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INFLUENCE GAME IN THE DIAOYU ISLANDS CHINA, JAPAN, AND THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

China and Japan are two major powers in the East Asia region. Both countries' coasts touch the East China Sea, a major strategic sea for trade and resources. In the middle of the sea, between the two countries are the Diaoyu Islands (Chinese name) or Senkaku Islands (Japanese name), a group of eight small islands whose sovereignty has been disputed since the 1970s.

The following paper will discuss the causes behind the dispute from the security perspective, taking into account what it is both countries are claiming. Moreover, because of the historic alliance between Japan and the United States, the role of the latter in the issue will also be taken into consideration.

Keywords: China, Japan, United States, Diaoyu, Senkaku, territorial dispute, national interest, strategic significance, resources, symbolism, security, alliance.

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	The Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Dispute	1
1.2	Objective of the paper	3
2	Methodology.....	5
2.1	Theoretical framework.....	5
2.2	Data collection and analysis	7
2.3	Method and data analysis.....	7
2.4	Challenges and Limitations	8
3	Theory.....	10
3.1	Alliance theory.....	10
3.2	Securitization and desecuritization	12
3.3	Theory of National Identities	13
4	Analysis	15
4.1	Historical Background	15
4.1.1	Sino-Japanese Diplomatic Relations in the 21 st Century	15
4.1.2	The Japan – U.S. Alliance	17
4.2	Exploring China and Japan’s Stance	19
4.2.1	China’s stance: history matters.....	19
4.2.2	Japan’s Stance: history and international law.....	20
4.3	Why the dispute?	21
4.4	The Diaoyu/Senkaku before and now, a security issue	22
4.4.1	Rising tensions, from 2010 to 2014.....	26
4.4.2	Economy and nationalism, domestic scope of the issue.....	28
4.5	The United States Role in the Issue	31
4.5.1	True neutrality or hidden agenda?.....	32
5	Conclusion.....	35
6	References	37

1 Introduction

1.1 The Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Dispute

The Diaoyu/Senkaku islands are a group of eight uninhabited islets, with a land area of less than 7 km² (SouthChina MorningPost, 2019). The islands are located in the East China Sea between China and Japan, approximately 170 km north of Ishigaki Island and 410 km west of Okinawa Island (MOFA, n.d.a). The islands are not inhabited, and their sovereignty is under dispute by both China and Japan, nonetheless, they are currently under Japanese administrative control (EIA, 2014).

On matters of international territorial disputes, it is important to keep in mind what the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, hereafter) says, as it sets the laws at sea for more peaceful coexistence. Moreover, both China and Japan have signed it and therefore are bound by it. Thus, according to Articles 2.1 and 2.2 of the UNCLOS (UN, 1982):

- 1) The sovereignty of a coastal State extends, beyond its land territory and internal waters, and in the case of an archipelagic State, its archipelagic waters, to an adjacent belt of sea, described as the territorial sea.
- 2) This sovereignty extends to the air space over the territorial sea as well as to its bed and subsoil.

In addition, Article 3 establishes that “every State has the right to establish the breadth of its territorial sea up to a limit not exceeding 12 nautical miles, measured from baselines determined in accordance with this Convention” (UN, 1982).

Thus, since the islands are under Japanese administrative control, from the coast of the islands up to 12 nautical miles out to the East China Sea, it is all Japanese territory, leaving a map like the one in the following figure.



Figure 1. Senkaku Islands

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, n.d.b

It is important to note though, that the UNCLOS it is how the UN has established the law. In practical terms these legal principles are rather malleable, and therefore it is just one decision over how to behave when maritime law it is disputed. Thus, in reality there could be different interpretations to solve a territorial or border conflict. That it is indeed the case for the islands in dispute. Both China and Japan have justified their claims based on, not only history, but also international laws. Nonetheless, both actors believe this is a bilateral issue and therefore, have not tried to resort to any international organization to help in the resolution process (Ramos-Mrosovsky, 2014).

Going back in history, the first record of sovereignty over these islands is in 1895, when Japan announced its formal annexation to the country (Ramos-Mrosovsky, 2014). After the Second World War, when the U.S. occupation of Japan took place, Japan conceded its administration to the United States, who then, returned them to Japan in 1972 (Manyin – CRS, 2021). Before 1968, these islands had never been of major importance to anyone, nonetheless that year a study about the region and the resources that could lie under the sea was published and suddenly they became the center of a dispute between China and Japan (Ramos-Mrosovsky, 2014).

China's first claim of sovereignty over the islands was in 1971, nonetheless, it was not considered an essential issue in Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations. It wasn't until 1978 that the first clash in the surrounding area of the islands occurred when 200 Chinese fishing boats appeared in the area. Notwithstanding that, the Chinese apologized and declared it had been an accident and would never be repeated again (Takahara, 2017).

However, 21st-century Chinese foreign policy has been marked by a steady advancement over the issue. In 2003, China established the Federation for Defending the Diaoyu Islands. Furthermore, there have been many trespassing episodes, the most important ones being in 2010 and 2012 (Yang, 2017). In September 2010, a direct confrontation over the issue happened for the first time. Japan arrested the crew of a Chinese fishing ship that crashed against the Japanese Coast Guard near the islands. The incident was interpreted by the Chinese as an aggravating action and the Japanese government was trying to impose its sovereignty over the islands on the PRC (Nakano, 2016).

The dispute became one of the central points in Sino-Japanese relations when in 2012, the Japanese government bought the islands from particular Japanese businessmen,

nationalizing them (McDevitt, 2014). This created a chain reaction, and led to an increase in trespassing by Chinese ships and the consequent response of Japanese patrol boats (McDevitt, 2014). Furthermore, the following year, there was more escalation of the conflict when China declared the establishment of an Air Defense Identification Zone, right over the Diaoyu Islands. This implied that any aircraft flying over that area had to obey the rules in place, for example, report the flight's plan to the Chinese government or have clear nationality exhibited in the aircraft (Osawa, 2013)

This has not changed over the years, to the point where even the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has published a report on an incident in August of 2016, that includes a list of previous incidents and incursions related to the Diaoyu/Senkaku area (MOFA, 2016).

Although the media has not reported many changes during the last few years it is still a very important issue for both Asian countries, and also a very important issue to resolve peacefully for the region.

1.2 Objective of the paper

This paper will look into diplomatic relations and the power struggle between China and Japan. Both countries are very important powers in the East Asian region and share a very long history. Japan shortly after the Second World War became the second most important economy in the world. Furthermore, it was the main economic power in Asia. Meanwhile, China was trying to overcome the Second World War and the civil war consequences. Nonetheless, slowly at first and very rapidly in the 21st century, it has gained territory and has surpassed Japan as the second economy in the world. This change in regional dynamics is bound to affect Sino-Japanese relations, without any doubt.

However, since trying to analyze the diplomatic relations between China and Japan could take very long, the paper will focus on one specific issue that has been present in discussions between Beijing and Tokyo during the 21st century: the territorial dispute about the sovereignty of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. To do so, the research question posed is *why is the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute a security issue in Sino-Japanese Relations in the 21st century?* This leads to different sub-questions that will help structure the analysis chapter:

- How has the Japan-U.S. alliance affected the issue?
- How has the stand of these three actors changed throughout the years?
- How do domestic factors affect China and Japan's positions about the issue?

