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U.S. should stay out of Asian countries' territorial disputes

Doug Bandow

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WASHINGTON – The Asian order is under strain as China has become an economic colossus with growing military might and diplomatic influence. China is asserting territorial claims once considered impractical or worthless. Opposing China are Brunei, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines and Vietnam.

Washington is not a claimant, but has sparred with China over the U.S. Navy's legal right to engage in intelligence gathering within China's 200-mile exclusive economic zone. More important, America has a formal military alliance with Japan which, the president declared, covers disputed territories. Washington's military relationship with Manila is looser, but Philippine officials are seeking a similar territorial guarantee.

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The Obama administration has escalated U.S. involvement by sending American aircraft over islands reclaimed by China and discussing joint patrols with Japanese aircraft. An aerial or maritime incident could result in a dangerous confrontation.

Most of the islands or islets are intrinsically worthless and provide little security value. Maritime rights are affected, but in peacetime the difference wouldn't matter so much; in wartime everything would depend on the capabilities of the contending navies.

The economic benefits from control are real but still relatively small compared with the economies of most of the claimants. For most of the countries national ego is the primary issue.

What should the U.S. do? Pressure is rising for a more actively negative policy toward China, to make Beijing pay “a price” for its increased aggressiveness, especially in East Asia. Yet such an approach would endanger America.

U.S. interests are few and of middling importance. Washington would prefer an ally rather than a rival control territorial waters and direct resource development. The U.S. also seeks to uphold global norms, in this case navigational freedom and peaceful conflict resolution.

The theory prevalent in Washington’s pro-war precincts is that a whiff of gunpowder on America’s part would deter a war on China’s part. However, for Washington to attempt to coerce China over interests viewed in Beijing as important, if not vital, guarantees a much more confrontational relationship.

China likely would respond by matching American air and naval maneuvers, accelerating military outlays, and challenging U.S. interests elsewhere. Americans should reflect on how they would respond if Beijing acted like the U.S.

Nor is maintaining the overly large and expensive military necessary for Washington to project power thousands of miles from home sustainable over the long-term. It costs far more to build carriers than to sink them. Americans are unlikely to heed a clarion call for sacrifice to ensure that the Senkaku Islands stay Japanese. In contrast, it would cost Beijing far less to bolster its military to further increase the cost of U.S. intervention. Moreover, the Chinese people likely would be willing to spend and risk much more to ensure that contested territories end up Chinese.

Instead of goading China, the administration should withdraw from East Asia’s territorial miasma.

First, Washington should acknowledge that East Asian hegemony is not essential for America’s security.

Second, Washington should make clear through action as well as rhetoric that it takes no position regarding competing territorial claims. While the U.S. should assert freedom of navigation — and insist that there is no valid legal justification for turning 80 percent of the South China Sea into Chinese territorial waters — Beijing so far has not threatened that basic freedom.

Third, the administration should remove contested territories from security guarantees. America's interest is in Japan's and the Philippines' independence, not their control over worthless rock piles. It is quite foolish to threaten war against a nuclear-armed state over territories to which the latter might be entitled.

Fourth, the administration should allow events to take their natural course, most obviously the increasingly hostile reaction of China's neighbors to Beijing's aggressiveness. Japan is spending more and rethinking historic strictures on its military, smaller nations are arming, some of them are working with Tokyo, and everyone is encouraging India to play a larger regional role.

Fifth, U.S. officials should more effectively make the case for negotiation. Washington should press its friends to offer creative solutions to the region's many disputes, such as setting aside or sharing island sovereignty.

Finally, Washington, having so often been involved in war in Asia, should highlight the advantages of peace for all concerned, especially China. The future should not be risked for stakes of such limited value.

What should the U.S. do about East Asia's territorial disputes? In most of East Asia's territorial controversies America's interests are peripheral and Washington should take a back-seat role. America's most important interest today is keeping the peace.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.