

An Australian Role in Reducing the Prospects of China-Japan War over the Senkakus/Diaoyutai?

Richard Tanter

The idea that China and Japan are slipping towards war over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands territorial conflict is deeply shocking. How could the world's second and third largest economies even consider the possibility of war over half a dozen uninhabitable islets? For Australians, the question is more serious still: could Australia be drawn into the dangerous conflict between its two largest trading partners on the side of Japan because of its defence agreements with Japan and because of the pull of the ANZUS alliance?

The Australian government needs to consider carefully but with all due speed Australia's interest in actively encouraging a negotiated solution to the dispute. Most importantly, Australia needs to ensure that its alliance with the US and its growing military ties with Japan do not lead to it being drawn into support for military action by [the most nationalist Japanese government](#) in half a century.

Most Australians are unlikely to know just how close our military ties with Japan have become. Even before the signing of the comprehensive Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in 2007, ANU strategic analyst [Desmond Ball](#) placed Japan as our fourth most important strategic partner - after the United States, Britain and New Zealand. Since then the ties binding the two defence forces have become closer still, with an agreement on defence cooperation, an intelligence sharing agreement, and, quietly coming into force a few weeks ago, a [defence logistics-sharing agreement](#). It's not quite ANZUS, but absent

some careful rethinking of the default position of Australia foreign policy, a real defence treaty with Japan may not be far away.

Acquired by the Meiji government in 1895 at the time of its colonial expansion to Taiwan and Korea and in the wake of Japan's victory in the first China-Japan War, the Senkaku Islands are today under Japanese de facto control. China (and Taiwan) call them Diaoyutai, and have long claimed them as Chinese territory. Japan [simply maintains](#) there is no dispute, and refuses to enter into any discussion. Both sides base their claims on [historical association](#), with both being at the very least plausible. Concerning the much larger dispute over the "midline" between Japanese and Chinese waters in the East China Sea as a whole, the Chinese government has called for arbitration under the Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). There Japan has rejected arbitration, most likely because its historically-based claim may suffer against Chinese claims based on the principle of extension of the continental shelf to the Okinawan Trough under UNCLOS. China has called for bilateral negotiations over the Senkakus, while Japan has simply refused to recognize the existence of a dispute - a position that is now simply untenable. With Japan having backed itself into a corner, arbitration under UNCLOS principles may provide a way out.



The Senkakus (Diaoyutai)

Japan is embroiled in myriad border disputes derived from its expansionist past, with longstanding, unresolved and bitter territorial conflicts with all of its neighbours – over the Senkakus/Diaoyutai with China and Taiwan; the island of Takeshima/Tokdo with South Korea (and presumably North Korea as well); and the southern Kurils (aka the Northern Territories) with Russia. All three disputes are volatile because of deep and vociferous nationalisms, though all governments have shown they can control the influence of those atavistic forces – when they want to. And all three are potentially soluble through compromise and cooperation given the necessary political will.

The Senkakus/Diaoyu conflict is now deeply militarised – with Chinese, Japanese and US forces all involved in increasingly risky actions. Japan has been rapidly expanding its air, [naval](#), and [intelligence capacities](#) in the region for [over a decade](#), and has recently been scrambling its fighters frequently in response to Chinese aircraft approaching Japan's Air Defence Identification Zone. China is projecting its military presence around the islands to remind the Japanese government that if your neighbour says there is an argument about your shared fence line, then there is a dispute, and it has to be faced. Chinese ships are showing their colours in Japan's claimed Exclusive Economic

Zone (EEZ) near the islands. On December 13th

a Chinese reconnaissance plane [entered](#) Japanese air space near the islands for four minutes, and Japanese officials [publicly mulled](#) the idea of ASDF fighters firing warning shots at Chinese aircraft, armed or unarmed. On January 10th the United States began deploying airborne warning and control (AWACS) aircraft flying very close to the East China Sea midline as Japan draws it. A few days later, on January 19th, China scrambled two Jian-10 fighters from a Shanghai base to tail the US AWACS aircraft, in turn prompting the ASDF to scramble its fighters from Okinawa. This cycle reportedly took place several times during the day.

It was on this same day that a Chinese warship on the high seas north of the islands woke up its fire control radar and locked onto an MSDF helicopter, an action normally signaling intention to fire. On January 30th, a PLAN Jiangwei II class frigate 100 kms from the islands did the same for several minutes to the MSDF frigate Yudachi. Perhaps all part of a lengthening tit for tat cycle, but extremely dangerous, since the next step on either side is an understandable move towards a trigger, that is behaviour the Soviets and Americans learned not to do long ago.

