

BATTLING CURRENTS IN THE EAST CHINA SEA: CLAIMS, INTERESTS AND CLASHES BETWEEN CHINA AND JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

The East China Sea has emerged as a critical flashpoint in the Indo-Pacific, shaped by overlapping territorial and maritime claims as well as strategic competition between China and Japan. While the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and the surrounding waters carry significant geopolitical value, the deeper roots of the ongoing dispute lie in the broader struggle for regional influence and control over resources. As a result, the increasing militarisation and conflicting assertions of sovereignty have heightened the risk of miscalculation, posing serious threats to regional peace and stability. Against this backdrop, the paper adopts a three-fold framework: first, it outlines the nature of the dispute to assess the perceptual gap between China and Japan; second, it examines the national interests that shape their respective behaviours; and finally, it evaluates the clashes and potential contingencies arising from the growing volatility between the two countries in the East China Sea.

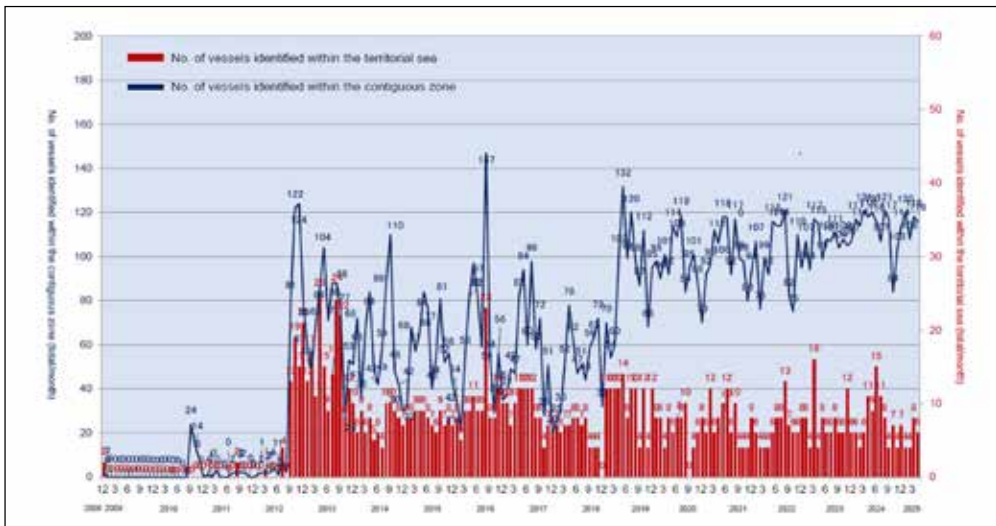
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INTRODUCTION

In March 2025, two Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) ships operated within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit in Japan's territorial sea in the East China Sea for over 92 hours, setting a new record for the longest-ever stay by surpassing the previous record of about 80 and a half hours.¹ Around the same time, China had expelled four Japanese fishing vessels from waters near the disputed Diaoyu Islands (Senkaku Islands for Japan). The Chinese coastguard spokesman Liu Dejun described the response as “*necessary control measures*” to drive the Japanese boats away after they entered what China considers its territorial sea.² The frequency and intensity of such incidents, coupled with the ongoing military build-up by both countries, have heightened the risk of military conflict in the East China Sea in recent years.

Notably, activities by China's maritime law-enforcement agencies have significantly increased in the territorial sea off the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. According to the Japan Coast Guard (JCG), CCG ships have intruded on the territorial sea surrounding the islands 68 times since September 11, 2012—a substantial increase from the previous year. This was followed by 188 vessels penetrating the territorial sea in 2013, 88 in 2014, and 86 in 2015. Thus, on average, the CCG entered the territorial sea with 7-10 vessels a month and the contiguous zones with 70-90 vessels a month.³ Over the years, there has been a significant surge in the near-daily manoeuvres around the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, as evidenced by the JCG database (see Figure 1). It is important to note that, except for a minor incident in 2008,^a China had not deployed any government ships to the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands since the 1970s.^b

Figure 1. Trends of Chinese vessels in the waters surrounding the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands (as of 30 April 2025)



Source: MOFA, Japan, 2025⁴

In 2024, a total of 1,351 Chinese government ships operated in the contiguous zone for a record of 355 days⁵—higher than in 2023, when a total of 1,287

a On 8 December 2008, the Chinese government vessels made a sudden intrusion into Japan's territorial sea surrounding the Diaoyu/ Senkaku Islands- highlighting China's new position concerning the Islands, one that had never been observed before.

b In 1978, when Japanese conservatives called on Tokyo to demand China's recognition of Japanese sovereignty over the Diaoyu/ Senkaku Islands as a prerequisite to the signing of the 1978 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, then Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping sent a flotilla of 80 to 100 lightly armed fishing vessels to the islands to assert Chinese sovereignty.

