

Assessing Neutrality: The United States' Role in the Diaoyu Islands Dispute

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On 21 April 2014, then-US President Barack Obama declared in a joint press conference that the Diaoyu Islands (referred to as the Senkaku in Japan, and Diaoyutai in Taiwan) are subject to Article 5 of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan – the article that commits the United States to defend Japan if it is attacked by a third party (Obama 2014). This was the first time that a sitting US president made this statement publicly, and openly challenged the traditional US position of not taking sides in territorial disputes. In fact, Obama continued to argue that the US does not take a position on the sovereignty of the Diaoyu islands, though it does take a position in ensuring that all countries follow basic international procedures in resolving their disputes peacefully. Nevertheless, the speech clearly identified China as a threat to international order, and that Washington would stand beside Tokyo to protect the islands, since Beijing was not acting in accordance with international rules and norms.

Even though the tensions over the Diaoyu Islands took centre stage in the international arena after the episodes of escalation in 2010–2012 – indeed, these tensions have been growing due to the increase of the Chinese presence in Japan's territorial waters over the years – the origins of the disagreement can be better understood if one takes into account not only their historical roots but how other major players have helped to shape the dispute. The origins of the dispute can be traced back to Japan's imperialism in Asia in the late 19th century and the Japanese incorporation of the Ryukyu Kingdom, known today as Okinawa (Chen 2014; Shogo 2009). As for US involvement in the history of the dispute, it is possible to highlight three major events: (i) the Allied Forces' occupation of Japan after the end of World War II and the 1951 Treaty of San Francisco, (ii) the reversion of Okinawa to Japan in 1971–1972 and (iii) the US' Pivot to Asia strategy.

In order to better understand the current status of the Diaoyu Islands issue, this chapter will present an analysis of the role of the US in the dispute. Then, it will show how US neutrality on the sovereignty dispute between China and Japan – and the fine line it walks regarding this stance – were shaped by US policy strategies and choices. In other words, the ambiguity of its neutrality has been serving US strategic interests in East Asia and increasing the legitimacy for the US to act in the region. It will also show that, due to the on-going balance-of-power transformations taking place in the region, the neutrality discourse is dwindling. The chapter is divided in two parts. Firstly, it will briefly review each claim over the Diaoyu islands and describe the US' official stance in regard to the dispute. Secondly, it will analyse the role of the US in regard to the Diaoyu Islands, presenting how US neutrality has served Washington's strategic interests in East Asia.

Diaoyu Islands Dispute, the Claimants, and the US Neutrality Stance

In recent years, we have seen a growing amount of attention paid to this dispute over a group of small islands nestled between Japan, Taiwan and China in the East China Sea (ECS). The dispute is catalysing a deterioration of the East Asia security environment and is closely affecting the security and foreign policies of countries in the region. The

Assessing Neutrality: The United States' Role in the Diaoyu Islands Dispute

Written by Alana Camoça Gonçalves de Oliveira

disputed islands are located in the ECS, about 170 km northwest of Ishigakijima, 170 km from Taiwan, and 330 km from the Chinese coast. Japan, China, and the ROC support their claims based on international treaties signed during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Japan asserts that the islands were incorporated into its territory through the Okinawa Prefecture in 1895 during the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). The Japanese government points out that the territory was only incorporated after provincial authorities recognized that there had been no previous occupation of these islands by any other country – the *terra nullius* principle. Post-World War II, Japan points out that the islands were under US control as per the Treaty of San Francisco, but the islands were returned to Japan in 1972 as part of the Japan-US Okinawa Reversion Agreement (Suganuma 1996; Eldridge 2014).

Differently, China claims that the islands were not *terra nullius* because of their discovery during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), and because Chinese fishermen have exploited the islands and their adjacent waters for generations. The People's Republic of China (PRC) authorities also argue that the islands were used as a navigation demarcation in the waters between Ryukyu and China. Moreover, the Chinese government also claims that, at the end of the 19th century, after the Japanese victory in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), the Diaoyu islands were among the territories that China ceded to Japan in the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki.

