

The Abe administration's policy about the Senkaku Islands and Role Theory

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Abstract The article shows the result of the research on foreign policy about the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands during the Second Abe administration. It focuses on Japan's relations with the US and China. Role theory, centered on its key concept of National Role Conceptions (NRCs) is used as a theoretical framework. Using Japanese and foreign political leaders' statements, NRC analysis gives the opportunity to grasp the degree of consistency between those of Japan and those of the targeted countries. Three key Japan's NRCs: *protector of Japanese sovereignty*; *promotor of universal values*; *realist who aims to avoid exacerbating diplomatic relations with the neighboring countries* are found. This paper argues that Prime Minister Abe is determined to protect Japan's sovereignty but his first aim to reinforce the administration over the islands has not been achieved. The US supports Japan's administrative right but opposes any Japan's behavior which destabilizes East Asian security environment. China claims its territorial right over the islands for historical reason and cannot compromise to maintain its domestic legitimacy. Abe increases Japan's deterrent near the Senkaku Islands and promotes value-oriented diplomacy in this region and safeguards the sea lane which is vital for Japan's economy. Abe says that he does not refuse a dialogue but it does mean Japan is willing to make a concession. As a result, the territorial dispute remains unresolved.

Keywords: Role theory; the Abe Administration; the Senkaku Islands; Relations between Japan and the US; Relations between Japan and China

JEL Classification: D74; D81; H12

Introduction

Abe's foreign policy about the Senkaku/Diaoyu territorial dispute is an interesting case to examine in terms of International Relations. Before becoming prime minister in December 2012, Abe, inherently conservative and hawkish politician, asserted Japan should strengthen the control over the islands (The Japan Times, 2012). At

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the same time, however, Abe emphasizes friendship and coprosperity with China and refrains from strengthening Japan's exercise of sovereignty over the territory. Abe's firm attitude can be found mainly in his statements such as speeches, interviews, and remarks on the press (statements altogether) and not in his behavior. Abe also supports value-oriented diplomacy which emphasizes political values such as democracy, freedom of the navigation and rule of law, but it does not lead to stir up the territorial dispute in the East China Sea (ECS) which peaked in September 2012 when then Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) administration nationalized some of the islands (Drifte 2014). This article tries to understand the discrepancy by using role theory, which derived from constructivism, as a theoretical framework on Abe's foreign policy. First, the article describes national role conceptions (NRCs), Abe and other influential decision-makers promote. NRCs are defined as 'the policy makers' own definitions [. . .] of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in subordinate regional systems' (Holsti 1970: 24-246). The originality of role theory resides in the fact that the perception and subsequent role performance of a given state interact with the perception and performance of what is called the ego-part (domestic constituencies) and the alter-parts (foreign countries). The article aims to detail the measures the Abe administration takes in the specific issue of the Sentaku Islands from cognitive and normative perspectives by role theory. It is examined how the Abe administration perceives the international environment around Japan related to the issue and how it determines the roles. Abe decides Japan should perform in taking into account the symmetrical perception of the two key concerned alter-parts, the US and China.

Role Theory and the Abe administration's Senkakus Policy

From a realism theoretical perspective, Japan's foreign policy can be assumed to counter China because the distribution of power is changing in the ECS due to this latter country's economic development and maritime expansionism (Hasebe 2017). While this is true to some extent, realism cannot fully explain Abe's Senkakus policy. The Balance of power concept concurrently provides room to justify policies that would strengthen Japan's control over the islands and - at the opposite - reasons to refrain from excessively beefing it up. Strengthening the effective control over the Senkakus would satisfy himself and his right-wing supporters but probably would make Japan run the risk of lowering the level of trust Japan has built with some countries, notably the US, the most important security partner, and China, the most important economic partner. Conversely, expressing its eagerness to defend the sovereignty over the islands, Abe may hope to settle for the dispute in a peaceful way. Thus, realism is not enough to explain what position Abe is taking with regard to the Senkakus.

Still, Abe's policy about the Senkaku Islands has often been analyzed by realism, which focuses on how China began strengthening its claim over the islands since the 1990s and how Japan regarded the move as a threat and increased its defense capability. There is also a liberal approach, which mainly addresses the issues such as international maritime law and historical perspective and how both countries can

cooperate with the exploitation of maritime resources in the ECS to put aside the dispute (Ramos-Mrosovsky 2008). Some researchers use different perspective such as 'securitization', which derives from constructivism but there are few constructivist approaches to analyze this topic, especially the latest Japanese administration (Danner 2014).

