

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Taiwan Challenges Its Neighbors

By: Ted Galen Carpenter - February 28, 2013

The territorial disputes between China and its Southeast Asian neighbors over islands in the South China Sea have received considerable attention from an anxious international community. There has been even more global angst about the flare up of tensions between China and Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. Concern about those feuds—especially the Sino-Japanese confrontation—is understandable, given the potential for miscalculation and escalation.

But it's important to note that there is another, increasingly assertive party to both disputes: Taiwan. And the Taiwanese have not been shy about pressing their claims. That adds a volatile element to the controversies.

Taipei has not only asserted ownership of portions of the South China Sea; it has managed to establish a significant physical presence there. Taiwan controls the Pratas—the largest island group, known locally as the Donghsa Islands—and Taiping, the largest of the hotly contested Spratly Islands. In September 2012, a group of thirty prominent Taiwanese, including national legislators, landed on Taiping to inspect the security situation. The coast guard conducted a live-fire exercise for the delegation during that visit, much to the annoyance of countries with competing claims.

The Taiwanese government summarily rejected all complaints. “Taiping Island is part of the Republic of China’s territory,” stated Wang kuo-jan, an official with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in response to Vietnam’s diplomatic protest. He added that “no one has the right to protest over Taiwan’s exercise of its sovereignty rights there.”

But incidents between Taipei and other claimants in the South China Sea have been mild compared to the tensions with Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Matters came to a head in late September 2012 when a comic-opera naval battle involving water cannons erupted between Japanese patrol ships and a flotilla of dozens of Taiwanese fishing boats and coast guard vessels.

It might be tempting to smirk at such an episode, but anti-Japanese ethnic animosity has flared on Taiwan. Indeed, there have been angry demonstrations in Taiwanese cities, punctuated by burning the Japanese flag, just as on the mainland. Thus far, there has been markedly more hostility directed against Tokyo’s claims than against Beijing’s. Indeed, PRC officials have sought to spin Taiwan’s conduct as proof that “all Chinese,” irrespective of political differences on other issues, consider the islands Chinese territory.

Some of the underlying reasons for Taiwan’s territorial claims in the South China and East China seas are not hard to discern. There are vast, valuable fishing waters in both arenas, and

commercial fishing is a crucial industry in Taiwan. It also is increasingly likely that there are large reservoirs of oil and natural gas under those waters. In other words, substantial economic stakes are involved in the territorial disputes, and neither Taiwan nor any other claimant is about to abandon such potential riches.

But in Taiwan's case, another factor also may be at play, especially with regard to the Diaoyu/Senkaku issue. Taipei has called for trilateral talks to resolve that controversy, thus challenging the global perception that it is a purely bilateral controversy between Tokyo and Beijing. Taiwanese officials are also pressing for multilateral negotiations regarding the various claims in the South China Sea. Taking a more proactive stance on the territorial disputes—which has clearly been the case over the past year—might be a clever ploy to gain de facto recognition as a sovereign actor from Beijing, Tokyo, and other governments. Even though none of those countries is willing to establish formal relations with Taipei, they may have to deal with Taiwan as a key party to what are becoming ever more dangerous disputes.

Being accorded such respect, however grudgingly, would have implications for Taiwan's international position. The island's diplomatic status hangs by a thread, with only about two dozen nations maintaining official ties to Taipei. And all of them are small nations that Taiwan has effectively bribed with financial inducements to refrain from switching diplomatic recognition to Beijing. That fading strategy cannot endure much longer—especially as China's economic resources and influence continue to mount.

Injecting itself as a major player in volatile territorial disputes may be a last-ditch, substitute strategy for gaining international recognition and respect. In any case, Taiwan is now a wild card in what are already some tense, worrisome confrontations. Washington and other governments need to carefully monitor this latest troubling development.