Although the issue is essentially just between China and Japan, I believe that to have a full picture of the issue, the U.S.' stand has to be analyzed too. As it will be explored in the analysis section, Japan and the U.S. have had a clear alliance since the end of the Second World War. This has helped the United States to spread its influence in the region when needed. Nonetheless, over the last few years, the U.S. has had to deal with disagreements with the other main superpower in the East Asian region: China. Therefore, since tensions between China and the U.S. are not a new thing, it is important to look at how a third party, such as the U.S. affects an apparent bilateral issue.

As mentioned already in the section above, although the dispute has been going on for many decades, the tension reached its peak in the 2010s, and after that there has not been much talk about it. Therefore, looking at the evolution of the conflict in the last years will allow to create a bigger picture, rather than to focus just on the concrete actions of each country. Moreover, the paper will indirectly study the interstate dynamics over regional security issues. I believe that looking at these actor's dynamics is essential because nowadays we live in an extremely interconnected world, thus the course of action and consequences of a matter as such as a territorial dispute are going to be slightly different.

Although it will be looked into more deeply in the analysis chapter, there are two main reasons for the dispute being a security: sovereignty/ border claims, that is more a political side of the conflict. And sovereignty but in relation to the resources available in the area, that is economy and development. Nevertheless, in a previous paper, I already looked at the economic relation and power struggle between these three actors. Therefore, this paper will rather focus on the political and diplomatic side of the relationship between China, Japan, and the U.S., always related to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands matter.

2 Methodology

2.1 Theoretical framework

In the process of defining the theoretical framework, different theories have been considered. As well as, different perspectives were considered. Since the territorial dispute might have different reasons to spark up, looking at the topic from an economic power struggle was considered. Nonetheless, only looking it up from an economic perspective left out many nuances of the dispute, thus I opted to analyze the issue from a political and security perspective.

Once the perspective was set, different theories have been considered. Firstly, the strategic triangle theory was an option since in the analysis three interrelated actors are included. This theory was first presented as such when analyzing the relationship and balance of power between China, the USSR, and the U.S. during the Cold War (Dittmer, 1981). Although narrowed down to just one case study, the topic of this paper tries to analyze the relations between China, Japan, and the U.S., since they have been involved in various disputes over the years. The strategic triangle theory would be fitting since it would allow looking at how the three actors' actions are intertwined, and how the power struggle between the three countries in a regional dispute could develop. Nonetheless, the scholars using this theory have polarized views, and it is usually used in a loose manner, with no explicit definition.

Secondly, the alliance theory is part of the realist tradition in international relations theories. Alliances have always been a part of history, and the contemporary international context is no different. In the analysis, it will be looked deeper into the Japan-US long-lasting alliance, and its role in the regional balance and in the islands' dispute, thus using the alliance theory is appropriate. Furthermore, using this theory will add a different layer and perspective to the analysis and will help take into account a more materialistic side of the dispute.

Thirdly, the securitization theory was the most evident choice and the most fitting one. The Diaoyu/Senkaku islands dispute has been a security issue since the beginning of the dispute. Although there are more perspectives on the issue, like the economic one, security is the essential one. The countries' actions throughout the dispute are based on each other's perceptions and using them to promulgate new foreign policies. These new

foreign policies will dictate how Sino-Japanese relations evolve in the future. Furthermore, desecuritization is an important concept within securitization theory, and it is applicable to the topic in discussion. After a few years, the dispute has been relegated to a less important position in the security agenda, or at least that is the perspective shown in the Western media. Is the dispute really undergoing a desecuritization process? Using the securitization theory will allow looking into that side of the conflict, while also analyzing the security importance of the issue itself.

Last, the theory on national identity will be also used a complementary theory.. If we take into consideration the symbolism of the islands and the importance both Japan and China give to the historic past for their arguments about the sovereignty over the islands, national identity becomes an essential aspect to consider when speaking about the Diaoyu/Senkaku issue. Although it will be discussed later on, China and Japan's modern nationalisms are based on their experience during the colonial period, bringing up different sentiments nowadays in each country.

The alliance theory and the securitization theory, with the national identity theory, will provide a relevant theoretical framework for this paper. On a preliminary basis, there might be three competing explanations on why this territorial dispute has become a security issue for the actors involved, and that will be explored in depth in the analysis section. Firstly, the control over the resources found under the seabed. Secondly the rather symbolic importance of the islands for both China and Japan. And third, the strategic role that the islands play for the U.S.' influence in the East China Sea and their alliance with Japan. The first two explanations can be explored from the securitization and national identity perspective. Meanwhile, alliance theory is a better fit to explore the U.S.' interest in the islands. Furthermore, the alliance theory will help incorporate the Japan-US alliance and the power balance between the alliance and China into the analysis. Whereas the securitization theory will help in the analysis of the dispute.

2.2 Data collection and analysis

In general terms, data collection has been fruitful and appropriate for the topic to be addressed. Mainly qualitative data have been used for this work, both primary and secondary sources. As for the primary sources, they have been mainly statements made by both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. In addition, reports published by the Japanese coastal authorities have also been consulted. In addition, press publications have been used to monitor the evolution of the dispute. On the other hand, reports and conventions on laws published by international organizations such as the United Nations have also been consulted, since these are the ones that govern international relations. Finally, given the Japan-US alliance, and in order to see if there is really an interest on the part of the latter in the dispute, sources from the archives of the US Library of Congress have also been consulted.

As for secondary sources, they have mainly been academic articles and other publications that have allowed us to establish an overview of the dispute and its context. In addition, they have allowed access to information that I would not have been able to access due to language barriers.

On the other hand, some quantitative data have also been used to a lesser extent. When dealing with the issue from a security perspective, it has been deemed convenient to consult and use data on the security expenditure made by the actors involved in the dispute.

2.3 Method and data analysis

After the data collection process, the approach chosen has been both document and speech analysis. Firstly, since it is an issue that affects the foreign policy of each country, a discursive and speech analysis approach was fitting. Using this approach has allowed me to analyze the official statements of the governments, and use first-hand reliable information, without having any doubt about its veracity.

Secondly, using document analysis as a method has allowed me to track and navigate the changes in the stand of every actor and what each of them has in play. Furthermore, using the document analysis approach, I have also been able to gather the main reasons for the tensions between the three actors surrounding the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands issue.

Moreover, the document analysis approach functions as a complementary approach to the discourse and speech analysis since the consulted documents provided the context and background for the official statements. Thus, providing depth and bringing up some of the nuances in the official statements.

2.4 Challenges and Limitations

Even though as already mentioned, the data collection process has been effective, and all the sources consulted are relevant to the topic, it is also important to note that there have been some limitations in the process. There are numerous sources from the beginning of the 21st century and right to 2015 analyzing the dispute, nonetheless, over the last 10 years, in the western media the issue has been relegated to the background, and it has not been heard of it anymore, therefore finding reliable updated information on the issue has proven to be quite a challenge. Furthermore, although there are plenty of primary sources available, only those available in English could be consulted, therefore at some point during the process, I had to rely on the translations found in secondary sources. Lastly, due to time constraints, I could not analyze the conflict from the very start and had to narrow down the time period to only the events in the 21st century.

