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Research Article

Simmering Storm in the East China Sea: Shifting Dynamics in the Great Power Rivalries of East Asia

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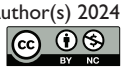
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Abstract

The East China Sea (ECS) is one of the region's most significant and oft-times under-addressed potential flashpoints. In this article we take a holistic approach and reexamine the recent actions of East Asia's two most significant powers, China and Japan, in relation to this important body of maritime space, as well as those of the United States (US), as the incumbent regional hegemon. Specifically, we examine the efficacy of each. This highlights a dynamism in Chinese actions, as well as elucidating how the US and Japan have come to adopt policies that are of dubious efficacy as a means of alleviating or nullifying the escalation of unwanted tensions across the ECS. In so doing, we draw upon two key concepts, immobilism and confirmation bias, that help us to understand why the US and Japan are failing to achieve their assumed objectives of regional stability and the maintenance of the status quo. Ultimately, we argue that a combination of immobilism and confirmation bias in American and Japanese foreign policy, in response to the greater dynamism and adaptability of regional great powers such as China, has led to latent changes in the status quo that risk undermining stability across the ECS.

Keywords

Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, East China Sea, Sino-Japanese relations, US foreign policy, immobilism, confirmation bias

Introduction

Stretching between the growing maritime power of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to the west and Okinawa as the United States (US)–Japan Security

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Alliance's keystone in the 'First Island Chain' to the east, the East China Sea (ECS) contains the ingredients for a perfect storm. The ongoing territorial dispute between Japan and China, as East Asia's two most significant powers, continues to escalate with the latter—however legitimately or contentiously (Sato, 2017; Sato & Chadha, 2022)—engaging in a record-setting number of activities in the ECS this past year (Takahashi, 2024). Yet, despite growing tensions in the region, amid a broader international scene that has now witnessed the outbreak of two interstate conflicts, the ECS has received comparatively little concerted scholarly attention from leading academics and policymakers. Moreover, the existing literature on its most likely flashpoint, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute, is mostly either focused on domestic aspects of this territorial dispute or largely examined purely in terms of the material balance of power between the competing sides (e.g., Burcu, 2023; Cho & Choi, 2016; Cooper, 2018; Downs & Saunders, 1999; Duan, 2019; Lim, 2022; Zhai, 2021a).

In our article, we take a more holistic approach and examine the recent actions of China and Japan as well as the role of the US as the regional hegemon together. Specifically, we ask the following two-part research question: How have each of the three key stakeholders—China, Japan and the US—attempted to further their respective national interests in relation to the ECS? Moreover, why have the US and Japan come to adopt policies that no longer seem effective or sustainable in alleviating or nullifying the escalation of unwanted tensions across the ECS? In answering the former, we focus on the evolution of specific state strategies and key policy implementations, while the latter is addressed through identifying broader trends of *immobilism* and *confirmation bias*, as detailed below, within American and Japanese policymaking circles. These serve to reveal the extent to which, despite best efforts to coordinate coastguard and military operations, China's grey-zone tactics in the area continue to pose a particularly significant challenge in these regards.

We undertake these tasks by first sketching a number of limitations to the existing literature and then defining the two terms identified above. This highlights how scholarship on the ECS to date has tended to under-explain or misrepresent the significance of each of the respective policy trajectories of the key actors, often over-assigning agency to a monolithic conception of China's rising power, as well as underestimating the importance of Japan in affecting the ECS's current geostrategic and political status quo (Jacques, 2009). With extensive use of original foreign language sources, we then map out how China and Japan are currently acting to change the security status quo across the ECS, with particular emphasis on their recent policy changes and other actions in relation to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute. Our analysis shows how China continues to make incremental attempts to unilaterally alter the status quo in its favour, primarily through the use of grey-zone tactics. Indeed, closer interrogation of the evidence suggests that these tactics and the issues that they raise have in many ways become of greater significance than those of the respective conventional armed forces. At the same time, it reveals how Japan struggles to manage discrepancies between domestic law enforcement and its heavily circumscribed

military power projection capabilities, as well as differences in the respective formal positions of the Japanese and American governments.

This is followed by an assessment of the US's contemporary ECS policy in response, which illuminates the importance of reconceptualising American intentions and strategy in the region. Concretely, we draw on two key concepts of foreign policy, namely immobilism and confirmation bias, to assess the developing situation in the ECS. These concepts help us to advance our theoretical understanding of why the region's most powerful state actor and its junior alliance partner are failing to achieve their assumed objectives of hegemonic stability and maintenance of the status quo. This allows us to explain how institutionalised processes of policy formation have led to relatively immobile path dependencies that limit the efficacy of policymaking in relation to the increasingly dynamic situation in the ECS.

Finally, we bring together the key strands of discussion to argue that although superior conventional military capabilities provide the basis for temporary continuation of dominance over the ECS by the US–Japan alliance, a combination of immobilism and confirmation bias, manifest in American and Japanese foreign policymaking models, risks offering China opportunities to circumvent or alter the status quo as its relative multifaceted power continues to grow in real terms. If a major conflict is to be averted as a result of this power transition, the adaptability of regional great powers such as China and Japan will be key to preventing latent changes in the evolving security situation undermining stability across the ECS. As such, we ultimately contend that a more flexible approach to analysis and policymaking is needed.

