



POLITICAL AND  
SECURITY AFFAIRS



# Competition and Confrontation in the East China Sea *and the Implications for U.S. Policy*

A ROUNDTABLE REPORT  
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THE NATIONAL BUREAU OF ASIAN RESEARCH

In late November, China declared an air defense identification zone in the East China Sea and days later announced that the zone would include the disputed island chain known as Diaoyu in China and Senkaku in Japan. This move led to an array of responses from neighboring states, ranging from wary compliance with the rules of the declaration to loud protests. The United States defied the declaration by flying two unarmed B-52 bombers over the zone.<sup>1</sup> This recent escalation is worrisome in the context of the rising tensions between Japan and China over the East China Sea in the last few years. Because each side is framing its claim to the group of islands as a core interest, the dispute could have a significant effect on the stability of the Asia-Pacific and overshadow positive economic development in the region.

## FEATURED EXPERTS

**Bonnie Glaser**

*Center for Strategic and International  
Studies*

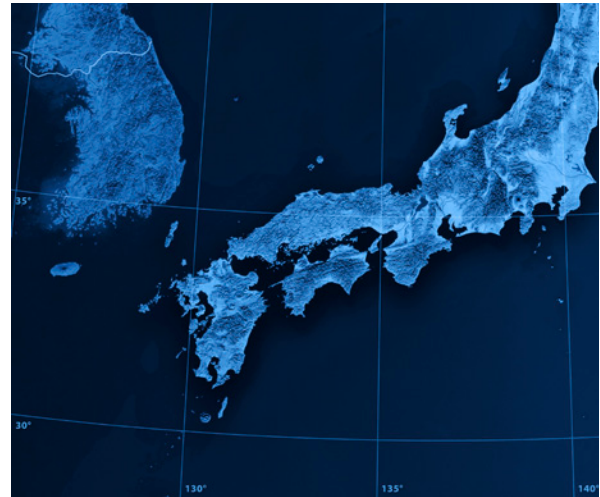
**Mike Mochizuki**

*The George Washington University*

<sup>1</sup> Craig Whitlock, "U.S. Flies Two Warplanes over East China Sea, Ignoring New Chinese Air Defense Zone," Washington Post, November 26, 2013, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-flies-two-warplanes-over-east-china-sea-ignoring-new-chinese-air-defense-zone/2013/11/26/0510eee2-56bf-11e3-835d-e7173847c7cc\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-flies-two-warplanes-over-east-china-sea-ignoring-new-chinese-air-defense-zone/2013/11/26/0510eee2-56bf-11e3-835d-e7173847c7cc_story.html).

The risk of conflict in the East China Sea has been of ongoing concern to U.S. policymakers. On September 27, 2013, the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) convened a group of senior policy experts for a roundtable discussion to examine the situation in the East China Sea and the strategic and political dynamics of the region. This discussion was part of a series of events supported by the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission that aims to provide members of Congress and their staff with policy-relevant analysis on the importance of the relationship between the United States and Japan.

The briefing featured presentations by experts Bonnie Glaser, a senior adviser for Asia in the Freeman Chair in China Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and Mike Mochizuki, the Japan-U.S. Relations Chair in Memory of Gaston Sigur at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs. Glaser outlined the motives behind China's actions in the East China Sea and expressed skepticism about the possibility of compromise. Mochizuki explored Japan's point of view in the dispute and discussed the difficult position of the United States as an ally of Japan. Both experts cited the importance of domestic politics as an element driving China's and Japan's actions and provided advice for how Washington can best navigate the potential diplomatic challenges of ongoing contention in the East China Sea. They also discussed the short- and long-term implications of the dispute for Asia's overall stability.



## RISING TENSIONS IN THE EAST CHINA SEA

Recent tensions in the East China Sea stem from Japanese authorities' detention of a Chinese fisherman in September 2010 after his boat collided with Japanese coast guard ships in the waters around the disputed islands. When the captain was not immediately released, the Chinese government demonstrated its outrage by suspending a series of diplomatic and commercial linkages between the two countries.<sup>2</sup> Two years later, on September 11, 2012, tensions rose further when the Japanese government nationalized three out of the five disputed islands in order to prevent their purchase and subsequent development by Shintaro Ishihara, then governor of Tokyo. The reaction of the Chinese government to this preventative measure contrasted starkly with Japan's evident expectations that the purchase would defuse tensions with China. Instead, Beijing responded with outrage and strong rhetoric against the actions of the Japanese government.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> James Manicom, "The State of Cooperation in the East China Sea," National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), April 30, 2013, <http://www.nbr.org/publications/issue.aspx?id=283>.