Regarding the challenges faced during the process, the biggest challenge has been to be objective and critical about the issue. Throughout my previous academic years, I had already read about the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands dispute, mostly when the tensions were at their apex. Therefore, when deciding the topic to study I had already an opinion on the matter. Nonetheless, very early in the research and writing process I had to forget everything I knew about the dispute and look at it with a new vision. That allowed me to present the arguments of every country in an objective manner, analyze the history behind the dispute, and the actions and decisions of each actor in regards of the topic.

In addition, another challenge has been to find reliable contrastable sources. It is true that, since the dispute has been going for so long, there are plenty of academic papers and media pieces. Nonetheless it raises controversy within the population of each country involved. Nowadays it is very easy to write what our personal opinion about one specific topic, that is why in the research process some interesting points and information came up. Nevertheless, on some occasions after trying to contrast the sources it turned out not to be reliable enough, thus slowing the investigation task.

One last challenge in the writing of this paper has been to use two different perspectives: on one hand, two theories from a social constructivism perspective: securitization and national identities theory. While, on the other hand, alliance theory is rather a realist perspective. The choices might seem arbitrary, however using these two different perspectives allows to take into consideration many aspects that are intertwined and cannot be singled out.

3 Theory

3.1 Alliance theory

The theoretical approach used in this paper is based on two theories, firstly the theory of alliances.

When we look back on history, we can see how alliances are commonplace. Alliances are established in family matters, between companies, or between friends. Thus, alliances in the political and international relations domain are not an invention of the 21st century. When we talk about alliances, especially in the field of international relations, the first thing that might come to mind is two different sides in a conflict or war.

All the main authors of this theory agree on the importance of alliances in the study of international relations, but each one provides a reason or cause for the creation of these alliances. The major representative of alliance theory is George Liska, a Czech social science scholar who worked in the Czechoslovak foreign ministry. Other major contributors to alliance theory were Kenneth Waltz and Stephen Walt.

We could say that the theory of alliance has its origins in realism since its first definition is presented by Hans Morgenthau, a representative of realism in international relations. According to Morgenthau, alliances are the manifestation of the balance of power (Gaertner, 2001:2). On the other hand, Arnold Wolfers (1968:268) presents a much simpler definition, and for him, an alliance is a pledge of military support between two or more states. If we look at the three major representatives of this trend, each presents a slightly different definition of an alliance. George Liska, in his book *Nations in Alliance* (1962:3), begins by remarking on how it is impossible to talk about international relations without any reference to alliances. Like Morgenthau, Liska bases alliances on the balance of power.

However, Kenneth Waltz and his student Stephen Walt are more in favor of explaining the creation of alliances based on the balance of threat (Gaertner, 2001). Thus, for them, it is not power that leads to the creation of alliances, but rather the possible threats surrounding a state. What is common to all definitions is the objective that these alliances have; that the capabilities of one state complement the other to fulfill its interests (Dar et al, 2017). Even George Liska goes further, and states that alliances will not depend at all

on the geographical proximity between states, these will palliate weaknesses with each other with other close cultural interests, for example. Nonetheless, the most important thing is the accessibility between allies (Liska, 1962:26).

Despite the different definitions of alliance that we have in the theory, this is applicable to the case if we talk about how the alliance between Japan and the USA was established and how it affects the evolution of the dispute between China and Japan. However, before going any further, we must be clear about the different types of alliances that can be established between countries. According to Stephen Walt, there are five types of alliances. First, there are states that form an alliance to confront the threat of another state, second, states that form an alliance with the state that threatens them to reduce the danger, third, states that form alliances with states of similar and close ideology, fourth, alliances that are formed on the basis of foreign investment or aid, and finally, a forced alliance that is created by a political penetration that facilitates the alliance (Snyder, 1991). In the case to be studied, the most important types to consider would be the alliance between states to confront a threat and the alliance created by the political introduction of another state.

Although it will be presented in more detail in the analysis part, it could be said that the alliance between Japan and the United States was born out of the occupation and political introduction of the Americans. However, over the years and with the development of China as a new Asian power, the Japan-U.S. alliance has evolved into an alliance between two countries to deal with potential threats.

In this case, the conceptualization of alliance theory is appropriate for the analysis. However, it should be noted that it has some shortcomings and is not a theory applicable to all cases of international relations. For example, in the process of data collection, numerous texts have emerged that highlighted how the actions of smaller states in alliance games were ignored. When in fact they were just as important as the actions that move larger states to establish or not to establish alliances.

3.2 Securitization and desecuritization

In order to answer the question posed at the beginning of this paper, the theoretical framework established is also based on security theory.

The issue of security has been a constant throughout history, however, the way of understanding the concept has been changing according to the social and political context, and the actors involved in the issue (Stritzel, 2014). Security theory was born in Copenhagen during the 1990s, and as its name indicates it revolves around the concept of security. The main scholars of this theory were divided into two generations, in the first one names such as Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan stand out, while in the second one Holger Stritzel and Thierry Balzacq stand out.

The theoretical framework of this paper will be based mainly on the ideas presented by Ole Wæver but also on those of Holger Stritzel. In order to apply the theory to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands issue, one has to start with the definition given by Wæver, in which he describes security as the field where states threaten each other, question each other's sovereignty, and try to impose their will (Wæver, 1995:3). However, the theory presented by him, and other scholars of the Copenhagen School has been criticized for lacking a conceptual framework as a basis (Taureck, 2006). Still, it should be noted that for this paper security theory will be used as a tool to establish under what criteria the territorial dispute over the Diaoyu Islands is a security issue and why.

As for security theory, it departs from the perspective presented in alliance theory, as it is mainly based on constructivist and poststructuralist ideas. And unlike the scholars of alliance theory, in this case, there is not such a common agreement among each of the authors, even some contradict others and have quite far-apart views.

Even so, they present essential concepts in the analysis of the Diaoyu/Senkaku territorial dispute from the point of view of security theory. To begin with, the concept of the speech act is essential to understand the process of securitization. The speech act is the moment when the representative of a state proclaims that something should be considered a security issue, then it changes its category and extraordinary measures that would not be used normally can be used to solve it (Wæver, 1995). Furthermore, for Wæver (1995), these security problems are issues that arise and threaten to undermine the sovereignty of the affected state(s).

Not only that, but the concept of desecuritization must also be taken into account. On this concept there is no agreement either, in fact, for Wæver it means the return to normality (Wæver, 1995). While for other scholars of this theory it means another thing. For Lene Hansen, for example, the origin in desecuritization is found in Wæver, but she defines four different processes. Stabilization, replacement, rearticulation, and silencing (Hansen, 2012). First, the stabilization process assumes that the initial security problem is presented in different terms than the security problem, but a larger conflict still lurks (Hansen, 2012). Second, replacement assumes that another larger issue replaces the original issue, while re-articulation assumes that the security issue leaves that context and becomes a politicized issue (Hansen, 2012). Finally, silencing involves the marginalization of a security issue, the topic is no longer talked about.

