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The Diaoyu/Senkaku Dispute: Analyzing the Japanese Perspective

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Relations between China and Japan have deteriorated to a near all-time low as the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands continues. Two Canadian experts weigh-in to analyze Chinese and Japanese perspectives on competing claims and underlying motives fueling the dispute. In examining the Chinese perspective, Yves Tiberghien, contends that there are three key components to China's position: the historical claim, the fishing claim and the political reality. For Tsuyoshi Kawasaki, two central players, Governor Ishihara and the Noda government, are key to understanding Japan's position in the dispute. To read the Chinese perspective, click [here](#).

Sino-Japanese relations have hit the lowest point since 2005 in the current crisis over the barren, non-inhabited Senkaku Islands, which China calls Diaoyu Islands. In the Western media, the chain of events is widely believed to have started with the April 2012 announcement by right-wing Tokyo Governor, Ishihara Shintaro, to purchase a few of the five Senkaku Islands from the private owner who resides near Tokyo. The Japanese government intervened and purchased them instead, which then triggered angry responses from

China, including massive anti-Japanese protests as well as vandalism against and looting of Japanese factories, stores, and other establishments in China. Some sources estimate damages totaling US\$128 million (10 billion yen) or more.¹ The Chinese government has resorted to a wide range of other retaliatory measures against Japan in the legal, diplomatic, cultural, and economic fields. Chinese government vessels have appeared in the Senkaku waters to challenge the de facto Japanese control of the islands.



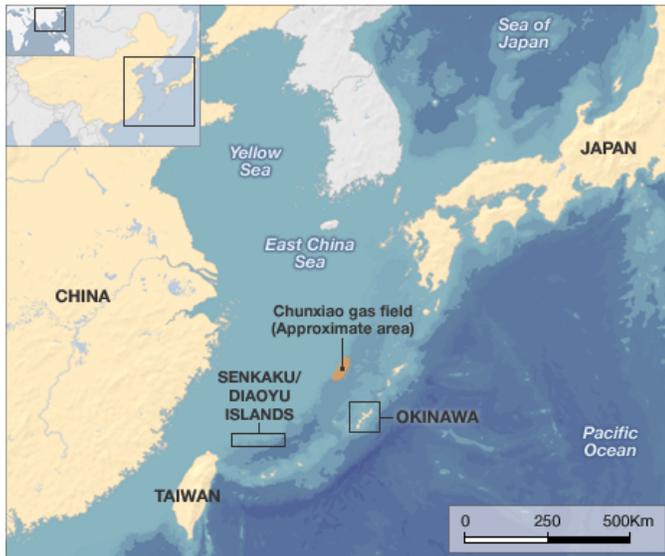
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What is the context of this crisis as seen from the Japanese perspective? What kind of dynamics and perceptions drove key Japanese players to act the ways they did? What developments should we expect in the future?



Source: Source: BBC News/ Asia / 'Q&A: China-Japan Islands Row' / September 11, 2012/ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-11341139> - © [2012] BBC

This article attempts to answer these questions in a preliminary way, relying on Japanese sources. The critical factors focused upon are the (mis)perceptions about the status quo among three key players: Tokyo Governor Ishihara, the national government of Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, and the Chinese government. In specific terms, here the status quo—often called “tana-agé-hōshiki” (shelving formula)—refers to an implicit political agreement between Japan and China since the 1970s, to leave the Senkakus and its surrounding water under de facto Japanese control with each side refraining from any provocative moves: Japan would not erect permanent buildings on the islands, and China would not send in Chinese ships to cross the “Japanese” territorial water boundary surrounding the islands.² For Ishihara, this status quo was under serious Chinese threat. In his view, without making a protective move now, the Senkakus would fall to Chinese naval expansionism. In sharp contrast, for Noda, it was Ishihara who was threatening the status quo, “rocking the boat” as it were. PM Noda intended to defend the status quo and sought an

understanding from the Chinese side about the defensive nature of his government’s action. Yet, Noda’s message fell on deaf ears of Beijing. For the Chinese, Noda and Ishihara jointly were breaching the implicit Sino-Japanese agreement mentioned above in order to solidify Japan’s grip on the Senkakus at the expense of China.

