

THE ESCALATING JAPAN–CHINA ISLAND DISPUTE AND THE POTENTIAL FOR WAR IN EAST ASIA

Daniel A. Métraux
Mary Baldwin College

Shouting at the top of their lungs, a large joint contingent of Japanese soldiers and American Marines jumped from their landing craft and surged on to a barren stretch of beach. Their mission was to invade and seize control of a Pacific island that had been captured by hostile forces. Guns drawn, the allied troops quickly captured an abandoned seaside dwelling and later swept inland as their rearguard secured the beachhead. There was air support, from Huey and Cobra Navy helicopters hovering above.

Then larger Navy hovercrafts roared in just in time to secure the whole island.¹ This whole scenario was not real. The site was Camp Pendleton in California in February 2014. American and Japanese forces were undergoing joint training, learning how to seize small islands very much like those islets in the East China Sea that today are claimed by both Japan and China. Japan now says that it is prepared to use force to maintain control of these islands and the United States is bound to help Japan should China try to grab one or more of them from the Japanese. The practice invasion at Camp Pendleton could very well become reality if the current crisis between Japan and China continues to heat up.

The years 2013 and 2014 saw an escalation of the crisis between Japan and China over which nation has sovereignty of a small group of islands in the East China Sea. While the islands themselves are the focus of the dispute, there are other very complex issues at work between Japan and China that have led to a dramatic deterioration of relations between the two Asian powers and the possibility of armed conflict. One factor is the deep antagonism between Japan and China that developed before and during World War II, which has never been truly resolved. Both nations are experiencing strong surges of nationalism and both are involved in a scramble for the rich energy resources that supposedly lie inside the disputed waters. China's demand in late 2013 that intends to force foreign

¹ Helene Cooper, "In Japanese Drill with the US, A Message for Beijing," *New York Times*, February 22, 2014.

aircraft to seek permission to fly over the island region is the latest irritant in the deepening crisis. While it is clear that neither nation really wants war and the chances of armed conflict are today quite remote, there is always the possibility of an accident that could lead to shooting.

The Heart of the Matter

The dispute centers on eight uninhabited islands in the East China Sea known as the Senkaku islands in Japan and the Daiyou islands in China. These tiny islands have a total area of about 7 square kilometers and lie northeast of Taiwan, east of China, and southwest of Japan's southernmost prefecture, Okinawa. The islands are currently controlled by Japan.

The islands are important because they are close to key shipping lanes, are known as rich fishing grounds, and lie near potentially very rich oil and gas reserves. They are also located in a strategically significant position for both China and the United States and matters to both nations, as well as for Japan in the search for military supremacy in the hotly contested Asia-Pacific region. Unfortunately, neither China nor Japan agreed to fixed territorial boundaries after World War II in the East China Sea region. During the immediate postwar period the area was primarily important for fishing and trawlers from both countries and Taiwan largely left each other alone.

Japan's claim stems from its assertion that it surveyed the islands for several years in the late nineteenth century and determined that they were uninhabited. On January 14, 1895, Japan erected a sovereignty marker on one of the islands and formally incorporated the islands into Japanese territory as part of the Nansei Shotō island chain. Japan states that international law supports their claim noting that when no one occupies or controls a piece of territory, it is deemed *terra nullus* (land belonging to no one).² After World War II, Japan renounced its claims to a number of islands and territories including Taiwan, but the Shotō came under U.S. trusteeship until they, along with Okinawa, were returned to Japan in 1971. Japan asserts that China made no claims to the islands when they were

² Eric Posner, "Why Are China and Japan Inching Toward War Over Five Tiny Islands? Japan Has the Law in Its Side, But China Does Not Care," *Slate Magazine*, February 25, 2014, pp. 1–4.

returned to Japan and only began making claims in the 1970s when a UN report suggested that the area might be rich in gas and oil.³

China argues that historical precedent favors their claim.⁴ The Chinese say that ancient texts and maps demonstrate Chinese control and that the islands are geographically part of Taiwan. Thus, when Japan took Taiwan in 1895 as a result of the first Sino-Japanese War, the islands also went to Japan. Therefore, when Taiwan was returned to China after World War II, the islands returned to Chinese control.