According to China's claims, because the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) ceded the islands to Japan in the Treaty of Shimonoseki, they should have been handed over to the ROC as stipulated in the Cairo Declaration (1943), the Potsdam Declaration (1945) and the San Francisco Treaty (1951), given that Japan was obliged to return Formosa, the Pescadores, and 'the islands appertaining to Formosa.' Thus, Beijing asserts that the United States should have not held control over the Diaoyu Islands at the end of the war. The Chinese government argues that Japan should have been stripped of all the islands in the Pacific which it had seized or occupied during its imperial period of colonial expansion. Although none of the aforementioned documents explicitly mentions the Diaoyu Islands, the Cairo Declaration does state that 'Japan will also be expelled from all other territories which she has taken by violence and greed.' Since about the 1970s, the PRC has interpreted this phrase to include the Diaoyu Islands. Officially, the Republic of China's (ROC) stance is the same as that of the PRC, though the government in Taipei is nowadays less active in pressing these claims.

Although territorial disputes are usually followed by conflicts between the countries that claim sovereignty over specific territories, other countries can play an important role in those disputes. Other countries can serve as mediators or provide military, economic, and even discursive support for one of the countries before, during, and after the dispute. Thus, in order to better understand the Diaoyu islands dispute it is important to highlight the US' role.

Even though the US government does not claim sovereignty over the islands, the Diaoyu group was under US control between 1951 and 1972. In addition, the United States has been an important player in the East Asia security theatre since the end of World War II. The US government's position is one of neutrality and opposition to the use of force to resolve issues of sovereignty (Oliveira 2021). Washington has constantly reiterated this stance since the beginning of the dispute in the late 1960s and early 1970s. With the reversion of Okinawa in 1972, for example, the United States placed the islands under Japanese administration. At the time, US Secretary of State William Rogers stated that the Okinawa reversion treaty did not affect the return of administrative rights over the islands to Japan, from which the rights were received, and 'can in no way prejudice any underlying claims. The US cannot add to the legal rights Japan possessed before it transferred administration of the islands to us, nor can the United States, by giving back what it received, diminish the rights of other claimants' (US Congress 1971).

However, the US position on the dispute cannot simply be regarded as one of neutrality. Washington has constantly been concerned with its own strategic, security, and foreign policy interests in dealing with the islands. In recent years, the growing US concern about China's rise has shifted Washington's foreign policy in East Asia since the Obama administration, and its discourse on neutrality has been fading.

Neutrality vs. US Strategic Interests

Assessing Neutrality: The United States' Role in the Diaoyu Islands Dispute

Written by Alana Camoça Gonçalves de Oliveira

The US Administration of Ryukyu and its Strategic Position in East Asia

The United States occupied Japan at the end of World War II, and at the time Washington's interests in Okinawa increased due to its geopolitical location. Eldridge (2001) argues that a top secret report, designated NSC 13/3, by the US National Security Council (NSC) in 1949, before the signing of the San Francisco Treaty, already noted that 'the United States intends to retain on a long-term basis the facilities at Okinawa and such other facilities as are deemed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to be necessary in the Ryukyu Islands south of 29° N, Marcus Island and the Nanpo Shoto south of Sofu Gan,' which is the northern end of the Ryukyu Islands (NSC, 1949).

Nonetheless, in the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty, the US administration pursued a strategy of maintaining its access and presence in East Asia through its control over the Okinawa islands. The treaty not only officially effected the surrender of Japan and ended the US occupation of Japanese territory, but also granted control over Okinawa and the surrounding islands to the United States. The latter is achieved through Article 3 of the international treaty, which presents the Nansei Shoto south of 29 degrees north latitude (including the Ryukyu Islands and the Daito Islands), as a territory where the US would have sole administrative authority. It is noteworthy that the San Francisco treaty did not name the Diaoyu explicitly as being among the islands that were ceded to the United States.

The vagueness of the San Francisco Treaty became one of the major problems involving territorial claims, not only in the Sino-Japanese territorial disputes, affecting other territorial disputes in the region. As Kimie Hara (2007) observes, disputes over the Takeshima/Dokdo Islands, the Sakhalin Islands, and the Spratly Islands are also inherited from the Treaty of San Francisco, which was neither signed by the ROC nor the PRC – to say nothing of the USSR or either of the Koreas (Hara 2007).