This article intends to fill the gap by providing a guide for how role theory can be used to study the Senkaku territorial dispute without denying realism and liberalism. Delving into the roles and factors that contributed to the formation of Abe's policy and paying attention to their characteristic is helpful to understand the Senkaku territorial dispute in a comprehensive way. Role theory is helpful because it takes both domestic and international politics into account on the assumption that a political leader's subjective understanding of his/her country's NRC corresponds to the appropriate foreign policy the country should implement. For example, Maull (2011) examined Japan-US relations and argued that the US expected Japan to increase its self-defense capability and to remain a faithful ally which contributes to sustaining US regional and global policies through material, financial, political and security support. It could be argued that it is precisely what the Abe administration has attempted to do during the last six years. Hirata (2016) argues that when politicians defending a different strand of NRC take over, they can be expected to insert their NRCs into their foreign policies and, subsequently, it leads to policy changes. For example, it can be said that mercantilism diminished and normalism, which argues that Japan should take more international responsibility including security as a 'normal country', prevailed after the Cold War.

In specific contexts and time countries can play roles of 'bastion of revolution-liberator, regional leader, regional protector, active independent, liberation supporter, anti-imperialist agent, defender of the faith, mediator-integrator, regional-subsystem collaborator, developer, bridge, faithful ally, independent, example' and others (Thies 2014: 2). These roles or social positions stipulate functions and aims in the international system and reflect the perception of domestic and foreign expectations by top leaders. Considering the fact that the territorial dispute related to the Senkaku Islands is a primary source of tension between Japan and China it can be considered a good case to apply role theory to analyze the interplay of roles of Japanese (the Abe administration), US and Chinese leaders.

Abe's policy on the issue apparently changed after assuming the office of prime minister. This research aims to enrich foreign policy analysis by identifying the most salient role conceptions that he expressed since 2012. Combining analyses of ego-part and alter-part, this paper aims to assess the consistency and inconsistency resulting from Abe's choice of appropriate Japan's NRCs. This will give the opportunity to observe the evolution of Japan's NRCs over the Senkaku Islands over time and to draw a tentative conclusion on the evolution of the conflict.

This article uses an inductive method to collect statements to extract Japan's NRCs and role expectation of Abe and does not set any NRCs beforehand. Statements which reflect particular responsibility, function, and aim related to the Senkaku Islands Japan

takes. This is the same in examining role expectations. Secondary sources, such as pieces of material originating from the government and other political elites in Japan and in the key alter-parts are used when they can help understand the meaning of the statement more precisely.

Abe's Senkaku policy revealed that he did not intend to exacerbate relationship with any country. There were internal and external expectations not to make trouble with China which, for example, led Abe to give up his idea of stationing official workers that he had aired in the general election of 2012. While Abe was determined to protect the sovereignty over the Senakaku Islands and to continue to reinforce Japan's defense capability around the islands, he refrained from strengthening direct control over the islands once he became prime minister. So, there was a gap between his role conception and his role performance before and after his accession to office.

Historical Account of the Senkaku Territorial Dispute

The Senkaku Islands consist of five islets and three barren rocks in the ECS named Uotsurijima, Kitakojima, Minamikojima, Kubajima, Taishojima, Okunokitaiwa, Okinominamiwa, and Tobise. Most of the islands are rocky and not appropriate to live. Until the modern era, there were no permanent residents and it was 'terra nullius' although fishermen in Japan and China knew the islands as a good fishing ground (Chung 2004).

Japan carefully researched on the ownership of the Senkaku Islands under the international law and incorporated them in January 1895, after taking measures in accordance with international law. And then in April of that year, the Shimonoseki Treaty was signed as a result of the Sino-Japanese War which led to the incorporation of Taiwan and the Pescadores into Japanese territory. After the conquest, the Japanese government lent Koga Tatsushiro, a Japanese merchant, four islands, Uotsurijima, Kitakojima, Minamikojima and Kojima for free for 30 years. Koga managed a dried bonito factory on the islands and there were residents until 1940. Then, they became uninhabited again (Chung 2004).