Today, the Japanese government owns the islands and its coast guard vessels patrol the nearby waters. Japan even erected a lighthouse on one of the islands, but even now they remain uninhabited. Nationalist activists from both China and Japan have repeatedly journeyed to the islands to plant their nation's flag and to publicize their cause. Since 2008 Chinese fishing trawlers have aggressively traveled through the region, in some cases even colliding with Japanese coast guard vessels. China upped the ante in 2012 when it sent several formidable military vessels, and again in late 2013, when it said that foreign aircraft would be required to notify the Chinese government when they fly through the airspace above the contested islands.⁵

The Chinese government feels that the United States is complicit with Japan in depriving the Chinese of their "rightful ownership" of the islands. The Chinese news agency Xinhua recently published a dispatch noting that:

Diaoyu and its affiliated islands have been considered part of China since ancient times. Chinese people were the first to discover, name and administer these islands. In

³ Sheila A. Smith, "Japan and the East China Sea Dispute," *Orbis* 56/3 (2012), p. 387.

⁴ I have an old European-made map from 1740, which shows the islands belonging to China, and I have seen copies of old Chinese maps that include the islands as part of their frontier. The Chinese acknowledge that their defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 and the subsequent Treaty of Shimonoseki ceded the islands to Japan. They further state that the treaties that ended World War II clearly state that all territories seized from China before World War II would be returned to China.

⁵ Posner, "Why Are China and Japan Inching Toward War," pp. 2–3.

June 1971, the U.S. signed the Okinawa Reversion agreement with Japan to “return” Diaoyu” and other [adjacent] Islands to Japan, privately taking China’s territory in a backroom deal between Japan and the U.S. China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement on Dec. 30, 1971, pointing out that this act is completely illegal and reiterating that Diaoyu and its affiliated islands are an inseparable part of Chinese territory.⁶

China’s claims are quite ambitious. The width of the East China Sea is only 360 nautical miles which creates a problem for both China and Japan since the UN suggests that nations can claim an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) that extends 200 miles off shore. Thus, whoever controls the Senkaku islands could claim economic and political sovereignty over a huge area of the East China Sea. China, however, argues that the natural extension of its continental shelf, which runs right up to the Okinawa trough, should be used to determine each state’s EEZ. This proposal is clearly unacceptable to Japan because it would bring Chinese territorial waters in propinquity with Okinawa.⁷

The situation grew in intensity in 2013 over disputes concerning which nation controlled the airspace over the islands. Japan has complained that China is flying unmanned drones over the area and has sent in its own jets to counter the Chinese aircraft. In October 2013 Japan said that it had the right to shoot down the drones, an act that drew a very sharp reaction from China.

The United States is also deeply interested in the disposition of this matter and is genuinely alarmed over the growing power and sophistication of China’s navy. It still recognizes the security alliance that it signed with Japan in the wake of World War II. According to the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, the United States is permitted to maintain military bases in Japan (most of them are in Okinawa) and in return promises to defend Japan if any third power attacks Japan.

Therefore, if war were to break out between Japan and China, theoretically the United States would be obliged to enter the conflict on the

⁶ “Contradiction in US position on Diaoyu Dispute,” *The Current Digest of the Chinese Press* 1/34–35 (2012), pp. 20–21.

⁷ Smith, “Japan and the East China Sea Dispute,” pp. 380–381.

side of Japan. So far, as the crisis has grown, the United States has continued to stress its support for its alliance with Japan and to support Tokyo's claims to the islands. At the same time, the State Department has urged for cooler heads to prevail and for the dispute to be settled diplomatically.

A Historical Precedent

The dispute between Japan and China over the islands is highly reminiscent of a crisis that developed in the late 1870s when both Japan and China laid claim to the nearby Ryukyu Islands and seemed on the verge of war. A rapidly modernizing Japan laid claim to the Ryukyu Islands (now Okinawa Prefecture) in the late 1870s. These islands were of strategic importance to both Japan and China. Throughout recorded history the Ryukyus had been an independent kingdom that paid tribute to both Japan and China. Japan decided that it wanted to control the Ryukyus and said that it was willing to go to war with a rapidly declining Chinese empire to get them. When former American President and Civil War hero Ulysses S. Grant passed through China on his way to Japan in 1879 on the final leg of his famous worldwide tour, both Japan and China asked Grant to negotiate with the other party on their behalf.⁸

Grant played the role of “honest broker.” Although his three-month stay in Japan was much longer than his sojourn through China, he refused to take sides. He successfully urged both sides to negotiate the issue, reminding them that a full-scale Sino-Japanese War at that point would only serve to weaken both countries to the extent that the Western powers could take advantage of their weakness. Sadly for both Japan and the Ryukyus, the negotiations failed and shortly thereafter Japan simply walked in and seized the islands. One can only hope that a modern version of General Grant will emerge to get both sides to a neutral site to hammer out a peaceful settlement.

