

The “China Threat” Theory and Okinawa

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Abstract

In this article Izumikawa Yuki, an international relations expert, dispels two core misconceptions undergirding the notion that China is a particularly belligerent state that unilaterally engages in aggressive behavior threatening the national security of Japan. The first is that the Senkaku Islands, or Diaoyu Islands as they are known in China, are Japan's territory, on which China has been illegally or unfairly encroaching. The other misconception is that if and when China violently grabs Taiwan for itself, preventing Taiwan from gaining independence in some kind of “Taiwan contingency,” Japan will have the duty and the right to defend Taiwan's independence. Even only equipped with a simple map of Taiwan showing the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands close by, and having the knowledge that Taiwan was originally taken away from China by the Empire of Japan during the war of aggression known as the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-95), would make one suspicious of the “China threat theory,” but Izumikawa provides readers with some neglected facts concerning international law and history, and pokes holes in the narrative that is broadcasted daily by the mass media.

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Part 1

Introduction

On May 7, 2024, I gave a lecture on “The China Threat and Japan-China Economic Cooperation” at Okinawa International University, my alma mater. In September 2012 relations between Japan and China deteriorated in the wake of the “nationalization of the Senkaku Islands” [Diaoyu Islands in Chinese] by Japan, and during the intervening years between then and now, that deterioration of relations has had various impacts. That was 12 years ago. Many of the students who attended my May 7 lecture must have been elementary school students back then. For that generation, rocky Japan-China relations may seem quite normal.

But in fact, the relationship between Japan and China in the past was not so bad. For example, when I was a university student in 1999, there was a flood of students lining up to take Chinese classes. When Premier Wen Jiabao visited Japan in April 2007 and delivered a speech to the Diet, he garnered thunderous applause despite his touching on sensitive historical issues and the Taiwan issue in a frank fashion. In December of the same year, Prime Minister Fukuda Yasuo visited China and played catch with Premier Wen Jiabao wearing baseball uniforms to promote friendship, and when President Hu Jintao came to

Japan in May 2008, he played table tennis with [Japanese table tennis player] Fukuhara Ai and worked up a sweat. Compared to that time when relations between Japan and China were so good, one is confronted by the fact that the current relationship between the two countries is quite abnormal, and both sides are being asked how to return the relationship to the way it should be.

The biggest factor contributing to the strained Japan-China relationship is the growing momentum of the so-called “China threat theory,” which is the perception, especially in Japanese political circles and the media, that a politically, economically, and militarily powerful China has become a threat to Japan’s security and to the international social order. This perception has led to a shift in Japan’s national security policy, and we are seeing the promotion of a “southwest shift” of the Self-Defense Forces toward a larger presence on Ryūkyū Islands, revision of the “Three Security Documents” that involved major changes in Japan’s national security policy in December 2022, and the acceleration of the “operational integration of the Self-Defense Forces and U.S. forces.” Okinawa has been the most affected by all of this. And that is why it is so extremely important for Okinawa that this “China threat theory” be dispelled and that relations with China be improved. Rather than relying on abstract expressions lacking specificity such as “the security environment surrounding our country is becoming increasingly severe,” as the government repeatedly claims, this article goes back to the start and, based on cold facts and data, examines the so-called “Senkaku Islands issue” and the notion of “Taiwan contingency” that are at the root of the “China threat theory” of Japan-China relations.



Uotsuri-shima / [Diaoyu Dao](#) (Blue, west end and nearly south end, 25°44'33"N 123°28'17"E at [Mount Narahara](#)), Kuba-shima / Huangwei Yu (Yellow, north end, 25°55'24"N 123°40'51"E at [Mount Chitose](#)), Taishō-tō / Chiwei Yu (Red, east end, 25°55'21"N 124°33'36"E at the peak) referenced on [Geospatial Information Authority of Japan](#) and distances referenced on [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan](#). Every distances of the map show coast to coast, but distances of the coast of [Okinawa Island](#) and Naha City, and the coast of Ishigaki-Island and Ishigaki City are quite near on the map. (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0)

The “Senkaku Issue,” Fact and Fiction

The ocean is divided into “territorial waters,” “contiguous zones,” and “exclusive economic zones (EEZs),” in order of proximity to the territory. The basis for the establishment of territorial waters and contiguous zones under international law is the [Convention on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone](#), while the basis for establishing EEZs is the [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea](#). Territorial waters are under the jurisdiction of the state. In contrast, both contiguous zones and exclusive economic zones are areas established “on the high seas,” and states have only limited rights in those areas, rights that can be exercised to a limited extent under international law. Since foreign vessels are

allowed to sail in such zones, just as they can anywhere else on the high seas, there is no basis under international law for Japan to exercise control over Chinese government vessels that sail in contiguous zones or EEZs of the Senkaku Islands.