Current Literature on the ECS

The dominance of the US–Japan alliance has often been highlighted by both academics and policymakers as the primary means by which Japanese sovereignty over its extended Economic Exclusion Zone (EEZ) in the ECS has been, for the most part, successfully maintained throughout and since the Cold War period (The White House, 2022; Vosse & Midford, 2018). However, despite the long-standing intra-alliance commitment and the de facto unipolar global system in the post–Cold War era, the security situation has gradually deteriorated in the ECS between China and Japan, now making it arguably one of the most significant sites of power transition in the region (Koga, 2016; Nakano, 2016, p. 166). The seeming transition away from unipolarity coupled with the recent resurgence of interstate conflicts throughout the international system compounds this significance (Nakano, 2016; Ritter, 2023). Amidst this geopolitical turmoil in the past decade, although contested in terms of how 'incursion' is defined (Sato & Chadha, 2022), we have observed an uneven but exponential increase in the number of *civilian*, naval and air entries by China into the waters surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (nominally administered from Japan's Ishigaki Island, Okinawa Prefecture), as well as Japan responding in kind by way of increases

to both defence budgets and coastguard capabilities, to strengthen its position in the area (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2022; McCurry, 2022). Why, then, despite formal commitments to defend the islands, are we seeing further escalation of the situation towards direct confrontation (Erickson, 2015), and why is there relatively little being done in terms of concrete policy innovations to address these growing concerns?

To date, international relations scholars and regional experts within the policymaking community have been quick to pinpoint the shifting Chinese geostrategic position and its developing domestic circumstances, especially under the Xi Jinping regime (Burcu, 2023; Downs & Saunders, 1999; Sato, 2019; Weiss, 2014; Wiegand, 2009). This pattern is not unique to the ECS, but rather is evident in different parts of the world, everywhere from Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe to the Arctic and the Pacific Islands (Weiss, 2019, pp. 96–97). However, while we agree that an assertive and, at times, aggressive China has certainly complicated the geostrategic situation, such one-dimensional analysis only explains part of the picture. This is particularly the case in the ECS where, despite frequent use of 'grey-zone' tactics, China remains in a position of relative weaknesses amid dynamic multiparty geostrategies (Koga, 2016; Takahashi, 2019).

Contemporary analysis, therefore, needs to more concertedly spotlight the extent to which the situation in the ECS has become increasingly tense and complex in recent decades (Choong, 2014; O'Shea, 2015). In 1978, as China sought to normalise Sino-Japanese relations and boost its own economic growth by tapping into Japan's 'miracle economy', former Chinese premier, Deng Xiaoping, famously stated with regard to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute that '[o]ur generation is not wise enough to find common language on this question … Our next generation will certainly be wiser. They will certainly find a solution acceptable to all'. Since that time, the power dynamics between East Asia's two powers have reversed (Ching, 2012; Taffer, 2020). As China rose and Japan's economic bubble burst, in synchrony with the ending of the Cold War, China became the preeminent regional hegemon in waiting (for an alternate view, see Hagström, 2012). In the interim, Japan has sought to compensate for sluggish growth and a rapidly aging society by projecting a more assertive foreign and security policy, encapsulated in former prime minister Shinzo Abe's terminology of 'proactive pacifism' (Sugita, 2022, pp. 63–65).

These shifts have meant that China's 'next generation' have been emboldened to assert themselves with regard to claims over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, while Japan has battled to demonstrate its own security credentials by taking a robust approach to their defence (Tsuruta, 2022). This included arresting and briefly detaining the crew of a Chinese 'fishing boat' that rammed a Japan Coastguard (JCG) vessel in 2010 and formally nationalising two of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2012 (Drifte, 2013). China reacted angrily in both cases and has increased its own coastguard, submarine and fishing incursions into Japan's EEZ across the ECS exponentially in the years since. In response, numerous leading figures from all sides have indicated that the ECS is a potential flashpoint for future conflict, as the scene for a clash of these East Asian titans (Mason, 2024, p. 1).

However, as Joseph Nye astutely notes in reference to structural power in East Asia, '[a]nalysts who ignore the importance of this political order are like those who forget the importance of the oxygen they breathe. Security is like oxygen—you tend not to notice it until you begin to lose it' (Nye, 1995). Here, we build on Nye's emphasis on the regional security order by focusing upon its influence over the geopolitical tensions in the ECS and the seeming inability, specifically of US and Japanese policymakers, to break out of immobile modes of thinking and develop more effective policy responses. We thereby offer a significant intervention into the contemporary literature by incorporating these aspects into a more holistic understanding of security across the ECS with particular reference to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute. To date, such scholarship has tended to examine either comparative military (deterrent) capabilities from a structural realist perspective (Brown, 2015; Rittenhouse Green & Talmadge, 2022) or the disincentives for escalating conflict based on neoliberal assumptions of economic independence and cost-benefit analysis (Koo, 2009; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2015). Although this literature has also been supplemented by a range of constructivist arguments that point to varying combinations of identity and ideology in shaping related policy drives (O'Shea, 2015; Wang, 2017), it remains limited in its ability to provide a nuanced understanding of the unfolding security situation. Furthermore, we argue that these perspectives need substantive supplementation in order to fully understand recent changes in the status quo and meaningfully interpret resulting policy trajectories.

Immobilism and Confirmation Bias in the ECS

Given the limitations of the existing literature in fully capturing the dynamic nature of the great power rivalries in the ECS, we incorporate two key concepts of foreign policy—immobilism and confirmation bias. Immobilism in foreign policy typically describes an inability to act quickly in the international sphere as the result of a 'lack of consensus among political forces' (Kosaka, 1973, pp. 17–22). We use the term here, specifically in relation to US foreign policy in East Asia, and Japan's unwillingness to shift its position in relation to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute as well as how it operationalises the JCG to defend these islets. In this context, immobilism amounts to the inability to diverge from or revise underlying conceptions manifest in an established convergence of political forces.

