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**Abstract:** *This Research aims to examine the ongoing dispute between China and Japan over the barren Islands present in the East China Sea. This study will proceed with a brief explanation of historical claims made by both parties and policy considerations made in history. The provoking act of Japan by nationalizing the islands has made China and Japan act aggressively. It tries to analyze all the major parties involved in the dispute and their policies toward each other. It highlights most of the applicable theories of IR and tries to evaluate the calculations, perceptions, and risk of armed conflict involved in the dispute. Recommendations are made with conclusive findings.*

**Key Words:** Senkaku Islands, Bilateral Dispute, Trilateral Framework, Territorial Sovereignty, Geopolitical Tensions

## Introduction

There are tiny groups of barren islands present in the South China Sea. Much of the land is dry and cannot be used for any agricultural activities. No life exists on the islands. China and Japan have been fighting over the island with each other since the 1960s despite all these unfriendly factors. The reason behind this is the strategic importance, security, and significant political implications. The waters surrounding the island consist of rich oil and gas reserves and have been used for fishing for decades. These are not the only factors of the dispute they are fighting for nationalism. Both sides accuse each other for different reasons. Japan preserves it as a growing China aggression and a threat from China while China accuses Japan's administration of imperial expansion over the East China Sea (Togo, 2014).

Many scholars are of the view that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the tension will escalate more in the Asian region rather than in the West. The reason behind the escalation is the major shift in power, economic and political power distribution within the region but low-level economic interdependence and institutionalization, and

widespread territorial dispute with natural resources conflict. A strong Japan and US presence can be a threat to China. The mistrust factor is present because of historical rivalries and Japanese colonialism (Valencia, 2014).

The data collected and analyzed shows that China is showing its continuous presence in the waters by sending coast guard ships, fishing, and many surveillance ships. In 2016 more than 200 Coast Guard ships were seen in the waters near the Senkaku island. In 2020 Chinese have shown increased aggression by sending more and more frequent ships. Every day the Chinese presence in the waters claimed by Japan near Sinkaku is increasing to convey the message that Japan's administrative powers are not acceptable. The non-compromise point is because of the political, economic, and strategic significance it holds. The hydrocarbons found can help them in crisis and the waters are rich in fishing, The Island can be used for holding military and anti-ship missiles (Togo, 2014).

## Historical Claims

According to China, after the first Sino-Japanese

War in 1895, Japan acquired sovereignty over the island. China's point is that Japan lost its sovereignty over the Island after WW2. Taiwan also claims to be on the island because it is nearest to it. However, before the discovery of gas and oil in 1968 neither China nor Taiwan protested against Japanese occupation. It is also linked with the handing over of the disputed islands by the US in 1972 under the Okinawa Reversion. Tension between China and Japan increased in 2012 when Japan nationalized the islands and bought them from a Japanese owner. To counter the Japanese move China banned the export of rare Earth metals. A similar situation can be seen in the current scenario as well. China has increased its aggression by showing continuous entrance into the water surrounded by Senkaku Island (Shea, 2012).

The Chinese claims are based on more old claims than Japan. Chinese claims that Diaoyu Island and the name discovered were much before Japan's claim. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Chinese fishermen used to travel to Diaoyu Island. Chinese Nationalists used to make regular visits in history as well. Chinese maps made by Japanese, Chinese, and other travelers show historical pieces of evidence of Chinese territories. The Chinese deny the claims of the Japanese by adding that the name given to the island by the Chinese was used by Japan in 1996. They justify their claims by saying that they discovered the island after China in 1885 and stole it in April 1895 to end the Sino-Japanese WAR. Chinese also highlights the Post Dam Declaration and the Treaty Of San Francisco. Those Japanese who accepted the Post Dam Treaty were obliged to return the Island to the Chinese. Chinese mention the Cairo Declaration of 1943 (the article says "all territories that Japan has stolen from China such as Manchuria, Formosa, and Pescadores shall be restored to China"). Secondly Post Dam 1945 declaration also strengthened Chinese claims. The Senkaku island dispute is merely a conflict over sovereignty rather than a maritime issue (Shea, 2012).

