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Asian Nationalism at Sea

By Joseph S. Nye

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Will war break out in the seas of East Asia? After Chinese and Japanese nationalists staged competing occupations of the barren landmasses that China refers to as the Diaoyu Islands and Japan calls the Senkaku Islands, angry demonstrators in the southwestern Chinese city of Chengdu chanted, "We must kill all Japanese."

Likewise, a standoff between Chinese and Philippine vessels in the Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea led to protests in Manila. And a long planned step forward in cooperation between South Korea and Japan was torpedoed when the South Korean prime minister visited the barren island that Korea calls Dokdo, Japan calls Takeshima, and the United States calls the Liancourt Rocks.

One should not be too alarmist. The United States has declared that the Senkaku Islands (administered by the Okinawa Prefecture when it was returned to Japan in 1972) are covered by a U.S.-Japan security treaty. Meanwhile, the standoff over the Scarborough Shoal has calmed down, and, while Japan recalled its ambassador from South Korea over the Dokdo incident, it is unlikely the two countries would come to blows.

But it is worth recalling that China used lethal force to expel Vietnamese from the Paracel Islands in 1974 and 1988. And China prevailed upon the Cambodian host of this year's ASEAN summit to block a final communiqué that would have called for a code of conduct in the South China Sea — the first time in the 10-member association's four-decade history that it failed to issue a communiqué.

The revival of extreme nationalism in East Asia is both worrisome and understandable. In Europe, while Greeks may grumble about the terms of German backing for emergency financing, the period since World War II has seen enormous progress in knitting countries together. Nothing similar has happened in Asia, and issues dating back to the 1930s and 1940s remain raw, a problem exacerbated by biased textbooks and government policies.

The Chinese Communist Party is not very communist any more. Instead, it bases its legitimacy on rapid economic growth and ethnic Han nationalism. Memories of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 and Japanese aggression in the 1930s are politically useful and fit within a larger theme of Chinese victimization by imperialist forces.

Some American defense analysts view China's maritime strategy as being clearly aggressive. They point to increasing defense expenditures and the development of missile and submarine technology designed to cordon off the seas extending from China's coast to "the first island chain" of Taiwan and Japan.

Others, however, see a Chinese strategy that is confused, contradictory, and paralyzed by competing bureaucratic interests. They point to the negative results of China's more assertive policies since the economic crisis of 2008. Indeed, China's policies have damaged its relations with nearly all of its neighbors.

Consider the Senkaku incident in 2010, when, after Japan arrested the crew of a Chinese trawler that had rammed a Japanese coast guard vessel, China escalated its economic reprisals. The result, as one Japanese analyst put it, was that "China scored an own goal," immediately reversing what had been a favorable trend in bilateral relations under the ruling Democratic Party of Japan. More generally, while China spends billions of renminbi in efforts to increase its soft power in Asia, its behavior in the South China Sea contradicts its own message.

I have asked Chinese friends and officials why China follows such a counterproductive strategy. The first and formal answer is that China inherited historical territorial claims, including a map from the Nationalist period that sketches a "nine-dotted line" encompassing virtually the entire South China Sea. Today, with technology making underwater and fisheries resources more exploitable in the area, it is impossible to abandon this patrimony. In 2009-10, some mid-ranking officials and commentators even referred to the South China Sea as a sovereign "core interest" like Taiwan or Tibet.

But China's leaders have never been clear about the exact location of the "nine-dotted line," or about whether their claims refer only to certain land features, or also to more extensive continental shelves and seas. When asked why they do not clarify their claims, my Chinese interlocutors sometimes say that to do so would require difficult political and bureaucratic compromises that would provoke domestic nationalists.

Moreover, sometimes they say that they do not want to give away a bargaining chip prematurely. In 1995, and again in 2010, the United States declared that the waters of the South China Sea should be governed by the 1982 United Nations Law of the Seas Treaty (which, ironically, the United States has not yet ratified), but that the United States takes no position on the territorial claims. Instead, the United States urged that competing claims be resolved through negotiation.

In 2002, China and ASEAN agreed on a legally nonbinding code of conduct for managing such disputes, but, as a large power, China believes that it will gain more in bilateral rather than multilateral negotiations with small countries. That belief was behind China's pressure on Cambodia to block ASEAN's final communiqué this summer.

But this is a mistaken strategy. As a large power, China will have great weight in any circumstance, and it can reduce its self-inflicted damage by agreeing to a code of conduct.

As for the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the best proposal comes from The Economist. China should refrain from sending official vessels into Japanese waters, and use a hotline with Japan to manage crises generated by nationalist "cowboys." At the same time, the two countries should revive a 2008 framework for joint development of disputed gas fields in the East China Sea, and Japan's central government should purchase the barren islands from their private owner and declare them an international maritime protected area.

It is time for all countries in East Asia to remember Winston Churchill's famous advice: "To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war."

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