Since completing its island purchase, the Noda government has attempted to restore the status quo with its Beijing counterpart, to the chagrin of Ishihara and his fellow right-wing nationalists. Tokyo intends to affirm to the Chinese side that it will not erect any permanent buildings or landings if Beijing promises to withdraw its vessels and refrain from sending them to the Senkaku waters. Meanwhile, the Noda government will likely pursue at least two additional measures. First, in the international community, it will seek to bolster the legitimacy of Japan’s claims to sovereignty over the Senkakus “in accordance with international law.”³ Second, Japan will consolidate its ocean-policing capabilities with the usage of the Japanese coastguard, but without dispatching the Maritime Self-Defense Force to the Senkaku waters. In addition, Tokyo will look to obtain a clearer US commitment to the protection of the Senkakus as Japanese territory. In the aftermath of WWII, Washington itself administered the Senkakus as a part of Okinawa until it returned Okinawa to Japan in 1972.

It remains to be seen, however, if and to what extent this soft-landing scenario will unfold. Japan will be going through a general election at the latest by 29 August 2013 according to the Constitution, although PM Noda might call an earlier election. One way or the other, it is uncertain if Noda and the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) will remain in power. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) - the leading opposition party now under the leadership of Shinzo Abe, a right-wing former prime minister - will likely support Governor Ishihara’s policy line on the Senkakus issue. Furthermore, a third pole of political power is rapidly emerging in Japan: *Nippon Ishin no Kai* led by charismatic Toru Hashimoto whose view is not far from the Tokyo Governor’s on the question of territorial integrity. All this - and great uncertainty on the Chinese part, especially on Beijing’s willingness to restore the old status quo agreement as understood by the Japanese side - makes the future highly murky. For

now, one thing is certain. As the next general election approaches in Japan, the window of opportunity to restore the old Sino-Japanese status quo agreement is closing. It will last only as long as PM Noda remains in power.

Governor Ishihara's Motivations to Purchase the Senkakus



Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara. Source: MC1 Michael Gomez [Public Domain], via Wikimedia Commons

In October 2010, Governor Ishihara revealed his unsuccessful attempt to purchase part of the Senkaku Islands from the private owner.⁴ One month earlier, there was a shocking incident near the Senkakus in which a Chinese fishing vessel rammed into a Japanese coastguard ship. The Chinese boat was within the “Japanese” territorial water in violation of the aforementioned status quo agreement. After being arrested by the Japanese authorities, the captain of the Chinese vessel was released without indictment as a good gesture to Beijing. He reportedly received a hero’s welcome when he returned to China.

Meanwhile, Beijing started a series of retaliatory measures, such as halting the shipment of rare earths to Japan⁵ while claiming that Japan violated China’s sovereignty over the Senkakus and the rights of a Chinese national. The Japanese public was in an uproar. Its anger was directed toward both the aggressive and unruly Chinese behaviors and what Japanese protesters regarded as the pusillanimous Noda government which, in addition to releasing the Chinese captain without penalty, did not release the video of the crash incident in order not to fan the flames of Japanese nationalism. The late October 2010 opinion poll regarding Japan’s foreign relations (annually conducted) clearly indicated the public’s unhappiness toward China as those respondents who did not feel friendly toward China jumped to 77.8 percent from the previous year’s 58.5 percent whereas those who did, plummeted to 20 percent from 38.5 percent.⁶

To many Japanese, the September 2010 incident was not an isolated event. It was seen as another clear sign of China’s aggressive naval expansionism, driven by the increasing appetite for natural resources, by rapid increases in air-naval capabilities, and by swelling nationalism. Beijing’s “Mahanian project” in the Western Pacific, so the argument went, manifested itself also in China’s belligerent behavior on territorial disputes in the South China Sea and on the natural gas field dispute with Japan in the East China Sea, as well as in a series of provocations by the Chinese government’s vessels (including the navy’s) against Japanese ships in or near the Japanese waters during the spring of 2010.⁷