Japan tried to prove its claims by showing repeated survey reports of 1884 before the occupation, the survey revealed that the islands

were totally barren and unhabitated. No clues were found of Chinese occupation nor did the Chinese government protest against the surveys. The Japanese government became part of the Diaoyu Islands under Okinawa in 1895 they formally annexed Senkaku Island after that they developed and exploited the Island, constructing docks and warehouses. After WWII the islands were under the administration of the US and were given back to Japan after the Reversion Treaty of 1971 (Sneider, 2013).

### China's Policy

China has increased its presence in the waters this year. Initially, it started for a few days then months and now in 2020, China's Coast Guard ships have shown their continuous presence for months. China is trying to bring a major change in the geopolitical shift of the region. China frequently sends ships to the surrounding waters to show who is the boss. China's main objective is to attain regional hegemony which is a gateway to global hegemony. This will help them to shift toward the Pacific and Indian Oceans from the South and East China Sea. During the cold war major communication sea routes were blocked by US and USSR. China's 40% GDP is dependent on sea trade. China couldn't take the risk of any such situation in the future. China wants to master these lanes.

China's aggressive policy is to challenge Japan's administration over the island. It is under the major Two Ocean Policy of China which includes the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. It basically focuses on expanding its naval operations from the South and East China Sea into the Indian Ocean. The main aim is to redistribute BOP in Indo Pacific region. There are three different schools of thought present in China one of them prefers to stay neutral and ignore Japan. The second ones prefer to engage Japan in technological and scientific matters. More economic interdependence will avoid any aggressive move from both sides. The third and most aggressive school argues to bomb Japan in any conflict like the Senkaku island dispute'

China is also trying its salami-slicing strategy. They are building Islands where they want to dominate. In the East China Sea China lacks its dominance for the increment of expansion in the South China Sea and East China Sea China sent military, non-military ships. More nonmilitary and Coast Guard ships are always present. All this is done to increase its Dominance in the region. China says their claims are legitimate and wants to confirm that Senkaku Island is a disputed area. China is doing the same in Indonesia and Malaysia, by taking more stakehold there they are able to send surveillance ships and fishing vessels ([Keating, 2012](#)).

### Japan's Policy

Both are using the “delaying strategy” to avoid any major armed conflict. Neither side has taken any serious steps to resolve the dispute In 1978 Ding Xiaoping described the delaying strategy when he stated "It doesn't matter if the question is shelved for some time, say 10 years. Our generation is not wise enough to find a common language on the question. Our coming generation will certainly be wiser. They will certainly find the solution accepted by all." For Japan, the delaying factor is favorable because it maintains the status quo which favors Japan. China benefits from the policy by maintaining its firm position which is weak ([Keating, 2012](#)).

Leaders of both states will be criticized by the public because they will consider their leaders ineffective in making a decision to find a solution. Japan proves its claims by the Okinawan Reversion treaty and terming the island as Terra Nullius nobody's land". Japan also relies on the US for security purposes under the US Security Umbrella. The Senkaku island dispute is merely a conflict over sovereignty rather than a maritime issue (Pan, 2007).

### US Policy

Nixon administration stated that they would not take any position in the territorial dispute but the 1960 treaty between the US and Japan assured security guarantees to all Japanese administrative areas in return for allowing US troops in the

Japanese administrative areas. Under Article 5 of the treaty, the US is legally bound to provide security to any external threat and Senkaku comes under this article. Therefore, Japan expects a security guarantee from the US against China's aggression. Each time the tension arises and China's Coast Guard Ships enter the waters of Senkaku question arises what is the US legal relationship to the Island dispute? Obama administration had openly supported Japan over its territorial claims as its policy in rebalancing in Asia. The US is responsible for providing a security umbrella under the obligation of the treaty if any states try to act aggressively in Japan's administrative areas ([Keating, 2012](#)).

Donald Trump reaffirmed or provided security to the Islands but China responded by arguing that the treaty was the product of the Cold War had nothing to do with sovereignty of the China and could not challenge China's historical claims. The US officials choose a policy of engagement rather than containment of China. The US prefers good relations with China which can compromise US good relations with Japan. Trump considered Japan as the economic competitor of the US.