In April 2001 over the East China Sea a Chinese fighter accidentally collided with an American Okinawan-based electronic surveillance plane it had been harassing as it sucked up Chinese military signals. The Chinese fighter pilot died, and the Chinese forced down the EP-3 spy plane on the island of Hainan, detained its crew, and stripped the plane of its highly secret equipment before handing it back.



The damaged US EP-3 on the ground on Hainan Island

All sides fear a repeat of the [April 2001 incident](#). An accidental downing of a Chinese or Japanese aircraft could be considered more than enough reason to go to war for nationalists of either country, including some in high office.

There are [signs of conciliation](#) on both sides, with the leader of the LDP's coalition partner visiting Beijing, and eventually being received by the Chinese president. Yet China is not without fault on this matter. There seems little doubt that Chinese warships did take the extremely dangerous step of locking their fire control radars onto an SDF ship and a helicopter – essentially a matter of playing chicken with the other side, gambling they won't do anything stupid, like think they are about to be fired on, and take appropriate action. It is important to know whether these were simply foolish decisions by poorly trained local commanders, or, less likely and even more dangerously, orders from Beijing. But either way, it is time for China to face the flip side of its blue water naval ambitions, and increase professional standards and abide by the rules of the road. It was precisely this kind of behaviour, repeated many times, that led the United States and the Soviet Union to negotiate the [Incidents at Sea Agreement](#) (INCEA), signed in 1972.

China has been using its newly minted maritime muscle to make clear to Japan that, like it or not, there is a dispute over the islands. This is a restrained version of gunboat diplomacy, but gunboat diplomacy it is. Doubtless China would fail to see the logic of Vietnam or the Philippines taking a similar approach in the South China Sea.

However, Australia has defence agreements with Japan, not with China. Japan and Australia are both formal allies of the United States. There are annual trilateral defence and foreign ministerial meetings of these three countries. Accordingly, beyond calling for bilateral calm and restraint, Australia, and the United States, have particular responsibility to advise the government of Japan of their concerns, and bearing in mind that support can never be uncritical and unlimited.

So what should be done? The first thing for Australia is to find its voice on the matter, and make clear that it has a strong and immediate interest in a peaceful resolution. Australia is and will continue to be a strong supporter of Japan's security, but at the same time we have no interest in supporting Japanese nationalist claims to colonial plunder. Territorial disputes like this must be solved peacefully, and by cooperative dialogue. Australia's interest lies in a rule-based, peaceful international order points towards negotiation and arbitration.

Moreover Australia needs to find its voice to press the United States to take the same stand, both publicly and privately. Australia may be an ally of the United States, and the United States an ally of Japan, but that does not translate into support for the peripheral interests of Japanese nationalism, whatever the provocation. Indeed the most important shift Australia needs to press on the Japanese government is abandoning the toxic legacies of the Japanese colonial period that exert such a destructive influence over Japanese (and Australian) strategic interests in North East Asia. Amidst

the complexities of the Northeast Asian strategic situation there is one simple, remediable, factor, with enormous strategic consequences pushing the system downwards in a vicious circle. That is the failure on the part of successive Japanese cabinets to address the persisting and corrosive failure of historical reconciliation. Nowhere has that been more evident than in the rapid emergence on Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's agenda of two key restorationist themes: denial of Japanese responsibility for wartime sexual slavery, and an imperial - and incompetent - disdain to respond to Chinese and Taiwanese contesting of Japanese territorial claims by simple refusal to even recognize the existence of a dispute.

In practical terms, Australia should be calling for a range of measures from both sides (and the United States) to ensure a peaceful and sustainable outcome, including:

- shelving the fundamental sovereignty dispute for the present, as was proposed effectively by earlier generations of Chinese leaders
- avoiding further provocation of any kind refraining from further military deployments, and preventing unauthorised civilian landings by nationalist groups
- pressing Japan on the precise nature of ASDF rules of engagement to be sure that they minimize risks of accidental conflict
- establishing an effective rapid communications channel between the Japanese and Chinese authorities, including military headquarters
- discussing joint fishing zone rights, and declaring the islands a nature conservation zone to be administered by an independent international body
- and working out arrangements to develop oil and gas resources in the disputed region cooperatively.

ANZUS alliance defenders like to boast of the seat at the Washington table the alliance is said to bring. The test is whether that seat comes with a voice that articulates Australia's independent interests in tough times. Now is one of those times, and if Australia does not find its own voice it may find itself drawn by default into support for the ugliest part of Japan's political culture with potentially disastrous consequences for China, Japan and the Pacific.

This is a revised and expanded version of an article that appeared [here](#).

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