by the Japanese government and the detention of the captain extended for a further 10 days, China responded with a hard-line stance by postponing talks with Japan over the treaty on the development of a joint gas field in the East China Sea.<sup>22</sup>

The second incident was over the Scarborough Shoals, which are a group of islands claimed by both China and the Philippines. In April 2012, after a Philippine Navy surveillance aircraft spotted some Chinese fishing vessels fishing at the waters of Scarborough Shoals, the Philippines sent its biggest warship to confront the Chinese fishermen and requested the US to intervene.<sup>23</sup> Given that these highly aggressive moves by the Philippines occurred shortly after the US's announcement of its rebalance toward Asia, it was likely that the Philippines government made these moves as it felt emboldened by the US's strategic shift and assurance. These more combative actions from the Philippines in turn sparked off stronger nationalistic sentiments in China and led to the prolonged standoff between China and the Philippines over the islands. It is also important to note that a week into the confrontation, the US conducted a joint military exercise with the Philippines to reaffirm both nations' commitments to uphold their mutual defense partnership.<sup>24</sup>

Two subsequent incidents which also followed closely from the US's announcement of strategic shift, seem to indicate that other regional nations might have felt similarly emboldened to make stronger claims against China over the disputed islands. Specifically, the third incident involves the dispute between China and Vietnam over the Spratly and Paracel Islands. In June 2012, Vietnam legislated the Oceanic laws that claim ownership of both Paracel and Spratly.<sup>25</sup> In response, China established Sansha City (as a prefecture of the Hainan province) and a garrison on the Paracel Islands to better administer China's territories in the SCS.<sup>26</sup> In addition, China also announced new rules to allow police in the southern Chinese province of Hainan to board and seize control of foreign ships which "illegally enter" Chinese waters from 1 January 2013.<sup>27</sup> In view of these Chinese responses, the US commented that it was concerned with "unilateral moves that would seem to prejudice the issue."<sup>28</sup>

The fourth incident happened in September 2012 when the Japanese government announced the "purchase" of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands from the islands' private Japanese "owners" and implemented the "nationalization" of the islands. As a result, violent anti-Japanese demonstrations spread rapidly in China, and Japanese businesses in several Chinese cities were forced by the protests to close temporarily. In response, China also stepped up its claim on the islands and adopted a harder stance against Japan. The situation escalated rapidly with both countries sending ships to enforce their sovereignty around the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. This brinkmanship continues and in December 2012, China stated that it was "completely justified and necessary," when it flew a maritime surveillance aircraft into the airspace of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands for the first time to "safeguard China's territorial sovereignty and exercise the inherent power of China."<sup>29</sup> Japan responded by scrambling its fighters to the islands. In January 2013, China scrambled, for the first time, a pair of J-10 fighters after Japanese

F-15s began tailing a Chinese surveillance plane near the disputed islands. Japan also stated that it was considering the use of tracer shots to respond to future airspace incursions by Chinese aircraft.<sup>30</sup>

### **China's Perspectives on the Island Disputes**

The background and recent developments of the island disputes demonstrate that while China is receptive to putting aside the difficult territorial issues and collaborating with fellow claimant nations on common strategic interests, it would also respond to bolder challenges over its territorial sovereignty with an equally aggressive stance. As island disputes are territorial sovereignty issues that could not be resolved easily, China has shown that it is prepared to lay aside the differences and collaborate with its neighbors on common interests. China has indicated that its priority is to ensure “continued economic growth and stability,” and “broader declarations of goodwill, accommodation, and “win/win” solutions.”<sup>31</sup> However, when nations assert strong claims on the disputed islands and challenge China's territorial sovereignty, they end up provoking strong nationalistic sentiments among the Chinese, forcing China to adopt similar hard stance, and making the peaceful resolution of the issue even more difficult.

China reacted aggressively to the recent bolder claims by Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan because it continues to see these claims as unacceptable challenges to its territorial sovereignty. In addition, the need to appease the domestic nationalistic sentiments and the proliferation of social media has also attributed to China's bellicose and rapid responses. The domestic population, after receiving near-instantaneous news updates of challenges to their nation's sovereignty, would expect the Chinese government to respond in an equally swift and bold manner against these challenges.