Biden also confirmed the security guarantee will be provided to Japan under the US-Japan Alliance This is a very initial move of Biden toward a policy of China. President Biden confirms that Senkaku Island comes under Article 5 of US-Japan Alliances. Japan and the US have deeply rooted economic and strategic ties and both are democracies because their interests and attitudes also hold importance for decision making. The young generation of the US is more inclined towards good relations with China while the old is more prone towards good relations with Japan. US US-Japan alliance helped the US to engage in the region, as it would have been impossible without agreement ([Pan, 2007](#)).

### Understanding from the Lens of Different Theoretical Frameworks

Different views are there on the ongoing situation. From the perspective of Deterrence theory, it is argued that tension increases because

of strategic calculations. Both states accept that the use of force is the last resort and no one will take a risk because it will lead to a greater war. Deterrence is preventing any aggressive action. The solution is that both parties should sign the bilateral agreement and work together to improve economic interdependence. Working together on resources will avoid a major war.

The theory of deterrence and security Dilemma theory sets perfectly in this situation. Both states claim sovereignty and none of them is willing to compromise. According to the realist perspective system is anarchic and states mistrust each other. To survive each state will use defensive and preventive measures. China emerging as a global power and Japan having an alliance with the US is sending naval ships to deter each other. As mentioned above, it is the key claim that both the conflicting states claim over the sovereignty of the island. None of them will ever compromise. Both of the conflicting states prefer their territorial sovereignty and security (Ishii, 2013).

**Realism Perspective:** From Japan's perspective in December 2008 Chinese maritime research ship was seen moving in the water near Senkaku Island to show its physical presence and pose their serious claims on the disputed island. The next day the statement of the Chinese officials showed that the Chinese presence would be through physical forces rather than peaceful negotiations. To counter Chinese threats Japan has to strengthen its coast guard and modify the equipment in the area. The defense budget declined from 2005-2012 (4.8297 trillion yen to 4.6804 trillion yen) and increased to 4.89 trillion years in 2013 and 2014. In 2014 Japan's maritime safety agency proposed a 13% increase (196.3 billion yen). Japan should strengthen its own military power rather than relying on the US. For China situation is grave as for Japan it can be viewed from Power Politics. China has reached the position in the international community that it can use force to exert its will. And in case of "core interest" use of force can't be off the table. In Chinese eyes Japan has taken certain provocative measures which are perceived as strengthening control over the island. Like nationalizing the island which was privately owned. The increase in

military capabilities and changing the interpretations of Article 9 of the constitution allowed Japanese self-defense forces to exert the right of collective defense. For the US: China is one of the few countries that are a threat to the US. So, the US cannot let the power expansion of China. But the US doesn't want to get into a long-term struggle with China. The US aims to deter China by strengthening its alliance with Japan to limit its expansion and counter the rise of China. The US doesn't want to get involved in the bilateral dispute. Even the US doesn't want both states to get involved in an armed conflict because the US would then have to take a proper clear position which could harm the peace and prosperity. The US doesn't want to put its own troops in harm's (Garlicki, 2003).

**Liberalism Perspective:** All liberals agree on the positive human nature. Their beliefs in the International Law to settle disputes between states. Here again, both states have their own perspective and different points of view. From Japan's perspective, before the treaty of Shimonoseki. The island was under the sovereign control of Japan including the US occupation of the island. Article 2 of the Sans Francisco Peace Treaty included a decision on the settlement of sovereignty over the territories previously owned by Japan. Article 3 covers both Okinawa and Senkaku whose administration could be given to the UN or the US. Another treaty is the Revision of Okinawa Agreement 1971 which states that the administrative rights of Okinawa and Senkaku have been transferred back to Japan. China is trying to change the status quo by force which is a violation of UN Charter Article 214., China justified its claims by quoting the 1943 Cairo Declaration treaty that "All territories that Japan has stolen from China such as Manchuria, Formosa, and the Pescadores shall be restored to China" Diaoyu island is among these territories. Secondly, Post Dam Declaration 1945 states that "The terms of the Cairo Declaration shall be carried out and Japanese sovereignty shall be limited to the islands of Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku, and such minor islands as we determine." Senkaku was not mentioned in the declaration. Japan is violating both the

agreements. Japan ignored the post-dam declaration but surrendered after the atomic attacks on Japanese cities ([Ishii, 2013](#)).

