

Japan–China Tensions in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Dispute and Their Impact on Regional Stability

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ABSTRACT

The topic concerning Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands represents the main topic of their interrelation. This topic causes tensions in the region and influences the security dynamics. Although there is no enmity between the two states, the discussion continues as a result of interests of nations. Thus, the current research was conducted applying the qualitative methodology as well as the approach of constructivism in order to estimate the influence of the nation's identity, the collective memory, and symbolic actions upon threat and state behaviors. According to the findings of the study, it should be stated that the reason for the peaceful situation in the region is not in its nonexistence, but rather in the management of conflicts through the use of strategic communications, self-control, and risk management. Disputes represent a form of competition in the region and this way create conditions for a peaceful situation in the region.

Keywords: Japan–China relations, Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, regional security, constructivism, East Asia

INTRODUCTION

Territorial disputes continue to be a source of tension that is difficult to quell in East Asian international politics. The region is not only experiencing a shift in the balance of power due to China's rise, but also a shift in the dynamics of power. However, the region is also facing changes in Japan's security posture and the United States' involvement in the regional architecture. In such a situation, sovereignty claims are not merely legal or strategic issues; rather, they are closely intertwined with nationalism, historical memory, and the way a state defines itself in relation to other states (Christensen, 2015; Hughes, 2016). The dispute over the Senkaku or Diaoyu Islands is the most prominent example of these dynamics. The islands carry economic and strategic importance, based on the type of resources available on the islands, and the strategic position of the islands in the East China Sea. However, there is

more to the importance of the islands than just geographic importance. The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands have come to symbolize not only sovereignty for Japan and China but also the mistrust between each other.

Since the early 2010s, tensions surrounding these islands have escalated significantly. Confrontational maritime patrols, strong diplomatic statements and emotional reactions from the public in both countries indicate that this dispute continues to be fuelled by day-to-day political practices. While direct warfare has yet to ensue, it poses the challenge of whether the stability of security within the region is sustainable due to how the threat perception of the parties involved stems from symbolic and narrative reasons rather than strategic thinking (Jervis, 1978; Fravel & Johnston, 2020). As such, one cannot help but pose the question as to how the constant tension is formed beyond material and strategic aspects.

The existing research done on the topic mostly frames the tension between Japan and China in the context of power politics and strategic calculation. According to M. Taylor Fravel (2010), the two sides have constantly exhibited restraint in order to maintain their sovereignty while preventing escalation into military conflict, suggesting that the two sides continue to exhibit stability with tension remaining present. From this, Erica Downs and Phillip C. Saunders (2013) suggest that China's actions were primarily motivated by the need to maintain its legitimacy as a nation where nationalism plays a big role. Meanwhile, Sheila A. Smith (2015) highlights the influence of domestic politics within Japan leading to a more aggressive stance while Christopher W. Hughes (2016) stresses the importance of change in the national identity of Japan. These theories highlight the point that not only is the conflict dependent upon outside conditions, but even domestic politics enter into the picture. However, these theories continue to rely upon materialistic assumptions, which means that they provide a limited explanation for why there remains a symbolic dimension of conflict and emotional intensification, as well as diplomatic disputes, particularly in an interdependent economic system, as explained by Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr. (2012).

According to this paper, the conflict dynamics arising from the dispute between Japan and China over the Senkaku or Diaoyu Islands cannot be fully understood without incorporating the perspective of the social construction of identity, history, and meaning. Specifically, building on Yinan He's (2009) contribution, which shows how unaddressed historical legacies prevent reconciliation and on Thomas J. Christensen (2015), who shows how alliances define threat perceptions, this study moves beyond the material to the interpretive and symbolic aspects of the conflict. Moreover, according to the work of M. Taylor Fravel and Alastair Iain Johnston (2020), the practices carried out by states in the East China Sea constitute signals imbued with political meaning, thus revealing that relations among states are performative acts. These works have shown the importance of symbolism, but they are still far from framing the dispute as a perpetually ongoing social process. Therefore, this article expands the existing literature by integrating nationalism, historical narratives, and state symbolic practices into a unified analytical framework, arguing that the apparent stability in Japan–China relations remains fragile as it is maintained through contested meanings and identity-driven interactions, rather than through agreed-upon material interests.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research conducted by Fravel (2010) evaluates the stability of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands conflict through the examination of the cautious approaches to territorial issues adopted by both Japan and China. Fravel (2010) suggests that although both parties have strong sovereignty claims, they usually refrain from escalating into open warfare due to the heavy cost of conflict. The article provides important information about the territorial issue in question by indicating that even if the countries do not go to war, they may still experience constant tension. However, the discussion provided by Fravel (2010) emphasizes the role of strategic calculation and fails to account for the frequent occurrence of symbolic confrontation and diplomatic tensions.

