



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 107/2014 dated 5 June 2014

Dubious Deterrence in the East China Sea

By Evan Resnick

Synopsis

During his recent visit to Tokyo, President Obama declared that the US-Japan alliance covers the contested Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Unfortunately, the president's deterrent strategy towards Beijing will place the US in a nightmarish predicament should either Japan or China initiate hostilities against the other.

Commentary

DURING HIS weeklong trip to East Asia in April, President Obama tried to steady nerves in a neighborhood that has been gripped by mounting tensions. Of the many geopolitical fault-lines that crisscross the region, the most dangerous one centers on a cluster of tiny islands in the East China Sea to which both Japan and the People's Republic of China have laid claim, referred to in Japan as the Senkaku and in China as the Diaoyu.

The most noteworthy development during President Obama's visit was his declaration in Tokyo on 24 April 2014 that the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security "covers all territories under Japan's administration, including the Senkaku Islands". Strictly speaking, the president's statement did not mark a shift in US policy, as senior officials in both the [George W.] Bush and Obama Administrations have consistently reaffirmed this position.

Obama's deterrent threat in Tokyo

What the president's words lacked in substance, however, they more than made up for in symbolism: Obama not only became the first sitting president to enunciate the formal US stance on the Senkaku/Diaoyu, but he did so in the Japanese capital in a joint press conference with the country's hawkish prime minister, Shinzo Abe.

Obama's assertion carried an unmistakable deterrent threat to Chinese leaders. Scholars of international relations have identified two conditions as being integral to successful deterrence, defined as State A's attempt to dissuade State B from initiating an attack by threatening overwhelming military retaliation. In short, A must persuade B that it possesses both the power and resolve to make good on its threatened reprisal.

Although the Obama Administration possesses ample military capabilities to deter Chinese aggression in the East China Sea, even in the wake of the president's Tokyo declaration its deterrent threat is weakened by a glaring lack of resolve. In general, resolve is easy to establish if a state seeks to deter an attack against itself (i.e., "direct deterrence") but is much harder to establish if it seeks to prevent an attack against an allied state (i.e., "extended deterrence").

The case at hand is one of especially tenuous extended deterrence. This is because the administration is trying to deter a Chinese attack not against the Japanese heartland per se, but rather against a chain of tiny, uninhabited islands whose sovereignty is fiercely contested by the very state the United States is trying to deter and that hold no tangible or intangible significance to the US.

Further complication

In contrast, although the longstanding US defence commitment to the Japanese home islands is also one of extended deterrence, that commitment is highly credible. Japan's populous home islands are of clear geo-strategic and economic importance to the US. The credibility of the US deterrent is both reflected and reinforced by a massive tripwire of nearly 50,000 American troops that are stationed on the home islands' soil.

In a further complication, although the disputed islands and the oil and gas reserves lying underneath them matter very little to the US, they are freighted with strategic, economic, and symbolic value to both Chinese and Japanese leaders, as well as their respective publics. The Japanese government's nationalisation of the islands in 2012 was greeted with strong public support in Japan and large protests in China. Tokyo's rigidity on the issue is underscored by its refusal to even acknowledge that the islands' sovereignty is disputed.

This situation further weakens the US deterrent because it tugs the policy in opposing directions. On the one hand, since Beijing is strongly motivated to challenge the status quo in the East China Sea, only a highly credible US deterrent threat will prove effective. On the other hand, however, Tokyo is just as intensely motivated to keep the islands as China is to seize them.

This means that a more credible US deterrent threat against Beijing also raises the likelihood that Japan will instigate a war against China to keep the islands under Tokyo's exclusive control. This conundrum explains why President Obama felt compelled to immediately follow-up his firm statement in Tokyo with the contradictory admonition that he was not drawing "a red line".

Loosening the Gordian Knot

The most likely outcome of Obama's Tokyo declaration is that China will be just as inclined to escalate the crisis and Japan will be just as loathe to climb down from its intransigent bargaining position on the islands. As vividly demonstrated by the recent near-collision between Chinese fighter-jets and Japanese electronic surveillance aircraft in the vicinity of the Senkaku/Diaoyu, both states are likely to continue their reciprocal acts of brinkmanship that have now become routine in the waters and airspace of the East China Sea.

If either side upsets this delicate equilibrium and a shooting war actually breaks out, the Obama Administration will be confronted with a Hobson's choice. It could either stand aside and betray its Japanese ally, thereby decimating the credibility of its security commitments throughout the region, or jump into a potentially catastrophic war against a nuclear armed adversary over an issue of marginal relevance to US interests.

A preferable alternative would be for President Obama to secretly inform Prime Minister Abe that the US will categorically abstain from any naval war initiated in the East China Sea and for Secretary of State Kerry to offer to mediate bilateral negotiations aimed at breaking the Senkaku/Diaoyu deadlock.

The latter initiative would signal Beijing that Washington takes its territorial claims seriously and is genuinely agnostic as to which country is the rightful owner of the islands. Additionally, it would inaugurate a diplomatic track for addressing a crisis that to date has been exclusively "managed" through sabre-rattling by the two rival claimants.

Evan N. Resnick is Assistant Professor and Coordinator of the United States Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.