### Bilateral Dispute in Trilateral Framework

The issue is bilateral but we see it in a trilateral framework because of US and Japan alliance. No states are going to compromise because of economic, political, and symbolic importance. Japan is termed as a "Defender" as Japan wants to maintain the status quo while China is termed as a "challenger" because it is challenging the status quo. The US has a major role in the dispute because of the security alliance between Japan and the US. After WWII the US had administered the island till 1972. However, the US had clear statements that it had no legal status or position over the island. Initially US avoided public statements in 1996 but due to repeated pressure from Japanese lawmakers US repeated its position over the security of islands ([Garlicki, 2003](#)).

In 2004 a clear statement was given by State Departments that Article 5 applies on the island as well. Similarly, in 2009 US stance remained firm and statements were repeated to show support for the Japanese administration which increased tensions and the presence of Chinese coast guard ships in the waters. The US had dealt very impressively and tried to solve the matter very peacefully. The US has sent signals of deterrence whenever China tries to act aggressively. As discussed, when the activist from China and Taiwan landed on the island US reconfirmed its stance and showed neutrality over the issue of sovereignty. This was a signal to China that Sinkaku came under the treaty of the US and Japan. In 2008 Continuous and increased entry of Chinese ships into the waters provoked Japan as a result they reacted by sending more modified vessels. The US has also again given several statements supporting Japan against China's aggression ([Fravel, 2010](#)).

### The Avoidance of Armed Conflict

China has threatened to use force but practically did nothing much aggressive. After the Cold War China and Japan's relations improved in fields of economy though political tension still exists. The

island has strategic and economic importance which may lead China to use force. As we can see in history China used force during Paracels in 1974 and the Spartyisland in 1988. Both actors have done well in avoiding the use of force. China had an option to use force to challenge the administration of the Japanese while Japan could also use force to claim its sovereignty. But both avoided any armed conflict because of several reasons.

1. **Deterrence:** China didn't use any armed aggression against Japan as it did during the Vietnam dispute. Because, unlike Vietnam, Japan has a strong navy and is under the security umbrella of the US. The treaty clearly states That the US is responsible for protecting and providing security to all Japanese administrative areas.
2. **Defacto Control:** China used force in old disputes because they were not pre-occupied by any other state while in the case of the island, Japan had occupied it and had administrative authority over the island. So the chance of showing any armed aggression is very low.
3. **Regional Rivalry:** China is rising and needs support and good relations with its neighbors and other states in the region. China does not want any hurdle in its peaceful rise. The aggressive image of China can portray a bad image of China in the region ([Cox, 2014](#)).

### China and the US-Japan Security Alliance and Security Dilemma in East Asia

East Asian region has increasing instability because of growing territorial disputes, natural resources, and postcolonial nationalism. The mistrust between states is because of past experiences and worst relations. According to the Security Dilemma theory, tensions will increase because of dramatic changes in capabilities and power projection in Seas and Skies. This will lead to destabilizing competition. Weapons used for defensive purposes can spark tension in the region. The mistrust between both the states is because of the historical issues and experiences. To decrease the security dilemma and lessen the

competition a mediator should play a role i.e. controlling tensions in East Asia by increasing US military presence, particularly in Japan. The US encourages Japan to adopt nonoffensive policies. But certain steps like joint research of US-Japan on Threat Missile Defense are considered offensive policies by China ([Fravel, 2010](#)).

China also fears the breaking of independent Japan because it will not be under any obligations and can be a direct threat as experienced in history. The anger of the Japanese is traced back to history when they didn't apologize for aggressive imperialist behavior during WWII. Japanese consider themselves victims of WWII and their future generation may work on building a military because they will know less about history. US security alliance with Japan is a delaying factor in military buildup. US Presence in Japan is like A "Bottle Cap" keeping the Japanese military buildup in the bottle or like an "Eggshell" fostering the growth of Japan's military power under US protection until it hatches one day in a regional sense. The "Eggshell" perspective is perceived as a threat while the bottle cap concept has declined ([Cox, 2014](#)).