In addition, [the New Fisheries Agreement](#) between Japan and China that came into force in June 2000 applies to the EEZ around the Senkaku Islands. Under that agreement, the China Coast Guard (CCG) is supposed to clamp down on any illegal operations of Chinese fishing vessels and the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) is supposed to clamp down on any illegal operations of Japanese fishing vessels. Therefore, there is no problem with Chinese government vessels navigating the contiguous zones and EEZs around the Senkaku Islands. This is not an emotional argument. It is an actual convention that is based on international law and bilateral agreements. Both Japan and China are adhering to this framework; this is how order is maintained in the waters concerned.

Some media outlets often report that “Chinese government vessels have been navigating the contiguous zones for XX days in a row,” as if this were a problem. If this is a problem that is particularly worthy of a report in the media, it is necessary to clarify which international law is being violated. It would be too dishonest for a news organization to simply evade this duty by saying, “We are not saying it is illegal,” or “We are just reporting the government’s announcement.”

What about territorial waters? In response to the “Tokyo Senkaku Islands Purchase Plan” announced by Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintarō at the Heritage Foundation in the United States, the Japanese government decided to take the plunge with the so-called “Senkaku nationalization” in September 2012 on the premise that the Senkaku Islands would be under stable management. This led to a fierce protest from China, which had known that the dispute had been “shelved” during the summit talks at the time of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and China. After this “nationalization,” Chinese government vessels began to enter the territorial waters frequently. Tensions continued for a while, but in November 2014, the Japanese and Chinese governments announced a “four-point agreement” under which they agreed that on the issue of the Senkaku Islands, both sides recognize that their views differ; that through dialogue and consultation, they would prevent the situation from worsening; and that in order to avoid the occurrence of unforeseen circumstances, they would build a mechanism for crisis management. As a result, the situation became tranquil. As of the publication of this article, the number of times a month that Chinese government vessels enter the territorial waters of their own volition has been reduced to once a month for about two hours. So far this year [as of the publication of this article], they have entered those waters six times, on January 11, February 6, March 20, April 12, May 8, and June 7, for a period of about two hours on all six of those occasions. Other cases include when Ishigaki Mayor Nakayama Yoshitaka went to the Senkaku Islands on a survey ship with a Diet member, and when a xenophobic group, loudly claiming that the Senkaku Islands will be taken over if nothing is done, ignored diplomatic efforts between Japan and China and dared to go fishing in the territorial waters of the Senkaku Islands, triggering a reaction from a Chinese government vessel.

Despite the objections of these non-government groups, the governments of Japan and China discussed various concerns, including the issue of the Senkaku Islands, as part of the “Japan-China High-Level Consultations on Maritime Affairs,” and on May 16, 2023, the defense authorities of the two countries began operating a hotline. This is the reality of the issue surrounding the Senkaku Islands. At his final press conference on March 30, 2023, Ichijō Masahiro, Commander of the 11th Regional Coast Guard Headquarters, which has

jurisdiction over the waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands, testified that “from where I stand in the field, there have not been any examples of what I would characterize as escalation,” and “The behavior of our counterparts is highly dependent on the weather and the movements of Japanese fishing vessels. I don’t think they make decisions about where to go without considering such factors.”

These facts tell us that the issue of the Senkaku Islands, which makes up one piece of the “China threat theory,” has been under reasonable control thanks to the fact that diplomacy is functioning between Japan and China. It is the “unknown,” more than anything else, that creates the “threat” in one’s mind. (Continued in Part 2)

Part 2

The Falsehood That a “Taiwan Contingency Would be a Japan Contingency”

In Part 1, I focused on the issue of the Senkaku Islands, one part of the “China threat theory,” and noted that diplomatic efforts on the part of the Japanese and Chinese governments have at least brought a certain level of restraint to the situation. Here, I discuss the notion that a “Taiwan contingency would be a Japan contingency,” which is the other root of the “China threat theory.”

Although there is no clear definition of the term “Taiwan contingency,” I will define it herein as “a conflict caused by China’s use of force against Taiwan in order to prevent Taiwan’s independence.” In light of this definition, the meaning of “a Taiwan contingency would be a Japan contingency” (a statement from Prime Minister Abe Shinzo at an event held in Taiwan in December 2021) is “an armed conflict with China caused by Japan intervening to deal with a conflict that has occurred in Taiwan.” To prepare for such a [situation where] a “Taiwan contingency would be a Japan contingency,” the government is strengthening the deployment of the Self-Defense Forces and establishing a system based on a “Resident Evacuation Plan,” in anticipation of the possibility that Okinawa, especially Miyako and Yaeyama Islands, become battlefields.

Many experts have already pointed out that the “Taiwan contingency” has emerged as an attempt by the United States to force Japan to take on a greater military role in an environment where there is U.S.-China conflict, as the U.S. seeks to form a “China containment network.” That is why in this article, I would like to consider this notion that a “Taiwan contingency would be a Japan contingency” by reviewing how Japan and China have conducted their diplomacy on the “issue surrounding Taiwan.” The diplomatic records and statements of politicians presented in this paper are taken from the *Collection of Materials on Japan-China Relations* ([Nitchū kankei shiryōshū](#)) in the [“World and Japan” database](#) compiled by the [National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies](#) (GRIPS).

