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The US Pivot to Asia: Will the Senkakus be its First Challenge?

By Anna Morris

Synopsis

Conflict between China and Japan over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands would carry a high cost for the United States. Washington would be well served by a clear, public position designed to deter future provocations over the islands and lower the risk of accidental escalation.

Commentary

THE AMERICAN PIVOT or strategic “rebalancing” toward Asia after a decade of intense focus on the Middle East and Afghanistan, may face its first test over a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea that are of no strategic value to the US. The Senkaku Islands are the scene of an increasingly militarised territorial dispute between Japan and China, both of which claim historical ownership.

Tensions have been on the rise since the Japanese government announced it would buy the Senkakus, also called the Diaoyus by China, from a private citizen in September 2012, inflaming Chinese official and popular anger. Since then, confrontations between the two Asian powers over the islands have intensified from verbal jockeying over the presence of Chinese survey vessels near the islands in September to the scrambling of fighter jets in December. The Japanese government recently alleged that a Chinese frigate locked its radar on a Japanese destroyer in January - an action fraught with the potential to turn into an actual exchange of fire.

What’s in it for Washington?

The possibility that Sino-Japanese tensions will escalate into an armed conflict, even a limited one, makes the dispute over these rocky outcroppings far from the US homeland deeply problematic for Washington. First, if future provocations follow the recent pattern of increasing militarisation, which heightens uncertainty and the potential for miscalculation among both parties, the US, as a treaty ally of Japan, could find itself drawn into a conflict between Asia’s two giants. Under the US-Japan Mutual Defence Treaty, both countries agree to “act to meet the common danger” of an armed attack on the US or Japan “in territories under Japanese administration.”

This does not mean an automatic show of force by the US over the Senkakus, which Washington considers under de facto Japanese administration, but it does put the US squarely on Japan’s side in the event of an armed clash. But were the conflict to escalate rapidly, the US would come under a great deal of pressure to intervene militarily on behalf of its most important Asian ally.

Second, how the US reacts to further provocations over the Senkakus will likely be read by its regional allies and strategic partners as indicative of Washington's *real* level of commitment to Asia. The pivot has been billed not only as a realignment of US diplomatic, economic, and military resources toward an increasingly powerful region, but also as a clear signal to its allies that the US is committed to them and to remaining the dominant Pacific power.

In a conflict over the Senkakus, even a limited one, a US decision not to intervene on behalf of a treaty ally would undermine the confidence of partners throughout the region. In the currently unfolding, albeit less dire, scenario of escalating tensions, the lack of a clear US position on how it would react may still undermine that confidence. But most importantly, to the extent that US intentions are unclear, either scenario is likely to elicit an increasingly assertive response from China at a time when the US is attempting to encourage China's peaceful rise. In fact, some experts interpret Chinese provocations over the Senkakus as, fundamentally, a test of the US commitment to the Pacific carried out under the pretext of a local territorial dispute.

Third, even if the US chose not to honour its treaty obligations in the event of an attack, it is not clear that it could afford to remain a bystander to conflict between the world's second and third largest economies for very long. The US has an overwhelming economic interest in forestalling confrontation between China and Japan: even limited war would be disastrous for both countries' economies, which do US\$345 billion in trade every year. The instability would send shock waves through global markets at a time when the US economy is seeing glimmers of hope after the worst recession since the Great Depression.

US intentions matter

The continued tensions over the Senkakus should, therefore, be deeply alarming to the US. Even if all-out war is unlikely, as Harvard professor Stephen Walt argues, the radar episode foreshadowed a situation in which momentary confusion could turn into a live-fire exchange, and it is not clear how much restraint either side would exercise. The costs of Sino-Japanese confrontation - disruption to the global economy, the high possibility of being drawn into conflict, and the loss of Chinese cooperation on a host of critical issues, including nuclear proliferation in North Korea and Iran - would be painfully high for the US.

If the US is indeed committed to remaining the dominant Pacific power, preserving peace in the region, and standing by its allies - which by all accounts it is - it would be best served by an active and coherent strategy designed to deter further provocations on the Senkakus. It is one that would include a clear, preferably public, position on what the US would do in the event of accidental escalation. This would, in a conflict, make the balance of power clear to all participants, reduce the risk stemming from miscalculation of US intentions on either side, have a cooling effect on future tensions and reaffirm the US commitment to the region.

There are signs that the US is moving in this direction: Japan's Nikkei newspaper recently reported that Tokyo and Washington are developing a joint military plan on retaking the islands if they are seized by China. A private conversation with its ally Japan would also be in order to ensure that articulating such position does not also embolden Tokyo to take action that heightens tensions. Ultimately, strategic ambiguity over the dispute does the US no favours - the stakes of a conflict, even a limited one, are simply too high.

Anna Morris is an Associate Research Fellow with the United States Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.