In their article, Downs and Saunders (2013) explore the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands issue from the perspective of Chinese domestic politics. It is established that sovereignty plays a critical role in the regime's legitimacy and thus restricts China's ability to adopt flexible foreign policies. The research provides valuable insight into the issue as it highlights the impact of domestic nationalism on the state's international relations.

Smith (2015) underscores the importance of Japanese politics domestically in addressing China's emergence. It is established that the Senkaku problem is often used for political struggles within the country, which leads to a stronger foreign policy position. The paper is pertinent to this topic because it indicates that the Japan-China conflict is initiated not only through the behavior of one side, but also through the processes of identity and politics that affect Japan's external perception.

Hughes (2016) investigates the shifts in Japanese security policy amid the rise of the Abe Doctrine and analyzes their significance for Japan-China interactions. He claims that the evolution of the role of Japan in security policy is to be viewed not only as part of strategic rethinking but also as an indicator of rising Japanese nationalism. The significance of this work lies in the way it highlights the fact that security policy gains a certain historical weight for China, thus promoting fear.

He (2009) considers Japan-China relations in the light of historical memories and unfinished reconciliation process. His point is that the legacy of World War II still dominates in collective memory and constrains the possibility of diplomatic compromise. It is worth mentioning that such a perspective on the issue is highly relevant since it sheds light on the fact that territorial issues can spark nationalism even though they offer little material benefit. Christensen (2015) discusses the impact of the United States–Japan security alliance on China's strategic calculations. He shows that the alliance not only increases the complexity of military calculations but also shapes normative perceptions of encirclement and regional dominance. This study is relevant because it illustrates how alliance structures reinforce China's sensitivity to sovereignty issues, including the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute.

According to Fravel and Johnston (2020), China uses political signalling in the territorial dispute in the East China Sea. The authors show that the actions such as patrols and official statements act as political messaging tools, and not tactics used by the country. The research is relevant as it illustrates that interactions associated with the Senkaku or Diaoyu islands have a performative quality. This means that all the moves made by China communicate something related to identity, commitment to national values and sovereignty.

Keohane and Nye (2012) explore the importance of economic interdependence in international relations. The scholars show that despite the fact that the states are economically dependent on each other, it does not necessarily mean that they do not have conflicts. This piece of research is important for Japan–China because even though the two states are economically interdependent, the territorial dispute over Senkaku or Diaoyu still continues. **Theoretical Framework** In order to analyse the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands controversy, I will utilise a constructivist framework. The constructivist theory, advanced by Alexander Wendt (1999), suggests that international politics are not dictated merely by material power; rather, they are socially constructed by means of shared ideas, identities and beliefs. According to Wendt (1999), state interests are not static; they arise from historically constructed interactions. Thus, a constructivist approach is highly appropriate for understanding the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute because it allows one to comprehend why the parties continue to be involved despite the fact that costs exceed possible gains.

Constructivist theory focuses on the importance of national identity and how it affects state perception of security threats and interests. National identity is not inherent to a state; it is socially constructed within an ongoing process. For instance, when it comes to Japan–China relations, there are multiple contradictory interpretations of events related to the Second World War that foster mistrust and prevent reconciliation. This is because nationalism turns territorial claims into ideological problems involving national sovereignty, pride and legitimacy.

Moreover, the idea of symbolic politics is invoked to highlight that actions undertaken by states are more than simply material activities. Patrols at sea, declarations and gestures in diplomacy may be considered examples of signalling that is imbued with meaning and aimed not only at external audiences but also at the domestic one. As a result, all interactions in the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue have a performative dimension, which serves as another element that leads to perpetuation of the conflict.

Using constructivism, nationalism and symbolic politics, the theoretical framework allows treating the issue under consideration as an ongoing social process rather than a strategic struggle. In this way, one can explain the

fact that seemingly achieved stability in the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue proves to be precarious because it rests not on mutual interests of parties but rather on constantly reproduced meanings and identity-based interactions.