Chinese government ships operated in the contiguous zone for a record of 353 days.⁶ According to reports, China planned to maintain ships near the Japan-controlled Senkaku Islands every day in 2024, under Xi Jinping's directive to "*constantly strengthen*" efforts to safeguard China's sovereignty over the islands.⁷ Furthermore, in August 2024, Japan's Defence Ministry confirmed that a Chinese military intelligence-gathering aircraft entered its territorial airspace off remote islands in the East China Sea,⁸ marking Tokyo's first such accusation against the People's Liberation Army Air Force of violating its territorial airspace, and adding a new irritant to the dispute. These dispositions represent China's increasing efforts to directly challenge Japan's long-standing administrative authority over the Diaoyu/ Senkaku Islands through a consistent pattern of incursions.

Against the frequent presence of Chinese vessels, Japan has also been enhancing its deterrence and response capabilities by building defence footholds on the Nansei Islands, a chain that stretches southwest from Kyushu toward Taiwan.⁹ For instance, a 2024 South China Morning Post report suggests that Japan has deployed an airborne early warning and control system aircraft, a patrol plane and a helicopter to the area, located near Okinawa, along with at least one marine destroyer.¹⁰ Therefore, both sides, with their military build-up and assertive posturing in the East China Sea, have increased the risks of contingencies in the region.

Against this backdrop, the paper seeks to examine three key aspects: first, the nature of the dispute as perceived by China and Japan; second, the interests that their actions; and finally, the evolving conflict scenarios arising from the increasing volatility in their bilateral ties.

MAPPING THE DISPUTE: TERRITORIAL AND MARITIME CLAIMS

After the normalisation of diplomatic ties in 1972, it was not until 1978 that the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute emerged as a more visible and disturbing issue between China and Japan.^c However, during the Cold War, both countries

c In 1978, when Japanese conservatives called on Tokyo to demand China's recognition of Japanese sovereignty over the Diaoyu/ Senkaku Islands as a prerequisite to the signing of the 1978 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, then Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping sent a flotilla of 80 to 100 lightly armed fishing vessels to the Islands to assert Chinese sovereignty. See, James Manicom, *Bridging Troubled Waters: China, Japan, and Maritime Order in the East China Sea* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014) pp. 45-49. After a stand-off lasting over a week, the Chinese vessels withdrew and negotiations resumed.

consciously chose to set the issue aside to maintain regional peace and preserve the territorial status quo. In October 1978, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping acknowledged the differences but emphasised the importance of deferral, stating:

*“It is true that the two sides maintain different views on this question (East China Sea) ... It does not matter if this question is shelved for some time, say, ten years. Our generation is not wise enough to find common language on this question. Our next generation will certainly be wiser. They will certainly find a solution acceptable to all.”*¹¹

At the core of this dispute lies a fundamental divergence in perception, beginning with the very name of the islands: what China calls *Diaoyu Dao*, Japan refers to as the *Senkaku* Islands. However, the disagreement goes deeper than nomenclature; rather, it is rooted in two intertwined issues: the question of sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands (a territorial dispute) and differing views on how maritime boundaries should be drawn in the East China Sea (a maritime dispute). This gap in perception can be best understood by examining the specific claims made by each side.