In the Cairo Declaration of December 1943, the UK, the US and China suggested that Japan return all the islands in the Pacific which it had seized or occupied from the beginning of World War 1, and that 'all the territories Japan has stolen from the Chinese, such as Manchuria, Formosa, and the Pescadores, shall be restored to the Republic of China'. Those decisions were included in the Potsdam Declaration in 1945 that Japan accepted when it surrendered (Zhong 2012).

The US occupied mainland Japan and Okinawa Prefecture separately and the Senkaku Islands were under the control of the government of the Ryukyu Islands which existed from 1952 to 1972 in current Okinawa prefecture. No one, even China doubted that the Senkaku Islands were Japanese territory. Finally, Japanese prime minister Sato Eisaku and president Nixon agreed on reversion of Okinawa and it was returned to Japan in May 1972 (Hosaka et al 2012). Territorial dispute occurred when the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East reported offshore oil resources around the islands in 1968. Then, China made an official

statement about the territorial right in 1971 for the first time. Although Japan and China normalized diplomatic relations in 1972 and concluded the Japan-China Peace and Friendship Treaty in 1978, they discussed the territorial dispute in the negotiation process. However, Japanese and Chinese political leaders decided to shelve the issue because priority was given to the development of economic relations between the two countries. They made a tacit agreement without conceding the territorial right to each other. The idea was that it was better to postpone the conflict resolution to the next generation (Hosaka et al 2012).

The Chinese government respected the tacit agreement until the beginning of the 1990s. Then it started to officially claim its territorial right. The government stipulated the Senkaku Islands as its territory for the first time in the 'Law of the People's Republic of China on its Territorial waters and their Contiguous Zone' enacted in 1992. Since the late 1990s, Japan became more concerned about its expanding area of maritime operations and constant dispatch of public ships and People's Liberation Army Navy vessels around the islands (Hosaka et al 2012). In December 2008, vessels of the China Marine Surveillance Headquarters under the State Oceanic Administration stayed in Japan's territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands for hours for the first time. The aim was to emphasize China's maritime sovereignty over the islands. The tension rose again in 2010 when the DPJ government detained the captain of a Chinese trawler and attempted to indict him because the trawler was sailing in the Senkaku Islands waters. The scheme aroused China's anger considerably (Anami 2012). Chinese official vessels increased their entries into the contiguous zone and the Japanese territorial sea around the Senkaku Islands after the incident. The frequency of Chinese vessels' intrusion into the Senkaku Islands maritime areas increased after the Japanese government announced the transfer of the ownership in September 2012. This is because China considered the nationalization of the Senkaku Islands in 2012 a fundamental breach of the territorial problem shelving agreed in the normalization process (Maslow 2016: 198-199). Since that, vessels of China's law enforcement authorities have been continuously standing face to face with JCG patrol boats in waters surrounding the islands until now.

National Role Conception of the Senkaku Islands

Examining statements of Abe reveals that the Abe administration has three main NRCs: *protector of Japanese sovereignty*; *promotor of universal values*; and *realist who aims to avoid exacerbating diplomatic relations with the neighboring countries*.

From the beginning of the Abe administration until today, it has maintained the idea that China, which has increased its defense expenditures annually by more than 10% since 1989, is a threat and Japan has to strengthen the defense capability to deter China. It has resulted in launching an earnest defense buildup program, with particular weight given to the Nansei Islands, which form a chain of islands from Kyushu to Taiwan. Abe showed his determination 'to defend fully people's lives, our territory, and our beautiful ocean' (Abe 2012a) and this determination is motivated by his sense of danger that 'the security of Japan is not someone else's problem; it is a crisis that