During the Cold War, as the US administered the Ryukyu Islands (including the Diaoyus), it was careful to characterize its governance there as temporary in nature. Even though the US had gained control over the islands, it never really severed relations between Okinawa and Japan. The Tokyo government was granted 'residual sovereignty' over the Ryukyu Islands. According to Smith (2013, 3–4), the rationale for this policy of residual sovereignty rested on at least three major considerations: (a) the US sought to cultivate Japan as a key Cold War ally in the Asia-Pacific, (b) it offered the Japanese government an incentive to allow the US military to use bases in Okinawa, and (c) residual sovereignty was, in part, meant to reduce anti-American sentiment in Japan. The idea of Japanese residual authority over the islands of Okinawa allowed the Ryukyu Islands to somehow remain united to Japanese territory, facilitating US control and discourse as a benevolent promoter of the international system.

On 29 February 1952 and 25 December 1953, the United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands (USCAR) issued two documents, respectively titled Ordinance No. 68 on the Government Provisions of the Ryukyu, and Proclamation No. 27 on the Geographical Boundaries of the Ryukyu Islands. Both documents defined the territorial limits that had not been outlined in the San Francisco Peace Treaty. Considering the geographical coordinates, the Diaoyu Islands were clearly part of the territories administered by USCAR (Eldridge 2001; Oliveira 2019).

As the Cold War intensified and containment policies were strengthened, US administrations, beginning with that of President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953–1961), believed that it was strategically and militarily important to maintain control of the islands of Okinawa as a means of safeguarding US interests and power in the Asian theatre. In a National Security Council (NSC) report, for example, the US government acknowledged that Japan desired to recover the Ryukyu territory, but due to the 'critical strategic importance of these islands, the United States must continue to impress upon the Japanese its intention to retain control over them pending the establishment of enduring conditions of peace and stability in the Far East' (NSC 1954).

As early as the 1940s, an American administration of Ryukyu was not only in the interests of the United States, but of the ROC as well, as evidenced by conversations about the situation in the region between US President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933–1945) and Chiang Kai-shek, head of the Nationalist government in China from 1928 to 1949, and from then until his death in 1975 head of the Chinese Nationalist government in exile on Taiwan (Zhai 2015). During the Cairo Conference in late November 1943, Roosevelt and Chiang discussed the possibility of Okinawa becoming a territory to be under shared administrative authority between the United States and the ROC. However, this vision

Assessing Neutrality: The United States' Role in the Diaoyu Islands Dispute

Written by Alana Camoça Gonçalves de Oliveira

did not make it into the final wording of the San Francisco Peace Treaty.^[1]

The deterioration in international stability that took place soon after World War II pressured Washington to secure a strategic ally in the region. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the United States created and strengthened a policy of containment^[2], which would be the guide and central reference for US foreign policy between the years 1947 and 1989^[3]. The incorporation of Asia into the containment scheme was the first important expansion of America's area of operation and occurred as it was on its way to becoming a country with a global projection capacity. During this period, the dispute over the Diaoyu Islands had not yet been triggered, but amid US strategies during the Cold War, the Ryukyu Islands together with the San Francisco Treaty established dubious boundaries that would later be one of the main problems of the sovereignty claims over the disputed islands.

The Reversion of Okinawa and the Beginning of the Diaoyu Islands Dispute

In 1965, US President Lyndon Johnson (1963–1969) presented his Okinawa policy in a joint communiqué with Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato (1964–1972). The statement reveals Japan's eagerness to recover administrative authority over the islands, asking the American president to understand the feelings of the people of Okinawa and Japan on this matter. Sato also offered his thoughts on the East Asia geopolitical scenario while the US government argued that they looked forward to the moment when the islands could be returned to Japan. It was clear back then that, with military bases on Okinawa supporting US operations in Vietnam, providing a strategic location for the US presence in East Asia, and safeguarding Japanese interests, it was impossible to predict when reversion would be possible (Ryukyu Archive 1965).