Territorial disputes often arise over the ownership of the land features scattered across maritime regions. In the East China Sea, the dispute between China and Japan centres on competing sovereignty claims over the five islets and three rocks, known as the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Although the islands are currently administered by Japan, China claims that they were historically Chinese territory, asserting that the islands were “*first discovered, named and used by the Chinese as early as the 14th century.*”¹² Beijing supports its position with historical records, asserting that the Diaoyu Islands were documented in Chinese texts dating back to 1372, which describe the islands being used as navigational aids and as an operational base for Chinese fishermen, and later incorporated into China’s maritime defences in 1556.¹³ China further cites Japanese historian Kiyoshi Inoue, who concluded that, “*these islands are territory of the People’s Republic of China, the only authority over the entire China*”, affirming that the “*People’s Republic of China alone has title to them... There can be no other historical conclusion!*”¹⁴ Officially, China maintains that the Diaoyu Islands have always been an integral part of its territory, stating:

*“Diaoyu Dao and its affiliated islands are an inseparable part of the Chinese territory. Diaoyu Dao is China’s inherent territory in all historical, geographical and legal terms, and China enjoys indisputable sovereignty over Diaoyu Dao. Japan’s occupation of Diaoyu Dao during the Sino-Japanese War in 1895.”*¹⁵

Further reinforcing its historical claims, Beijing adds: “*The Diaoyu Islands are an integral part of China’s territory. [And] China’s sovereignty over the Diaoyu Islands has a sufficient historical and legal basis.*”¹⁶

These official narratives reflect three key aspects of China’s position: first, that it acknowledges the existence of a dispute between the two countries; second, that it believes that its claims over the sovereignty of the Diaoyu Islands is rightful; and third, that this claim is rooted in an irredentist logic to reclaim what it perceives as historically rightful territory.

In contrast, Tokyo’s official discourse categorically denies that a territorial dispute exists, rejecting Beijing’s claims. The Japanese government states:

*“There is no doubt that the Senkaku Islands are clearly an inherent part of the territory of Japan, in light of historical facts and based upon international law. Indeed, the Senkaku Islands are under the valid control of Japan. There exists no issue of territorial sovereignty to be resolved concerning the Senkaku Islands.”*¹⁷

Thus, while Beijing acknowledges the presence of a territorial dispute, Tokyo denies the existence of any such issue altogether, highlighting the fundamental gap in perception between the two nations.

Japan maintains that the Senkaku Islands have consistently been part of its territory in the post-war international order and under established international law. This position is supported by several historical and legal assertions, such as:

“In January 1895, after having carefully ascertained that there had been no trace of control over the Senkaku Islands by another state prior to that period, the Government of Japan incorporated the islands into the Japanese territory by lawful means under the international legal framework which existed at that time.

After World War II, the San Francisco Peace Treaty placed the Senkaku Islands under the administration of the United States as part of Okinawa, thereby reaffirming the islands’ status as part of Japanese territory.

*Furthermore, the Senkaku Islands were included in the 1972 Okinawa Reversion Agreement between the United States and Japan as part of the area over which the administrative rights were returned to Japan.”*¹⁸

In support of this claim, Japan cites the Okinawa Reversion Treaty of 1971, which states that:

*“[the Senkaku Islands] were included in the areas whose administrative rights were reverted to Japan in accordance with the Agreement between Japan and the United States of America Concerning the Ryukyu Islands and the Daito Islands, which came into force in May 1972.”*¹⁹

To counter China's irredentist claims, Japan emphasises its administrative authority over the islands based on the principle of *terra nullius*—land without an owner. In Japan's view, the disputed islands were acquired by 'discovery occupation', one of the recognised modes of territorial acquisition under international law, whereby valid title over a piece of territory can be acquired through occupation if it was recognised as *terra nullius*.²⁰

Tokyo's claims over the islands are founded on three perspectives: First, that the Senkaku Islands have historically been part of the Nansei Shoto island chain, which falls within Japanese territory. Second, that the islands were neither part of Taiwan nor the Pescadores, which were ceded to Japan by the Qing Dynasty under the Treaty of Shimonoseki. Third, that China did not object when the Islands were placed under the administration of the United States, under Article III of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, indicating that it did not consider the islands part of Taiwan.²¹ Based on this three-tier perspective, Japan rejects China's historical and geographical claims over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands as invalid under international law. Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs pamphlet, entitled "*The Senkaku Islands*", clearly mentions that: "*Japan has been exercising effective control over the Senkaku Islands for more than 120 years. China began to claim sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands, escalating its assertion from the 1970s*".²²