exists right there and now' (Abe 2012a). And his statements revealed that deterrent such as the JCG and the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) play important roles. In 2014, in response to China's assertive posture after the nationalization, the Abe administration relaxed restraint on the SDF's action in the case of 'gray zone' infringement, i.e. a border incursion that does not lead to serious armed conflict (Gupta 2014). Putting emphasis on deterrent resulted in taking other security measures like this to make a favorable security environment for Japan. For example, the Abe government has built bases for the SDF composed of guards and missile units since 2014 in Western islands next to Okinawa Island such as Amami Oshima, Miyakojima, and Yonagunijima which are near the Senkaku Islands. Such reinforcement of security measures enables to attack vessels approaching the Senkaku Islands with missiles (Clint 2014). In addition, the Maritime Safety Agency strengthened its mechanism to patrol around the Senkaku Islands by having 12 large-sized patrol boats (10 in Ishigakijima, 2 in Okinawa Island) by the end of 2016. The total number of the staff of the Maritime Safety Agency in Ishigakijima near the Senkaku Islands is about 700 (Asahi Shimbun 2017). They were a manifestation of Abe's determination of protecting the Senkaku Islands by increasing 'defense budget, as well as the budget for the Japan coast guard' (Abe 2013a). In 2016, the government decided to increase the budget for the JCG to increase the number of the JCG staff who were engaged in dealing with the Senkaku Islands and improve maritime surveillance capability of the JCG (The Japan Times 2016). All these measures are designed to enable Japan to respond more quickly in a future conflict over the Senkaku Islands to have China recognize that 'it is impossible to try to get their way by coercion or intimidation' (Abe 2013a). Abe never thought that Japan could ensure its security by itself. He thought cooperation with the US and other like-minded countries was necessary. Abe considered the strengthening ties with the US a crucial role so that China's territorial expansion would be halted. For Abe, the existence of the Japan-US alliance is a 'stabilizing factor, which contributes to peace and stability of the region' (Abe 2013b). In other words, this region would immediately become unstable without the Japan-US alliance from Abe's point of view.

Abe's commitment to protection of Japan's sovereignty and economic prosperity leads to Japan's proactive activity in taking defensive measures. The Second Abe administration established the National Security Council and made National Security Strategy for the first time as well as an increased defense budget. He also revised the three principles regarding arms exports and paved the way for international joint development of defense equipment. State secrecy law was also enacted to secure security information (Hughes 2015). Finally, Abe revised the Japan-US defense cooperation guidelines and made security-related laws in 2015 (MOFA 2015).

Also, the Second Abe administration strengthened ties not only with the US but also with Australia, India and the Philippines in the form of 2+2 meetings, providing arms, maritime patrol vessels, joint exercises and so on to secure the safety of the sea lane ([Prashanth](#) 2015). The intention of Abe, whether in the framework of the Japan-US alliance or not, has had a clear orientation to have Japan align with democracies in promoting NRC of universal values. Abe expanded conventional Japan's security

policy which has emphasized Japan is a member of the group of democratic countries. In doing so, he intended to have Japan perform what he considered an appropriate role as a 'mature maritime democracy' (Abe 2012b). In reinforcing its defense capabilities Japan was defending the rule of law, democratic values and human rights.

Strengthening ties with those countries indicates that Abe wants to establish a connection among the Senkaku Islands, Japan's economic activity and supporting universal values. The Senkaku Islands are crucially important to secure Japan's sea lane. Japan's economy, which does not have natural resources, would be in danger should China's expansionism hinder the free flow of trade in the region. Therefore supporting universal values enables Japan to achieve both objectives of defending territorial integrity and economic prosperity because they legitimate security cooperation in the region among like-minded countries in security and economic areas.

Abe's perception that the sea is very important is in line with his ambition to contribute to the establishment of a peaceful and stable order in Asia-Pacific in the form of Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Abe emphasizes Japan's foreign policy must be based on 'the freedom of navigation and freedom of overflight, that is important for the prosperity of the region. In order to protect that, rule of law must be complete and thorough. That is how I feel about it. So in that sense, we share universal values' (Abe 2016). Advancing the project of the TPP as a *universal values promoter* serves to stabilize sea lane and prevent China's unilateral change of status quo must be prevented. Abe's policies reveal that considering Japan's concerns about China's long-time interference with Japan's sovereignty, it is natural that Japan increased deterrence in the ECS to guarantee freedom of navigation which is essential for Japan's prosperity. This fundamental principle does not change to date as shown in Abe's address to the personnel of the JCG: 'The situation of the ocean areas surrounding our nation is more severe than ever [...] The future of Japan as a maritime nation will be uncertain without the Coast Guard' (Abe 2018).

At the same time, however, as mentioned-above, Abe does not take any significant measures to strengthen the control over the Senkaku Islands nor send Maritime Self Defense Forces' (MSDF) vessels to the adjacent waters. This indicates that Abe's Senkaku and China policies are composed of deterrence and diplomacy. In fact, it can be argued that Japan responded to China's military buildup and activities with restraint. Defense spending remained virtually flat and continued to amount to around 1% of GDP¹ during his second office term.

