

War Over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands

By: Justin Logan - February 20, 2013

Washington is deeply entangled in the dispute between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. But the most basic question has hardly been examined: Would America really fight a war with China over the islands?

As with so many issues in East Asia, Washington clearly wishes the dispute would just go away—or at least away from American officials' desks. Further complicating matters, however, is the fact that the United States has apparently contradictory legal obligations as regards the islands. In short, even a modestly liberal reading of American commitments lends fuel to the Chinese and Japanese fires both.

It is simple to understand why Beijing and Tokyo are so exercised about the uninhabited islands. If sovereignty over the islands were settled, the victor would gain not just the fishing and (potential) energy resources that lay in the surrounding waters, but recognized territorial waters that implicate naval rights. Further, a virulent and irrational nationalism has captured both countries' citizens, constraining policymakers' room for negotiation.

What's harder to understand is what Washington has at stake in this fight. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland was visibly uncomfortable trying to explain the U.S. position on the sovereignty of the islands last summer, repeating the U.S. position that Washington does not take sides in the dispute over their sovereignty, but views them as covered by the U.S. security guarantee to Japan, since they have been under the administration of Japan.

But would the United States really engage in a shooting war with China over the islands?

There's good reason to wonder.

The biggest reason to doubt it is the stakes involved. Even if China acted aggressively, as it did when it apparently engaged a Japanese vessel and locked fire-control radar on it, the stakes are almost certainly lower than the costs of a war. America has littered the globe with a variety of security guarantees and promises, banking on the assumption that they will never be challenged but can depress security competition in peacetime.

This reality can be seen in a 2007 statement from then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. In a conversation with a U.S. Asia scholar, Clinton remarked that it is absurd to think that Americans would support a war with China over Taiwan—a much more important strategic asset than the Senkakus/Diaoyus. (Apparently there was some miscommunication about who was on the record when, because the video containing the discussion was swiftly edited to remove the Taiwan comment.)

Clinton's remark about Taiwan points to a truth that is even greater in the case of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands: the game just isn't worth the candle. Even if Washington dealt China a swift and decisive defeat, the consequences would be extremely costly in both economic terms

and in terms of making a permanent enemy out of China without doing anything to moderate its future ambitions or capabilities.

The present condition looks alarmingly like what Peter Liberman feared when in 1998 he assessed whether Germany and Japan would rely too much on security guarantees from the United States. Following the historian Geoffrey Blainey's observation that "some alliances, on the outbreak of war, had no more force than a flapping sheet of paper," Liberman considered scenarios in which U.S. security guarantees could be modified in adjustment to new political contexts facing its clients. Liberman judged that one of the worst scenarios would be if the American commitment to Japan were weaker than its client believed, and wound up being withdrawn in a crisis scenario. In such an instance the danger would be that Japan would fail to adjust gradually, running the related risks of crash nuclearization and preventive war. Liberman sensibly judged that:

Early warning signs of any emerging dangers should...trigger a policy reevaluation, preferably before it is too late for the option of gradual renationalization.

Despite the ample early warning signs of trouble in East Asia, Washington does not look to be reevaluating policy.

In literally every discussion I have had with Japanese security scholars and political scientists, these experts are unwilling to give an inch on their position on Senkaku/Diaoyu while pointing to U.S. assurances that the islands are covered by the MDT. At the same time, I have seen no evidence that U.S. defense policy makers are thinking seriously about fighting a shooting war against China over the rocks—to say nothing of the American public.

The worst aspect of the problem is that there is good reason to believe that we are seeing an image of the future in the East China Sea. A rising power feels itself encircled and threatened by an array of alliances with a faraway great power. The incumbent power's clients feel warm and safe in its embrace, and have yet to reconsider the wisdom of their patron's desire to infantilize them and keep them dependent on its largesse. Meanwhile, the solidity of that embrace has hardly been scrutinized, and there is reason to believe it is much weaker than commonly believed. There are a number of ways this story could end, but the worst ones have not received enough consideration.