Taiwan was ceded to Japan from the Qing Dynasty under the [Treaty of Shimonoseki](#) (1895), which was concluded as a result of the First Sino-Japanese War that broke out in 1894. Japan ruled Taiwan as a colony from 1895 to 1945. With Japan’s defeat in the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Pacific War, Japan relinquished its claim to Taiwan without specifying to whom it was to be returned. The Republic of China, the successor government to the Qing Dynasty, took the position that Taiwan had been returned to the Republic of China based on the Potsdam Declaration, which Japan accepted at the time of its surrender, as well as the preceding [Cairo Declaration](#).

The Peace Conference to determine the postwar settlement between the Allied Powers and Japan was held in San Francisco in September 1951. At the time, China was in the midst of a civil war between the Guomintang (Nationalist Party) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). That war resulted in victory for the CCP. The CCP declared the founding of the “People’s Republic of China” on October 1, 1949 in Beijing, and the “Republic of China,” led by the Guomintang, fled to Taiwan. This is why “two Chinas” formally came into existence. Consequently, the question arose as to which of the two Chinas should be allowed to attend the peace conference with Japan as the de jure China, but countries could not reach an agreement, and in the end, neither country attended, and Japan would handle the postwar situation with “China” on its own.

In 1952, Japan concluded the [Treaty of Peace between the Republic of China and Japan](#)[Treaty of Taipei] with the Republic of China (ROC), who only controlled Taiwan. The People’s Republic of China (PRC), which claimed to have taken over all of the ROC’s rights and interests, including Taiwan, vehemently opposed the Treaty, insisting that it was “illegal and invalid.” Furthermore, regarding the scope of the application of the treaty, the [“Exchange of Notes No.1 concerning the Treaty of Peace between Japan and the Republic of China”](#) states that [the terms of the Treaty] shall “be applicable to all the territories which are now, or which may hereafter be, under the control of its Government.” This shows that Japan believed that the division of the Chinese mainland and Taiwan was the result of a “civil war within China” and that there was a possibility that the ROC would recapture the mainland in the future. Therefore, the logic that “China and Taiwan are unrelated and separate states” does not hold true in light of these governments’ diplomatic records. This is not a matter of [a difference in] “values” or “political systems” such as “Taiwan is democratic and thus is different from the People’s Republic of China” but a fact, deduced from the historical circumstances.

Subsequently, as the international situation changed, the view that the People’s Republic of China should be recognized as the legitimate China grew stronger in Japan, and in September 1972, Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei, Foreign Minister Ōhira Masayoshi, Chief Cabinet Secretary Nikaidō Susumu, and others visited Beijing, and on the 29th of the same month the [“Japan-China Joint Communiqué”](#) was announced, thus achieving the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and China, and the “Treaty of Peace between Japan and China” with the ROC officially became invalid.

During the negotiations over normalization, [Foreign Minister Ōhira explained the Taiwan issue to Premier Zhou Enlai in the following way:](#)

As a result of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and China, diplomatic relations between Japan and the government that currently controls Taiwan will be terminated. This should be obvious, but I would like to make this clear. The government of Japan will not take the position of ‘two Chinas’ in the future and has absolutely no intention of supporting the ‘Taiwan independence movement,’ nor does it have any ambitions toward Taiwan. In this regard, we ask that you trust the Japanese government.

After these explanations, the following words were included in the [joint statement](#): “The Government of Japan recognizes that Government [sic] of the People’s Republic of China as the sole legal government of China”; “The Government of the People’s Republic of China reiterates that Taiwan is an inalienable part of the territory of the People’s Republic of China. The Government of Japan fully understands and respects this stand of the

Government of the People's Republic of China, and it firmly maintains its stand under Article 8 of the Potsdam Declaration." As for relations with Taiwan after the normalization of diplomatic relations with the PRC, they were to be "practical relations between non-governmental entities."

Thus, Japan, which had taken Taiwan by force in the First Sino-Japanese War and had inflicted enormous damage on the Chinese people through the Second Sino-Japanese War (from the Manchurian Invasion in 1931 until Japan's defeat in 1945), put an end to the state of war and the abnormal situation. That is to say, for Japan the "Taiwan issue" is closely related to its handling of the war of aggression that it started [against China], and moreover, to its prior colonial rule [of Taiwan]. When Japanese leaders say that a "Taiwan contingency would be a Japan contingency," they must remember the serious promise that Japan made to China at the time of the normalization of their diplomatic relations, and that such a statement would be a violation of that promise. □□

In 1978, six years after the normalization of diplomatic relations, Japan and China concluded the "[Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and the People's Republic of China](#)," which states that Japan and China "shall in their mutual relations settle all disputes by peaceful means and shall refrain from the use or threat of force." Since then, the two nations have produced numerous other joint documents and bilateral agreements. Understanding and supporting such diplomatic history between Japan and China will ultimately dispel the "China threat theory," prevent a so-called "Taiwan contingency," a war that would involve Japan, and ensure that Okinawa never again becomes a battlefield.

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