⁸ For a detailed analysis of General Grant's visit to both Japan and China, see my article, “The Mikado, Guranto Shogun and the Rhapsody of US-Japanese Relations in Early Meiji,” *Education About Asia* 11/3 (2006): 39–43.

A Dangerous Rise of Nationalist Passions

The current dispute has unfortunately ignited strong nationalist passions in both China and Japan. Nationalism, a long history of hatred and bloody warfare, and a rapidly changing balance of power in East Asia between a greatly diminished Japan and a rapidly rising China are all factors that have made the dispute over sovereignty over the islands a major issue for both countries.

This nationalist fervor has put pressure on politicians in both countries to appear tough, which ultimately makes the crisis much harder to resolve. Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō and his Liberal Democratic Party won the 2012 general election partly on their platform to defend Japan's sovereignty over the Senkaku islands. There have been many anti-Japanese riots in China, angry demonstrations in Tokyo, and major boycotts of Japanese goods, particularly cars, in China that have badly hurt the Japanese economy.

When I visited Japan in May and again in November 2012, there was constant nervous talk about the Senkaku territorial dispute between Japan and China. One day I stumbled on a nationalist rally in Tokyo. It was a cold clammy day in front of Odakyu Department Store in Shinjuku in central Tokyo. A few sound trucks were parked in the street with a group of older men together with a plethora of Japanese flags. A small crowd made up mainly of older men stood on the sidewalk to listen to the speakers rant on and on oblivious to the light rain and cold wind. Hundreds of pedestrians passed by every minute, most of them totally ignoring the demonstration and the few men who were handing out leaflets to passing pedestrians asking them to consider their cause.

I was curious and had no better plans that afternoon, so I stopped to watch the spectacle for a while. The leaflet written entirely in Japanese focused on the Senkaku islands. The pamphlet, which was adorned with the Rising Sun Flag of Japan, stated in no uncertain terms that the Senkaku islands are sovereign Japanese territory. It accused China of coveting the islands and castigated the "weak" Japanese government for not showing any backbone in confronting the Chinese over the problem.

The Islands and National Security

Both China and Japan see control of the islands as vital to their national security. Since the 1980s China has greatly expanded its naval fleet and is becoming a major maritime power in East Asia. Outgoing President Hu Jintao told the 18th Communist Party Congress on November 8, 2012

that “We [China] should enhance our capacity for exploiting maritime resources, resolutely safeguard China’s maritime rights and interests, and build China into a maritime power” and added that it is essential for China to, “build a strong national defense and powerful armed forces that are commensurate with China’s international standing.”⁹

China’s naval build-up and its supposed goal of building a submarine base in the Senkaku region greatly concerns Tokyo. Frequent Chinese surveying activities over the East China Sea, in areas in or near what Japan claims to be its territorial waters, and in what Japan calls its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), further rankle the Japanese. Furthermore, the Japanese are concerned that the Chinese recently have expanded their defenses and defense perimeter farther from the coast while approaching areas that are sensitive to Japanese national security. The United States shares Japan’s concerns about the challenges posed by the growing reach of Chinese maritime and air capabilities extending into the East and South China Seas.¹⁰

Japan, however, in recent years has also significantly strengthened its navy. According to naval expert James Holmes, “Under the division of labor worked out between the two navies, the U.S. Navy supplied the offensive firepower, manifest in aircraft carriers and other high-end implements of war. The defensive-minded JMSDF [Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force] acted as a gap filler, making itself proficient at niche missions like minesweeping, anti-submarine warfare, and offensive submarine warfare.”¹¹ However, in more recent days Japanese Admiral Katsutoshi Kawano indicates that Japan is going well beyond this to expand its own naval capacity. He highlighted “Japan’s role in recent international minesweeping drills and new procurements such as a 5,000-ton anti-submarine warfare (ASW) destroyer; two Kawasaki P-1 maritime patrol aircraft (MPAs) to replace ageing P-3C Orions; and modernization of the

⁹ “China must be maritime power: Hu” *The Japan Times*, November 9, 2012, p. 1.

¹⁰ Smith, “Japan and the East China Sea Dispute,” p. 373.