<sup>3</sup> Ken Jimbo, "The Japan-China Feud in the East China Sea," NBR, November 19, 2013, <http://www.nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=373>.

The controversy resulted from a collision of two starkly opposing points of view about the status of the islands. Whereas Japan viewed its actions as preventing a likely crisis about sovereignty, China interpreted the nationalization of the islands as a direct violation of the already fragile status quo. The current state of affairs continues to be marked by a lack of understanding by each party of the perspective of the other, precluding compromise on this contentious issue.

## China's Stance

In her presentation, Glaser detailed the mindset that China brings to the dispute. Territorial integrity and sovereignty are core Chinese interests, and Beijing believes it is defending these interests against a provocative Japan. In China's view, the two nations agreed to shelve the issue when they established diplomatic relations in 1972. Glaser argued that recent developments in territorial disputes between China and claimant countries in the South China Sea, most notably China's seizure of the Scarborough Shoal in June 2012 at minimal cost, have shaped its decisions in the East China Sea.

Glaser observed that the goals of the Chinese government are relatively transparent. In the near term, Beijing wants to establish its own jurisdiction in the East China Sea by challenging Japan's administrative control over the islands and surrounding waters. Beijing is

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testing the security treaty between the United States and Japan and gauging the willingness of the United States to step into the dispute. There is also a sense that China is attempting to subvert widely held expectations of continuing U.S. presence and influence in the Asia-Pacific. Glaser maintained that China is underestimating U.S. staying power and argued that the United States would have to become involved if Japan invoked the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty as a result of a skirmish over the islands.

The Chinese government hopes that aggressive posturing will prevent Japan from using the islands for any purpose. Realistically, Beijing seeks a compromise—an admission that the sovereignty dispute exists followed by agreement on a joint administration scheme. On this point, Mochizuki asserted that China is steadfast and will not negotiate with Japan unless Tokyo admits there is a dispute.



## Japan's Stance

On the other side, Tokyo claims there is no dispute as to the sovereignty of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands because they belong to Japan. The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs unequivocally asserts that Japan legally annexed the islands in 1895 and recovered administrative control of the islands as part of the 1972 Okinawa reversion agreement.<sup>4</sup>

Mochizuki stated that after the September 2010 Chinese fishing trawler collision with a Japanese coast guard vessel, Tokyo initially took a tough stance by detaining the Chinese captain and raising the possibility that the captain

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might be tried under Japanese domestic law. This response departed from previous incidents when Japan quickly deported Chinese or Hong Kong intruders. When China reacted strongly against the Japanese handling of the trawler incident, however, Japan gave into Chinese pressure and released the captain. This Japanese backtrack after China responded assertively has

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), "The Senkaku Islands: Seeking Maritime Peace Based on the Rule of Law, Not Force or Coercion," <http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000018519.pdf>.



contributed to Beijing's combative position. At the same time, the Japanese government's yielding to pressure from Beijing provoked then Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara to take actions that eventually compelled the central government to purchase three of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. This purchase triggered the current round of Japan-China tensions. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has continued to insist that there is no territorial dispute and that China, not Japan, has been provocative in its actions. Mochizuki argued that Japan welcomed the United States' statement that it opposes any unilateral actions that would seek to undermine Japan's administrative control over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, as well as its confirmation that the U.S.-Japan security treaty applies to the islands.

While the Japanese government is willing to discuss crisis prevention and cooperation surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, it views as illegitimate China's uncompromising demand that Japan recognize the existence of a sovereignty dispute. Mochizuki noted that Japan is interested in keeping all military vessels out of the area in order to prevent a potential incident between the Japanese and Chinese coast guards from escalating into a military conflict.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

As Secretary of State John Kerry reiterated in April 2013, the United States “does not take a position on the ultimate sovereignty of the islands. But we do recognize that they are under the administration of Japan. And we obviously want all the parties to deal with territorial issues through peaceful means.”<sup>5</sup> Glaser pointed out that China requests that the United States remain neutral in the dispute. A U.S. assertion of Japanese sovereignty would thus provoke serious negative reactions from Beijing. Due to mutual interest in regional stability and promotion of international trade, a stable U.S.-China relationship is important to both parties,

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<sup>5</sup> “Joint Press Availability with Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida after Their Meeting,” U.S. Department of State, April 14, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/04/207483.htm>.



