



## **Enhancing Japan's position in the Senkaku Dispute**

by Robert Dujarric

*Robert Dujarric ([robertdujarric@gmail.com](mailto:robertdujarric@gmail.com)) is Director, Institute of Contemporary Asian Studies, Temple University, Japan Campus.*

Following the release of the captain of the Chinese trawler involved in a collision with Japanese Coast Guard vessels off the Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands, we can draw some lessons from the incident. It is also a good time to think about how Japan can prepare itself for the next crisis with China.

Japan caved in to China, but Beijing is the real loser. Its words and deeds, which sharply contrasted with Japan's softer approach, helped anti-China "hawks" in Washington, Tokyo, Canberra, New Delhi, Hanoi, and perhaps Moscow (given how much of the Russian Far East can more easily be claimed as historically Chinese than remote South China Sea reefs). Japanese, Americans, and others who argue that China's rise is a positive sum-game have lost face.

But unless this episode convinces Beijing to alter course, there will be other altercations in the East China Sea. We can't predict how serious they will be, but this issue is unlikely to vanish.

How should Tokyo respond to the challenge? Strategically, the primary Japanese objective is to steer Beijing toward a less confrontational stance. There is no magic formula to achieve such an outcome, but it remains the most logical policy for Japan (and the US).

Fortunately for Tokyo, the Senkaku quarrel offers an opportunity to improve ties with Korea and as a result to strengthen Japan's position in Asia.

In relations with South Korea, Japan is in the same position as China is with regard to the Senkakus. South Korea's Tokdo islands (known in English as the Liancourt Rocks and Takeshima in Japanese) are under Korean control, while Japan argues that the islands belong to it. However, Tokyo's lack of threatening tone in this dispute differentiates it from Beijing's when it deals with neighbors.

Nevertheless, this dispute has hurt Japan's national interest. Korea has a strong sense of nationalism, driven in part by its colonization by Japan, the subsequent division of the country by foreign powers, and an unequal relationship with the US. Many Koreans believe Japan does threaten Tokdo; given Korean history, these feelings are not surprising.

However, despite this animosity toward Japan, Koreans are now frequently more worried by what they see as China's push for influence on their peninsula. These point to a growing Chinese presence in North Korea as well as research by Chinese historians asserting that Koguryo was a Sinicized state, a denial of the generally accepted fact that it was a

Korean kingdom. Beijing's unwillingness to side with Seoul after the *Cheonan* sinking further undermined China's standing South Korea.

One way for Japan to strengthen its position in the region would be to formally renounce any claim to the Liancourt Rocks. This would be cost-free since there is no plausible scenario under which they could become Japanese. But doing so would remove an unfortunate source of tension and misunderstanding between both societies. Such a statement would strengthen Japan's standing in Korea vis-à-vis China. It wouldn't solve all problems between the two nations, but it would be a step in the right direction.

The United States would welcome this gesture. For decades, a major US objective in the region has been to strengthen ties between its two Northeast Asian allies, Japan and South Korea.

A small but vocal minority in Japan will be shocked by this proposal. But Japan does not control the Liancourt Rocks and no Korean government will ever concede sovereignty over Tokdo. The only thing that will be lost is a self-defeating attack on Korean sentiment that serves Chinese (and North Korean) goals by sabotaging Korean-Japanese relations.

Such a move has historical precedent. Germany has formally given up title to vast areas of Poland, even though they, unlike the Liancourt Rocks, include lands that had been part of the Prussian heartland for centuries. This act of Realpolitik has eliminated what would have been a major source of friction between the two countries, thereby improving Germany's position in Poland. Many other European countries have accepted reality by jettisoning territorial claims against their neighbors.