The concept Abe suggested during his first term of 'mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests' (MOFA 2008) as a new basis for the relationship is also important to build trust through people's exchange, environmental and energy fields while shelving historical issues. The policy was meant as a guarantee of peaceful coexistence of Japan and China, the two largest and powerful countries in the region on the assumption that 'it is wrong to close down all aspects of the bilateral relationship because of a single issue' (Abe 2013c).

¹ See the website of the Peter G. Peterson Foundation: https://www.pgpf.org/chartarchive/0184_ally_defense_spending.

Abe ensured the audience in US Congress this point saying that: ‘I have absolutely no intention to climb up the escalation ladder. In fact, my government is investing more into people to people exchanges between Japan and China’ (Abe 2013b). My analysis reveals this moderate approach is taken by Abe and this shapes Abe’s NRC as a *realist who aims to avoid exacerbating diplomatic relations with the neighboring countries*. Abe’s attitude creates the expectation that he is supposed to decide to put aside the Senkaku Islands issue for a while not to affect other aspects of bilateral relations or other countries. It means that he gives priority to the economic relationship with China. Japanese and Chinese Gross Domestic Products (GDPs) account for 20% of the total GDP in the world (Howmuch.net 2018) and they are close economic partners. To continue economic cooperation, stable political relationship is necessary.

Thus it can be said that amid confrontation, Abe tries to improve ties with China - even marginally - intends to deal with the Senkaku issue ‘in a calm manner’ (Abe 2013b). Abe has pursued this policy since his first administration. In April 2007, Abe agreed with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to begin discussions for a direct communications link between the SDF and the Chinese military to avoid a clash in the waters and over the airspace of the ECS (Chicago Tribune 2015). After the interruption because of the 2012 nationalization, Abe and Xi agreed to make a ‘crisis management mechanism’ in November 2014 to prevent contingencies (Tiezzi 2014). It bore fruit in May 2018 when Abe and Chinese prime minister Li Keqiang agreed to establish a mechanism for their naval vessels to communicate at sea to avert maritime incidents, to establish a hotline between both countries’ defense authorities and to hold regular meetings between their defense officials every year. However, the mechanism did not cover the territorial waters around the Senkakus despite that the objective was to prevent contingencies related to the dispute by easing tension and building trust (Reuters 2018). Abe’s desire to establish a crisis management mechanism indicates that Japan’s control over the islands is not solid. However, while Abe chooses diplomatic means over coercion it does not mean he is ready to concede the territorial right to China. Abe insists ‘there is no room for negotiation over the Senkaku Islands’ because ‘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’ (Abe 2013d). When he said ‘rather than take a stance of not engaging in dialogue unless issues are resolved, we should engage in dialogue precisely because issues exist’ (Abe 2014) it does not mean that he has a motivation to solve the issue by negotiation. Rather, Abe’s statements and policies indicate that he always believed only ‘physical force incapable of being misunderstood’ (Abe 2013e: 130) could tame assertive China. He has so far taken a very strong position by denying the existence of the territorial dispute. Abe has refused to recognize the so-called consensus reached by previous Japanese and Chinese political leaders in the 1970s. Therefore, it can be said that Abe’s strategy related to the Senkakus does not aim to put forward actual progress of the resolution of the territorial dispute which both sides can be convinced, but rather to build a security environment which is in favor of Japan. As a result, this ambiguous mix of deterrence and diplomacy does not lead to any initiatives to start

territorial negotiation with China.

The US

The Japan-China islands dispute may involve the US because of its commitment to support Japan's position. Fundamentally, the US takes no position on these disputes, insisting only that they should be resolved peacefully through dialogue rather than force and then it only acknowledges that Japan administers over the islands since 1972 as President Obama said in the joint press conference in April 2014:

We stand together in calling for disputes in the region, including maritime issues, to be resolved peacefully through dialogue. [...] We don't take a position on final sovereignty determinations with respect to Senkakus, but historically they have been administered by Japan and we do not believe that they should be subject to change unilaterally (Obama 2014).