However, sequestration, instituted by the Budget Control Act of 2012, and cuts to the defense budget have caused some policymakers in Asia to question Washington’s commitment to the U.S. rebalancing policy, which could lead to a miscalculation. As Glaser highlighted, the Chinese government may underestimate the willingness of the United States to take action in the event of a military confrontation. Nonetheless, Mochizuki encouraged the United States to continue to refuse to take a side on the sovereignty issue.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Reducing tensions and threat perceptions between Japan and China is extremely important for avoiding outright conflict in this dispute. If both sides remain unrealistic about the possibility of compromise and refuse to at least understand each other’s position, unwise foreign policy decisions may result. Glaser indicated that one of the most worrisome elements of the dispute is the lack of personal ties between the two nations at the political level. She cited the 2012 purchase of the islands by the Japanese government as an example of a miscalculation that could have been prevented by high-level communication.

The experts also discussed the effect of popular nationalism on the dispute. Glaser noted that anti-Japanese sentiment in China is quite prevalent; one sees anti-Japanese content in the news, throughout the education system, and in television programs. This has a profoundly negative effect on how Chinese view the Japanese people and the actions of their government, and public opinion has pushed Beijing away from the promise of potential compromise.

Although Mochizuki similarly noted an increase in anti-Chinese sentiment within Japan, he did not argue that the country has become more nationalistic or militaristic as a result. Participants also discussed the role of textbooks and other accounts in presenting selective or biased views of historical events, thus shaping public opinion and often exacerbating anti-Chinese and anti-Japanese sentiments.

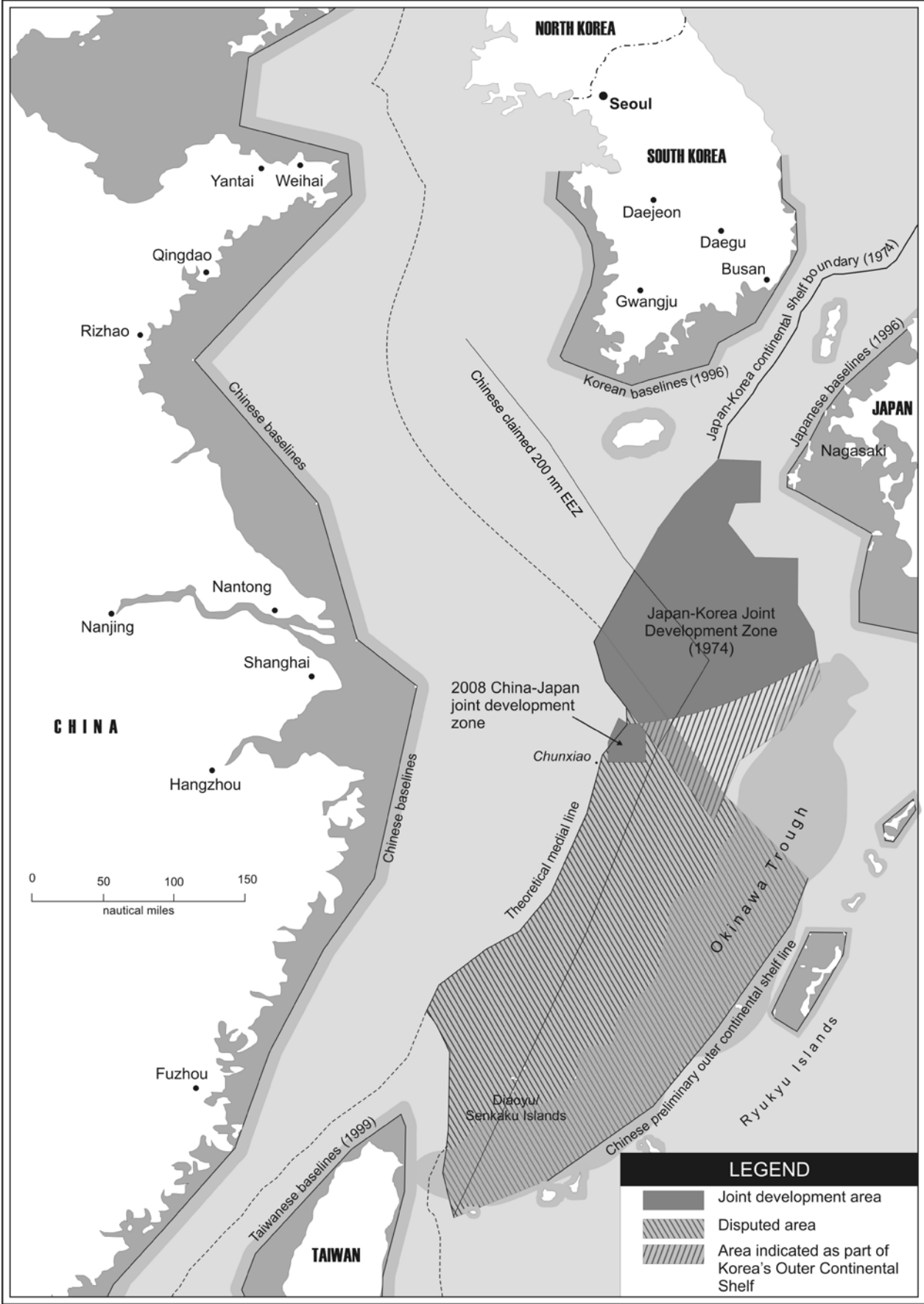
In spite of escalating conflict, the two experts argued that the prospects for stability in the East China Sea are not hopeless. Strengthening ties in other realms, such as through greater economic engagement, could help defuse recent tension. For example, the trilateral free trade agreement between Japan, China, and South Korea could provide an opportunity for constructive relationship-building between the territorial adversaries.