METHODOLOGY

The present study uses qualitative methodology, which centers on the interpretation of discourses and analysis of literature, to explore the complexities of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands controversy in Japanese-Chinese relations. The choice of qualitative methodology was based on the fact that the study does not aim at quantifying variables, but rather aims at exploring how issues such as national identity, historical memories, and state actions symbolically affect the perception of threats and interactions within the region.

The main sources of data for this research will be academic literature on the topic, which includes studies related to the Senkaku/Diaoyu territorial dispute, security policies in Japan and China, domestic nationalism, and alliance and regional security orders. Such papers as Fravel (2010), He (2009), Hughes (2016), Downs & Saunders (2013), Smith (2015), and Fravel & Johnston (2020) will be analyzed to investigate the interpretation of the conflict, its discourse, and reproduction in policy and security practices. Also, economic interdependence and regional order literature, for example, Keohane & Nye (2012) and Christensen (2015), will be used to determine the conditions that shape Japan-China relations.

The analysis is carried out through a critical engagement with the narrative and argument presented in the literature concerning the way Japan and China understand issues like sovereignty, threats, and legitimacy of statehood in the dispute for control over the islands referred to either as Senkaku Islands or Diaoyu Islands. It is important to note that in this study, state behavior and policy are not considered merely in response to objective factors, but rather as ways of conveying social meanings and identities developed over time, including historical and political interaction.

This analytical framework is interpretative in nature, where the literature forms the main source from which patterns related to identity formation and threat perception emerge. Through this framework, the study aims to examine how Japan-China bilateral relations contribute to security stability within the region. It further allows one to understand why there is continued tension between the two states despite mechanisms that help reduce the likelihood of conflict, such as economic interdependence and crisis management.

DISCUSSION

Persistent Tension Patterns in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Dispute: The Interaction of Japanese and Chinese Strategic Interests

The disputes between Japan and China over the Senkaku or Diaoyu islands have been quite consistent over the years, even as there are periodic incidents that can escalate the situation. The existence of such a pattern cannot be explained randomly because there exists a dynamic equilibrium created from the clash and the restraint of each side's strategic interests. It has become an area where the convergence of material gains, national identity, and strategic considerations is achieved.

In the case of Japan, it is important for the country to retain its territorial integrity and sovereignty, and also its role as an effective player who can ensure the existing status quo. The administration's control over the Senkaku Islands during the post-war era constitutes an integral component of the Japanese narrative on the basis of the regional order that is founded on law. It should be noted that any concession from Japan could weaken the position of the Japanese government domestically and provide a dangerous precedent in the sphere of other territorial disputes.

By contrast, in China's case, the Diaoyu Islands are seen as part of a historical reclamation project and a declaration of its emergence as a great power. The claim to the Diaoyu Islands is not just a matter of securing economic benefits and geopolitical advantage but also a story of historical grievances and resistance against the

legacy of Western imperialism and Japanese aggression in East Asia. As pointed out by Downs and Saunders (2013), Chinese nationalism constrains the space for compromise within the ruling political elites, who have integrated the Diaoyu Islands dispute into their regime legitimacy.

The relationship between the two interests creates a recurring cycle of tension. These cycles involve maritime patrols, airspace violations, and strong rhetoric, which occur with a regular rhythm. Yet, the escalation does not go beyond a specific point. As pointed out by Fravel (2010), neither Japan nor China engages in any activity that can cause a direct clash because they do not want their efforts to solidify their positions to result in a military confrontation.

In the context of constructivism, this dynamic of rivalry can be interpreted as the product of the process of learning and development of reciprocal expectations. In this sense, both China and Japan share the perception of the Senkaku Islands dispute as an ongoing dispute, which cannot be solved instantly, but at the same time, which should not be resolved through violence. According to Johnston (2019), in most of the cases of the territorial disputes involving China, strategic signals are employed by China in order to avoid escalation.

In addition, the presence of the U.S. as Japan's security partner affects the pattern. The partnership enhances the deterrence capability of Japan, but it also forces China to be cautious and act in such a way that there would be no direct intervention by the U.S. Christensen (2015) calls this situation an example of ambivalent strategic interactions, when the partnership strengthens stability on the one hand and keeps the rivalry alive on the other hand.

The repeated and controlled process of strain has several consequences for regional security. The confrontation is constantly reminding the region about its vulnerability and encourages regional states to adjust their strategies. As Liff (2019) claims, the processes occurring in the East China Sea create a sense of normalizing the presence of the military and their heightened readiness, thus changing expectations concerning regional stability.

