



The U.S. Should Stay Out of Asia's Island Disputes

By [Doug Bandow](#) 5/29/15 at 12:08 PM

The Asian order is under strain as the People's Republic of China (PRC) has become an economic colossus with growing military might and diplomatic influence. The PRC is asserting territorial claims once considered impractical or worthless. Brunei, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines and Vietnam all stand opposed to these claims.

Washington is not a claimant but has sparred with the PRC over the U.S. Navy's legal right to engage in intelligence gathering in Chinese waters. 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.

The Obama administration has escalated U.S. involvement by sending American aircraft over islands reclaimed by China and discussing joint patrols with the Japanese.

Most of the islands 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 to the economies of most of the claimants. For most of the countries, national ego is the primary issue.

What should the United States do? American interests are few and of middling importance. Washington primarily seeks to uphold global norms, in this case, navigational freedom and peaceful conflict resolution.

It is widely assumed that America's involvement would deter China from starting a war. However, any attempts to coerce the PRC over its perceived interests would add conflict to the U.S.-China relationship.

[As I point out](#) on National Interest online: "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."

Maintaining the overly large and expensive military presence necessary for Washington to project power 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 [Senkakus](#) stay Japanese.

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 United States 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 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 especially foolish to threaten a nuclear-armed state over territories to which the latter might be entitled.

Fourth, the administration should allow events to take their natural course. China's neighbors are growing increasingly hostile to Beijing's aggressiveness. Japan is spending more and rethinking historic strictures on its military, smaller nations are arming—some of which 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 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 United States do about East Asia's territorial disputes? In most of East Asia's territorial controversies, America's interests are peripheral and Washington should play a minor role. America's most important interest today is keeping the peace.

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