On the other end, China negates Japan's claims based on the principle of 'discovery occupation' as the islands were not *terra nullius* by officially arguing that "*Diaoyu Dao was first discovered, named and exploited by China*" and further positing that Japan "*grabbed Diaoyu Dao*" from China.²³ Given this, China firmly argues that Japan's occupation of the islands as part of the Treaty of Shimonoseki of the First Sino–Japanese War in 1895 is "*illegal and invalid*."²⁴ It further claims that the islands should have been returned to China under the Cairo (1943) and Potsdam (1945) Declarations, which stated that Japan must return all territories stolen from China.²⁵

Furthermore, Beijing regards Tokyo's claims as "*totally unfounded*", presenting three core arguments, based on the illegality of occupation, affiliation with Taiwan and misapplication of the Treaty of San Francisco.²⁶ First, Japan's act to include Diaoyu Dao as "*terra nullius*" into its territory based on the "*occupation*" principle is an illegal act of occupying Chinese territory, having no legal effect according to international law. Second, that Diaoyu Dao has always been linked to Taiwan both geographically and by China's historical jurisdiction practice, and thus,

through the unequal Treaty of Shimonoseki, Japan had forced the Qing court to cede to it “*the island of Taiwan, together with all islands appertaining or belonging to it*”, including Diaoyu Dao. Finally, China contends that the Diaoyu Dao was not placed under the trusteeship established by the Treaty of San Francisco; and that the United States arbitrarily expanded the scope of trusteeship to include the Chinese territory of Diaoyu Dao, whose “*power of administration*” was later “*returned*” to Japan.

These conflicting justifications underscore the depth of the sovereignty dispute. More than a legal disagreement, the issue reflects deeper geopolitical ambitions—particularly China’s efforts to challenge Japan’s administrative control over the Diaoyu/ Senkaku Islands and assert its jurisdiction in the East China Sea.

Maritime Claims

Beyond the territorial dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, tensions also extend to the demarcation of the sea boundary and competing interpretations of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in the East China Sea (see Table 1 below). At the heart of the maritime dispute is an overlapping assertion of the 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). Japan claims a full 200-nautical-mile EEZ and continental shelf in the area; however, its domestic law suggests that the median line be treated as a de facto boundary when there are unresolved, overlapping claims with another country. In contrast, China claims its own 200-nautical-mile EEZ while also claiming an extended continental shelf that stretches beyond the median line and reaches further toward Japan.²⁷

This maritime dimension adds further complexity to the dispute, as both countries anchor their claims in legal interpretations of UNCLOS while pursuing broader strategic and economic interests in the region.

In 1992, China enacted the Law on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone, explicitly referring to the Diaoyu Islands as Chinese territory. Article 2 of the Law states:

“The territorial sea of the People’s Republic of China is the sea belt adjacent to the land territory and the internal waters of the People’s Republic of China. The land territory of the People’s Republic of China includes the mainland of the People’s Republic of China and its

Table 1. Claimants in the East China Sea

China	Japan	Taiwan
Straight baselines connecting base-points on the mainland coast and the outermost coastal islands	A system of straight baselines	-
A territorial sea extending 12 nautical miles from these baselines and offshore islands, including specifically the Diaoyu/ Senkaku Islands	A 12-nautical-mile territorial sea extending from these straight baselines (but only 3 nautical miles in the Korea Strait and other straits)	A 12-nautical-mile territorial sea
A contiguous zone extending 12 nautical miles from the territorial sea	An unspecified continental shelf	A continental shelf extending throughout the natural prolongation of its land territory to the edge of the continental margin
A continental shelf extending throughout the natural prolongation of its land territory to the outer edge of the continental margin, that is, presumably to the Okinawa Trough, although no precise limits of the claim have been published	A 200-nautical-mile EEZ from the straight baselines, although the claim to the west and north of the Diaoyu/Senkaku features has purposely been left vague (one option considered by Japan was to exempt waters bordering South Korea and China from its EEZ claim)	A 200-nautical-mile EEZ
Sovereignty over the Diaoyu/ Senkaku Islands, but not a continental shelf or EEZ extending from the features	Sovereignty over the Diaoyu/ Senkaku features	Sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, but not a continental shelf or EEZ extending from the features

Source: Compiled by the author with reference to Valencia²⁸

*coastal islands; Taiwan and all islands appertaining there to including the Diaoyu Islands; the Penghu Islands; the Dongsha Islands; the Xisha Islands; the Zhongsha Islands and the Nansha Islands; as well as all the other islands belonging to the People's Republic of China. The waters on the landward side of the baselines of the territorial sea of the People's Republic of China constitute the internal waters of the People's Republic of China.*²⁹