Therefore, the Senkaku/Diaoyu conflict, apart from being an expression of the clash of interests between Japan and China, produces a pattern of behavior that perpetuates the tensions involved in the process. This pattern is maintained as both sides believe that exerting a certain level of pressure is better for their interests than attempting to solve the problem with uncertainties involved. As long as the interests are perceived through identity, legitimacy, and regional standing, the tension in relation to the Senkaku will always be a constant feature of East Asia's security environment.

Conflict Escalation Thresholds: Conditions and Risks of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Dispute Transformation

The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute is arguably among the longest standing contentious issues in the East China Sea. Even though the dispute appears on the surface to be an issue of legal territorial rights to land ownership, past research has established that territorial disputes do not always revolve around legal rights to land, but instead involve strategic considerations as well as other regional political security matters (Hensel, 2012; Fravel, 2010). The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute has increasingly become more than a territorial dispute between China and Japan; it is now a broader strategy game amid East Asian rivalries (Liff, 2019; Christensen, 2015).

The current status quo is defined by the solidification of the claims by both parties involved. According to Fravel (2010), one reason why the conflict has been relatively stable until now is the fact that despite sovereignty still being unresolved, both parties acted with restraint in an inherently delicate balance of power. However, recent studies have shown that this delicate balance may be difficult to maintain in light of the fact that the actions of China in the East China Sea have now become the "new normal." Signaling by China in the territorial disputes has also become more calculated, meaning that what is happening in relation to the islands is not just a reaction to other factors but rather part of a bigger strategy (Fravel & Johnston, 2020).

This dynamic is particularly troublesome given that it fits the security dilemma perfectly. According to Jervis (1978), a state's effort to enhance its own security is likely to be perceived as a threat, which will prompt other states to undertake measures that further the same goal, thus increasing the likelihood of escalating tensions. For example, with regard to the current situation concerning the islands, China's ever-increasing military presence and Japan's

attempt to enhance its administrative control and security are likely to fuel each other (Hughes, 2016; Pugliese, 2021).

Domestic politics further intensify this risk. Downs and Saunders (2013) show that nationalism has played an important role in China's handling of the Diaoyu issue. However, they also emphasize that nationalist legitimacy has limits and does not fully determine state behavior. At the same time, the broader historical and political structure of Sino-Japanese relations continues to constrain reconciliation and deepen mistrust (He, 2009; Smith, 2015). This means that the dispute is not sustained only by material interests, but also by identity, memory, and political legitimacy, all of which make de-escalation more difficult.

The dispute has also taken on greater significance in terms of alliance politics and regional order. The security strategy of Japan has become more assertive in light of shifting strategic circumstances, while the U.S.-Japan alliance continues to be vital for regional equilibrium (Hughes, 2016; Pugliese, 2021; Green, 2019). The security strategy of Japan has also included certain elements of hedging and normative positioning in East Asia, which is consistent with its approach to managing China's rise while maintaining institutional and strategic cooperation (Koga, 2020). Against such a backdrop, the dispute involving the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands is not merely a bilateral issue between China and Japan, but also part of a larger network of alliances and strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region (Christensen, 2015; Green, 2019).

With regards to risks involved, the first and foremost concern is that of unintentional escalation. Frequent encounters in the maritime domain and in air space increase the probability of miscalculation since signaling, deterrence, and coercion tend to blend in practice (Fravel & Johnston, 2020; Mastro, 2019). It is important to emphasize that studies on the subject of territorial conflicts and international relations point to territorial disputes being one of the most conflict-prone international matters (Hensel, 2012). Consequently, the potential for such situations to spiral out of control becomes greater if they relate to signaling and deterrence efforts.

However, apart from military implications, there is more to the conflict. Blackwill and Harris (2016) suggest that modern states employ a variety of competitive means, which include economics as a way of achieving strategic objectives. This viewpoint would be important to comprehend the wider scope of the conflict as it may affect other aspects, such as geoeconomics and even systemic fragmentation of the region. In times of high interdependence among states, their political tensions may result in disruptions at the level of economy and technology (Keohane & Nye, 2012). Consequently, the dangers of the conflict cannot be reduced to military engagement alone, but should encompass the issues of economic fragmentation as well.