Desecuritization processes could be interpreted as efforts that are undertaken in order to be able to handle the important issue in a better way. However, Wæver thinks of desecuritization processes as a failed security process, where the audience the authorities are trying to reach has given up on the issue as important for security (Austin & Brossard, 2017). In this paper we move slightly away from Wæver's definition, and closer to the definition presented by Hansen, in order to apply it to the case at hand. As will be discussed in depth in the analysis of the dispute, we do not currently hear as much about the evolution of the conflict. However, the situation is not back to normal, as Wæver defines. So, let us consider Hansen's definitions to talk about what has happened to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the last five or six years.

As with alliance theory, security theory provides us with a theoretical framework that fits the case to be studied. The combination of both concepts, that of security and that of the desecuritization process is not new, although they are often seen as mutually exclusive concepts (Austin & Brossard, 2017). In this case, they will be used as simultaneous concepts.

3.3 Theory of National Identities

Furthermore, some concepts from a third theoretical perspective will be used throughout the analysis. In the context of international relations nationalism and national identities have an essential role, especially when looking at territorial disputes. In this specific study case, the thoughts of Benedict Anderson on how the notion of nation is created will help

explain the nationalist sentiment both for China and Japan over the issue of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

According to Anderson (2006:6), a nation “is an imagined political community”. For him, it is imagined because all the members of that community don’t know each other, but in their perceptions, they are part of the same group (Anderson, 2006). Therefore, a nation is a concept built by the community and their shared experiences.

Benedict Anderson in his book focuses more on the experience of the birth and development of nationalism in Europe, however, he highlights Japanese nationalism as a process to be taken into account in Asia. Nineteenth-century Japan was affected by various internal changes and according to Anderson (2006) is where we can find the origins of modern Japanese nationalism. After centuries of isolation, Japan was forced to open its borders to European countries, which led to a feeling of unity against the barbarians who had forced them out of their bubble (Anderson, 2006: 94). However, the Japanese elites realized that, in order to be able to confront the European powers, Japan had to incorporate their way of doing things. Thus, it adopted an attitude of conquering or being conquered, giving birth to the imperialist desire driven by the new Japanese nationalism.

The Japanese elites had a very easy time getting the imperialist idea across to the rest of the population under the guise of national pride since that sense of community already existed in an incipient form as a result of several years of isolation (Anderson, 2006: 95). With Anderson’s explanation of the birth of modern Japanese nationalism, we can see how the concept of imagined community comes into play when talking about a nation. This will be useful later on, since in this specific issue, both actors evoke their own past history to support their sovereignty claims. Moreover, the formation process of the national identities of both China and Japan finds their origins in their colonial experience (Cooper, 2015), a crucial period for nationalism according to Benedict Anderson (2006).

Using the theory on national identities, by Benedict Anderson, together with the alliance theory and securitization, will help paint a complete picture of why the dispute is an important security issue in the region, taking into account different perspectives on the disagreement and the different competing explanations for it.

4 Analysis

China and Japan are two countries that share a long history, going back more than two centuries. The relationship between the two has been marked by many ups and downs throughout history, and the dispute between both over the sovereignty of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands is not an exception. The issue has had numerous ups and downs over the many decades that it has been on the political agendas of both countries. Even so, both countries have remained firm in their positions, while China has based its arguments mainly on the historical past, Japan has done so focusing mainly on technicalities and treaty interpretation.

4.1 Historical Background

4.1.1 Sino-Japanese Diplomatic Relations in the 21st Century

To understand why the Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations are as they are in the 21st century, and how the islands dispute has evolved throughout the years, it is essential to go back in history and take a quick look at the first Sino-Japanese War (1894 – 1895). China and Japan fought in Korea to demonstrate their supremacy in Asia, and it proved that Japan had the power to compete with the traditional power in East Asia (Jansen et al., 1979). The Treaty of Shimonoseki, which marked the end of the war, forced China to recognize Korea's independence and to give Taiwan, the Pescadores islands, and the Liaodong peninsula to Japan (Zhang & Li, 2017). Although it was not specified in the Treaty of Shimonoseki, the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands were also incorporated into the Japanese empire in 1895.

Up until the end of the Second World War, Japan took advantage of China's weakness and became the most important power in East Asia. It occupied Korea and the Chinese coast, demonstrating its military strength. However, when the Allies won World War II, Japan lost all the occupied territories, lost its interest in China, and focused on its recovery after the war. In 1972 diplomatic relations between Beijing and Tokyo were officially reestablished, and although with many ups-and-downs they are still evolving.

According to previous studies of Sino-Japanese relations, the diplomatic relations between both countries in the 21st century, are characterized as "hot economics, cold politics" (Kamata, 2022). That is, a beneficial and profitable relationship in the economic

aspect, but that is notably tense in the foreign policy and diplomacy context, although this has not always been the case. Since 1972, when diplomatic relations between the two countries were formally settled, and until the early 1990s, the relationship between China and Japan was very good. China saw Japan as the example to follow to modernize the country, while Japan was deeply remorseful for its actions during World War II and wanted to demonstrate it by helping China in any way possible (Takahara, 2017). However, in the late 1990s and early 21st century, different aspects led to a slight worsening of Sino-Japanese relations, which has deepened over the last twenty years (Lam Peng, 2017).

At the same time, bilateral economic relations are getting stronger as the years go by, and despite obvious political tensions, there is no apparent slowdown in economic agreements and investments between the two countries. Moreover, the economic relation is further secured at the beginning of the 21st century when China joins the WTO in 2001 (Takahara, 2017). Both countries have hoped that the stability in economic relations will help prevent a worsening of diplomatic relations, thus always trying to promote new cooperation ways such as the implementation of the RCEP, which they believe will have a positive impact (TokyoReview, 2022).

The entire 21st century, therefore, presents no apparent change in terms of economic relations between China and Japan. However, political relations will be marked by constant tensions, which will always revolve around three main issues: historical issues, territorial disputes, and Japan's international position (Yang, 2017). For example, a recurring theme between the two countries is the visits of Japanese Prime Ministers to the Yasukuni Shrine or how history books present the war and the actions carried out by the Imperial Army in those years. On the one hand, Japan believes it has done enough to show its repentance and ask forgiveness for its actions (Takahara, 2017). Nonetheless, on the other hand, China feels that the issue is not settled, and that Japan's attitude is not enough to find a solution. Moreover, these tensions are aggravated by the strong nationalist sentiment that characterizes both countries and their political leaders. Chinese nationalism is primarily based on regaining the country's pride after centuries of humiliation in the international context. This is why territorial issues take on special importance in Chinese nationalist sentiment and its foreign policy strategy. Meanwhile, Japanese nationalism is based mainly on the feeling of superiority over other countries (Yang, 2017).

