

East China Sea

Background:

The Senkakus (Diaoyus in Chinese) comprise a small chain of five core islands, among other features, located in the East China Sea. They are uninhabited, of questionable economic or strategic value, and are simultaneously claimed by China, Taiwan, and Japan. The United States transferred control of the islands to Japan in 1972, which has administered them since. Japan does not recognize foreign claims to the islands, nor has the United States taken a clear stance on the islands' sovereignty. However, the United States has committed to defending Japan should it come under attack in the process of exercising administrative control.

Although the sovereignty of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands have been disputed for decades, their significance in Sino-Japanese relations has sharply increased since 2010. On 7 September 2010, a Chinese fishing boat collided with a Japanese Coast Guard vessel in the waters surrounding the islands. Japan detained the boat and crew, and arrested its captain, which produced a major diplomatic row. In 2012, over Chinese objections, the Japanese government purchased the islands outright from a private owner. These two incidents drastically increased the prominence of the dispute, leading to increased Chinese efforts to undermine the Japanese claim. Since 2012, official Chinese Coast Guard ships have regularly conducted incursions into the territorial waters surrounding the islands, and official Chinese aircraft have regularly flown into their associated airspace. The United States, for its part, expanded its rhetorical support for the Japanese position, and has increased diplomatic and security coordination with Japan as part of the official U.S. policy to "deter conflict and coercion."

Summary:

A Chinese military incursion in the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands during the very early hours of the morning of 9 June 2016 triggered a crisis for Japan. At 12:50am a PLA military frigate entered the contiguous waters adjacent to the Senkaku islands' territorial waters. The contiguous zone stretches 12 nautical miles beyond the 12 miles of territorial waters, which hug the islands themselves. For roughly two hours before the Chinese ship had entered the zone, a Japanese military destroyer attempted to contact the vessel and advised it to change direction. The Chinese ship, however, maintained its course straight towards the islands' territorial waters. Adding to the tumult, three Russian war ships passed through the contiguous zones from 10pm on 8 June to 3am on 9 June (though their entry was not protested by the Japanese), sparking concern of potential Chinese and Russian coordination. While this was not the first time that a Russian military ship had entered the contiguous zone, it marked the first time that a Chinese military vessel breached the region.

In Tokyo, a crisis management team assembled inside Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's office to monitor the situation. Abe was notified of the ship's presence at around 1am on 9 June. At around the same time, the Chinese ambassador was called in to the Japanese Foreign Ministry, where the Japanese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Saiki Akitaka, demanded that Beijing remove the ship from the contiguous zone. The Chinese ambassador did not officially accede to the demand, but relayed that escalation was unwanted and that he would report back to his superiors. Vice Minister Akitaka felt that there was legitimate concern among Japanese officials at the time that the incursion would lead to a serious military clash between Chinese and

Japanese forces. Ultimately, this did not occur, as the Chinese ship left the contiguous zone at 3:10 am, and headed north.

While the departure of the Chinese frigate lessened immediate tensions, it did not terminate the crisis altogether. On 9 June Abe ordered the Japanese Navy and Coast Guard to be on alert. Yoshide Suga, the chief cabinet official, noted at a press briefing that “China’s actions unilaterally escalate tensions in the area, and we are seriously concerned.” China, for its part, did not confirm that a military vessel had sailed around the islands, and publicly reaffirmed its belief that the Senkaku islands are Chinese territory. A Chinese Ministry of National Defense statement read: “For China’s military vessels to pass through waters under the country’s own jurisdiction is reasonable and legitimate, and other countries have no right to make irresponsible comments.”

The United States acknowledged the incident but did not express judgment. On 9 June a U.S. State Department official said in a press briefing that the United States had been in touch with the Japanese government, and that they were monitoring the situation closely, but referred reporters to the Japanese for further detail about the incident.

The crisis terminated shortly after it began, on 14 June 2016, as a joint military exercise between Japan, the United States, and India allayed Japanese concerns that China might attempt a land grab. Japan’s crisis ended around the start of a previously planned annual military exercise between Japan, India, and the United States dubbed Exercise Malabar. The exercise consisted of two portions: a harbor phase followed by an at-sea phase. The harbor portion began on 9 June in Sasebo, a port city in Southwestern Japan along the East China Sea, and the at-sea-phase began on 14 June in the Philippine Sea. As the exercises began, Japan was awaiting any significant response from China regarding their protests towards the Chinese incursions near the Senkaku Islands. The initiation of the at-sea-phase served to assure Japan of the strength of U.S. commitments to defend Japanese interests, and the lack of any significant Chinese response in the interim reassured Japan that the crisis would not escalate further.

Sources:

Congressional Research Service; New York Times; Reuters; Texas National Security Review; US Navy Press Release; World Bank