In the ensuing years, the Japanese government and US authorities continued negotiations over the islands. On 14 and 15 November 1967, during meetings in Washington between Sato and Johnson, the process began to take shape. Both US and Japanese leaders shared their interest in returning administrative rights over the Ryukyu Islands to Japan at the earliest possible date (Worldjpn 1967). An agreement over the reversion of the islands would not occur until the administration of US President Richard Nixon (1969–1974), however. In November 1969, Nixon met with Sato in Washington to establish the terms of reversion and issued a joint statement reporting that the two governments had agreed to immediately enter into consultations regarding specific arrangements for accomplishing an early reversion of Okinawa, and declaring that this would occur in 1972 (Smith 2013).

During the Nixon administration, the reversion of Okinawa was a priority in order to enhance the Japan-US alliance and diminish the problems that the United States was facing in regard to the discontentment of the Okinawan population over the US presence in the region. However, the return of negotiations over Okinawa were impacted by energy surveys conducted by the Committee for the Coordination of Joint Prospecting for Mineral Resources in Asian Offshore Areas, under the authority of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East in 1968 and 1969. The report revealed that the ECS might contain substantial energy deposits (Drifte 2013; 2016; Smith 2013).

The studies did not show the exact amount of resources that existed in the Diaoyu Islands' surroundings, but almost immediately after the announcement, several Western companies expressed an interest in exploring the region (Park 1973). Soon after the exploration intentions began to arise, the Chinese government took a position claiming sovereignty over the islands but demonstrated the willingness to negotiate the continental shelf and its exploration with other claimants of territorial waters in the ECS, namely the ROC, South Korea, and Japan (Park 1973). On 21 December 1970, the Japan-Korea Cooperation Committee, as well as the Japan-Taiwan Cooperation Committee, convened to establish an offshore development and research liaison committee (Park 1973; Suganuma 1996; Friedheim 2019). The PRC condemned the move, releasing a critical note on 3 December 1970, through the State-run Xinhua News Agency. In this note, China criticized this cooperation and the joint development in the vicinity of the Diaoyu Islands. The following day, the PRC regime announced in a radio broadcast that the Diaoyu Islands were not, in fact, part of Ryukyu territory, but belonged to the continental shelf of China.

All this took place as other important events were developing that would shift the Cold War balance of power. The necessities of Cold War geopolitics directly involved the United States in negotiations over the disputed islands. In

Assessing Neutrality: The United States' Role in the Diaoyu Islands Dispute

Written by Alana Camoça Gonçalves de Oliveira

the late 1960s and early 1970s changes in the balance of power during the Cold War were becoming evident: the US rapprochement with China; negotiations over Okinawa; and the consequent return of the Diaoyu Islands to Japan, all brought difficulties for the US strategy in the region. Nixon and Henry Kissinger – the latter serving concurrently as Secretary of State and National Security Adviser – had planned to make their approach to China while maintaining friendly relations with Taiwan and Japan. During the Okinawa resolution process, and due to the emergence of the dispute over the Diaoyu Islands, the US government was pressured by PRC and ROC leaders to intercede on their behalf, but in the end Washington opted for a position of neutrality (Eldridge 2001; Eldridge 2014). The discourse of neutrality at the moment can be explained by two important US interests: (a) maintenance of the Japan-US relationship and a strong US presence in East Asia, and (b) rapprochement with China while maintaining good relations with Taiwan.

In maintaining the Japan-US relationship, during the mid-1960s, the United States had started to review its policy on Okinawa, since US officials were increasingly concerned with the anti-US sentiment among citizens in Japan and Okinawa (Komine 2013). Even though this pressured Washington to rush the reversion of Okinawa, the US military maintained its bases on the islands after their return to Japan. In fact, this territory still remains a vital cornerstone of US forces in Asia due to its strategic location. During the reversion negotiations, it is noteworthy that Nixon's government had some demands. One of them was related to textile trade policies in favour of the United States, and the other had to do with transit and entry of nuclear weapons into Okinawa in emergency situations.