In view of the political tension between Beijing and Tokyo, one of the growing concerns is security issues. China has shown its concern on numerous occasions about the revision of the security agreement between Japan and the United States, which would entail a change in the peaceful constitution of Japan (Zhang, 2020). While Japan has on numerous occasions stated its concern about China's security spending and militarization, particularly in recent years (Zhang, 2020)

The strong nationalism of both countries, growing security concerns, and the importance of territorial issues, consequently mean that the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute has a heavy influence on the evolution of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations. At the same time, in today's interconnected world, it is impossible for a problem to remain between only two actors. As discussed above, Japan's position in the international context is a recurring theme in Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations (Yang, 2017). This is due to China's concern about the alliance established between Japan and the United States, as it may lead to Japan's actions in the world one way or another, driven by the cooperation between the two countries.

It is important to understand what the U.S.-Japan alliance entails to understand why Beijing is concerned about the possible involvement of the U.S. in the territorial dispute, and the involvement of a third actor in an issue that at first glance only influences Japan-China relations.

4.1.2 The Japan – U.S. Alliance

August 1945, end of World War II, Japan is on the losing side of the war and awaits the occupation of the Allied forces led by the United States. This will be the start of an alliance that at the beginning will be forced, but over the years will become natural.

When the Allied forces arrived in Japan, they had one main objective, the demilitarization, and democratization of the country to reduce the danger of a new Japanese threat in the West (Ward, 1968). The occupation officially lasted until 1952 and was characterized by numerous initiatives and changes that deeply affected Japanese society. One of the most important changes that have influenced Japanese foreign policy from the very beginning, was the creation of a new Constitution. When the war ended and General McArthur arrived in the country, they realized that the Meiji Constitution was outdated, so they pushed for the creation of a new one. However, the first draft that was presented did not

satisfy the Allied forces, so they took over and also participated in the writing of the new constitution. The most important article of the new Constitution would be and will be to this day Article 9 which states that:

Article 9. Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as another war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized. (*Constitution of Japan, 1947 art.9*)

Thus, according to this article, Japan would not have any kind of military force, so they would depend on American forces to maintain their security. However, as the years went by, it became evident that Japan did need at least some defense forces, so in 1954 the so-called Self-Defense Forces were created, whose sole purpose was to defend the national territory in case of attack.

By leaving the security issue in the hands of the United States, Japan was able to focus on its economic recovery and gradually become the Asian power par excellence at that time. However, Japan gradually began to covet a greater role in the alliance established with the United States and after the establishment of the Mutual Security Treaty in 1951, revisions have been made over the years (Maizland & Cheng, 2021) to adapt to the context Japan was living in the moment.

These revisions have led to modifications in the responsibilities of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces, and of the U.S. military role in Japan. For example, in 1992, a new law was passed whereby the Self-Defense Forces could participate in peacekeeping operations conducted by the UN (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). Another example would be when in 1997 the extension of the area of action of Japanese military forces was approved. Finally, in 2015, the Japanese Prime Minister carried out a reinterpretation of the Japanese constitution, whereby the Japanese Self-Defense Forces could provide support to allied countries in case of need, although only if specific circumstances were met (Maizland & Cheng, 2021). Thus, although the alliance between the two countries originated in a forced manner, over the years it has deepened, to the point of including aspects beyond security, such as protecting the environment.

Notwithstanding that, security remains the central aspect of the alliance between the two countries, as it benefits both sides. Japan has the support of the largest military-investing country, and the United States has a permanent foot in Asia, at least for the time being.

For the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands issue, the Mutual Security Treaty, and the alliance between the two countries take on special importance. According to Article 5 of the Treaty:

Each Party recognizes that an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional provisions and processes. Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall be immediately reported to the Security Council of the United Nations in accordance with the provisions of Article 51 of the Charter. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security (*Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1951, art.V*)

Therefore, if the Japanese territory, including the surrounding islands, is attacked by another country, in compliance with Article 5, the United States can provide military support to Japan in resolving the conflict, if necessary. Consequently, should a conflict break out because of the territorial dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, the United States would be allowed to intervene in the case.

4.2 Exploring China and Japan's Stance

4.2.1 China's stance: history matters

The People's Republic of China has essentially made three arguments for claiming sovereignty over the island group in dispute (Ramos-Mrosovsky, 2014). All three arguments revolve around national history and its shared history with Japan.

In 2012, the state council of China presented a document where it listed all the reasons why the islands actually belong to China. In that document, first of all, it is clearly stated that the islands were "first discovered, named and exploited by China." (State Council, 2012). According to the document, the first records of the islands are found in a book, entitled *Voyage with a Tail Wind*, published in 1403, when the Ming dynasty reigned in China (State Council, 2012). In this book, the expeditions of some travelers to the west

seas are recorded. Thus, it shows the name of the islands they used to pass through, which included the "Diaoyu Yu", now known as Diaoyu Dao (National Marine Data, 2014). Thus, it shows how China already knew of the existence of the islands long before Japan obtained them, and how they used them as navigational markers.

Secondly, there are documents that show that the islands were incorporated within the maritime territories to be protected from Japanese piracy. For example, in 1561, the *Illustrated Compendium on Maritime Security* was published, where the islands were included in the *Map of Coastal Mountains and Sands* (State Council, 2012). Not only that but there are also official court documents of the Qing dynasty whereby the islands were under the jurisdiction of the local government of Taiwan at that time (State Council, 2012). Thus, China argues that, as the islands were under the jurisdiction of the island of Taiwan, with the Shimonoseki treaty, they came under Japanese sovereignty. However, after World War II and the consequent invalidation of the Shimonoseki treaty, when Taiwan became part of China again, the Diaoyu/Senkaku should also have been returned (Ramos-Mrosovsky, 2014).

Finally, the third argument presented is that both Chinese maps and those of other countries before the 19th century included the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands within Chinese territory (State Council, 2012). Various documents from the Ming and Qing dynasties contained maps depicting Chinese territory, and these included the islands within Chinese borders. In addition, maps created by French, British, and American cartographers also included the islands in Chinese territory. Likewise, a Japanese book published in 1785 groups the islands and mainland China territory with the same color (State Council, 2012), thus recognizing the islands as Chinese territory.

4.2.2 Japan's Stance: history and international law

From the beginning of the dispute, Japan has made it clear that sovereignty over the islands is an undisputed issue. They belong to Japan and have belonged to them since 1895 when they incorporated them within their borders (MOFA, n.d.b). Like China, Japan supports its position on three arguments (Ramos-Mrosovsky, 2014).

First, according to the government of Japan, before incorporating the islands within Japanese borders, it conducted numerous surveys of the islands. From those surveys, it was concluded that there were no signs that they were occupied or exploited by anyone,

so they were declared *terra nullius* and incorporated into the Japanese territory (MOFA, n.d.b). Thus, Japan argues that the incorporation of the islands was always done in accordance with international law at the time. Also, since Japan considered the islands to be *terra nullius* when the terms of the Shimonoseki Treaty were established, the islands were not specifically included in the list of territories ceded by China (Ramos-Mrosovsky, 2014). Consequently, after World War II, when the territories seized from China were returned, the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands were considered part of the Okinawa prefecture and placed under the control of the United States (MOFA n.d.b).