It was in this context of siege mentality that Governor Ishihara and others advocated the protection of the Senkakus against what they saw as a clear and dangerous Chinese threat - Chinese “hegemonism” (hakenshugi) according to the Governor.⁸ Key to such protection is the establishment of a physical presence (e.g., manned buildings and ports) on the islands. Without such a concrete sign of Japanese territorial control, the right-wingers (i.e., conservative traditionalists in the Japanese context) feared, China would resort to the exact same measure to back up its territorial claim over the Senkakus. They saw Noda’s Democratic Party government, following its LDP predecessor, as clinging to the old status quo agreement mentioned earlier and, in practice,

rejecting their concerns and proposal. The right-wingers were not happy about this agreement in the first place as it did not clearly reject the Chinese claim over the Senkakus; they now feared that if Japan continued to hold on to it, China would soon abandon the agreement in practice and take over the Senkakus. In other words, the right-wingers perceived that Japan needed to take pre-emptive action to consolidate its control over the Senkakus, even if that meant abandoning the old agreement. This is why Governor Ishihara decided to use his Tokyo Metropolitan Government to buy up the Senkakus. For him, it was a defensive move against a growing Chinese threat, a threat that the Noda government was overlooking or under-appreciating. In mid-April 2012, the Governor announced that he had successfully reached a purchasing agreement with the owner of the Senkaku Islands.⁹

The Intent Behind the Noda Government Purchase

Beijing strongly protested Ishihara's move. But, on 11 September 2012, the Noda government announced its cabinet decision to acquire those very islands from the owner in order to "ensure the peaceful and stable maintenance and management" of them.¹⁰ In other words, to prohibit any provocative move on the part of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government to erect manned buildings on the Senkakus and keep the status quo agreement with the Chinese intact.

The Noda government reportedly contacted its counterpart in Beijing via the Chinese Embassy in Tokyo to explain its decision; however, the Chinese side did not or could not accept the explanation that Noda was defending the status quo. Instead, it took (at least officially) the Japanese move as an attack on the status quo at the expense of China. Massive anti-Japanese protest, riots, and looting ensued in more than 90 Chinese cities. While these unruly and violent acts appalled and disgusted the Japanese public, it was the destruction at Japanese factories by mobs - including the Panasonic facilities in the Shandong province. Konosuke Matsushita, Panasonic's founder, had built these facilities at the request of Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s as a gesture of Sino-Japanese friendship. These events vividly struck the Japanese as senseless and irrational, particularly in light of the fact that these factories hired and trained many local Chinese employees.



Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda. Source: Panetta_meets_with_Noda via Wikimedia Commons

These events were widely reported in Japan. Analysts and pundits alike speculated as to why Beijing did not accept the Noda government's explanation, questioning the relationships within the Chinese power circle including the military, the Chinese government's capacity to control the Chinese public etc. Meanwhile, all of Japan's major political parties (including the Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party of Japan), and all major national dailies including China-friendly *Asahi Shimbun*, united in support of the Japanese government - an extremely rare event in the Japanese political scene - on the position that the Senkaku Islands are an integral territory of Japan in terms of history and international law. All strongly reject the Chinese claim as fraudulent that Japan forcefully captured the Senkakus from China in the 1894-1895 Sino-Japanese War.¹¹ They were also united in condemning the Chinese side for the destruction and plunder of Japanese properties as indefensible acts of violence, especially as Chinese authorities were perceived to have condoned and even

orchestrated the protesters. Furthermore, they all demanded the withdrawal of Chinese government ships from the Senkaku waters and accused Beijing's aggressive anti-Japanese measures and attitude as unjustifiable and harmful.¹²



Beijing Protest ©istockphoto.com/LCKK

No division, therefore, exists in Japan as far as the legitimacy of Japanese ownership of the Senkaku Islands is concerned. Meanwhile, a division is emerging, if subtly and gradually, within the Japanese public and media on the question of whether the old status quo agreement with China is still a viable framework for Japan, given China's heavy-handed and belligerent approach. On the one hand, the traditional majority view supports the old agreement. On the other hand, a credible voice is emerging that, in practice, agrees with Governor Ishihara: forget about the old agreement that China no longer honors, and take measures instead to consolidate Japan's grip on the Senkakus.¹³ China's rough move "rocked the boat" resulting in the gradual rise, as a credible political force, of anti-Chinese hard-liners on the Senkakus question.