On the international front, there have been some long-term trends in the nature of international relations which are at play in the conflict. As Ikenberry (2018) suggests, the liberal international order has been increasingly strained, and as Johnston (2019) explains, the engagement of China with the international order is neither one of strict adherence nor outright defiance. Indeed, in Asia, there remain conflicts over regional hierarchies and the question of regional leadership, and here we find China seeking greater leadership on the international stage in spite of its efforts being frustrated by others (Rozman, 2018).

Finally, it can be argued that the Senkaku/Diaoyu conflict has evolved into an increasingly complex strategic problem that goes beyond the traditional scope of a simple territorial dispute. Prior research has demonstrated that the longevity of the conflict stems from the interaction between various factors, including territorial nationalism, the security dilemma phenomenon, alliance politics, coercive bargaining, and changes in the international system (Fravel, 2010; Downs & Saunders, 2013; Liff, 2019; Fravel & Johnston, 2020). Escalation risk management thus necessitates not only the exercise of restraint on the part of both China and Japan, but also a series of measures to decrease mistrust and manage crises.

Trigger Factors for Escalation and Limited Conflict Transformation

The issue of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has multiple escalation points where a relatively minor conflict might escalate into a more serious regional conflict. Studies on territorial conflicts indicate that sovereignty conflicts are

highly susceptible to escalation, as they are directly linked to credibility and strategic commitment issues (Hensel, 2012).

The first and especially perilous threshold pertains to a physical altercation that results in casualties, either at sea through an accident or in the air through some sort of collision. In territorial disputes, any physical altercation that causes casualties may be perceived as an act of defiance by the rival state, thereby exerting pressure for revenge (Fravel & Johnston, 2020). Another threshold pertains to the attempt to change the physical status quo in connection with the disputed territories. In the past, relative stability in the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute has hinged on the maintenance of the status quo without any physical alterations that could not be reversed (Fravel, 2010). The sensitivity of this threshold has increased owing to the fact that the Chinese military presence in the East China Sea region has assumed a more regularized pattern in the form of pressure tactics under the threshold of conventional warfare. This tactic has been characterized as "a new normal in the East China Sea" from Beijing's perspective (Liff, 2019). The final threshold pertains to the intervention of American forces in support of Japan.

In particular, this dimension becomes even more important since Japan's security strategy has shifted to becoming more proactively engaged as a reaction to the changing regional dynamics (Hughes, 2016). Such a development has increased the strategic value of incidents that occur in relation to Japanese territories (Hughes, 2016). Strategic calculations within such thresholds are extremely sensitive to misperception. Security dilemmas are situations whereby defensive measures may be perceived by others as preparation for aggression, leading to reciprocal escalation (Jervis, 1978). Miscalculation is particularly dangerous in maritime conflicts due to the overlapping of signaling, coercion, and deterrence strategies in these situations. China has shown that it uses calibrated signaling strategies when it comes to territorial disputes in order to control and affect rival behavior even if it does not involve crossing the threshold for all-out warfare (Fravel & Johnston, 2020). Moreover, domestic considerations complicate this problem even further. Nationalism has played an instrumental role in China's strategy towards the Diaoyu conflict, making the situation even more politically sensitive (Downs & Saunders, 2013). Historical relations between China and Japan have made it more difficult to achieve compromise within conflicts.

There are several routes through which the initial limited confrontation can escalate into larger conflicts. First, there is the possible route that starts with an unfortunate event at sea or air, leading to a limited counterstrike designed to show strength while avoiding an all-out war. Such actions could trigger a backlash rather than a concession since the dispute centers on issues of sovereignty (Mastro, 2019). In the event that the situation escalates, alliance dynamics will become an important aspect. Japan's national security strategy has evolved from being merely defensive to taking on a more proactive approach in its strategy, thus making the ramifications of any conflict that involves Japan's land greater (Pugliese, 2021). Furthermore, such escalation will be difficult to contain within the region. Geoeconomic coercion and other instruments of coercive statecraft are becoming more relevant in international relations (Blackwill & Harris, 2016).