Almost half a decade before the ending of the Cold War, Howard Wiarda (1986, p. 18) wrote of the American foreign policymaking elite that it was 'fragmented, incoherent [and] quasi-paralysed', going on to claim that such elements 'and others besides—helped contribute to the immobilism we now face, and which seems likely to become worse in the near future'. Wiarda was referring to the inability of US foreign policymakers to respond rapidly to a myriad of dynamic international challenges as a function of competing domestic

factors, actors and interests. Yet, despite presidential initiatives such as Barack Obama's 'pivot to Asia' (Cruz de Castro, 2013), this has resulted in an approach across the East Asia region that can be characterised as 'passive and incremental', performed in 'a stolid style devoid of fresh strategic thinking [which is] truly extraordinary for the leading world power during a time of international fluidity' (Hellmann, 1992, p. 401). For instance, immobilism has been a key characteristic of the US's North Korea policy in the post–Cold War era (Farago, 2016; Peh & Park, 2021).

With regard to the ECS, Japan does not recognise that there is any dispute over the Senkakus, which has been its consistent but inflexible position, so it leads to a degree of immobilism in responding effectively to recent changes. The US remains neutral on the question of sovereignty, but this immobile Japanese stance further complicates the US posture, making it difficult as an alliance partner to recognise the existence of disputes, which could otherwise be leveraged as an important justification for the US to support Japan more comprehensively. We argue that such characteristics have persisted in relation to the ECS, in large part as the result of policymakers' *confirmation bias*.

Confirmation bias is the tendency to process information by selecting, defaulting to or interpreting data that is consistent with the presiding political actors' existing beliefs (Gardner, 2008). In the case of foreign policy, this can be linked to what Dominic Johnson (2004, p. 8) terms 'positive illusions', which are a 'particularly pervasive source of overconfidence … precisely because a number of both "cognitive" and "motivational" psychological biases compound the effect in different but complementary ways'. This includes a notable sunk-cost fallacy, whereby a huge amount of both material resources and political capital has been invested in regional security initiatives—as per American and Japanese investment in securing Japan's southwest island chain and Japan's defence of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Hence, there is a substantial collective incentive not to abandon hereto adopted conceptions and strategies that supposedly *work* (Charles Koch Foundation, 2018). This historically based confirmation bias is compounded by a tendency among policy elites to perceive current challenges as unlike any other, resulting (ironically) in intensified reliance upon tried and tested issue framings and path-dependant policymaking in an attempt to minimise security risks (Pillar, 2016, p. 8). Confirmation bias in foreign policymaking that has transitioned over time, therefore, has a 'freezing effect' (Tetlock & McGuire Jr., 1985) in which the repetition of processes leads to overall rigidity where 'policymakers and organisations often fail to readily adjust to new situations and changes in their environment' (Rosati, 2000, p. 67).

Reconceptualising Status Quo in the ECS

As aforementioned, we analyse the reasons behind the escalation of geopolitical tensions in the ECS despite the continuation of Cold War military alliance structures already in place. Through its postwar bilateral alliance structure with

key regional allies, such as Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Australia, the US has maintained a relatively high degree of regional stability and order through the hub-and-spokes system (Cha, 2016). This has been reinforced in recent times with Asian regional architecture, ASEAN regional security and the Quad, bringing the US and other Asian states together through multilateral institutions and diplomatic forums (Yeo, 2019). The above had also been further buttressed in the post–Cold War era while under the American unipolar system and strong US power projection capabilities in the region (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2023). Indeed, at the time of writing, the US-led Cold War alliance structure essentially remains intact and continues to serve as the backbone of regional peace—or at least as a powerful deterrent against initiating major conflict (Ross 2002).

This has been especially evident in the ECS. Ever since renewing the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation in 1960 and agreeing reversion of Okinawa to Japanese rule in 1972, the US–Japanese alliance has played an important role in defusing potential militarised disputes between China and Japan. Indeed, the US–Japanese alliance and its commitment to defending Japanese sovereignty in the ECS since 1972 has served as what comparative historical analysts refer to as a self-reproducing continuous process, where the initial event is 'stably reproduced over time … that maintain the underlying process in (approximately) a continuously stable form' (Falleti & Mahoney, 2015, p. 221). Within this self-reproducing continuous process, the default approach of decision-makers has been to 'satisfice'—'meaning they choose policies judged to be good enough even if further analysis of a problem could lead them to a policy of greater value' (Hafner-Burton et al., 2013; Rapport, 2017). Put differently, the status quo for combined US–Japanese foreign policy towards the territorial dispute over Senkaku/Diaoyu in the ECS has largely been to defend Japanese sovereignty resolutely.

Drawing on the works of Glenn Hook et al. (2015) and Dan Gardner (2008), among others, we explore the territorial dispute in the ECS through the two concepts above. Immobilism and confirmation bias, which are adapted from IR constructivism and socio-psychological risk theory, respectively, spotlight how, based on the current policymaking stricture, the approach adopted through the US–Japan alliance system has remained path dependent even in the unipolar post–Cold War regional system. Crucially, conceptual immobilism, we argue, has been exacerbated by an inability to reconcile historical disputes and tensions between China and Japan. At the same time, based on a range of supporting empirical indicators and discursive statements, our findings confirm that a process of confirmation bias in relation to American and Japanese capabilities has led to this immobilism being largely unchallenged, either domestically or by international allies and partners. Such occurs as successive policymakers in Washington and Tokyo, and their respective domestic interlocutors, reinforce existing conceptions of conventional military superiority at the expense of paying full attention to a number of key shifts in the policymaking trajectory being enacted by other regional states. Primarily, these are being initiated and escalated by the CCP and its proxies from China.