Second, Japan argues that it has taken actions that demonstrate in practice that the islands are under Japanese sovereignty. Under sovereignty laws, sovereignty becomes effective if economic or other activities are carried out in the territory, thus, as over the years, economic activities such as feather picking or dried sweet potato manufacturing have been carried out in the territory, Japan has demonstrated that it has control over the islands (MOFA, n.d.b).

Finally, Japan supports its position by arguing that, from 1895 when the islands were incorporated into Japanese-controlled territory, until the 1970s, China had not questioned Japanese sovereignty. Even after the entry into force of the San Francisco treaty, there are Chinese publications that mark the islands as Japanese territory (MOFA, n.d.b). According to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (n.d.b), the change was due to the publication of a study that presented the possibility of the islands being in an area rich in resources such as oil or gas, raising the Chinese interest in the area.

4.3 Why the dispute?

Looking at the arguments provided by both parties, we could conclude that there are three main causes behind the dispute. The first, and most obvious, would be the economic cause. In the 1970s, a study of the area was carried out, and it concluded that the area where the islands are located could be rich in energy resources (Szanto, 2021). Therefore, the control of the islands, under the laws established in the UNCLOS, would allow the country to take advantage of these resources, thus reducing its dependence on imports from other countries. In addition, it is a highly exploitable area for fishing, so control of the area would facilitate the development of the fishing industry of either country.

Secondly, there are interests in the control of the area, for security and strategic importance reasons. For China, the East China Sea is of great strategic importance since most of the country's economic activity is concentrated in the coastal provinces. Moreover, since China began to develop at a frenetic rhythm, this has been based mainly on the exploitation of resources such as oil or gas, which currently arrive in the country through the East China Sea (McDevitt, 2014). Likewise, the control of these waters is of great importance for the security of the area and the region, as they touch the coasts of the two most important countries in Asia (McDevitt, 2014). Control of the islands, and in turn of the waters surrounding them, would give an advantage to one country over the other. This is why sovereignty over these islands is so important in terms of security.

And thirdly, the islands have great political importance in the nationalist discourses of both countries (Szanto, 2021). For China, the loss of these islands in the first Sino-Japanese War is one more grievance to add to the many they suffered in what is called the century of humiliation in China's history. That is why the recovery of the islands is an essential part of China's national project and would restore the country's honor (Szanto, 2021). It would also represent victory against the Japanese, whose brutalities during World War II have not been forgotten (Ramos-Mrosovsky, 2014).

On the other hand, in Japan, the perception of China is not too good, so the political elites take advantage of the constant tension over the Diaoyu/Senkaku issue for their political benefit domestically (Szanto, 2021). Moreover, Japan believes that the time has come to regain its position as a superpower regionally and internationally, so the ongoing tensions with China have become the main strategy to accomplish this goal (Ramos-Mrosovsky). Even so, and taking into account that Japan maintains that the sovereignty of the islands is an undisputed issue, depending on the government cabinet of the moment, some advances or others have been made on the resolution of the issue, for example, with Prime Minister Hatoyama there was no discussion possible, while during Kan's cabinet, there were meetings on several occasions to peacefully discuss the issue (Przystup, 2010).

4.4 The Diaoyu/Senkaku before and now, a security issue

As it has already been briefly introduced in the theory chapter, to analyze the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute, it is convenient to do so with the securitization theory. Why do both China and Japan consider the dispute to be a security issue? To begin with,

one of the most recurring concepts in security theory is sovereignty. So, since the object of the dispute is the legitimate sovereignty over the islands, it could automatically be raised as a security issue. Even so, let us go deeper into the matter since it can be analyzed from security theory for other reasons as well.

According to Wæver (1995:3), security is the field where states threaten each other, question each other's sovereignty, and try to impose their will. The dispute over the islands meets all three criteria of Wæver's definition. First, both Japan and China have threatened each other over this issue. These threats, however, are of a more sophisticated nature, going beyond simple military threats or written declarations. From Japan's point of view, the continued presence of Chinese fishing vessels around the islands poses a threat from the People's Republic. Since these are in territory under Japanese administrative control, and repeatedly in the past, fishing vessels were followed by government vessels (MOFA, 2016). Thus, from Japan, it is already perceived as a threat. On the other hand, from China's perspective, Japan is illegally occupying the Diaoyu Islands, as they are an inherent territory of the People's Republic that should have been returned with the Potsdam Declaration (State Council, 2012). Thus, having fishing vessels passing through the area is a routine process, and therefore the response given by the Japanese coast guard, is what poses a threat to China.

Second, as already mentioned numerous times throughout this paper, the main object of the dispute is the sovereignty of the islands. That is, China questions Japanese sovereignty over the islands and argues how they are part of the People's Republic of China. Japan, on the other hand, has made it clear from the beginning that the sovereignty of the islands is undisputed, questioning the Chinese arguments.

Finally, both sides present numerous arguments that interpret the same documents in different ways in order to impose their will on the other and have the dispute resolved in their favor. For example, both China and Japan base one of their arguments on the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki and its subsequent invalidation with the Potsdam Declaration. China believes that, when China ceded the island of Formosa to Japan, Formosa included the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, so with the Potsdam declaration they should have returned to Chinese sovereignty (State Council, 2012). However, Japan has a different interpretation, since, for Japan, the islands were never part of the territory of Formosa, therefore, the Potsdam declaration does not apply to this case (MOFA, n.d.b).

In order to understand the process of securitization of an issue, the concept of the speech act is essential. That is, presenting an issue as something exceptional that requires a reaction outside the normative. The issue in question threatens to undermine the sovereignty of the countries involved over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, so exceptional measures must be taken. On the one hand, China calls Japan's actions invalid and illegal (State Council, 2012), thus making a claim of something exceptional at the state level and requiring actions outside the normative to be taken to entrench its position and defend against possible Japanese retaliation. Furthermore, it adds that, after the San Francisco treaty, since the administrative control of the islands passed into the hands of the United States, its actions are also within the framework of the illegal.

Not only that but the State Council (2012) has stated that "China's will to defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity is firm and its determination to uphold the results of the World Anti-Fascist War will not be shaken by any force". Thus, declaring that anyone who goes against it will be affecting its war against fascism.

On the other hand, as will be discussed in depth a little later, Japan is in a sense counting on the defense of the United States in case the conflict escalates. U.S. support in a matter of bilateral relations shifts the issue from the diplomatic realm to the security realm, essentially because this support is based on the framework of the Mutual Security Treaty between the two countries.

However, despite the fact that the dispute over the islands has been going on for many decades, it has not been possible to reach an understanding between the parties. Both China and Japan have stated that even with the tension arising from this issue, they are willing to try to reach a solution in a peaceful manner, trying not to get into an armed conflict. In fact, as mentioned above, the issue has been discussed in numerous meetings between the political elites of both countries. Although, there has not always been the same willingness to listen (Przystup, 2010).