In a crisis of this magnitude, however, the conflict might spill over into other operational arenas as well. The progress China has made in terms of military modernization and general preparations indicates that the nature of the future crises cannot be explained by referring to traditional naval operations alone (Heath & Gunness, 2022). Furthermore, the implications of any escalation will be tied to the nature of the regional order, which, in the Indo-Pacific region, is being increasingly dominated by the struggle for dominance and rule-making in the region (Ikenberry, 2018). On the other hand, China's role in the international order is neither fully submissive nor outrightly oppositional but selectively adaptive and resistant (Johnston, 2019). This complicates any efforts of handling regional crises because the strategies used during such times are shaped by normative contestation. In summary, the transformation of a limited incident into a larger conflict may arise due to a combination of fatal incidents, attempts to change the status quo, alliances, and escalation in cumulative miscalculations. The key threat of a regional crisis, therefore, is not only intentional aggression but also the loss of room for restraint after the beginning of the conflict (Jervis, 1978).

The Implications of the Senkaku or Diaoyu Dispute for East Asian Regional Security Stability

To comprehend the potential impact of the Senkaku/Diaoyu conflict on the security stability in East Asia region, it is crucial to consider the conflict within the framework of the emerging regional order. As Japan-China relations deteriorate due to the imbalance of power in the region and changes in regional security, a consensus on the regional 'rules of the game' remains elusive. It implies that such issues like territorial disputes become venues where the future regional order will be negotiated and contested.

According to constructivist theory, order in the international realm does not emerge only through the power of material capabilities but also due to a social consensus on the identities, roles, and legitimacy of regional powers. In East Asia, Japan and China offer conflicting visions of regional order. On one hand, Japan seeks to portray itself as a champion of the rule-of-law based order, which it supports through its military alliance with the US. However, China sees the existing order as a historical phenomenon that fails to capture its growing importance and experience (Christensen, 2015).

The tension exacerbates the regional security dilemma. While Japan's actions in increasing its military strength and cooperation with the United States may be seen as defensive maneuvers, according to the Chinese perspective, these measures pose a danger of containment that infringes upon China's strategic interests. At the same time, the Chinese activities in the area, both naval and air, are perceived by Japan as coercion that could result in unilateral change in the situation. According to Fravel (2010), security dilemmas become exacerbated by issues that have a strong symbolic and historical importance, as in this case of territorial sovereignty.

The structural instability created through the process described above is a permanent one, not episodic in nature. There are no open conflicts due to rational assessment and crisis management tools, but there is always present a certain amount of tension in the relationship. As stated by He (2009), institutionalization of nationalism within the framework of foreign policy makes the possibility of de-escalation highly undesirable and risky. In other words, the "pseudo-stability" in East Asia is achieved by means of self-restraint.

Consequences for the security of the region can be observed from the reactions of other states in the region. For example, South Korea has to deal with the tension created by its security relationship with Japan while taking into account its economic partnership with China. The nations of Southeast Asia are under pressure to change their approach because of increased competition between great powers, despite the fact that the dispute does not have any direct relation to them. According to Christensen (2015), competition between major actors leads to an "effect spill-over," causing the emergence of regional security anxieties, which push countries towards hedging and diversifying their security alliances.

The Senkaku/Diaoyu case is quite useful within the field of regional security studies, since it allows understanding that peace and stability are two different phenomena. In contrast to traditional views about regional stability that require transformation of relations between actors, the case of Senkaku Islands shows that regional stability is nothing but fragile harmony created by managing existing conflicts. In fact, the conflict proves that symbolic and narrative aspects of international affairs can create security problems, despite the fact that no large-scale military operations occur.

In conclusion, the main point which makes this dispute a source of insecurity in the East Asian region is related to the role it plays in linking a bilateral competition with the uncertainties of the regional system. The reason for this is that until Japan and China see this territorial issue as an opportunity to prove their legitimacy and prestige, East Asia will be in a state of security based not on trust but on self-control.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The case of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands highlights the insufficiency of regional stability in East Asia as simply an absence of conflict in the region. In this context, regional stability should be seen as socially constructed through the process of managing tensions through strategic interaction, national identity, and history. The findings of this paper suggest that in the context of Japan-China relations, there is a presence of managed rivalry, whereby symbolic contestations of legitimacy and power coexist with a policy of strategic restraint to yield a fragile and precarious

type of stability. From the importance attached to the ideational aspects of conflict and rivalry such as the role of threat perceptions, signaling, and politics of recognition, the main contribution made in this paper can be said to be a critique of materialist and balance-of-power-based conceptions, as well as limitations of current conflict management strategies. In conclusion, it is proposed that for any study of regional stability in the region to be fruitful, a comprehensive approach involving symbolic elements should be adopted.

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