On the latter issue, Wakaizumi Kei (2002) revealed in his memoir that, at the moment of the elaboration of the 21 November 1969 Joint Statement by Japanese Prime Minister Sato and US President Nixon which states that both the United States and Japan have an interest in returning Okinawa, the two leaders moved into a private office following a procedure prearranged by Kissinger and Wakaizumi, Sato's secret emissary. The officials elaborated the confidential 'Agreed Minute' between Nixon and Sato regarding the possibility for entry of nuclear weapons into Okinawa during emergencies (Wakaizumi 2002; Komine 2013). The Agreed Minute states that 'in time of great emergency the United States Government will require the re-entry of nuclear weapons and transit rights in Okinawa with prior consultation with the Government of Japan' (Ryukyu Archives 1969). According to Komine (2013), without a confidential written assurance for the emergency re-entry of nuclear weapons, the reversion of Okinawa itself could have been opposed by the US government. This issue is related to the dispute insofar as the US interest in maintaining relations with Japan and getting its agenda done made it hard for Washington to follow, for example, the ROC request for the non-reversion of the Diaoyu Islands to Japan. At the time, 'the deal [had] gone too far and too many commitments [had been] made to back off now (Smith 2013, 34).

Regarding the rapprochement with China, secret talks between Washington and Beijing were being conducted in the early 1970s. Initially, negotiations took place through indirect channels. The first tentative steps toward overt rapprochement came only after an April 1971 ping-pong tournament held in Japan, when the American team received an invitation to play in China. Later, the incident would become known as ping-pong diplomacy. In July 1971, Kissinger secretly travelled to China after an invitation from Zhou Enlai and, on the 15th of that month, Nixon publicly announced his trip to China.

During the July 1971 meeting, Kissinger and Zhou debated Beijing's interest in a 'One China' policy, discussed the principle of reciprocity between countries, and presented their concerns regarding the regional environment, including the issue of Japanese militarism. It should also be noted that Nixon and Kissinger both played the so-called Japan Card; raising the conceptual possibility of a militaristic and expansionist Japan to exploit fears, long held by the Chinese, of a revival of Japanese militarism, in order to justify the US-Japan Security Treaty and to legitimize the stationing of US troops in the region (NSA 1971). The territorial dispute between China and Japan, especially regarding the islands near Okinawa, made the American military presence more acceptable to the countries of the region and the world (Hara 2015). While emphasizing the China threat and prioritising Japan's defense, Nixon managed to secure tacit approval from the Chinese for a US presence in Okinawa for Japan's defense, thus exploiting China's fear of a revival of Japanese militarism.

Also, it is important to point out that recognizing Japan's or China's claim over the islands could undermine Taipei's claim over its own sovereignty as an independent country, as well as deteriorate US' relations with one of the two

Assessing Neutrality: The United States' Role in the Diaoyu Islands Dispute

Written by Alana Camoça Gonçalves de Oliveira

other nations. Thus, the declaration of neutrality was calculated to prevent a potential conflict capable of harming US relations with any of the three East Asian nations. In sum, US policy was acceptable to the Japanese while providing enough ambiguity to avoid deterioration of relations with Taipei and Beijing. Since then, the islands have been disputed by China, Japan and the ROC, with escalation of tensions occurring in 1978, 1990, and 1996, as well as in 2004–2005, 2010, 2012, and onwards.

Obama's Pivot to Asia and Fading Neutrality

The ambiguous US policy of acknowledging, though not recognizing, the claims helped Washington achieve its foreign policy goals in East Asia during the Cold War. However, US neutrality and the attendant ambiguity thereof continued to impact the dispute into the 21st century. In fact, the adherence to neutrality has been fading over the past few years due to changes in the balance of power of East Asia, as well as changing perceptions by US leaders of China. When Barack Obama (2009–2017) assumed office, he discursively emphasized diplomacy, multilateralism, and respect for the international order as pillars of his foreign policy, aiming to distance himself from Bush's unilateralism (Brands 2017). Obama highlighted the need to promote greater restraint, cost cutting and precision in the use of US military power, to double diplomatic engagement with friends and rivals, and to rebalance American policy geographically, due to the emergence of the Asia-Pacific as the focal point of 21st century geopolitics and geoeconomics (Brands 2017).