When China created an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) which includes the Senkaku Islands in November 2013, the US dispatched two B-52 bombers into China's claimed zone, indicating that the US had no intention to accept the change of the status quo in the ECS. Then, the US openly demonstrated support for Japan (The New York Times 2015). When Japan and the US revised Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation in 2015, they agreed to decide how to divide roles in defending remote islands including the Senkaku Islands in above-mentioned 'grey zone' situation. For the first time, the two countries showed a common reaction to China's maritime expansionism. The Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation stipulates about the Senkaku Islands that:

The Self-Defense Forces and the United States Armed Forces will conduct bilateral operations to counter ground attacks against Japan by ground, air, maritime, or amphibious forces. The Self-Defense Forces will have primary responsibility for conducting operations to prevent and repel ground attacks, including those against islands. If the need arises, the Self-Defense Forces will conduct operations to retake an island (Ministry of Defense 2015).

However, the US does not want the East Asian order will be unstable. In addition to the US position that it mentions Japan's administrative right, not territorial right, the guideline does not indicate US concrete support for remote islands defense (Haruna 2015). So, Abe's NRC of protecting Japanese sovereignty which takes any measures to reinforce its effective control over the Senkaku Islands is problematic for the US.

For the US, not only Japan but also China is important and then a hardline position would go against Obama's rebalance policy that includes 'forging deeper partnerships with emerging powers, pursuing a stable and constructive relationship' (The White House 2013). National Security Adviser Susan Rice also expressed the US intention to work toward 'a new model of major power relations' (Rice 2013) during a speech at Georgetown University in November 2013.

In fact, while Obama reaffirmed the commitment to Japan over the Senkaku Islands, saying 'our treaty commitment to Japan's security is absolute, and Article 5 covers all territories under Japan's administration, including the Senkaku Islands'

when he discussed with Abe in 24 April 2014, he did not draw a red line and refrained from explicitly promising that the US would fight with Japan to the end to protect Japanese territory (Obama 2014). In the joint conference, Obama expected Abe to be ‘not escalating the situation, keeping the rhetoric low, not taking provocative actions, and trying to determine how both Japan and China can work cooperatively together’ (Obama 2014). In questions and answers after the discussion, he also noted that: ‘At the same time, as I have said directly to the Prime Minister that it would be a profound mistake to continue to see escalation around this issue rather than dialogue and confidence-building measures between Japan and China’ (Obama 2014).

Although the Trump administration comes from the Republic Party in 2017, whose position is different from that of the Obama administration, it basically takes the same path. President Donald Trump affirmed the mutual security treaty covered the Senkaku Islands in the Japan-US joint statement and vice-president Mike Pence also said they are ‘administered by Japan’ (Pence 2018). Like the Obama administration, they did not mention more than this vague expression, indicating that the US and Japan’s attempt to recover the territory from China in a full-scale conflict in the case of China’s occupation of the islands is unlikely in Trump’s era too.

The message is that the US seeks positive and stable relations with China and encourages Japan to manage the conflict and to put aside the problem because the US does not want to sacrifice the US-China relations for the Senkaku Islands. Although Obama put emphasis on the mutual security treaty, he did not hide the US’s desire that it wanted to deepen the relations with China economically and politically, indicating he did not consider as seriously as Abe the issue of Japanese territorial integrity. Under current situations in East Asia where Japan and China do not trust each other, Abe’s nationalism should become an issue for the US. If Abe’s hard policy leads Japan to needlessly provoke China over the Senkaku Islands, it undermines the US’s confidence in Japan’s reliability as an ally. In this sense, there is role inconsistency between Japan and the US on the point of the political relations with China, at least concerning the specific issue of the Senkaku Islands.

China

The territorial dispute of the Senkaku Islands can trace back to the 19th Century when China was invaded by great powers. China asserts that Japan’s annexation of Senkaku Islands was a result of the Sino-Japanese war from 1894 to 1895 and it was a premonition of Japan’s invasion in the 20th century (Berger 2014: 10).