During the first half of the 2010s, the dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands made headlines in major newspapers, not only regionally, but also internationally. However, in the last five years, the dispute has been erased from the public's mind, at least from the Western public. The dispute, from the Western perspective, has undergone a process of desecuritization. According to Wæver, this process occurs when normalcy returns after

the state of emergency. However, neither China nor Japan has reached a solution, nor have they abandoned the state of emergency and returned to normalcy. Therefore, according to Wæver's definition, the matter remains a security issue.

Lene Hansen, on the other hand, develops the process of desecuritization in depth, in a way that departs from Wæver's explanation and provides a perspective to explain why the issue of the islands has remained in the background or even forgotten.

According to Lene Hansen, the desecuritization process could happen in four different ways, stabilization, replacement, re-articulation, or silencing. Although interesting, in the Diaoyu/Senkaku issue, desecuritization through re-articulation has not happened. The re-articulation process would suppose that the issue has left the security context to become more of a politicized topic (Hansen, 2012). This process would be the closest one to the desecuritization explanation of Wæver since the issue is no longer considered a security issue. The other three processes could be a possible explanation for the desecuritization of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands issue. On the one hand, stabilization could be a possible applicable process from the regional perspective. For both China and Japan, the dispute is still very much a security issue for both countries, nonetheless, their approach is in different terms, therefore in accordance with Hansen's definition of stabilization.

Moreover, another process that could be applicable from the regional perspective would be that of replacement. This process is too a sensible explanation from the West's perspective. Looking at the evolution of the conflict and the evolution of the international context, it is plausible that although the conflict is still an important topic, more important issues have arisen as the years go by. Other territorial disputes in nearby regions, the Russia – Ukraine War or the Covid-19 Pandemic have been the most substantial ones in the past one or two days. If we take just one of those examples, the Covid-19 pandemic put on hold the whole world for a year or more, and the entire world, in general, is still recovering from its effects. Therefore, it is plausible that the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute became a desecuritized issue through replacement.

Lastly, the silencing process could also explain the issue's desecuritization process. However, it could also do it if we look at it from the West's information library. Over the past five-six years, western media has forgotten all about the issue, and it has put the focus on other issues. Some of them related with the same actors, some of them not at all.

Nevertheless, not talking about how the issue is still important and essential for the region, is a way of silencing a real problem that could lead to important changes in the power balance of the East Asia region.

4.4.1 Rising tensions, from 2010 to 2014

Since the beginning of the dispute, sightings of vessels from either China or Japan around the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands are very common. Furthermore, protests in both countries against the disputant claims are also very normal. Nonetheless, from 2010 to 2014, three different episodes have raised tensions so high fear of an armed conflict might unleash.

The Chinese Fishing Trawler Incident (2010)

On September 7 the Japanese Guard Coast confronted a Chinese fishing boat in the waters near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. The confrontation led to a collision and the consequent detention of all the crew and the captain of the fishing boat by the coast guard (Tiezzi, 2014). After the detention of the Chinese nationals, nationwide anti-Japanese protests rose, while the government suspended talks with Japan over different issues, until September 24 when the captain of the ship was released and returned to China (NATO, 2019).

Once back in China, the captain of the boat declared that he had done nothing wrong, since the islands were part of Chinese territory he could be there (Tiezzi, 2014). Meanwhile in Japan many protests around the country popped up (NATO, 2019), since the population believed the Prime Minister releasing the captain meant that Japan was not strong enough to face China (Hall, 2019).

From the securitization perspective if both governments had not taken the diplomatic way, the dispute could have easily escalated into an armed conflict. Showing again that something as apparently small as a collision between two vessels could trigger major misunderstandings.

Clueless nationalization effort or avoiding substantial disagreement (2012)

Two years after the fishing boat incident, it is clear that the Japanese population remains dissatisfied with the performance of the prime minister at the time. One person stands out in particular within the general discontent, the mayor of the city of Tokyo. In 2012, the mayor of Tokyo announced that he was going to buy three of the eight islands, thus

demonstrating that he was willing to stand up for Japan's national interest, something in which the Democratic Party of Japan had not been very successful (Hall, 2019).

However, the Japanese government eventually went ahead with the purchase, thus nationalizing those three islands. According to the Japanese government, they made this decision to prevent tensions from rising between the two countries if a private individual within the Japanese political sphere purchased the islands under the argument of defending the national interest (O'Shea, 2015).

Even so, the purchase of the islands only worsened the situation. China formally protested on several occasions, claiming that the territory was Chinese, therefore the purchase had been illegal and that it was a unilateral change of the status quo. Thus, after the formalization of the purchase, almost all channels of communication between China and Japan were disrupted (Grieger, 2021).

Chinese ADIZ Delimitation (2013).

In November 2013, China announced the delimitation of its Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea. This area overlaps with part of the area delimited by Japan, specifically over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands (Osawa, 2013). From a security perspective, the delimitation of this area creates an extra danger, as so far the dispute has not yet reached armed conflict, but the overlap increases the possibilities of conflict.

Despite Japan's protests, these have no basis beyond concern over possible future accidents, as China has done nothing illegal. International law does not prohibit any country from establishing an ADIZ adjacent to its air territory. Moreover, establishing the ADIZ does not imply gaining sovereignty over the area or being able to prohibit the passage of aircraft from other countries, but is for identification functions only (McDevitt, 2014).

China vs Japan a cat-and-mouse game

In addition to the specific episodes described above, over the years both Japanese and Chinese vessels are involved in the cat-and-mouse game. When the Japanese Coast Guards detects Chinese vessels around the area, they try to send them away, and the other way around. One example of this, in the midst of the tensions over the islands issue, some Chinese patrol vessels sighted a flotilla of boats carrying some Japanese nationalists

around the islands under the argument of conducting some survey of the fishing grounds. Exacerbating even more the already tense situation (Villar, 2014).

4.4.2 Economy and nationalism, domestic scope of the issue

Despite the essential security nature of the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute and its regional significance, there are different domestic factors that influence both how China and Japan face the diplomatic tensions over the issue.

Both China and Japan are two major economic powers in the region, so the economic dimension is very important in the evolution of the dispute and the actions of both countries. First, it is important to remember that both players are significant importers of energy and natural resources. As previously mentioned, in 1968 a study was published declaring the area to be rich in oil, so that, according to Article 56 of UNCLOS¹, the country that has sovereignty over the islands may benefit from the resources found in the area (O'Shea, 2015). Consequently, one of the reasons for the dispute is purely economic. However, studies published subsequently show that the number of resources available in the area is not as high as initially deduced and that the construction of the infrastructure necessary to obtain the resources would be more expensive than the final benefit (O'shea, 2015).

Secondly, another economic factor to take into account is that the East China Sea has very important trade routes for the economies of both countries. Both China and Japan use these routes for their many imports, but also for their exports, thus sovereignty over the islands would give them control over the waters around these islands and in turn control over the routes passing through their vicinity (McDevitt, 2014; O'shea, 2015).