Likewise, since the official implementation of the Pivot to Asia policy in 2012, there has been increased US involvement and interest in safeguarding its position of supremacy in East Asia. This promoted a greater US involvement in the region's territorial disputes, including the dispute over the Diaoyu Islands. During the escalation of the Sino-Japanese territorial dispute in both 2010 and 2012, the US government started to get more involved and discursively pointed out that the Diaoyu Islands were covered under the US-Japan Security Treaty. It is worth noting that the US policy of neutrality began to take clearer turn, with the US leaning towards favouring Japan.

On 23 September, for example, then-US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton made assurances that the Diaoyu Islands were under the protection of the Mutual Security Treaty between the US and Japan, and that any intervention or use of force was not welcome (Drifte 2013). Since 2010, it has been possible to observe an increase in the number of Chinese ships converging on the islands, precipitating an increase in US involvement in the region.

In another example of increased US involvement, after China demarcated an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the ECS in 2013, and amid the growing presence of Chinese naval assets in the surrounding waters of the Diaoyu Islands, Obama stated that the islands were under the umbrella of the US-Japan Security Treaty. Obama's statement is particularly significant because it was the first time that any sitting US president had overtly stated that the Diaoyu Islands fall within the US-Japan Security Treaty. Even though other high-level US officials had offered similar reassurances to Japan in the past, this had great symbolism. In response to the Chinese ADIZ, two American B-52 planes were dispatched on an overflight of the Diaoyu Islands (Drifte 2013; 2016).

In an April 2014 press conference, Obama reiterated the US commitment to fundamental principles such as freedom of navigation and respect for international law, stating that the 'treaty commitment to Japan's security is absolute, and Article 5 covers all territories under Japan's administration, including the Senkaku Islands' (Obama 2014). As pointed out by Gronning (2014), US diplomatic sources reveal that Japanese officials consistently encourage the United States to restate its commitment to defend the islands. His statement helped Obama gain leverage in bilateral issues involving Japan, and sent a signal to China that the United States would not tolerate any unilateral actions that the Chinese government might be tempted to pursue. The US government still holds that this position is not related to the sovereignty dispute between the two East Asian countries, and it continues to defend the US position of neutrality. However, this position of neutrality, in an era marked by increased Chinese belligerence, has served to strengthen US-Japan security relations^[4].

By 2014–2015, Japan and China had signed a four-point consensus laying out their differences concerning the disputed islands. The bilateral discussions resumed in early 2015. In 2018, after nine rounds of high-level consultations, they launched a maritime and aerial communication mechanism (South China Morning Post 2018).

Assessing Neutrality: The United States' Role in the Diaoyu Islands Dispute

Written by Alana Camoça Gonçalves de Oliveira

However, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, tensions continue. For the last few years, Beijing's moves have put pressure on US officials to increase their commitment to Japan's security, and US authorities have publicly declared that unilateral actions by China would not affect the US acknowledgment that the islands are administered by Japan. The US Congress inserted in the FY2013 National Defense Authorization Act (H.R. 4310, P.L. 112-239) a resolution stating 'the unilateral action of a third party will not affect the United States' acknowledgment of the administration of Japan over the Senkaku Islands.' Similar language appeared in a number of bills and resolutions concerning US interests in the ECS (Manyin 2021, 9).

Even if Obama's foreign policy was not consistent throughout the years, due to budget cuts, domestic political splits, and a lack of strategic cohesion on the concept of the pivot (later rebalancing) to Asia in government speeches and documents; the Pentagon managed to maintain its commitments in the Asia-Pacific, maintaining an active military presence in the region (Green 2017; Oliveira 2021). Washington's main goal can be seen as upholding and enhancing the US-led security architecture in the Western Pacific and maintaining a regional balance of power favourable to the US and its allies. When the Trump administration began, the US government adopted different policies that worsened US-China relations. The US foreign and security policy towards China evolved toward confrontation, based upon a perception of China as a revisionist power seeking regional hegemony (United States 2017). In the last few years, the United States has helped to strengthen the military capabilities of its allies in the region, particularly Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and New Zealand (O'Rourke 2021).