Nevertheless, toward the ASEAN nations such as the Philippines and Vietnam, China seems open and ready to set aside their differences and to work together with these nations on common strategic interests. Mingjiang Li characterizes China's recent approach to the island disputes in the SCS as "non-confrontational assertiveness." According to Li, the majority of Chinese analysts and officials believe that the disputes in the SCS in the past few years have led to the worsening of China's regional security environment. They have, through frequent debates, proposed that China "be more proactive in the SCS in order to change its current reactive posture." They believe that China should take initiatives in three areas: "accelerating exploitation of resources in the SCS; restraining the involvement of the US in the SCS issue; and exercising greater flexibility in adopting multilateralism to deal with various non-traditional security challenges in the SCS."<sup>32</sup>

To illustrate its willingness to move beyond the differences and collaborate on common interests with the ASEAN nations, China has repeatedly stated that it wants to resolve the dispute with ASEAN countries through negotiations in accordance with the DoC. In addition, it has also reminded all claimant states that resolving disputes, an important principle of the DoC, was agreed by all nations that signed the declaration. To demonstrate its sincerity in addressing the issue, China announced in July 2012 that it is open to launching discussions on the Code of Conduct in the SCS, but calls for all parties to exercise self-restraint in keeping with the spirit of previous declarations and United Nations conventions.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, to allay fears of the international community, China has also declared that, "navigation freedom and safety in the SCS are fully guaranteed."<sup>34</sup>

In contrast, given the historical enmity between China and Japan, the recent bolder challenges from Japan have not only evoked stronger nationalistic sentiments, but also sparked



intense and violent anti-Japanese protests in China. As a result, the Chinese government has been responding with a harder stance, which has in turn led to the rapid escalation of the dispute. In fact, China has stated categorically that it has “the unshakable resolve and will to uphold the nation's territorial sovereignty,” and that it also has the “confidence and ability” to safeguard its state sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>35</sup> The Chinese media has stated that Japan is the “real danger and threat to the world” and that China “needs to prepare for the worst.”<sup>36</sup>

### **China’s Perspectives on the US’s Position**

Given how the US’s rebalance toward Asia and its position on the island disputes have influenced the dynamics of the territorial contention, China does not welcome unhelpful intervention from the US. In fact, the predominant view among Chinese analysts is that the tensions and disputes in the SCS are mainly attributed to the collusion between the US and regional claimant states.<sup>37</sup> China fears that foreign governments might be “stoking mistrust and enmity between China and its neighbors”<sup>38</sup> and “those who try to prevent or resent [China’s] rise might use the SCS to contain it.”<sup>39</sup>

Although China notes the US’s refusal to take a position on the individual territorial claims in the SCS, it feels that the US has been siding with both the Philippines and Vietnam on the disputes.<sup>40</sup> China complains that the US has moved from a policy of “non-alignment” to a policy of “active neutrality” where it conducts naval exercises with Vietnam and the Philippines to put pressure on China. It also claims that this policy by the US has “encouraged other countries to further consolidate their sovereignty claims, further strengthen their de facto occupation, and unilaterally exploit energy resources” in the SCS (especially the Spratly Islands).<sup>41</sup> As such, China requests that the US “keeps its commitment and makes efforts that help, rather than harm, regional peace and stability.”<sup>42</sup> China expresses hope that the “parties

concerned will support the consensus between China and the ASEAN members and make efforts that will boost mutual trust and stability in the region.”<sup>43</sup>