¹¹ James Hardy, “Japan’s Navy, Sailing towards the Future,” *The Diplomat* (accessed January 21, 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/01/21/japans-navy-steaming-towards-the-future/?all=true>).

service's Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems."¹²

The Senkaku crisis has forced Japan to seek to both strengthen and revise its security pact with the United States. In 2010, American Secretary of State Hilary Clinton reiterated that the disputed islands fell under the U.S.-Japan security alliance, thus requiring the U.S. military to come to Japan's aid during a possible clash there. However, some Japanese officials have questioned whether the United States would actually risk a war with China over what on the surface seems like little more than barren rocks surrounded by shark-infested waters. Japanese leaders want the United States to take a further step and openly support Japan's claim to the islands.¹³ It is unclear, however, whether the U.S. is willing to take this step at this time.

Japan's recently elected conservative Liberal Democratic government announced on January 8, 2013 that it would increase the nation's defense budget by more than 100 billion yen (\$1.15 billion) and that its defense ministry had begun to explore a series of five war scenarios, three of which involved its Self-Defense Forces squaring off against the People's Liberation Army. These three all involved a potential crisis in the East China Sea where an aggressive China might seize the Senkaku islands by force or where China might launch an invasion of Taiwan, which might involve simultaneous attacks on Japanese forces in Okinawa.¹⁴

Historical Memory of Japanese War Crimes in China and Conflicting Nationalisms

Relations between China and Japan remain tense today almost seven decades since the end of World War II. Japan's intense invasion of China that destroyed the land and killed many millions of Chinese has left deep resentment between the two nations. It is possible for former enemies to reconcile their differences and to construct new relationships if the guilty parties acknowledge their sins and take measures to right old wrongs. Germany, whose sense of sincere contrition and postwar posture of

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Martin Fackler, "Japan Aims To Revise Pact With U.S.," *The International Herald Tribune*, November 10–11, 2012.

¹⁴ J. Michael Cole, "Japan Explores War Scenarios with China," *The Diplomat*, January 9, 2013.

cooperation in building a new united Europe, has built strong ties with its former enemies. Japan, on the other hand, has never fully acknowledged its responsibility for the terrible destruction of life it caused in World War II. There have been some half-hearted apologies by the Emperor and several prime ministers, but they have never fully convinced their neighbors, especially China and Korea, of their sincerity.

Shared national memories and enmity remain deeply embedded in the psyche of many Japanese and Chinese. One can find ample evidence of this phenomenon in two of the major museums dedicated to World War II, one in Tokyo and the other by the remains of Marco Polo Bridge on the outskirts of Beijing.

When one visits Yasukuni Shrine in the Kudanshita area of downtown Tokyo, as I did most recently in May 2012, one gets a very slanted view of the War. The theme of the museum next to the shrine is that the Japanese were the “good guys” and that the Allied Powers were the “bad guys.” We are told that Japan’s unselfish goal was the liberation of Asia from the Western imperialists. Japanese soldiers fought hard for this liberation and Japan did lose the war and suffer horribly the agony of defeat. But, ultimately, Japan was the victor because its war goals were achieved—the Western powers made a futile attempt to recover their colonies and their influence in Asia—but the Japanese victories in the early stages of the war had unleashed the forces of nationalism in all these Asian countries that ultimately led to their liberation. There were no displays or mention of the Nanjing or any other massacres in China, and a prominently displayed book that I purchased in the museum bookstore went to great lengths to deny that the Nanjing massacre had ever occurred.¹⁵ Apparently, all of the pictures that Chiang used in her book *The Rape of Nanjing* and in other works by different authors were fakes, doctored as Allied propaganda to humiliate the Japanese. A colorful film running continuously in the museum’s theatre, “Lest We Forget,” is a tribute to Japan’s WWII heroes who died liberating Asia from the West.

By contrast, the Museum for the War of Resistance Against Japan, which I visited in mid-July 2006, located next to the bridge in Nanjing, is a very modern structure full of exhibits commemorating China’s historic

¹⁵ Honda Katsuichi, *The Nanjing Massacre: A Japanese Journalist Confronts Japan’s National Shame* (Tokyo: Studies of the Pacific Basin Institute, 1999).

resistance to the Japanese invaders. One sees many exhibits of Japanese forces cheering “Banzai” as they shoot Chinese civilians while other photos show piles and piles of corpses of Chinese soldiers and civilians murdered by the Japanese. The terrible destruction of the Nanjing massacre is shown graphically in a whole range of pictures that show heroic efforts of the Chinese people to fight against the Japanese aggressors. The real heroes, of course, are the Chinese Communists led by Mao, although there are pictures of Nationalist troops and Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek who also fought the Japanese. Interestingly, there are statues and memorials to certain other foreigners who fought the Japanese on behalf of the Chinese, including American general Claire Chenault, who greets you as you walk through the front door.