Creeping Tiger Barely Hidden Dragon: China's Overt Covert Operations

With claims based on historical legitimacy and sparking national emotions, Beijing has become increasingly vocal in how it argues its sovereign rights over the disputed ECS islands in its discourse construction vis-à-vis Japan and the US (Zhai, 2021b). Entering the 2010s, after the trawler collision incident of the same year and the nationalisation of the islands by Japan in 2012—leading to the deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations (Weiss, 2014, p. 189)—China began a more assertive foreign policy towards Tokyo. In terms of geostrategy, China openly came to identify the US–Japan alliance as the main threat to its rightful ownership of the disputed islands and has tried to weaken the alliance by employing a 'wedging' strategy (Taffer, 2020). Such an aggressive approach can be captured by the setting up of the Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over parts of the ECS and the subsequent activities in this region (Rinehart & Elias, 2015; Trent, 2020, p. 10). Moreover, in the 2019 defence white paper, it is noted that the contested islands are an 'inalienable parts' of its territory and China 'exercises its national sovereignty … to conduct patrols in the waters of Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea' (Ministry of National Defense (MND) of the People's Republic of China, 2019).

Soon thereafter, Chinese activities in, and incursions into, Japanese waterways and airspace would slowly increase in both quantity and quality (Cooper, 2018). Incidents of Chinese aircraft entering Japanese airspace have dramatically increased since 2010, with numbers reaching 638 and 674 intrusions in 2018 and 2019, respectively (Fravel, 2016, p. 30; Hall, 2019, pp. 13–14; Liff, 2019, pp. 15–16), and in 2022 the highest number of waterborne maritime incursions to date, 334, was recorded (JCG, n.d.). Chinese assertiveness over the territorial dispute has become much more visible over this period with regular patrols in contested waterways increasing in both duration and assertiveness; '[China Coast Guard (CCG)] ships entered Japanese-claimed waters for more than 100 consecutive days, including over 300 days in the contiguous zones around the Islands in 2022' (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023a, p. 121). Consequently, attempts of a Sino-Japanese rapprochement has had limited success (Trent, 2020, p. 2). For instance, since the Fumio Kishida administration assumed power in Japan in October 2021, although normal for vessels to traverse foreign EEZs to access international waters, the Chinese crossed Japan's maritime border 5 out of 8 times even when directly challenged by Japanese authorities (Takahashi, 2022). Moreover, Chinese ships were not only armed with their largest cannon to date but also entered into coordinated action with Russia in the summer of 2022 (Liao, 2022; MI News Network, 2022). In addition, Beijing's reliance on grey-zone tactics in the ECS has increased. That is, it rarely deploys People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) ships directly into the disputed waters, though Chinese naval forces strongly back the activities from nearby shores.

Rather, it is CCG ships and the China Maritime Militia (CMM) that enter the disputed zones, and such actions have taken place 'more regularly and extensively than its navy' in recent years (O'Rourke, 2023, p. 15). According to the US Department of Defense, the CMM, as a semi-autonomous unit, is tasked to

advance 'coercive activities to achieve China's political goals without fighting, and these operations are part of broader Chinese military theory that sees confrontational operations short of war as an effective means of accomplishing strategic objectives' (US Department of Defense, 2023a, p. 80). Consequently, these grey-zone forces are being 'tasked with asserting China's "maritime rights and interests" which in turn has blurred the lines between "civilian" and "military" operations' (Erickson et al., 2019; Liff, 2019, pp. 4–5).

Chinese actions are backed by Beijing's rhetoric relating to how it perceives the developments in the area. As it stands, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands form an important part of China's emerging national security strategy under Premier Xi. This asserts that 'no compromise can be reached' (Granados, 2016, p. 80; O'Rourke, 2023, pp. 8–9). Beijing has constantly stated that it has 'indisputable sovereign rights' over the islands in the ECS that it perceives as valid from ancient times (Lim, 2022, p. 141). This positioning, however, is a recent development, with China's stance becoming more vocalised since tensions escalated between the two countries in the early 2010s. For instance, in response to the Government of Japan's (GoJ) statement on its position surrounding the ECS, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Hong Lei, stated that China held 'indisputable sovereignty' of the islands and its determination 'to safeguard its territorial sovereignty remains unshakable' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of the People's Republic of China, 2014). As such, any positions taken or remarks made on this issue by Japan are regarded as measures that challenge the Chinese stance and are something to be defended against. Recently, the US secretary of defence, Lloyd Austin, has, as per his predecessor, Jim Mattis in 2017, reaffirmed the applicability of the US–Japan Security Treaty to the disputed islands in the ECS. Yet, Lu Kang, then China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, dismissed the alliance as a 'product of the Cold War mentality' and urged 'the U.S. side to take a responsible attitude, stop making wrong remarks on the issue involving the Diaoyu island's sovereignty, and avoid making the issue more complicated and bringing instability to the regional situation' (MFA of the People's Republic of China, 2017).

While China's public discourse surrounding the ECS as part of its national sovereignty remains consistent, the means it would use to defend it continue to firmly increase, particularly since 2020, in-line with increased incursions into Japanese maritime waters and airspace. For instance, when Japanese fishing boats clashed with Chinese maritime police, Zhao Lijian, Foreign Ministry spokesperson, stated that it was 'China's inherent right of cruising and law-enforcing in the waters of Diaoyu Islands' (MFA of the People's Republic of China, 2020a). A month later, when it was announced that the Ishigaki City Council in Okinawa Prefecture passed the motion to change the name of the island's 'administrative area', Zhao commented that this was a 'serious provocation to China's sovereignty' and that China would 'reserve the right to act further' (MFA of the People's Republic of China, 2020b). In short, Beijing's attempt to enhance its legally dubious claims and escalate the territorial dispute has acted to enhance its de facto degree of control over the islands and 'challenge the status quo' (Fravel, 2016, pp. 25–30). Furthermore, the employment of co-opted fishermen, nationalist

activists and maritime militia, as well as formal Coast Guard upgrades and legal changes, means that Beijing is now well equipped with a flexible arsenal of tools and means to perpetuate this dynamic in its favour.

