

Disputed Islands May Dominate Upcoming APEC Summit

Scott Stearns

August 29, 2012

WASHINGTON — China and Japan are locked in an increasingly bitter dispute over islands in the East China Sea, a topic bound to dominate this week's trip to Asia by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

In an increasingly dangerous game of chase, Japan's Coast Guard is trying to stop Chinese activists from landing on the disputed islands known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China, where competing territorial claims to fishing and natural gas deposits have long been a source of friction between Beijing and Tokyo.

But the dispute has intensified with the approaching anniversary of Japan's WWII defeat. With neither country showing room for compromise, some analysts think the Senkaku dispute and broader claims over the South China Sea are sure to dominate the upcoming summit of the Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in Russia.

"In the Senkaku dispute, there is an almost poisonous history surrounding this issue that is almost certainly doing the bulk of the work in causing the controversy over those islands," says Cato Institute analyst Justin Logan. "This backdrop of cross-cutting territorial claims in the waters near Southeast Asia and up the Chinese coast will be the backdrop for this whole discussion."

The standoff comes amid domestic pressure within both countries, as China's Communist Party heads towards a leadership change and public support for Japan's prime minister is falling.

Although Japan has a mutual defense treaty with the United States which includes the island chain, State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland says Washington is trying to stay out of the dispute.

"We don't take a position on the islands, but we do assert that they are covered under the treaty," she says.

Secretary of State Clinton is leading the U.S. delegation to the summit, following stops in New Zealand, Indonesia, Brunei, East Timor, and China.