Conversations that I had with numerous Chinese intellectuals while on a summer Fulbright in 2006 convince me that many Chinese, few if any of whom actually experienced the Japanese invasion, continue to bear varying degrees of hostility towards Japan.¹⁶ These feelings were especially evident in 2005 when there was a wave of demonstrations across China fueled by the Senkaku dispute, the visits of then Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to Yasukuni Shrine, and a Japanese-government sanctioned textbook which barely mentioned Japanese war atrocities in China. Prime Minister Abe’s visit to Yasukuni Shrine in January 2014 drew a strong rebuke from China.

Chinese antipathy towards Japan is mirrored by growing hard feelings by many Japanese concerning China. A 2005 poll reported by Reuters showed that just over seventy percent of Japanese have negative feelings about and are distrustful of China and polls in early 2014 showed this number growing. Furthermore, there is a perceptible rise of nationalism among many Japanese concerned about their country’s increasingly weak economy and fading global status. There is growing anxiety in Japan over China’s potent assertiveness in East Asian affairs and its gradual but very real evolution as the leading power in the region, a position long held by

¹⁶ Several of my current Chinese students in Virginia express similar feelings. They enjoy good individual friendships with our Japanese students on campus, but have very negative feelings for the Japanese government. My Korean students express very similar feelings about their Japanese classmates here and the Japanese establishment; Odd Arne Westad, “In Asia, Ill Will Runs Deep,” *New York Times*, January 6, 2013.

Japan. The recent election victory of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party and its leader Abe Shinzō is a possible indication of voters' increased sense of nationalism.

The Senkaku islands have become a flashpoint where both nations are attempting to vent their nationalist frustrations. Despite strong economic ties between Beijing and Tokyo, political relations have become even tenser since 2010 when Japan detained the captain of a Chinese trawler that had collided with two Japanese boats that were patrolling the islands. This incident intensified when Ishihara Shintarō, the conservative and rigidly nationalistic former governor of Tokyo, suggested that Tokyo should buy the islands from their current Japanese proprietor. This suggestion prompted strong protests from China and the occupation of the islands by a group of Hong Kong Chinese activists that were quickly arrested by Japanese who returned them quickly to China. The Japanese government bought the islands before Ishihara could do so.

Nationalist groups such as the ones I encountered in Shinjuku are taking advantage of the current weakness of the Japanese government to compel Japanese leaders to take a more assertive stance towards China. Most Japanese seem to be very reluctant to rearm (or to even contemplate) a military confrontation with China, but at the same time there is this rising sense of nationalism and frustration in Japan. As noted at the start of this paper, when I suggested to a group of East Asian students at my college that Japanese claims to the Senkaku islands were rather bogus, the Japanese, all women, shouted that the "Senkakus are Japanese" and that they were not willing to compromise their feelings on this point.

Conservative Japanese nationalists, such as Ishihara Shintarō, have improved their public standing in recent years. They have decried what they call the weak-kneed policies of Japan's mainstream parties towards China and have been advocating a stronger Japanese position in defending its position in the Senkakus. Not long ago these conservatives have been small vocal minorities, but Japan's economic decline has caused growing unrest among many Japanese and the question of Japanese sovereignty over the Senkakus is increasingly drawing more mainstream attention and support in Japan.

The rising sense of nationalism coupled with Japan's continued economic stagnation has resulted in a shift of Japanese political opinion to the right. When Ishihara resigned as Tokyo governor in October 2012, and soon thereafter merged his small Sunrise Party with Osaka governor Toru Hashimoto's Japan Restoration Party, he vowed to change the war-

renouncing clause (Article 9) of the constitution and to take a far tougher stand against China. He has suggested that Japan should develop its own nuclear weapons, and he goes so far as to deny that the Nanjing Incident ever occurred—words that are sure to inflame Chinese protest.