According to the Japanese Foreign Ministry, this was the first official mention of the Diaoyu Islands by Beijing, and it noted that no such reference existed in China's 1958 Declaration on the Territorial Sea.³⁰ In response, Japan took several legal and administrative measures to secure its claims. For instance, in 1996, Tokyo ratified the UNCLOS and established the Law on the Territorial

Sea and the Contiguous Zone, as well as the Law on the EEZ and continental shelf and established an EEZ around the Senkaku Islands, although it did not include the Senkaku Islands in its straight baseline claims. In 2007, Japan further reinforced its legal framework by passing the Basic Law of the Ocean and the Law on Establishing Safety Areas for Maritime Structures.³¹

A major point of contention lies in the overlapping EEZs. China invokes the UNCLOS principle of the natural extension of its continental shelf, delineating its boundary at the Okinawa Trough, just west of the Ryukyu Island chain. Japan, by contrast, marks the boundary halfway between the Ryukyus and the Chinese mainland. This has created overlapping maritime claims of nearly 81,000 square kilometres.³²

Material Interests

The sovereignty clash between China and Japan is further intensified by the material interests at stake, particularly the valuable resource deposits in the East China Sea. Economically, the waters surrounding the East China Sea hold strategic importance for both nations due to their rich hydrocarbon resources and fisheries, which are vital to their energy and food security. As major global energy and fishery consumers, both nations rely heavily on oil, natural gas, and fish stocks from these contested waters.

This ‘material’ dimension is central to understanding the origins of the dispute. The tension over territorial and maritime claims only surfaced following a 1969 geological survey of the East China Sea, by the Committee for Co-ordination of Joint Prospecting for Mineral Resources in Asian Offshore Areas of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, which revealed the promising signs of oil reserves in the sea around the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands.³³ Following this discovery, on 20 April 1971, Taiwan claimed sovereignty over the Diaoyutai Lieyu (as it is known in Taiwan), and on 30 December 1971, China formally asserted sovereignty over the Diaoyu Islands.³⁴ This resource-driven dimension was even acknowledged at the 1972 Japan-China Summit Meeting in Beijing. When Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka asked Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai about how the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands issue should be addressed, Zhou replied:

“I don’t want to talk about the Senkaku Islands this time. It is not good to discuss this now. It became an issue because of the oil out there. If there wasn’t oil neither Taiwan nor the United States would make this an issue.”³⁵

Arguably, the energy factor remains the principal driver of the ongoing dispute. China is currently the world’s largest importer of crude oil, while Japan is the largest importer of liquefied natural gas (LNG). In 2023, China imported 11.3 million barrels per day (b/d) of crude oil (a 10 per cent increase from 2022),³⁶ while Japan imported approximately 147.66 million kiloliters of crude oil.³⁷ In 2022, China and Japan imported 93.2 and 98.3 billion cubic meters of LNG, respectively.³⁸

This material need justifies the increasingly assertive behaviour of the countries in securing their access to the East China Sea resources. According to American estimates:

“The East China Sea has about 200 million barrels of oil (MMbbl) in proved and probable reserves. Chinese sources claim that undiscovered resources can be as high as 70 to 160 billion barrels of oil for the entire East China Sea, mostly in the Okinawa trough. Other sources have not corroborated these reports. Moreover, undiscovered resources do not take into account economic factors relevant to bring them into production, unlike proved and probable reserves. [...] EIA estimates that the East China Sea has between 1 and 2 trillion cubic feet (Tcf) of proved and probable natural gas reserves. The region may also have significant upside potential in terms of natural gas. Chinese sources point to as much as 250 Tcf in undiscovered natural gas resources, mostly in the Okinawa trough, although these have not been independently verified.”³⁹

In particular, the Xihu Sag in the East China Sea Shelf Basin (ECSSB) is believed to contain abundant hydrocarbon resources, primarily natural gas and condensate oil.⁴⁰ With such a high value attached to the East China Sea, it is estimated that the oil and natural gas reserves in the East China Sea would be enough to meet China’s needs for at least 80 years. For Japan, the abundance of manganese in the waters near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands is essential to meet its needs for 320 years, while there are also substantial reserves of cobalt (enough for 1300 years), enough nickel (100 years), and enough natural gas (100 years), alongside other mineral resources and a rich supply of fish.⁴¹