Misaligned US–Japan Alliance

Japan's responses to the Chinese approach outlined above are highly illuminating in terms of further understanding the wider impact of immobilism and confirmation bias in this sphere. As stated in its official defence posture (Kantei, 2010), Japan's underlying strategic goal in the ECS is to fortify its Southwest Island Chain and maintain administrative control over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2022). Tokyo justifies these goals in response to competing claims over the islands and apparent material threats presented by China (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2022). However, its discursive construction of the risks it identifies with these adversaries and the precise means by which they can be mitigated against are far from constant or consistent (Hook et al., 2015, p. 77). Moreover, claims about their objectivity are highly contested. In other words, security concerns emanating from rival states over the ECS are treated as variables that periodically require discursive recalibration, often without accurate coupling to relevant policy initiatives and in subtle misalignment with American appraisals of the same or overlapping set of variables (Mason, 2014). Nevertheless, Japan enacts policy innovations justified by adherence to a supposedly robust legal framework approved by its senior alliance partner (Japan Office of Policy Planning and Coordination on Territory and Sovereignty, 2021). Thereby, while the extent of Japanese policy innovations has varied, Tokyo's focus upon the US–Japan security alliance has remained rigid and preeminent. This has been further reinforced by Japan's alignment of policies in response to Western action taken against Russia's invasion of Ukraine and US-backed invasion of Gaza by Israel. Such has been illustrated, for example, by a controversial increase in defence spending beyond an unprecedented 2% of GDP and participation in US-led sanctions against Moscow (Smith, 2022). It also means that Japan now has the highest level of funding since the Pacific War that it can allocate to outlying island defence.

In the ECS, this policy trajectory involves increased interoperability with US forces stationed on the Ryukyu Islands as well as mainland Japan (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). At the same time, however, despite joint shows of military force that include amphibious island landing simulations, official GoJ and US State Department reassurances over what is covered by Article 5 of the US–Japan Security Treaty and the fact that the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are officially administered from Ishigaki Island within the Japanese prefecture of Okinawa, Japan has struggled to embed de facto control of outlying islands located in the ECS into formal agreements with the United States. This is particularly exacerbated by Tokyo's insistence upon non-recognition of the dispute, unwillingness to deploy grey-zone tactics equivalent to those used by China and curtailment of militarily led island defence that is limited by Article 9 of Japan's constitution.

The JCG and Japan Maritime Self-defense Force (MSDF) do have a formal legal agreement whereby the minister of defence can enact the so-called (emergency) maritime security operations (or *kaijō keibi kōdō*). In contingencies where there is a 'special need to protect life, property or the maintenance of security at sea', it effectively enables the MSDF to take on the JCG tasks (Yamakoshi, 2021, pp. 105–106). Yet, despite MSDF involvement, this does not normally mean that such activities are automatically escalated to the category of mobilising national defence. In contrast, crucially, the same laws that by default preclude the JCG from using forceful expulsion (or *kyōsei haijo*), to prevent 'innocent passage' of foreign vessels through maritime spaces, for instance, also apply to MSDF ships and personnel in these circumstances—even under the remit of *kaijō keibi kōdō* (Mazarr et al., 2021, p. 32). In that regard, despite political backing for closer Japanese Self-defense Force (JSDF)–JCG coordination and extensive strengthening of coastguard capabilities, including 20 new patrol boats and 17 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), as well as a 1.4-fold budget increase projected up to fiscal year 2027 (Kyodo News, 2022), Japanese law enforcement authorities may need to rethink how these material and financial enhancements can be applied more effectively to deal with China's use of grey-zone incursions within Japan's EEZ across the ECS (Yamakoshi, 2021, p. 101).

As such, Tokyo's adaptations and provisions, as detailed above, may seek to provide a more mobile response posture, but fail to convincingly explain the efficacy of practical responses—military or otherwise (primarily led by the JCG and MSDF)—to a range of potential contingencies involving Chinese and Japanese coastguards. This also includes respective interpretations of American strategic ambiguity over the specific question of sovereignty (*The Japan Times*, 2021). Washington is deeply reluctant to commit to the operationalisation of its military in such circumstances as the risks of serious and rapid escalation are grave. However, given Beijing's awareness of such, in addition to the JCG's open admission of prioritising non-escalation from the Japanese side, Tokyo's ability to maintain a credible deterrence when it comes to preventing Chinese incursions by (non-lethal) force has been significantly reduced.

Notwithstanding such uncertainties, much of the mutual expansion in this sector is specifically focused upon the Southwest Island Chain, in both material and rhetorical terms. For instance, Tokyo continues to host more than 70% of its American military bases on Okinawa and has now supplemented these with recently completed JSDF facilities on Miyako Island, Ishigaki Island and Yonaguni Island (Mason, 2016, p. 16). These are being rapidly upgraded with the deployment of missiles that are expected to be able to strike Mainland China. Japan has also committed to allowing joint usage of these outposts with US forces in the case of a contingency in the ECS (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). Correspondingly, there is little doubt that these facilities would be key to operating the JSDF's new amphibious unit, which has been training intensively in scenarios that encompass the retaking of small islands from the sea and air (Yokosuka Council on Asia Pacific Studies, 2022). Here, too, Japan has played a combination

of training, participation and observational roles in an effort to make responses to any kind of Chinese advancement in the ECS as credible and seamless with the United States as possible (TBS News, 2021).