### **Interests of the US in Supporting Japan over the Island Dispute**

America's main interest in supporting Japan is its position in the Asia Pacific region. The US-Japan security umbrella is the indirect policy of the US to engage in the region. Without the security alliance, it was not possible. US Secretary of State states "We consider the Japan-US alliance as one of the most important partnerships we have anywhere in the world and we are committed to our obligations to help Japanese people." On Jan 2013 again emphasized that "Our alliance with Japan remains the cornerstone of some American engagement with the region." Moreover, the US wants strong bilateral ties with China and will avoid any situation that will be a risk to the good relationship between the US and China. One of the important US policies for moving further is to have good US-China relations. However, this

would be difficult in such challenging situations ([Blanchard, 2000](#)).

Because of the economic value of the region US wants to ensure its presence there. The region holds the greatest economic power. Rapid increase in tension between both China and Japan will eliminate chances of development of the region and challenge the peace. The conflict will also affect economic growth and prosperity. The US doesn't want the situation to get worse and trying its best to improve trilateral relations, its first preference is to avoid any armed conflict. US policy on the issue is neutral but the US-Japan security alliance rejects this point of neutrality. Sep 2012 US gave its neutral position and also gave additional statements that the US has no intentions to play its role as an arbitrator ([Bader, 2016](#)).

The US considers Japan as legal and authentic. But blame China's unilateral act and historical claims as the US also supports Japan because its claims are based on loyal grounds and the US discourages China from using unilateral and illegal force to exert its claims. By supporting Japan's sovereign claim over the island, the US will reassure Japan of the value of increasing strategic and economic ties with the US. Supporting Japan's claim of sovereignty reassures Japan of the US commitment to oblige the US-Japan security treaty. By clearly taking a position the US will assure other Asian Pacific allies. China has maritime issues with many East Asian states; this will help to seek closer engagement of the US with the allies ([Blanchard, 2000](#)).

We have a counterclaim for US support for Japan over the island issue. If the US supports Japan consequences faced by the US will be worse. If the US took any clear position in favor of Japan this would provoke China and the factor of mistrust would increase and risk future partnerships in the military and economy. The ASEAN community will be forced to side with either the US or China. China is providing funds, loans, trading, and infrastructure assistance to ASEAN members. So US relations with ASEAN can be in danger ([Bader, 2016](#)).

## Conclusion

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This research tries to explain the emerging dispute in the East Asian Sea which can lead to a major war. The Senkaku island dispute is not easy to resolve as three major states are involved. But it should not be taken as less important because of the major geopolitical shift and China's growing aggression. China is trying to make a major change in the geopolitics of the region. As we can see China is trying to push back all the regions i.e. South China Sea, East China Sea, and Ladak. This is all done to change the game of power in the region as a whole. Japanese has to be now very clear about what it believes. Japan has to learn new strategies and lobbies should not affect the foreign policy of Japan towards China. Industrialists can't hold your foreign policy. China's consistent presence in the waters shows who the boss is. Japan and India need to get together on sovereignty-related issues, if they don't, they will see larger problems for both. Japanese understand the geopolitics of China and political intentions Japanese will play a waiting game here. Japan has written about Senkaku and

they have said that this seems to problem where the President of China is under pressure domestically due to COVID-19 or any other issue like the state of the economy. We are seeing increasing presence but China will not prefer to go to war No action by Japan because they are waiting to see how far China can go. India and the Japanese should take full advantage of this together as a superpower and hold the responsibility to solve the emerging dispute peacefully. It can also be done by showing full support toward Japan under the security umbrella so that China can avoid its aggressive attitude. Being neutral is not a good option. The stance of the US should be very clear. Subsequently, the United States should take the situation to help Japan's case of power over the Senkaku Islands. After more than 40 years of keeping an unbiased position on the debate, the U.S. should now take a situation to help Japan in light of the fact that the essential connection between China and Japan has changed. China's financial ascent has enabled it to attest to its situation in the debate; hence, China is less disposed to hold the contest to keep up monetary binds with Japan.

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