Consequently, both China and Japan have engaged in resource exploration in the East China Sea, making ‘unilateral exploration’ a significant point of serious contention. The first incident that escalated tensions occurred in 2003, when Chinese oil companies established a production platform at the Chunxiao gas

field near the Japanese maritime boundary. The Japanese Government demanded geological proof that China was not tapping into Japan's reserves—a demand Beijing rejected. In 2004, Tokyo sent a seismic survey ship to the maritime border zone, prompting Beijing to respond with naval surveillance, submarine deployment, and the despatch of two destroyer ships in the disputed area.⁴²

However, in the subsequent years, Chinese activities in the disputed zone expanded. In 2017, China installed three jack-up rigs in the area – Haiyang Shiyou 942, Kantan Qihao, and Kaixuan Yihao.⁴³ In 2022, China installed a new production platform near the median line with Japan in the East China Sea— the first new permanent platform to be installed in the area since 2015. This triggered a protest from Tokyo, which maintains that the two countries should share the area's hydrocarbons under international law.⁴⁴ As of 2023, the Japanese government has confirmed that 18 Chinese structures have been built on the Chinese side of the equidistance line between Japan and China.⁴⁵ The China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) is the primary operator in the area, with its East China Sea assets representing approximately 2.9 per cent of the company's total reserves and approximately 1.7 per cent of its production.⁴⁶ In contrast, Japan's drilling activity has remained relatively limited. Tokyo accuses Beijing of unilateral development in the absence of maritime delimitation. Japan argues that the maritime delimitation should be conducted based on the geographical equidistance line between Japan and China.⁴⁷

Notably, in 2008, China and Japan reached a “Joint Development Area” agreement covering 2,700 square kilometres along the disputed boundary to jointly develop natural resources in the East China Sea. According to the “2008 Consensus”:

“Both sides will, through joint exploration, select sites for joint development by mutual agreement and conduct joint development at the sites based on the principle of mutual benefit. Details will be decided by the both sides through consultation.”⁴⁸

However, the growing tensions over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute led to the collapse of follow-up efforts on the 2008 Consensus,^d including a plan

d During the negotiation of the 2008 joint understanding, the Chinese had demanded joint development of energy resources in the area around the Diaoyu/ Senkaku Islands in exchange for their compromise on joint development in other areas of the East China Sea. Although the Chinese government agreed to the understanding without getting satisfaction on its demand, the failure to achieve greater reciprocity from the Japanese in the Diaoyu/Senkaku area then made it domestically impossible for the Chinese government to go any further with negotiating an implementation of the understanding.

to allow Japan to join the Chunxiao gas field exploitation, which lies within a disputed EEZ area.⁴⁹ The designated development sites lie across the 2700 square kilometre area extending over the median line proposed by Japan and include the Chunxiao/Shirakaba oil and gas field. Ultimately, the way each country interprets and implements the agreement reflects the divergence in approaches, deepening the dispute over sovereignty and resource control.

Furthermore, the East China Sea is rich in fisheries, hosting over 800 species. Of these, approximately 40-50 species, including yellow croakers, hairtail and squid, hold significant commercial value. It is estimated that the region's annual fish productivity could reach up to 3.4 million tons—a vital asset for both countries' fishing economies.⁵⁰ This dimension has further compounded tensions, with overfishing and control measures by each side repeatedly fueling the dispute. In 1997, China and Japan signed a joint agreement on “cooperation of fisheries” (effective from 2000), which also established a provisional measures zone regarding parts of EEZs where states' claims overlapped and pending final maritime delimitation.⁵¹ Despite the agreement, violations persist. China criticises Japan's control measures as a projection of ‘illegal sovereignty’ in the disputed area, while Japan accuses Chinese fishing vessels of illegal activity in its EEZ. In response, both countries have ramped up coast guard deployments. Japan deploys its coast guard to monitor Chinese fishing activities, and China has increased its coast guard presence to protect its fishing interests. These actions are often described as “grey-zone tactics,” used by both sides to reinforce their sovereignty claims without triggering a direct conflict.⁵²

While access to marine resources carries economic significance, the core of the East China Sea dispute, from a broader strategic perspective, centres on the geopolitical contest for regional influence and control. This makes the East China Sea a multifaceted issue, which can be summarised as:⁵³

- (a) Disputes over the sovereignty of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands;
- (b) Disputes over maritime rights and interests in the surrounding waters of the East China Sea;
- (c) The increasing activities of Chinese naval vessels passing through international waters, through the Japanese archipelago into the Western Pacific, compounded by Japan's air scrambles;

- (d) Disputes concerning the overlapping Air Defence Identification Zones (ADIZs)^e; and
- (e) Disputes over unilateral exploration of resources in the East China Sea.