Further to the above, as already noted, the GoJ has bolstered investment in UAVs for the JCG to use in reconnaissance missions (Imai, 2023). In that regard, Tokyo is attempting to invest its newly increased defence budget—and in the case of the JCG as a law enforcement agency, to circumvent it—in a form that counters recent Chinese dynamism as best as it can, but it is in the difficult position of being unable to employ equivalent grey-zone tactics. This is due, then, not so much to shortfalls in budget or workforce capabilities. Rather, it is in significant part down to its own interpretations of operationalising legislative and alliance frameworks—amounting to a kind of institutionalised immobilism. Such frameworks include not only formal legal restrictions but also societal opinion and a national identity that demands Japan be recognised as peaceful and law abiding in contrast with China's perceived aberrance (Gustafsson, 2016, p. 255). Under these conditions, moreover, even with the stated increases to budgets and equipment, the GoJ cannot hope to match Beijing's military spending over time nor its grey-zone tactics or conversion of (naval) hardware into law enforcement (coastguard) assets.

Nevertheless, Tokyo has considerably improved its independent ability to counter incursions into Japan's maritime EEZ by stationing land-to-sea missile units capable of striking targets across the ECS on its new facilities. These stretch throughout the Ryukyu Island chain, from Amami Oshima Island offshore of mainland Japan through to Yonaguni Island that lies within the (naked eye) sight of Taiwan (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, n.d.). What remains lacking, however, is a fluid and adaptable way of *thinking* about their use and coordination between different Japanese defence and law enforcement agencies, beyond what has already been achieved by JCG-MSDF coordination under the rubric of *kaijō keibi kōdō*, as well as with the United States as their senior alliance partner.

In these regards, it is important here to scrutinise the discursive practices conducted by leading political actors in Tokyo, which are somewhat distinct from those of Japan's North American ally. Of particular significance is how the rhetoric used regarding the fortification of the ECS is consistently decoupled from measurable changes in the military strength, stated intentions and operational activities of rival states, such as China, that Japan's policies claim to be responding to. This suggests a degree of confirmation bias, whether defence postures are adopted unilaterally or bilaterally with the United States, insofar as Japanese policymakers remain confident that they do not require rigorous scrutiny in relation to recent changes in their intended adversary. For example, the GoJ places a heavy emphasis upon the importance of establishing deterrence in a defensive capacity on Okinawa despite a shift by China towards targeting the Second Island Chain (centred on Guam), rather than the First (Kanke, 2017, p. 234). Further, apart from the US Airforce base at Kadena, the majority of US forces on the main island of Okinawa are Marines, whose primary mission roles are designed to be offensive, so they would serve a highly limited function were the Ryukyu Island chain to actually be attacked or penetrated (Sonoda, 2017, pp. 1–2).

Even with additional radar capabilities and increasing intra-alliance intelligence gathering abilities, the GoJ's official statements that 'there is no doubt that the Senkaku Islands are clearly an inherent part of the territory of Japan' and that 'the Senkaku Islands are under the valid control of Japan' (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016) fail to address the losing battle for administrative control over the ECS in real terms. Therein, Japanese governmental authorities cite Chinese vessels entering into waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands on an almost daily basis with relative impunity and disregard for Japanese maritime law, creating a fait accompli favourable to Beijing (Okinawa Prefectural Government, 2023). In this regard, the bold rhetoric of the GoJ does not match the tangible changes made to the status quo by its principal rival or its responses to them. This is further illustrated by Japan having rejected calls to follow China's lead in adapting decommissioned naval ships to bolster its coastguard's combat capabilities in the area, despite the noted US unwillingness to engage 'non-military' Chinese targets with its own armed forces or coastguard on Japan's behalf (NHK, 2022). This leaves the JCG in a precarious position in relation to its official mission and legal status, as the CCG have also become increasingly aggressive in entering the waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and chasing Japanese fishing boats out of them (Ishii, 2021, p. 124). This fundamentally challenges Japan's claims to sole and effective administrative control over the Islands. It also highlights significant disparities in the relative states' discursive construction of sovereignty and casts considerable doubt over US and Japanese assertions that despite discrepancies in interpretation, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands will be robustly defended.

This tension between rhetorical and tangible exercising of sovereignty is further reflected in pertaining National Diet discussions and once again highlights a concerning degree of immobilism among Japan's political elite. Correspondingly, conceptual awareness of a credibility deficit has been used to justify the normalisation of even closer security cooperation with US forces in the ECS, but the logistics of implementing it remain somewhat opaque. For instance, in April 2022, then foreign minister (later to become Chief Cabinet Secretary), Yoshimasa Hayashi, emphasised how 'as severity and uncertainty increases, tensions are growing as a result of changes to the military balance stemming from China's attempts to unilaterally alter the status quo in the South and East China Seas'. Yet, in response to demands for an explanation of proposed countermeasures, he could only explain that

> under our prevailing understanding, the US-Japan 2+2 meeting has made clear that US-Japan defence capabilities will continue to be resolutely strengthened across the region through stepping up development in all areas, including increasing responsivity and durability, and improving interoperability, as well as deepening cooperation in space and cyber spheres. (Hayashi, 2022)

The details of how this policy trajectory will be implemented remain largely unspecified or circumspect.

Concomitantly, Japan's opposition parties have also been offered somewhat ambiguous responses to queries addressing conceptual as well as material aspects

of maintaining control over sections of the ECS. For instance, in reply to Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) representative Tajima Maiko's query as to what can be done to increase Japanese influence over the ECS's extended maritime area, Gō Itō (2022), special adviser to the Parliamentary Committee on International Economy and Foreign Affairs, remarked:

> It goes without saying that military expansion lies behind China's so called 'sharp power', but in response to this within the international public domain, it is increasingly said that Japan should develop its own form of 'sweet power' which better represents its national character, rather than trying to oppose China's … [China] has a very strong sense that it wants to restore its past glory, hence it tries to change the status quo [in the ECS] by force. When conceptualised as a victim of American and European acts, these [nationalistic] sentiments become even stronger. So, in response, I think Japan needs to establish a more distinctly Japanese identity as a starting point.