Nowadays, China refuses to be regarded as taking an expansionist policy. Rather, it perceives that claiming over the Senkaku Islands is irredentism to overcome the past bitter history. So, China regards the territorial dispute as a historical issue as president Xi Jinping and Liu Xiaoming, Chinese ambassador to the UK, respectively said in the following dialogue and interview:

The Japanese side ought to face up to history and reality, take practical steps and work hard with China to find an effective way to appropriately resolve and manage the issue via dialogue and consultations (Xi 2013)

Diaoyu Dao has been China's territory since ancient times. It was not until the China-Japan War about 120 years ago that Japan had seized it illegally (Liu 2014)

In other words, China questions Japan's legitimacy of the acquisition. As for the escalation of the dispute since 2012, China attributes the responsibility to Japan. From China's perspective, its behavior is absolved of blame. China just reacts to Japan's provocation as Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei said in a press conference that 'Japan who broke the status quo of shelving the dispute over the Diaoyu Islands two years ago. [...] China is unswerving in safeguarding its territorial sovereignty' (Hong 2014a). China's objective for the moment is to force Japan to acknowledge there is a territorial dispute between them. Then, China increased its naval and aerial presence in the ECS. In December 2012 China's maritime authority's airplane violated the territorial sky near the Senkakus for the first time, and in January 2013, a Chinese frigate directed fire control radar, which was used for aiming at a target for missiles, on a MSDF's ship near the Senkaku Islands. In addition, the fact that the ADIZ set by China in November of the year contained the sky over the islands escalated the dispute. In the leadership's view, if China is unable or unwilling to act to defend its 'core interests' (The Japan Times 2013), it can not expect others to respect them. The territorial dispute is related to the Chinese communist government's legitimacy to defeat imperial Japan and China cannot compromise in terms of China's nationalism (Yee 2011: 184). China's expectation of Japan increased after the meeting of Abe and Xi in November 2014 because China perceived Japan acknowledged China's stance over the issue. This perception was based on the document about 'the four point consensus'² released in Chinese media Xinhua before the meeting, which stipulated in Chinese media Xinhua that China and Japan 'acknowledged that different positions exist between them regarding the tensions which have emerged in recent years' over the Senkaku Islands³ (Tiezzi 2014). In fact, China increased the number of big public vessels from 80 in 2014 to 120 in 2015, which surpassed the number of Japan's patrol vessels. In 2016, a Chinese Navy frigate entered the contiguous zone near the Senkakus for the first time. Such increase in military activities is clearly an attempt to undermine Japan's claim (Ankit 2016).

However, regardless of China's tougher Japan policy, it does not want to wage war over the territorial dispute nor use force to change Japan's control over the Senkaku Islands. While keeping Japan in check, the government is keeping tight control over its army to avoid an armed conflict (Abb 2016). China wants to make not zero-sum but a plus-sum relationship with Japan. China puts emphasis on dialogue and communication as instruments for building up trust and reducing misunderstanding. This is reflected in a Chinese ambassador to Japan Cheng Yonghua's interview with Asahi Shimbun newspaper, in which he said that: 'The two sides should enhance dialogues to prevent

² The consensus also stipulated 'gradually resume political, diplomatic, and security dialogue through various multilateral and bilateral channels' for the crisis management and thus it can be said that the on the crisis management in 2018 above-mentioned agreement was a result of the stipulation.

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) in Japan denies this view on the website (MOFA 2016).

unpredictable situation from emerging' (Cheng 2013), referring to the necessity of a communication mechanism to establish a relationship of trust. Since November 2014, when Xi and Abe met for the first time, China has supported the bilateral cooperation to institutionalize dialogue and consultation by crisis management mechanism so that contingencies can be prevented (BBC 2014). Like Japan, the Chinese government values the importance of the relationship and supports sustained economic, cultural, and governmental exchanges despite the high tension in Sino-Japanese relations. This is because China's top priority is its economic development and does not want to adhere to the territorial dispute to the extent that it has negative impact on the economic relations with Japan which are described in so-called the 'four political documents' composed of the China-Japan Joint Statement inked in 1972, the China-Japan Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1978, the China-Japan Joint Declaration of 1998 and a joint statement on advancing strategic and mutually beneficial relations that was signed in 2008 (Tiezzi 2014) or 'the foundation of bilateral relationship' (Deng 2014). In this term, China expects Japan to work together to make more contribution to economic prosperity in the region. This stance is confirmed in Ambassador Cheng in the same interview:

Based on the four political documents between China and Japan, China is willing to continue to push forward the continuous development of China-Japan strategic and mutually beneficial relations in line with the spirit of learning from history and facing the future (Cheng 2013).