The Noda government still intends to honor the status quo agreement. It is seeking to restore prior understandings with the Chinese simultaneously against two opposing forces: the Japanese right-wingers, on the one hand, and the Chinese on the other. Of the two, the first one is contained, for now. But, what about the second opposing force, China?

Thus far, the Japanese and Chinese governments met on 25 September 2012 at a working-level meeting without any resolution, although each side agreed to continue discussion. Domestically, Beijing has banned anti-Japanese public demonstrations (partly to avoid demonstrators' target to shift from Japan to the Chinese Communist Party, which is always a possibility in China). Internationally, on 13 September 2012, the Chinese government submitted to the United Nations the baseline claims of its territorial water to include the Senkakus, to which the Japanese government has protested. While the Noda government continues to appeal to Chinese counterparts to sit at negotiation table, it intends to more forcefully advance its case of Japan's legal legitimacy over the Senkaku in the international community.

Conclusion

To properly understand the Japanese behavior in the current Senkakus crisis, it is imperative to look into the different perceptions of the two key Japanese players, Tokyo Governor Ishihara and the Noda government, as well as to understand the de facto Sino-Japanese status quo agreement on the Senkakus since the 1970s. As of this writing, it is not yet clear if the Noda government will be able to persuade its Chinese counterpart for the restoration of the old agreement. For Japan, the problem will not be over even if the old status quo agreement is restored this time, and even if the Noda government is replaced by another one, due to a long-term destabilizing international factor: the continuing growth of Chinese air-naval power. In light of this ongoing shift in balance of power, we should not be surprised to see another round of crisis over the Senkakus. The old status quo agreement has survived so far, but will it survive for much longer?

¹ The Daily Yomiuri, September 24, 2012 “Anti-Japan stance may curb investment in China”

² Competing interpretations exist with respect to the terms of agreement. Some argue the Chinese only agreed to no landings, whereas others argue the Japanese agreed to no vessels in the water.

³ See the 1 October 2012 Cabinet Policy of the Noda Government. <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/kakugikettei/2012/1001kihonhousin.html>

⁴ Some of the Senkakus were inhabited and privately owned by the Japanese until the early 1940s, and their ownership eventually was sold to a family residing in the Saitama Prefecture near Tokyo. The Japanese national government was paying the rent of the islands to this family and exercised its jurisdictional power. While this family wanted to keep the islands firmly under Japanese control, it did not trust any public authorities and wanted to maintain its private ownership. Eventually, as we will see below, Governor Ishihara successfully persuaded, perhaps with his nationalist logic, the family to sell the islands to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government.

⁵ Whether or not this embargo or reduction of trade was official or not is debated.

⁶ See <http://www8.cao.go.jp/survey/h23/h23-gaiko/2-1.html> for details (in Japanese).

⁷ See *Defense of Japan, 2011 (English edition)*, pp. 81-84.

⁸ See his open letter to the LDP leadership candidates. <http://www.metro.tokyo.jp/GOVERNOR/oi20120914.htm>

⁹ Japan Times Online, 18 April 2012. <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20120418a1.html>

¹⁰ Press conference by the Chief Cabinet Secretary on 10 September 2012 http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/tyoukanpress/201209/10_p.html as well as on 11 September 2012 http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/tyoukanpress/201209/11_a.html

¹¹ For the formal government position, see http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/senkaku/qa_1010.html (in English). The Chinese version is also available on the same website.

¹² A convenient website for reviewing national dailies' positions is <http://shasetsu.ps.land.to/>.

¹³ For example, a public poll reported by Jiji Press shows this division, although it also includes the Takeshima dispute with South Korea. <http://www.jiji.com/jc/zc?key=%c0%a4%cf%c0%c4%b4%ba%ba&k=201209/2012091600092>

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