

Washington Needs to Jettison Its Commitment to Defend the Senkakus

Ted Galen Carpenter

January 9, 2020

The United States has an array of defense commitments to allies of which the costs and risks greatly outweigh any potential benefits. Washington's obligation under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty to consider an attack on one member as an attack on all is a graphic example of such imprudence. Adding the three Baltic republics to NATO means that the United States now is obligated to defend small, vulnerable Alliance members located directly on Russia's border. Such a perilous (and probably unachievable) mission does not serve America's best interests and should be rescinded.

U.S. leaders even need to re-evaluate some aspects of Washington's bilateral mutual defense treaty with Japan. There is a credible case for maintaining that alliance for at least another decade or so. North Korea remains a disruptive factor in the region, and unlike the situation in Europe, there is no multilateral entity comparable to the European Union to which the United States could transfer significant security responsibilities in East Asia. China's meteoric economic and military rise also provides an important reason as to why the U.S.-Japan alliance remains important for regional stability and a balance of power.

However, the U.S. security pledge to Tokyo should not be a blank check. It is especially important that a continuing defense relationship with Japan does not include backing Tokyo's dubious territorial claim to the Senkaku Islands—a chain of small, uninhabited rocks in the East China Sea. Beijing emphatically disputes Tokyo's claim to those islets (which China calls the Diaoyus), and some nasty maritime incidents concerning the islands have occurred over the past decade. Worse, the balance of air and naval power in the immediate area appears to be shifting in China's favor, making U.S. involvement in the dispute increasingly perilous.

Yet U.S. leaders insist that the U.S.-Japan mutual defense treaty include the Senkakus. James Mattis, President Donald Trump's first secretary of defense, reiterated that position in February 2017, affirming the U.S. commitment to defend all Japanese territory from attack. Mattis specifically asserted that Article 5 of the defense treaty covers the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Trump himself subsequently reaffirmed that commitment in talks with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Such a bold stance was not always Washington's official position, though. In fact, it is a rather recent interpretation. Barack Obama was the first U.S. president to state explicitly that the alliance extended to the Senkakus: "The policy of the United States is clear—the Senkaku Islands are administered by Japan and therefore fall within the scope of Article 5 of the U.S.-

Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security,” Obama stated in a [2014 interview](#) with Japan’s Yomiuri Shimbun. “And we oppose any unilateral attempts to undermine Japan’s administration of these islands,” he added.

Washington is exposing the United States to an unnecessary security risk by adopting that stance. Beijing’s response to Mattis’ unequivocal support for Tokyo’s claims was quite firm. “Diaoyu and its affiliated islands have been Chinese territory since ancient times. These are historical facts that cannot be changed. The so-called U.S.-Japan security treaty was a product of the Cold War, and it should not harm China’s territorial sovereignty and legitimate rights,” Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang insisted at a press conference. “We urge the U.S. side to adopt a responsible attitude and stop making wrong remarks on the issue of the sovereignty of Diaoyu Islands,” Lu added.

Washington needs to rescind any implied commitment to defend the Senkakus. The current U.S. position is based on a strained, revisionist interpretation of the mutual security treaty text that only the last two U.S. administrations adopted. Worse, it needlessly inserts the United States into an emotional territorial dispute between Tokyo and Beijing—one in which it is unclear which party has the better case.

It is one thing to continue a security partnership with Japan to maintain stability in East Asia and balance China’s rising power and influence. There are at least respectable arguments in favor of such a policy, despite the risk of exacerbating existing tensions between Washington and Beijing. But inflicting damage on America’s relations with China—and perhaps risking a war with it—over Japan’s murky claim to uninhabited rocks is a case of foreign policy folly. Such risks are imprudent, even though there are valuable fishing grounds and possible energy deposits in the waters surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu chain. The Obama administration’s expansion of the U.S. security obligations to Japan was profoundly unwise. A continuation of the security relationship with Tokyo should be contingent upon the elimination of any U.S. commitment to back Japan’s claim of the Senkakus.

Ted Galen Carpenter is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.