

The Current Situation Concerning the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands

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Located in the East China Sea, the five uninhabited islands with a total area of about 6 square kilometers, which in Japan are called Senkaku and in China Diaoyu, are among those few “particularly heated” zones, from which, under unfortunate circumstances, the flames of full-scale conflict could well erupt. Not only in the Indo-Pacific region, but also on a global scale.

That the latter claim is not an ill-founded assertion is evidenced in particular by the military activation of some of the leading European countries in the IPR in general and in the immediate vicinity of the zones mentioned. It is here, on the other side of the globe, that the former [major colonialists](#) are looking for a thrill.

In the latest development, on February 9, a French nuclear attack [submarine](#) surfaced in the South China Sea. Two weeks later, a French frigate [called](#) into the Japanese port of Nagasaki: North Korea needs someone to look after it, you know. Where, one wonders, are the various troubles of the IPR, and where does the growing lump of French (British, German) problems lie?

But the main external force in the IPR and in all the “hot zones” of the region remains, undoubtedly, the United States. The fluctuation of Washington’s political course in relation to the situation in each of them is influenced by the sum of a variety of factors. Both internal and external. In this regard, Washington’s response (if any) to occasional questions from Tokyo about extending Article V of the 1960 bilateral “Security Treaty” to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands is quite revealing.

The very fact that for decades, time after time, this question has been raised not only before every new American administration, but often while some of them have been in power, is remarkable. As was the case, for example, during B. Obama’s second presidential term. Something unusual is hidden in the very subject of the said question, if it is periodically actualized. To determine this oddity we must [once again](#) turn to local geography and recent history.

The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are located approximately 150 km west of the southern Ryukyu

Archipelago, which stretches 1,200 km from north to south from one of the four major Japanese islands, Kyushu, to Taiwan. From this last island, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are 150 km away, from the PRC coast 300 km away. This geography serves as a reason for Beijing (as well as Taiwan, which is secondary) not to refer the disputed islands to the Ryukyu Archipelago.

And this is where the history part comes in. The fact is that the entire Ryukyu Archipelago is present in the Japan-China territorial dispute (in the author's view). Just as part of India's elite has buried deep in its "mental subcortex" the problem of suzerainty (not sovereignty as it is today) of Beijing over all of Tibet. Although on the political surface there are "only" disputes over the ownership of 100 thousand square kilometers of the Sino-Indian border zone.

Just as India would like (of course, not publicly and officially) to see all of Tibet fairly autonomous from Beijing, so the latter would prefer (again, not publicly) to have a quasi-state entity called Ryukyu, with extensive autonomy from Tokyo, next to it. For which there are some historical reasons.

The fact is that before the second half of the nineteenth century, such a quasi-state formation with its fairly autochthonous population already existed. The Ryukyu Archipelago became part of Japan as Japan began its foreign policy expansion after the so-called Meiji Restoration (in the late 1960s), and mainly as a result of the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-95). The status of the adjacent Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands was not specified in any way.

With the end of World War II, the Ryukyu Archipelago came under US control, which in 1951 was enshrined in the San Francisco Peace Treaty (Article 3) with the international legal status of trusteeship. However, this document, too, said nothing specifically about the status of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

In 1972, the Ryukyu Archipelago returned to Tokyo's jurisdiction, an act of goodwill on the part of Washington toward a now key ally in Asia. On lease (but paid for by the Japanese budget) part of the territory of Okinawa, that is, the main island of the Ryukyu Archipelago, remained the main base of the American military contingent in Japan. But with the return of this archipelago to its jurisdiction, Japan also regained the unresolved status of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

In the author's view, again, the connection of this very local problem with the potential issue of the status of the entire Ryukyu Archipelago underlies the acuteness of the situation in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands area. And not so much the (almost always mentioned) abundance of fish and the allegedly huge hydrocarbon reserves at the bottom of the surrounding sea. The latter was predicted by a certain UN commission back in the late 1960s.

In 2012, the Japanese government decided to end the terra nullius status of these islands. A certain Japanese "owner" of three of them was found who agreed to "sell" them. Since then they have all been the "property" of the Japanese government.

It is hardly necessary to explain Beijing's reaction to the very procedure of this "sale-purchase". With its accomplishment, the situation around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands began to deteriorate steadily. Japan considered as an open challenge the introduction in early February of this year of China's Border Guard Law, which, among other things, allows Chinese border ships to fire on foreign "intruder ships" in national territorial waters.

On February 9, during a conversation with US charge d'affaires ad interim Joseph Young at the office of the Japanese Defense Ministry, its head Nobuo Kishi [called](#) the law “absolutely unacceptable”. Two weeks later, there was a “news leak” about a conversation between a “group” of members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and some Japanese government representatives concerning the rights of Japanese [border ships](#) in the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands area. The relevant question raised by the “group” was answered positively.

In other words, the situation around these islands is getting only worse. And the question of the US position is extremely important in predicting its further development. Which in relation to Japan is in terms of a binding military-political alliance, and to China as the main geopolitical opponent.

Meanwhile, during the aforementioned conversation between Joseph Young and Nobuo Kishi, the former only uttered a ritual mantra about his country’s commitment to the principle of “freedom and openness” in the maritime communications of the IPR and said nothing on the subject of the issue raised by Nobuo Kishi. Or at least there is no mention of it in the media comments.

Article V is mentioned in the [official report](#) about one of President Joe Biden’s phone conversations with Prime Minister Yo. Suga. But without any “territorial” reference, which contradicts the more definite interpretation of this conversation by almost all the respected news media. Meanwhile, in the course of the election campaign, the same Biden was already making such a connection. But, as is well known, opposition “blabbering” and the words of an official clothed with supreme power are completely different things. Even in form, not to mention in content.

There are noticeable nuances on this issue during the press conferences of Pentagon spokesman John Kirby, which was [noticed](#) in Japan.

In other words, as before, we are witnessing the usual behavior of every participant in the “Great World Game,” seeking to benefit himself, but to avoid (if possible) the prospect of getting into trouble for an entirely unnecessary reason. The same can be seen in the positioning of the US in relation to the “Taiwan Issue,” the territorial disputes in the South China Sea: “We have no formal obligations and behave according to the situation”.

Japan is “dragging its feet” on joining the anti-Russian sanctions adopted by its allies over “some Ukraine,” claiming that it is extremely important for Tokyo to develop good relations with Russia (for reasons that go far beyond the notorious “Northern Territories” issue). Articles about the dubiousness of extending Article V of the bilateral “Security Treaty” to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands appear in the landmark US press. Japan eventually joins the said sanctions – some time later President B. Obama publicly declares that, of course, the US obligations apply to these islands as well.

With the uncertainty of US foreign policy in general and towards China in particular, it is quite possible that the same contradictory “nuances” in the situation around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands will continue to emerge, which is escalating before our eyes.

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