On the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands disputes, China views the “backroom deals” by the US—to “arbitrarily” place Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands under the trusteeship of the US in the 1950s, and the US’s subsequent “return” of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands to Japan under the Okinawa Reversion Agreement in 1971—as “acts of grave violations” of China’s territorial sovereignty that were “illegal and invalid” according to the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation.<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, although the US repeatedly states that it will not take sides on the territorial disputes between China and Japan, China feels that the US “should not send out signals that conflict with each other” and hopes the US would “keep its word” and “do more things that are conducive to [the] peace and stability in the region.”<sup>45</sup> The US Senate in December 2012 passed an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act which recognizes Japan’s rights of administration over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and states that any armed attack “in the territories under the administration of Japan” would be met under the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the US and Japan. China strongly opposes the US’s inclusion of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands under the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, as it “betrays” US’s repeated assertion of its neutrality in the dispute.<sup>46</sup> China views the treaty as a “product of the Cold War era,” and that it “should not go beyond bilateral scopes,” so as not to “undermine the interests of a third party.”<sup>47</sup>

### **Implications and Recommendations**

The recent developments and China’s perspectives on the disputes reveal that the US’s rebalance toward Asia could become counter-productive, as the US’s increased presence in Asia

is a fine balancing act that may also embolden regional countries to challenge China. China's perceptions of these bolder challenges to its territorial sovereignty have caused it to adopt a harder stance against the claimant states. Consequently, tensions have rapidly escalated and in the worst case, the US might be forced to confront China resulting in greater instability in the region.

The US's rebalance toward Asia has so far created an impression that the US may be siding or encouraging the regional countries in their island disputes with China. As the US continues to increase its presence in Asia, it needs to finely balance its actions in two key areas so as to avoid emboldening the regional countries. First, the way the US upholds the rule of law and international norms<sup>48</sup> in the region and exercises its neutrality on the disputes could potentially come across as siding with the regional countries against China. For example, although the US has repeatedly commented on China's aggressive responses, it remained largely silent on the regional nations' bolder claims and actions over the disputed islands. Second, the way the US goes about enhancing its military presence and alliances in the region could potentially be perceived as instigating countries to challenge China. For example, the conduct of military exercises between the US and the regional nations during these nations' recent standoffs with China over the disputed islands may have given the impression that the US was siding with these nations. In addition, during the recent Sino-Japanese standoff, the US's passing of an amendment to an Act that unambiguously places the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands under the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, may also have bolstered the Japanese resolve to engage in aggressive brinkmanship with China.

Given the inherent dynamics (the strong nationalistic sentiments and historical enmity) present in the island disputes in the Asia Pacific region, the emboldening of these nations to

challenge China has triggered even more aggressive response from China. Consequently, the tensions over the island disputes have rapidly escalated to a volatile situation with an increased likelihood of accidental armed conflict between China and its neighbors (as seen in the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands). When such conflict breaks out, the US with its current security arrangement with the regional countries would be forced to confront China or risk losing its credibility in Asia.

For the US to achieve its intent of enhancing the Asia Pacific's security and prosperity, it should not only prevent actions from escalating the tensions but also help mitigate the disputes. Specifically, the US needs to carefully calibrate its actions so as not to give the wrong impression that its increased presence in Asia is to contain China or that it condones regional countries to engage in reckless brinkmanship with China. Instead, the US should leverage its influence in the region to encourage nations to put aside their difficult differences and collaborate on common strategic interests and challenges such as counter-piracy, counter-terrorism, and joint exploration of natural resources in the disputed regions. The mutual confidence and trusts built from such collaborations would be useful in helping nations to come together to address the more difficult differences later. Such an approach would not only reduce the strategic risks, but also optimize the available opportunities in the region.

### **In Conclusion**

This paper has shown that the US's rebalance toward Asia to enhance the regional security and prosperity could become counter-productive, as its increased presence in Asia is a fine balancing act that may also embolden the regional countries to challenge China over the island disputes. China's perceptions of these bolder claims by the regional nations have led it to respond aggressively. As a result, tensions have heightened rapidly in the region, and if an armed

conflict breaks out, the US may be forced to confront instead of engage China. Going forward, the US should be careful not to send the message that its refocus toward Asia is to contain China or to embolden the regional nations against China. Instead, the US should leverage its relationships with the Asia Pacific nations to encourage them to collaborate with China to enhance security and economic development in the region.



## Endnotes

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