

Taiwan and the Diaoyutai Islands: Historical and Regional Perspectives

Issue No. 15

December 2012

A relatively small chain of islands in the East China Sea has been the focal point of potential maritime conflict between Taiwan (R.O.C.), China (P.R.C.), and Japan for several decades, with escalating rhetoric in recent years. Known to Taiwan as the Diaoyutai, to China as the Diaoyu and to Japan as the Senkaku islands, this dispute was discussed at a Taiwan Roundtable entitled "[Taiwan and the Diaoyutai Islands: Historical and Regional Perspectives](#)" held by the Sigur Center for Asian Studies on November 20, 2012. Experts on the history and contemporary international affairs of East Asia met to offer their insights on the background and future implications of the conflict over this disputed territory.

Taiwan's Case for Sovereignty: Background and Critiques

Dr. Steven Phillips, Professor of History at Towson University, offered a historical perspective on Taiwan's claims to the islands. He stated that Taiwan's interest in the islands is based on maintaining its own historical legitimacy through territorial claims. Taiwan does not necessarily have to "win" in its pursuit of sovereignty over the islands, but it does not want to be seen as having "lost" the islands to Japan or having allowed the P.R.C.'s "Chinese" claim to trump its own. From this point of view, Dr. Phillips contended that the *process* of asserting sovereignty is just as important as any eventual outcome.

Dr. Phillips outlined three main arguments in the case made by Taiwan.

The first is simply geography. The islands are situated closest to Taiwan. The second is history. The Chinese were the first people to document the islands and they have the longest record of contact with them, dating back at least to the Ming Dynasty. As the "Republic of China," the Taiwan government asserts that it succeeded to the sovereignty over these islands originally held by China's last imperial dynasty. The third category is international law and agreements. Both China and Taiwan insist that Japan's claims to the islands are illegitimate since they are based on territory gained through imperialism. According to the Chinese and Taiwan governments, the Cairo Declaration following WWII annulled these claims.

Dr. Phillips also offered a critique of Taiwan's territorial claims. He stated that there is actually far too much competing information available on the issue; all sides involved have maps and documents proving their case. In regards to the Cairo Declaration, the islands were so little discussed in relation to other issues that it gives the impression that they were hardly worth considering, let alone worthy of international conflict. In addition, a major problem for Taiwan is that it is the weakest of the three parties involved in the dispute, and so has little power to enforce any of the claims it makes. Finally, Taiwan's position risks appearing too similar to the P.R.C.'s, which could undermine Taiwan's own claims to sovereignty and complicates other territorial disputes.

A Regional and Strategic Context

Dr. Michael Yahuda, Visiting Scholar at the Sigur Center, agreed with Dr. Phillips' general assessment that the underlying issues of the dispute have deep historical roots and are

unlikely to go away. He also elaborated on the dynamics between China and Japan over the issue as well as R.O.C. President Ma Ying-jeou's East China Sea Peace Initiative. He noted in particular Ma's proposal to allow fisherman to go into the waters around the Diaoyutai islands freely, leaving sovereignty issues aside. The peace initiative also acts to highlight Taiwan's separateness from China, since Taiwan conceived of and proposed the idea independently of China.

While the Initiative arguably highlights Taiwan's perceived separateness in the region, Dr. Yahuda pointed to the existence of an underlying strategic dilemma: the only way that the Chinese can reach the Western Pacific Ocean is by traversing the straits between Taiwan and Japan where the Diaoyutai islands are located. Consequently, the more Taiwan is seen as strategically important by Japan and the U.S. in light of China's growing naval power, and the more independently it acts and is perceived, the more concerned China will become.

This is especially true considering that China has been able to win over few allies on the Diaoyutai dispute.

Finally, Dr. Yahuda concluded that while China and Japan may invoke international law in their pronouncements on the islands, international law will not work in moving either side from their absolutist positions. Neither China nor Japan wishes to bring the issue before an international court, and a solution will likely have to be reached by the parties themselves. Only then would international law become useful in formalizing a permanent agreement.

The U.S. Foreign Policy Perspective

According to **Dr. Robert Sutter**, Professor of the Practice of International Affairs at GW, a peaceful resolution of the dispute would serve U.S. foreign policy interests. Thus Dr. Sutter discussed President Ma's peace initiative and active stance from a U.S. foreign policy perspective. He also placed the dispute in the context of a recent U.S. "pivot," or reengagement with Asia, as well as in light of increased "Chinese bullying," or the use of extraordinary power by China in the region. In addition, he examined the dispute in light of improved U.S.-Taiwan relations. One example of this improved relationship is the resolution of Taiwan's ban of U.S. beef containing the additive ractopamine, which has paved the way for more trade talks and senior level visits. Finally, the issue is complicated by the uncertain leadership situations in Japan, South Korea and the U.S, with no decision yet made on a replacement for Secretary of State Hillary Clinton or Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta.

Dr. Sutter stated that President Ma's call for three-party talks and his diplomatic initiative were consistent with the U.S. approach of trying to calm things down and avoid any further escalation. The U.S. is likely also pleased that Taiwan does not appear to be collaborating with China on the Diaoyutai issue. However, Dr. Sutter posits that the U.S. would prefer that Taiwan not complicate the issue as it detracts from Washington's ability to pursue diplomatic and economic reengagement in the region, including with China. Reengagement in the region takes on higher priority than improved ties with any one country. Therefore, further action by Taiwan would probably not be welcome by the U.S.

One conclusion that seemed clear by the end of the roundtable was that there is no universally accepted position regarding who deserves sovereignty over the disputed islands. Instead, it appears to be an issue that will continue to complicate regional developments as well as U.S. foreign policy until some sort of consensus is reached.

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