On the issue of the disputed islands, the United States has constantly demonstrated its commitment through the statements made by its political leaders and military commanders. In 2020, for example, Lieutenant General Kevin Schneider, commander of US forces based in Japan, launched the joint US-Japanese exercise Keen Sword 21. Schneider said that 'our arrival today was simply to demonstrate the ability to move a few people, but the same capability could be used to deploy combat troops to defend the Senkaku [Diaoyu] Islands or respond to other crises and contingencies' (Zhou 2020). Backing up these words, the US Navy has shifted a greater part of its fleet to the Indo-Pacific region (O'Rourke 2021). The Department of Defense is assigning its most capable ships, aircraft, and personnel to the region and conducting increased operations and warfighting exercises, as well as developing new weapons and other technologies that could be crucial for the continued US presence in the East Asian region (O'Rourke 2021). Even now, Washington continues to emphasize its neutrality towards the islands. However, the American commitment to the defense of Japan and its growing presence in the region, demonstrate how US neutrality tends to serve US strategic interests in East Asia.

Conclusion

The US has consistently used its position of neutrality, and the ambiguity surrounding it, to prevent conflicts that could undermine its alliances in East Asia. The success of this strategy has been evident, especially during the political, ideological, and security tensions that arose in the 1970s. In the 21st century, this ambiguity has seen a renewed importance due to the US willingness to protect its East Asian allies like Japan, as well as a way of balancing revisionist threats, such as that posed by China.

Even after the Obama administration, the US presence in East Asia and its involvement in territorial disputes continue, whether through military cooperation or other commitments. In January 2021, White House press releases from the newly minted Biden administration sent a clear warning to Beijing against any expansionist intentions in Northeast and Southeast Asia. In multiple calls and statements, Biden and his top security officials have underscored 'US support for allies Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines, signalling Washington's rejection of China's disputed territorial claims in those areas' (Strait Times 2021). Other correspondence between high-level officials continued to reiterate the US commitment to defending the Diaoyu Islands, since they fall under Article 5 of the US-Japan Security Treaty (US Department of State 2021; Johnson 2021).

The US stance on the Diaoyu Islands dispute over the years shows how Washington's interests and statements on the issue have the power to shape the development of territorial disputes in East Asia. In the last few years, the US government has come to recognize in China a rival power with the potential to challenge US supremacy. Thus, it is not a surprise to see the US military presence in the Indo-Pacific grow and, as China's influence and military

Assessing Neutrality: The United States' Role in the Diaoyu Islands Dispute

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capabilities increase, the policy of neutrality is beginning to fade. Thus, in the years ahead, we may witness a more resolute US response in regards to the Diaoyu Islands dispute. Since the beginning, the United States has been one of the major players in the dispute, and even though Washington does not claim sovereignty over them, the islands are entangled in a discursive, military, and political power play closely related to US interests.

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Assessing Neutrality: The United States' Role in the Diaoyu Islands Dispute

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[1] During conversations prior to the signing of the Cairo Declaration, Roosevelt asked more than once if the Republic of China would want the Ryukyu territory. Chiang Kai-shek answered that China would agree to a joint occupation of Ryukyu by the ROC and the US and, eventually, a joint administration of both countries but under the trusteeship of an international organization (Zhai 2015).

[2] The policy of containment was to contain the threat posed by the USSR at that time and was inspired by George Kennan's ideas, a career US Foreign Service Officer. This idea inspired the Truman administration's foreign policy. The first time that containment was presented was in the form of an anonymous contribution to the journal *Foreign Affairs*. In this article Kennan, under the pseudonym Mr. X, writes that the main element of any US policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient, but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/kennan>

[3] This is one of the reasons why the United States started to have an interest in stabilizing the economies affected by the war as soon as possible, as in the case of Japan. Nonetheless, Washington signed the Mutual Security Treaty with Japan in 1951, and this treaty was revised in 1960.

[4] In fact, as the threat posed by increased Chinese aggression has grown in the last few years, Japan's security policies and behaviour have shifted (Hughes 2017). Since the Abe administration, Tokyo decided to enhance Japan's deterrence capacity by improving Japan-US relations, as can be seen in the Japan's National Defense Program Guidelines published in the 21st century and the revision of the Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation.

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Japan.