These overlapping concerns have transformed the East China Sea into a strategic flashpoint between China and Japan.

Incidents, Escalations, and Contingency Risks

The East China Sea issue was a minor irritant but has evolved into a potential flashpoint of conflict in the twenty-first century. Although tensions over the islands and the surrounding waters existed in the 1970s, the dispute escalated sharply in the 21st century, elevating the risks of an unwarranted contingency between China and Japan.

The first major trigger occurred in September 2010, when a Chinese fishing boat collided with two Japanese Coast Guard vessels in waters off the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. The Japanese Coast Guard arrested the Chinese trawler captain, prompting China's Foreign Ministry to respond: "*The Japanese side applying domestic law to the Chinese fishing boat operating in this area is absurd, illegal and invalid, and China will never accept it*".⁵⁴ Beijing further demanded the "unconditional" release of the captain and the vessel, justifying its patrols as the first of many with the dispatch of Fisheries Law Enforcement Command vessels to the disputed waters. This incident was a turning point in China's East China Sea policy. Until that point, except for a minor incident in 2008,^f China had not deployed any government ships to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands since the 1970s (when Deng Xiaoping sent a flotilla of lightly armed fishing vessels to the islands to assert Chinese sovereignty

e An ADIZ is a defined area extending beyond national territory in which unidentified aircraft are liable to be interrogated and, if necessary, intercepted for identification before they cross into sovereign airspace. Such zones presumably serve national security interests, primarily by providing adequate early warning of aircraft entering or flying near a country's territorial airspace. The US established the first ADIZ in the 1950s, to reduce the risk of a surprise attack from the Soviet Union.

f On 8 December 2008, the Chinese government vessels made a sudden intrusion into Japan's territorial sea surrounding the Diaoyu/ Senkaku Islands. The incident made clear China's new position concerning the Diaoyu/ Senkaku Islands, one that had never been observed before. See, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.

in 1978). However, after the trawler incident, Chinese maritime law enforcement established a more regular presence in the contested area. The event also led to a diplomatic fallout, a rise in anti-Japanese protests, and the suspension of talks between Beijing and Tokyo. Ultimately, yielding to Chinese pressure, Japan released the Chinese trawler captain after two weeks of detention.^g

While tensions were somewhat diffused, a more severe setback occurred in September 2012, when the Japanese government under Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda announced its decision to ‘purchase’ the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and their affiliated Nanxiao Island and Beixiao Islands—a move described by Tokyo as ‘nationalisation’.^h The Chinese government strongly condemned the action, stating that the “*Diaoyu Islands cannot be bought.*”⁵⁵ Raising discontent against Japan’s actions at the UN General Assembly, then Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi made provocative remarks: “*The moves taken by Japan are totally “illegal” and “invalid,” which can in no way change the “historical fact” that Japan stole the Diaoyu Islands from China and the fact that China has territorial sovereignty over them.*”⁵⁶

This nationalisation triggered one of the largest anti-Japanese protests in China since diplomatic normalisation in 1972. In its military response, China intensified a penetration campaign into the surrounding waters of the disputed islands by Chinese MLE vessels—mainly civilian fishing boats or possibly vessels representing the para-naval People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia or Chinese Coast Guard. However, China justified these maritime activities to be lawful, describing them as ‘maritime surveillance’, performing ‘law enforcement over its maritime rights’. Since this episode, the risks of miscalculations and unwarranted circumstances between China and Japan in the East China Sea have been elevated. A further flashpoint came in November 2013, when China unilaterally established an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea, overlapping

g The intensifying diplomatic crisis between China and Japan halted abruptly when on 24 September, the deputy prosecutor in Ishigaki announced the release of the Chinese fishing captain, stating that the “diplomatic impact” of this case suggested this unprecedented interruption of legal proceedings. See, Smith, “Japan and the East China Sea Dispute”, p. 376.