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Importantly, Mochizuki encouraged China, Japan, and the United States to work toward developing more robust procedures to manage and prevent crises. Lines of communication must be open, especially in the wake of the recent escalations in the region. He argued that the United States is wise to not take sides on the issue of sovereignty, but it can still help facilitate discussion between the two adversaries. With clear communication of each side's intentions and goals, at the very least accidental escalation should be avoided. China's recent declaration of a new air defense identification zone has underscored this need for increased communication and crisis management in the East China Sea. ♦



# East China Sea



Created by I Made Andi Arsana and Clive Schofield for the National Bureau of Asian Research, 2010.

## EXPERT BIOS

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**Bonnie Glaser** is a senior adviser for Asia in the Freeman Chair in China Studies, where she works on issues related to Chinese foreign and security policy. She is concomitantly a senior associate with CSIS Pacific Forum and a consultant for the U.S. government on East Asia. From 2003 to mid-2008, Ms. Glaser was a senior associate in the CSIS International Security Program. Prior to joining CSIS, she served as a consultant for various U.S. government offices, including the Departments of Defense and State. Ms. Glaser has written extensively on Chinese threat perceptions and views of the strategic environment, China's foreign policy, Sino-U.S. relations, U.S.-China military ties, cross-strait relations, Chinese assessments of the Korean peninsula, and Chinese perspectives on missile defense and multilateral security in Asia. Her writings have been published in the *Washington Quarterly*, *China Quarterly*, *Asian Survey*, *International Security*, *Problems of Communism*, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, *American Foreign Policy Interests*, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, *New York Times*, and *International Herald Tribune*, as well as various edited volumes on Asian security.

**Mike Mochizuki** holds the Japan-U.S. Relations Chair in Memory of Gaston Sigur at the Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. Dr. Mochizuki was director of the Sigur Center for Asian Studies from 2001 to 2005. He co-directs the "Memory and Reconciliation in the Asia-Pacific" research and policy project of the Sigur Center. Previously, he was a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. He was also Co-Director of the Center for Asia-Pacific Policy at RAND and has taught at the University of Southern California and Yale University. He has published articles in such journals as *The American Interest*, *Asia Pacific Review*, *Foreign Affairs*, *International Security*, *Japan Quarterly*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *Nonproliferation Review*, *Survival*, and *Washington Quarterly*. He is currently completing a book entitled *A New Strategic Triangle: the U.S.-Japan Alliance and the Rise of China* and co-editing a volume entitled *Reconciling Rivals: War, Memory, and Security in East Asia*.

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