China 1, Japan 0. Allies beware

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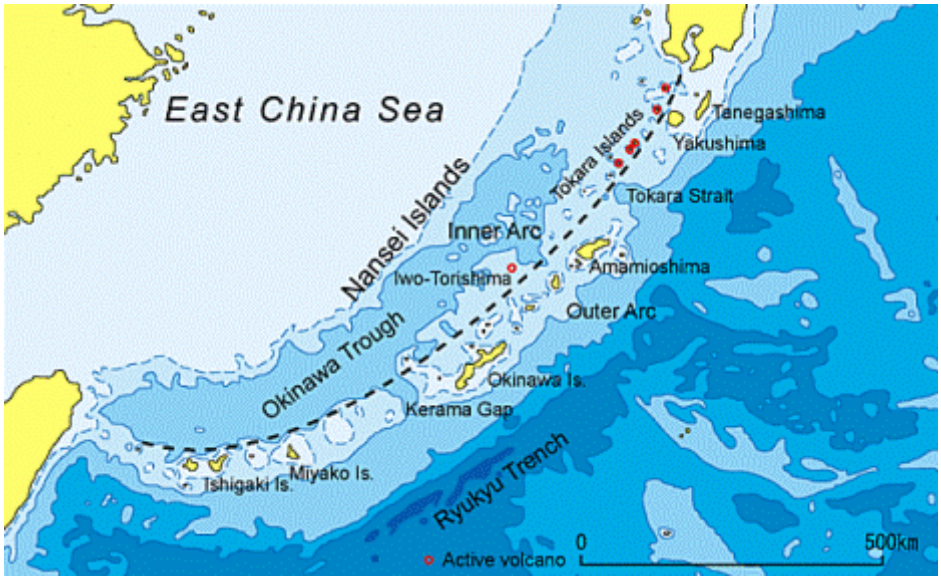

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Japan has a talent for border disputes: it has one with all of its neighbours: the Senkakus or Diaoyutai with China (and with Taiwan for good measure); Takeshima/Tokdo with both Koreas and the southern Kurils/Northern Territories. All these disputes share important qualities that should be remembered when governments are formulating policy responses to the latest flare-up, especially friends of Japan.

First, all three are derived from the period of Japanese colonial expansion which was ended by the Soviet entry into the Pacific War at the end of 1945.

Second, all three have considerable strategic significance, apart from any economic and EEZ issues.

Thirdly, all three provide oxygen to volatile nationalist claims on both sides of the disputes. All of the governments concerned articulate these themes with greater or lesser fervour, depending on circumstances. The good news, though, is that all the governments involved have found occasion to ratchet down their own nationalist enthusiasms and to make life more difficult for its non-government nationalists - when it suits them.

Lastly, all three issues are in fact soluble using principles and approaches that have worked well in other circumstances – if the political will is present – by joint development and fishing zones, and separating out the sovereignty issue from others aspects.

In the last few months China's sometimes dangerous gunboat diplomacy has succeeded in one of its undoubted goals: to make clear to the world that there is a territorial dispute over the Senkakus/Diaoyu, whatever a diplomatically wrong-footed Japan might say. That dispute is related to a more serious one - the "midline" in the East China Sea between China and Okinawa. Look at satellite photos of the region and a line of Chinese oil and gas rigs – for exploration and for production – are visible. Japanese nationalist websites have been wont to show schematics of dastardly Chinese drilling diagonally "under the line" under the seabed to steal Japanese gas reserves. Yet the Chinese have been punctilious to locate all their rigs to the west of the line that Japan claims marks the midline between the Ryukyus and the Chinese coast. And that is a long way west of where China says the midline should be, based on the principles of the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea which would focus on the location of the Okinawan Trough as the edge of China's continental shelf. Japan has refused to admit a dispute in the East China Sea, and is not happy at the thought of UNCLOS principles being applied to its historically-based claim.

Whatever the merits of the Japanese and Chinese claims, there is a dispute, and Japan's refusal to recognize its existence is simply untenable. Japan's obduracy works to China's advantage.

China 1, Japan 0. Again.

-Richard Tanter, NAPSNet contributor

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