h According to Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the lands of the three islands that are now owned by the Government of Japan were previously owned by the Government of Japan until 1932. A private citizen acquired the lands later, and the Government of Japan has decided to reacquire the lands this time. Moreover, the Government of Japan has consistently retained ownership of Taisho Island, which is also the part of the Senkaku Islands. See, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Situation of the Senkaku Islands”.

with Japan's ADIZ and covering the airspace above the disputed islands. Japan condemned this violation as an infringement of international norms regarding the freedom of overflight above the high seas. The move escalated the risks of accidental confrontation and was widely interpreted as an attempt by Beijing to unilaterally alter the status quo.

Therefore, what was once a peripheral issue has become a focus of regional stability. Although Japan's 2012 nationalisation of islands acted as a key trigger, the sustained volatility that followed has largely been driven by China's assertive actions, such as the establishment of the ADIZ in 2013, and the frequent incursions that directly challenge Japan's administrative control.

Hence, the East China Sea has evolved into a 'flash point' in the Indo-Pacific. In general, flashpoints refer to geographic areas that possess the potential to erupt suddenly into violent conflict, often due to longstanding, unresolved conflict. Timothy Hoyt identified that flashpoints share three common features: "politics, proximity and paranoia." According to him:

"Flashpoints, in essence, (1) must be at the forefront of a significant and long-standing political dispute, (2) tend to become greater concerns if they are proximate to both adversaries, and (3) are of greatest concern when they threaten to involve or engage more powerful actors in the international community, raising the possibility of escalation to a broader war."⁵⁷

The East China Sea meets all these criteria. Similarly, Brendon Taylor includes the East China Sea among Asia's principal flashpoints, alongside the Korean Peninsula, South China Sea and Taiwan.⁵⁸ In the East China Sea context, the triggers to the maritime insecurity in the region include:⁵⁹ (a) disputes over islands; (b) disputes over maritime rights and interests; (c) the Chinese Navy passing through international waters, through the Japanese archipelago and into the Western Pacific; and (d) overlapping ADIZs.

Despite the absence of open conflict thus far, the risk of escalation remains tangible. Zack Cooper has warned that as China's maritime capabilities grow and the margin of the Japan-U.S. alliance's supremacy narrows, "the likelihood of an incident is growing".⁶⁰ This concern is further magnified by:⁶¹

- (a) China's increasing efforts to directly challenge and undermine Japan's long-standing administrative authority over the islands through a fairly regular pattern of incursions into nearby spaces by civilian government aircraft and ships;

(b) The relatively high numbers—and in some cases, the growing level of capability—of the government vessels participating on both sides; and

(c) The intensity of elite and public emotions involved, especially in China, as demonstrated by the widespread anti-Japanese protests.

In this regard, three plausible military contingencies include: first, an accidental or unintended military confrontation between China and Japan due to heightened emotions and operational activities at close proximities; second, a serious political miscalculation to demonstrate sovereign control which could lead to an armed conflict; and third, deliberate escalation, where either side chooses to forcibly alter the status quo and establish control over the disputed islands.⁶² Such scenarios could be triggered by events such as:⁶³ (a) clashes during fishing at sea, (b) collisions on or near the Diaoyu/ Senkaku Islands, (c) the deployment of an oil rig across the median line, (d) challenges to aircraft operating in China's East China Sea ADIZ and, (e) military escalations involving unmanned systems. Amidst these potential scenarios, one certainty persists: both China and Japan will continue to employ displays of force to assert their sovereignty claims and deter the other.

CONCLUSION

The East China Sea has become a critical flashpoint in the Indo-Pacific, fuelled by overlapping territorial claims and strategic rivalry over marine and seabed resources. While the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands remain uninhabited, they carry immense symbolic and strategic significance for both China and Japan. It is not merely resources, but the broader quest for regional influence and control that drives this enduring conflict.

As both countries expand military and maritime deployments in contested areas, the risk of miscalculation and unintended confrontation has increased. These tensions not only jeopardise regional security but also have implications for the global order, impacting the global balance of power and international law. Given the fragile status quo, sustained communication and crisis management mechanisms are vital. Avoiding miscalculations and managing provocations will be critical to preventing a conflict that could destabilise the broader Indo-Pacific.

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