In these regards, Japanese lawmakers and their advisers have begun to exhibit an increasing awareness that controlling the ECS amounts to more than simply clinging to a somewhat evasive and immobile US foreign policy agenda that may no longer be fully fit for purpose, but thus far lack a compelling agenda with which to replace it. Either way, Tokyo faces a growing credibility gap between the public presentation of its expanding military and coastguard capabilities, on the one hand, and its ability to actually transform these elements and larger defence budget into the effective enforcement of sovereignty, on the other. This is manifest starkly in Japan's failure to exercise the kind of real control over the seas surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands that the GoJ attempts to project via public statements and discursive praxis. Hence, given recent assertive activities and dynamism driven by Beijing in this sphere, the immobilism exhibited by Washington and Tokyo in response plays a significant role in exacerbating Japan's predicament and undermining attempts to rectify shifts in the status quo that increasingly favour China.

US Regional Foreign Policy and Control of the ECS

Amidst the growing Sino-Japanese tensions in the ECS, the US stance towards the region largely mirrors its general foreign policy orientation in the Indo-Pacific region. The formal US position of neutrality with regard to recognising sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands demonstrates a continued entrenchment of concerning policy immobilism in this regard. With the signing of the Okinawa Reversion Treaty, the US returned administrative control of the Senkakus back to Japan; as Robert Starr, the acting assistant legal adviser for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, wrote in 1971, the Okinawa Reversion Treaty included 'the terms and conditions for the reversion of the Ryukyu Islands, including the Senkakus' (Manyin, 2021, p. 6). Since then, however, successive US administrations have maintained a position of neutrality whilst continuously

supporting Japanese control of the islands. Simply put, neutrality on the question on sovereignty and support of Japan's territorial defence has served as the status quo for the US in the Sino-Japanese dispute in the ECS (Hall, 2019, p. 12; Kim, 2016, p. 9).

This US position of neutrality aligns well with the 'active denial' strategy that has been echoed as the alternative policy pathway between direct engagement with a more assertive China and a complete abandonment of American allies in the region (e.g., Beckley, 2017; Gholz et al., 2019; Heginbotham & Heim, 2015). As Eric Heginbotham and Jacob Heim (2015, p. 186) succinctly note, active denial strategy 'aligns well with the status quo nature of U.S. interests and provides a cost-effective deterrent that would reduce rather than increase the incentives for pre-emption during crises'. Furthermore, a key feature required for active denial is to strengthen the capabilities of regional allies as part of the deterrence link (e.g., Kelly et al., 2016). An example of this is the recent US–Japan–South Korea trilateral security summit (US Department of Defence, 2023b). Such stance has continued even though China's relative power has increased exponentially during that time and continues to do so.

Despite ambiguity on the issue of sovereignty over the islands, successive US administrations have made it clear that Japan holds administrative control over the Senkakus. The formalisation of this stance became more pronounced under the Obama administration when the former president openly declared the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands to be covered by the US–Japan Security Treaty in an interview with *Yomiuri Shinbun* (Panda, 2014) and confirmed his remarks with then prime minister Abe in April 2014, as follows:

> We share a commitment to fundamental principles such as freedom of navigation and respect for international law. And let me reiterate that our treaty commitment to Japan's security is absolute, and Article 5 covers all territories under Japan's administration, including the Senkaku Islands. (Manyin, 2021, p. 9)

This longstanding US position over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands was reaffirmed by both the Trump and Biden administrations. President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Abe also called for a further strengthening of the US–Japan alliance in order to 'safeguard the peace and stability of the East China Sea' (Liff, 2019, p. 3). Similarly, one of the first phone calls Joe Biden made was to then Japanese prime minister, Yoshihide Suga, where he reaffirmed America's 'unwavering commitment to the defence of Japan under Article 5 of our security treaty, which includes the Senkaku Islands' (Manyin, 2021, p. 10). On 23 January 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken followed up with a phone call to his Japanese counterpart, Nobuo Kishi, where he emphasised the US position of being 'opposed to any unilateral attempt to change the status quo in the East China Sea' (Manyin, 2021, p. 11).

As the US has held on to the status quo with even more explicit and expanded rhetorical support for Japan, Washington has also made it clear that it is opposed to any potential unilateral action against Japan in the ECS. To that end, the US–Japan alliance has evolved since 2011 with greater security cooperation between

the two countries under the so-called dynamic defence cooperation (DDC) and with the issuance of new security guidelines since 2015 (Granados, 2016, p. 86; Sinkkonen, 2019, p. 763). The basic American position as outlined in the US Defense Department's 2015 Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy is to 'deter conflict and coercion' while providing material assistance to Japan, such as intelligence and reconnaissance information, and conducting joint military exercises (Manyin, 2021, p. 11). That is, rather than undertaking the necessary conceptual changes to its approach in engaging with maritime security issues across the Asia-Pacific, which might include more dynamic engagement and countering of China's grey-zone tactics, for example, the US has largely stuck to a consistent role of maintaining its presence in the region and relying even more heavily upon its allies. Accordingly, it does not largely challenge Japan's own confirmation biases when it comes to tackling the emerging asymmetrical threats posed by China's grey-zone tactics in the area. In essence, then, the US appears stuck in a Cold War mind-set underpinned by the idea of not fixing what is not perceived as broken. Yet, as policy analyst William Burns (2020) notes, 'it's time to move beyond the debate between retrenchment and restoration and imagine a more fundamental reinvention of America's role in the world'.

