

Washington's Involvement in Territorial Disputes Could Trigger a War with China

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March 22, 2021

The United States increasingly is interjecting itself into an array of territorial disputes between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its neighbors. It is a foolish and provocative policy that creates significant risks for the United States over stakes that have little or nothing to do with important American interests. U.S. leaders should move to extricate their country from such ill-advised positions as soon as possible.

Although the Trump administration's decision to explicitly back the ASEAN powers in their various territorial disputes with Beijing in the South China Sea needs to be reversed, two other flashpoints are even more worrisome. One involves the Diaoyu (Senkaku) islands in the East China Sea. The other involves Taiwan's territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Even though the United States and Japan first signed a mutual defense treaty in 1951, the document did not assert that its coverage included the disputed Diaoyu islands (which Tokyo and Washington both call the Senkaku islands.) That expansive interpretation did not take place until President Barack Obama issued a clarifying statement. "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."

Officials in both the Trump and Biden administrations subsequently reiterated that stance. Indeed, for a brief time the Biden administration seemed to go even beyond the expanded interpretation. In late February, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby stated that Washington supported Japan's "sovereignty" over the Senkakus. His comment appeared to signal a significant shift in U.S. policy. Even with Obama's escalation, Washington's official position was that while the United States would resist any use of force to end Tokyo's administration of the islets, it did not take any position regarding the merits of the territorial dispute itself. Kirby's statement put his country on record as endorsing Tokyo's claim, although he beat a retreat the next day with a "clarification" reaffirming the more limited policy.

Even with such backtracking, the United States has undertaken a risky commitment. The uninhabited islets are located southwest of Okinawa and are significantly closer to both Taiwan and mainland China than they are to Japan's main islands. Beijing is uneasy about a potentially hostile power continuing to control the Diaoyus. Abundant fishing grounds also surround the islands, and there are growing expectations of major oil and natural gas deposits. For reasons of

geography, history, economics, and national pride, the PRC has resolutely resisted Japan's assertion of sovereignty, and there has been a longstanding, bitter dispute between Tokyo and Beijing. Worse, the dispute has been heating up noticeably in recent months. Re-interpreting the mutual defense treaty to cover the Diaoyus may prove to have been a very costly mistake for the United States.

America's risk exposure is not as formal, but it could become just as real with respect to Taiwan's claims to tiny islands in both the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. Even during the Cold War, when Washington recognized the Kuomintang regime in Taipei as the "legitimate" government of China, U.S. administrations were coy about whether the mutual defense treaty also covered Quemoy (Kinmen) and Matsu. When Washington severed diplomatic relations with Taipei in 1979 and established formal ties with the PRC, the extent of the U.S. security obligation became even hazier. The Taiwan Relations Act entails an implied commitment to come to Taiwan's defense if the PRC attacks the island, but any collateral obligation regarding outlying, Taiwanese-claimed islands is utterly unclear.

Even if the prospect of U.S. military intervention deters Beijing from attacking Taiwan itself, the continuation of such restraint with respect to Kinmen and Matsu is far less certain. The level of uncertainty is even greater regarding the still smaller and more distant islands that Taiwan claims in the South China Sea. Taiwan administers two sets of islands there, the largest of which is Taiping (Itu Alba) in the Spratly chain. Taipei also controls Pratas Island (along with some atolls) in another chain, the Dongsha islands, farther north. The PRC also exerts territorial claims over both island chains, making for a potentially explosive situation.

As I've written previously, those territorial disputes between Taipei and Beijing merely are part of the larger, and growing, struggle over Taiwan's political identity. PRC leaders exhibit mounting impatience with the refusal of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government in Taipei even to discuss reunification with the mainland. Indeed, the DPP authorities continue to move in the opposite direction and push the envelope on independence in a variety of ways. There are multiple signs in recent years that the PRC is growing very impatient with such behavior.

A way for Beijing to express that dissatisfaction emphatically would be to move militarily against one or more of the outlying islands that Taipei claims. It's apparent that Taiwanese leaders are becoming increasingly worried about that possibility. On March 17, Defense Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng confirmed that Taiwan has deployed additional military personnel and armaments on Itu Aba.

The United States appears to have wandered into potential military minefields with respect to the territorial claims by both Tokyo and Taipei. In the case of the Diaoyus, Washington's apparent assumption is that while the PRC may periodically send fishing boats and other vessels into the disputed waters, it will never make a serious military move. That assumption places a very heavy reliance on the credibility of deterrence even when the issue at stake has little intrinsic importance to the United States. It is a highly questionable assumption that could lead to a tragic military confrontation between Washington and Beijing.

The situation with respect to Taipei's territorial claims is even worse. The U.S. commitment under the Taiwan Relations Act to defend Taiwan itself is only implicit; there is no binding defense treaty. Whether the implied commitment also extends to remote islands that the

Taiwanese government claims is murkier still. U.S. policy on that question amounts to piling strategic ambiguity on top of strategic ambiguity, and it is profoundly dangerous.

A complete reassessment of Washington's posture with respect to both sets of territorial disputes is imperative. U.S. leaders have undertaken explicit or implied obligations that make almost no sense from the standpoint of legitimate American interests. Worse, the risk exposure from such involvement is now extremely high. Washington's current posture is an egregious case of foreign policy malpractice.

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