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Japan needs U.S. to anchor territorial tug-of-war with China

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BODY:

Last week, the Japanese coast guard took control of a lighthouse on a tiny, uninhabited island in the Senkaku archipelago, which lies between Okinawa and Taiwan in the East China Sea.

Japan's unexpected move touched off a diplomatic row with China, which also claims the islands. While seemingly trivial, the Senkakus controversy should prod the United States and Japan to rethink their approach to East Asian maritime strategy.

Right-wing Japanese activists had erected the lighthouse as a symbol of Japan's claim to the islands and the surrounding waters.

The Chinese government, which increasingly thrives on nationalism --- nationalism focused primarily on Japan and America --- permitted public protests outside the Japanese embassy in Beijing. This was China's most visible display of anger since 1999, when American warplanes mistakenly bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade.

But more than symbolism or national pride is at work in Sino-Japanese relations. Behind the seemingly endless squabbles over territory lie strategic calculations that promise to pit Japan --- and by association the United States, Japan's longtime ally --- against China on the high seas.

First, the security of seaborne energy supplies is at stake for both of these economic heavyweights. China needs vast amounts of petroleum to fuel its economic boom, and thus its claim to political eminence in the region. Japan, whose economy remains the world's second largest, is likewise dependent on oil and gas imports.

Indications that the seabed near the Senkakus contains large deposits of oil and natural gas prompted Beijing to begin exploration in areas that --- Japan maintains --- impinge on its "exclusive economic zone," the offshore preserve where international law grants the coastal nation an untrammelled right to exploit natural resources. Fits of pique over

drilling rights have become a regular feature of Sino-Japanese relations.

China's aggressive naval buildup has heightened anxieties among its neighbors. Just last November, Japan's navy tracked a Chinese nuclear attack submarine in Japanese waters --- adjacent to the Senkakus.

Shoichi Nakagawa, Japan's flamboyant trade minister, connected the submarine incident to Chinese gas exploration efforts near the Senkaku Islands.

The Senkakus are part of the "first island chain," an offshore line of islands that runs along the Chinese coast from Japan to Taiwan to the Philippines. Strategic thinkers in Beijing have long feared that, should the island chain remain in unfriendly hands, China's economic and military aspirations would be at risk.

Beijing worries about U.S.-led efforts to combat threats on the high seas along the Pacific Rim. Beijing looks askance at the Proliferation Security Initiative, which seeks to interdict shipments of weapons-related materiel. China evinces even less enthusiasm for the U.S. Pacific Command's Regional Maritime Security Initiative, a "coalition of the willing" against nautical dangers such as piracy and terrorism.

Clearly, the strategic environment in East Asia --- especially its maritime component --- is in flux. China's evolving maritime strategy will increasingly demand the attention of policy-makers in Washington and Tokyo. In their deliberations, they need to reassure the major players in East Asia while discouraging Chinese designs that could imperil the region's security.

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GRAPHIC: This 1996 photo shows Uotsuri Island, which is claimed by both China and Japan. It is one of five titled islands --- called Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyutai in China --- located between Taiwan and

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