The problem remains that there is little evidence of this being enacted over the ECS. A continuation of the current strategy can be witnessed in the Biden administration's 2022 *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*; noting China as the biggest challenge to the Indo-Pacific region, the Biden administration highlights the 'strategic necessity of the United States' consistent role' (The White House, 2022, pp. 4–5). However, a successful approach to tackling these escalating challenges amid the shifting regional order will rest upon cooperation with regional allies by forming what the new 2022 National Defense Strategy refers to as integrated deterrence—'developing and combining strengths to maximum effect, by working seamlessly across warfighting domains, theatres, the spectrum of conflict, other instruments of U.S. national power, and our unmatched network of Alliances and partnerships' (US Department of Defense, 2022; US Marine Corps, 2020). Contrarily, as senior fellow of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Craig Singleton, succinctly points out, though, US policies in the Asia-Pacific are marked by 'longstanding continuity across administrations and across parties', meaning that 'the U.S. will continue to muddle along in the region' (Feldscher, 2022). Moreover, in-line with Japan's 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), this appears to include accepting a Japanese position which itself prioritises risk aversion over innovation in the maritime security sphere (Kantei, 2010, p. 2).

By re-affirming its current position in East Asia and towards the territorial dispute in the ECS, the US also, once again, evinced a high degree of confirmation bias that things will work pretty much as they always have done. Notwithstanding, the US remains an important player in regard to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island dispute and the maintenance of regional security in the Asia-Pacific more broadly. As Sino–US great power rivalry has accelerated in the past decade, there has been growing pressures for the US to take a much more prominent, if not an assertive, role in the region. However, the US has largely exercised immobilism in its policy

trajectory by sticking to defence of the status quo, maintaining neutrality over the issue of sovereignty and continuing its reliance on its Asian allies, particularly Japan, to deter against future Chinese aggression in the region. Moreover, this is being continued in partnership with Tokyo despite strong evidence that such a strategy is bound to be unsustainable in the long run, given the equivalent rigidity of its junior alliance partner and the evolving capabilities of its major adversary, China.

Conclusion

In light of the preceding discussion, it is evident that the complex configuration of multilateral geostrategic, political and economic dynamics will ensure that the ECS remains of considerable significance to regional security for the foreseeable future. Amid this, as China continues to grow in relative conventional military strength, its ability to invest further in the kind of expansive grey-zone tactics documented in this article is likely to increase. In response, Japanese concerns over the US commitment and ability to respond effectively to a contingency in the ECS, such as over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, look set to magnify in kilter with its own inability to keep pace amid a dynamic competition of—mostly coastguard-led—law enforcement capabilities. This has been illustrated by Japan's willingness to invest exponentially in both its coastguard infrastructure and fortification of the Southwest Island Chain, centred on the Okinawan islands. With China responding in kind, including increasingly out-gunning Japan in terms of the quantity and quality of its own coastguard fleet and other vessels despatched into the area, a localised arms race is already underway.

Meanwhile, a reconceptualisation of the US's ECS strategy, including how it is implemented effectively with Tokyo in light of Japan's entrenched position of non-recognition towards regional territorial disputes, is essential in order to address these changing dynamics and escalating but asymmetrical responses of China and Japan as the region's two regional powers contesting control over this strategically significant body of water. Institutionalised path-dependent policy-making hampered by American and Japanese immobilism and confirmation biases have, therefore, been shown to act as dangerous elements in this regard. Specifically, if a major conflict as the result of escalation is to be avoided, key decision-makers must develop fluid and effective policy mechanisms in response to rapid changes in the status quo enacted unilaterally by China and countered with only limited efficacy by Japan.

In these regards, while we do not necessarily advocate that the US or Japan take a more militarist position in the region, with specific reference to the ECS, we argue that Washington and Tokyo can ill afford to stand idly by and allow China to bully and provoke Japan, as well as other key regional players such as Taiwan. The long-term strategic objectives of the US–Japan alliance in the ECS include maintaining a stable status quo and regional stability. However, personnel and economic limitations and an unwillingness by Japan to combat China with

equivalent grey-zone tactics, as well as limited flexibility and dynamism among the current US foreign policymaking establishment responsible for the East Asia portfolio, indicate that these goals will be highly challenging to achieve. Japan's position relative to China's appears structurally weak—undermined further by population decline and deeply embedded social opposition to militarisation. In this regard, those in positions of power that oversee the day-to-day operationalisation of the US–Japan alliance seem yet to have fully awoken to the complex and increasingly dangerous environment currently unfolding across the maritime space stretching from the northern entrance to the Taiwan Strait to waters surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

Our exposition of diverse sources that document the recent activities and state-level rhetoric of East Asia's two major regional powers, in addition to the nuanced conceptual understanding of how they and the US are responding, leads to the conclusion that things must change in this sphere if a fragile peace is to be maintained. At the very least, leading policymakers in Tokyo and Washington need to break out of their rigid mind-set and apply more fluid and dynamic means by which to enforce control over the ECS. As it stands, conversely, Beijing can win the battle for control of these waters by a thousand cuts—or wavelets. To be blunt, if the current dynamics—including the respective rates of financial and political expenditure committed to related issues—persist on all sides, it is hard to see how China will be deterred from further incremental encroachment across this maritime space. In contrast, while beyond the remit of this article to assess, constructive engagement may, in combination with more effective containment, still be possible, but without changes to strategic and tactical *thinking*, the US–Japan allies and their friends in Taiwan cannot rest assured that the simmering security situation in the ECS will not one day become a raging storm.

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