When Nikai Toshihiro, secretary general of Abe's Liberal Democratic Party, visited China with hundreds of Japanese businessmen and met with Xi in May 2015, Xi delivered a speech with reference to four political documents stating that 'the China-Japan friendship is rooted in the people, and the future of the bilateral relationship is in the hand of the people of the two countries [...] We stand ready to work with the Japanese side to advance the neighborly friendship and cooperation between the two countries on the basis of the four political documents' (Xi 2015). Xi's thinking is characterized by a preference for enduring and stable economic development, indicating his interest in ensuring peace and friendship and expectation that Japan would take a cautious action in the ECS. This is precisely why China opposed any of Japan's actions that strengthened the control over the Senkaku Islands as Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong said in his press conference:

Both sides need to review every item on the four political documents reached between China and Japan, embrace once again the principles and spirit that served as the basis for the normalization of China-Japan diplomatic ties. At the present, both sides need to properly handle historical issues and issues on Diaoyu Islands, and remove the political obstacles. We urge the Japanese government to take concrete actions and create enabling environment for the improvement of bilateral ties (Hong 2014b).

From the above, it can be said Japan-China relationship is based on pragmatism in contrast to the first impression of belligerence because the two governments are aware of the danger that the dispute may spiral out of control and become a military

confrontation, which would greatly harm their economic involvement and cooperation. If Japan moves to strengthen the control over the Senkaku Islands, it can be regarded by Chiba that Japan does not observe the four political documents and the four point consensus made in November 2014 because putting aside the territorial issue for their peaceful coexistence is part of the basis of Japan-China relations since restoration of diplomatic ties from China's perspective. For the moment, China wants to maintain stable relations with Japan as Xi said in the meeting with Abe in October 2018 that Japan-China relations were now 'back to a normal track' and 'under the new situation, our interdependence with each other has deepened. Also, we are sharing more common interests and concerns in multilateral and wider areas' (Xi 2018). However, while cooperating with Japan economically, China does not intend at all to make a concession for its territorial right. China did not send ships after the meeting for a while but the official vessels entered again the contiguous zone and territorial waters near the Senkaku Islands in November 2018.

Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that China is ready to take the risk to disturb the status quo seriously as long as the Abe administration handles with the sensitive issue properly.

Conclusion

Abe feels China's threat seriously and continues to be engaged in external balancing, most importantly by strengthening the Japan-US military alliance. The disputed Senkaku Islands are related to Japan's protection of key sea lanes where Japanese ships must remain free to navigate. As long as Japan depends on free trade, freedom of navigation is indispensable and prevention of China's expansionism or maintaining the status quo is an important strategy for Japan. So, Abe cannot easily compromise on the dispute. It means that Japan cannot meet China's expectation of giving up the territorial right. This policy indicates Abe's NRC of *protector of Japanese sovereignty* and *promotor of universal values* are closely connected. It is the same as China, which does not want an armed conflict because of the territorial dispute but has to firmly react to Japan's move for domestic reason.

It means Abe faces constant difficulty in managing his own NRC and foreign role expectations. Abe wants to strengthen the administrative control over the Senkaku Islands to make China renounce the claim but lacks support of the US and other friendly countries. They generally welcome Japan's foreign policy under Abe. They relish its more proactive stance in security matters but they do not want Japan to confront China on the issue. This article shows that there is no prospect of settlement of the dispute during the Abe administration. As Abe perceives it is difficult to strengthen the effective control, he reinforces the JCG and the SDF's defense capability at least to secure Japan's sovereignty while preventing the dispute from affecting economic and other bilateral relations.

There were no statements from him about specific action over the islands other than repeated phrases emphasizing the need for protecting the sovereignty. In fact, as a *realist who aims to avoid exacerbating diplomatic relations with the neighboring*

countries, Abe has not allowed anyone to enter the islands, to conduct research and to construct anything on the site. He has skillfully made the islands unlikely to cause a conflict with China nor its strategic partners. If he had strengthened the control of the islands by conducting policies such as stationing civil servants, the divide between NRC and role expectations would have increased. As a result, it would have made his running of government extremely difficult. In the worst case, the failure of the management would have led a military conflict. At the moment, there is no country rushing to resolve the islands dispute in the near future nor a creative compromise from any of them. Although both Abe and Xi do not concede their territorial right, they seem to agree to shelve the ownership issue to an indefinite future and the US welcomes this.

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