While it is unclear whether many Japanese will accept Ishihara's harsh rhetoric, it is clear that the defense of the islands is indeed spurring greater Japanese nationalist sentiment. During my recent visit to Japan, I asked over twenty-five Japanese acquaintances, most of them middle-aged well-educated men and women, who had sovereign rights over the Senkakus. They all appeared slightly agitated when I broached the topic and they all asserted Japan's claims to the islands. One of them, a moderate 60-year-old businessman, stated: "The Senkakus are Japanese. The Chinese have never been to the islands and we took them by treaty in 1895. Even though we lost World War II, both the U.S. and Japan asserted Japanese sovereignty over these and neighboring islands. The islands are vital to Japan's economic and political security." Interestingly, all my interviewees were reluctant for Japan to go to war with China over the islands, but they felt that a diplomatic settlement would come out in Japan's favor if the United States stood by its commitment to defend Japan.

Despite this apparent reluctance, Japan is taking steps to upgrade its naval forces and to hold joint military exercises with other Pacific region countries. *New York Times* reporter Martin Fackler writes, "Taken together those steps, while modest, represent a significant shift for Japan, which had resisted repeated calls from the United States to become a true regional power for fear that doing so would move it too far from its postwar pacifism. The country's quiet resolve to edge past that reluctance and become more of a player comes as the United States and China are staking their own claims to power in Asia, and as jitters over China's ambitions appear to be softening bitterness toward Japan among some Southeast Asian countries trampled last century in its quest for colonial domination."¹⁷

It seems clear that Japan's apparent failure to deal with its past has put it at a distinct disadvantage in its relations not only with China, but also Korea. However, China continues to exploit Japan's invasion that started in the 1930s for its own propaganda gains. Much of the anti-Japanese ranting

¹⁷ Martin Fackler, "Cautiously, Japan Raises Military Profile as China Rises," *The New York Times*, November 26, 2012, p. 1.

in China is state-sponsored and not the spontaneous outbursts of impassioned citizens. Even Korea brings up embarrassing questions about World War II when it seeks to gain some diplomatic advantage over the Japanese.

Another interested party here, of course, is Taiwan. Over a year ago when a delegation of professors and officials from our sister university in Taiwan visited our college, I asked them about these islands. They all smiled quietly and said with confidence. “You know, we are Taiwanese. We are Chinese by ethnic origin, but our families have been here longer than there have been English in Virginia. Those islands, in fact, belong to Taiwan!”

Further Dimensions of this Dispute

The Senkaku Island dispute can and should be settled if both Japan and China agree to work together to exploit the fishing and natural resources in and around the islands. Calmer heads probably will prevail here, but a bigger question is whether a broader rapprochement between China and Japan can be found to calm these tensions.

The balance of the problem lies with the Japanese and the way that they have treated their neighbors since the early Meiji Era. Japan during Meiji had a fundamental choice—to join the West in the exploitation of Asia or to help other Asians counter Western imperialism. Tokyo chose the Western option which in turn led to its seizure of Korea, wars in China and its attempts to dominate Southeast Asia during World War II. Japan again focused its attention on the West after World War II while at the same time failing to make amends with its neighbors for its aggression.

Japan must come to terms with the new political and economic reality of a powerful China. Japan needs good relationships with its neighbors and to show greater contrition for its past actions if it is to stop its economic slide. This seemed a real possibility when Yukio Hatoyama became prime minister in 2009. Hatoyama made it clear that Japan needs to drastically improve its relationships with China, Korea and other Asian states even if that meant some distancing from the United States. Unfortunately, Hatoyama proved to be an inept leader and his premiership only lasted for about eight months. Hatoyama has been succeeded by a long list of equally weak and incompetent leaders whose governments have seemed unable (or unwilling) to counter the demands and appeals of the fervent nationalists who want to reclaim the Senkaku islands for Japan even at the expense of good relations with Beijing.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that China is, indeed, becoming the major power in the region. Chinese assertiveness may continue, which would mean Beijing's refusal to compromise on the Senkaku islands. Japan, on the other hand, needs to recognize its reduced status and adapt itself to the new reality. The present state of affairs has the potential of exploding in the faces of both nations. A reconciliation must come very quickly.

Both China and Japan have more to gain from cooperation rather than conflict. Harping on each other's past sins will do neither any good. If China and Japan wish to become predominant powers in the region, they must cooperate with each other. As General Grant noted well over a century ago, both China and Japan would be losers in a conflict over islands in the East China Sea.