In addition to the economic importance of the islands, the economic development and power of both China and Japan is a very important part of the issue. When the dispute arose, and up until the late 1990s, Japan was in the midst of economic development and on its way to becoming the Asian power by default. Thus, the narrative was controlled to a greater extent from Japan. During those years, China had to deal with other important

¹ In the exclusive economic zone, the coastal State has:

- a) Sovereign rights for the purpose of exploring and exploiting, conserving, and managing the natural resources, whether living or non-living, of the waters superajacent to the seabed and of the seabed and its subsoil, and with regard to other activities for the economic exploitation and exploration of the zone, such as the production of energy from the water, currents and winds. (*art. 56a. UNCLOS, 1982*).

issues domestically, plus the percentage of imports and investments coming from Japan was around 20% (O'shea, 2015), making the Chinese economy very dependent on Japan. However, from the 2000s onwards, there is a change in the Chinese economy. After the modernizations introduced by Deng Xiaoping in previous years and its entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, China had a very solid foundation for the rapid economic development it experienced. As a result, it ceased to depend so much commercially on Japan, even replacing the United States as a trading partner in 2004 (O'shea, 2015). By having greater economic power, a more stable domestic economy and reduced dependence on the Japanese economy, China was able to change its attitude about the islands and adapt a much more assertive position.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that one of China's largest trading partners is the United States. China's economic policies in recent decades have been heavily focused on exports, making the United States the largest market for them (O'shea, 2015). As it will be explored in the next section, given its alliance with Japan, the United States could become involved in this bilateral issue. However, it is important to keep in mind that, given the existing trade relationship between China and the United States, the latter's involvement into the dispute could have serious consequences for the Chinese economy.

As briefly mentioned earlier, the national political context is also relevant to the discussion of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands issue. Something as simple as who the national political leader is and his or her perception of the dispute can lead to more or less discussion in trying to reach a solution. However, the issue goes far beyond the political leader of the moment and his or her views. The population of a state also influences the decisions that governments make, non-state actors can put pressure on governments in different ways to act if they are not happy so far. In addition, it should be kept in mind that there are nationalistic values such as territorial unity that have a substantial influence on people's evaluation of their governments' actions (Downs & Saunders, 1998). This is why nationalism takes on so much importance in the political spectrum when it comes to disputes of this caliber.

Looking at Japan, the dispute over the islands has been used on numerous occasions by the political opposition to highlight the inaction or passivity of the ruling party (Deans, 2000; Hall, 2019). A glaring example of this is the 2012 episode when the mayor of Tokyo announced that he was going to buy the islands, so that they would be brought back under Japanese sovereignty, something the government was failing to do (Hall, 2019). Besides

that, it has also been used by the same party in power to legitimize its actions against China, for example, or when Abe Shinzo proposed to build a port or some kind of infrastructure that would solidify Japanese control over the islands (Hall, 2019). Not only that, but the dispute is incorporated into the discourse of Japanese national identity. It is here that we can apply the concept introduced by Benedict Anderson (2006) of imagined communities. The islands take on a special symbolism in the construction of Japanese identity, maintaining administrative control of the islands and the possibility of gaining sovereignty over them, implies that little by little Japan will be recovering its position as an Asian power that it has now lost to China. That power that had the strength to control a larger territory in the imperialist era and is now eclipsed by the exponential development of China.

In China, on the other hand, the dispute over the islands is being used in a similar way. As in Japan, the government is using the dispute within the nationalist discourse characteristic of the Chinese Communist Party. Traditionally the Chinese Communist Party has used nationalism for the legitimization of its actions (Downs & Saunders, 1998), which are always carried out for the benefit of Chinese society and never for the benefit of the few. We return here to Benedict Anderson's (2006) concept of the imagined community, when the Communist Party refers to the Chinese society, and how it relates to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute. For Chinese society, the islands have become part of another reminder of the so-called century of humiliation, and regaining the control over them will put China one step closer to what Xi Jinping has set as "China's Dream" (Schenck, 2020) which is part of its modern national identity. It is a symbol of Japanese imperialism and their attitude in which they are no longer remorseful for their actions during the period of Japanese imperialism (O'shea, 2015). Thus, they are a factor that often brings up anti-Japanese sentiment in Chinese society. Not only that, but the Communist Party government has also on numerous occasions seen political benefits in conducting propaganda campaigns recalling Japanese atrocities (O'shea, 2015).

The government's national image and national identity are not the only things influencing China's actions during all these years of dispute. In addition to the high security risk if the dispute were to escalate into an armed conflict, this would be a serious blow to the image China is creating internationally and regionally. Since China became a power in the region, it is evident that the fear of the neighboring countries has been increasing. Nevertheless, China has done a great job in presenting itself with peaceful and

cooperative objectives to create a powerful but non-threatening identity. This is why if China were to take matters into its own hands and decide to escalate the conflict, its image as a peaceful power would fall apart (O'shea, 2015).

4.5 The United States Role in the Issue

The relationship between the United States and Japan is stronger than ever. The two countries have been economic and political allies since the end of World War II. This is why, although the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute is primarily an issue between China and Japan, the United States plays a role in it.

It should also be noted that the islands have also been under the control of the U.S. After World War II and with the Treaty of San Francisco, the United States gained control of Okinawa, which at that time included the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. These were thus under U.S. administrative control until 1970 when they were returned to Japan (McDevitt, 2014).

Despite the ongoing tensions and its alliance with Japan, the United States has stated on several occasions that it does not take a position in favor of either Japan or China in the dispute (McDevitt, 2014). Nonetheless, when the conflict reached its most critical point, Hillary Clinton, Obama, and even Trump, have stressed that, as the islands are under the administrative control of Japan, they are included in the Mutual Security Treaty between Japan and the US (Manyin - CRS, 2021). However, it is important to note that, even if the islands are included in the Mutual Security Treaty, it does not give Japan a *carte blanche* to increase tensions with China. In fact, on different occasions, it has been made clear that, in the hypothetical case that the dispute turns into an armed conflict, Japan will be responsible for the defense of the territory, not the United States (McDevitt, 2014).

Also, on all occasions, the United States has stressed the distinction between the islands being protected under the Security Treaty because they are under Japanese administrative control and its neutrality over the rightful sovereignty of the islands (Manyin - CRS, 2021). According to the US, the sovereignty issue is a bilateral matter to be resolved peacefully by China and Japan.

The most obvious evidence of American commitment with Japan on the islands issue are the statements made over the last few years by Obama, Trump, or Biden, among others and as already mentioned above. These continue to occur, and are repeated on an almost

annual basis, since in the joint statements published annually by both countries the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands issue is always briefly mentioned (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). It is worth mentioning that, in this year's statements, concern over China's rapid military development and its shift to an increasingly assertive and even "provocative" attitude has been highlighted, categorizing it as the greatest challenge in the region (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). In addition, American support for Japan's new security policies has also been declared, and Japan has welcomed the U.S. commitment to maintain its presence in the region (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023).

Moreover, it is also worth mentioning, that the United States has demonstrated its commitment to Japan in other ways. One of these has been to conduct joint military exercises. Since the beginning of their alliance, it is not uncommon for both countries to participate in joint military drills. However, those that took place after the tensions following the Chinese fishing boat incident in 2010 and the Japanese government's purchase of three of the five islands in 2012 stand out. On both occasions, the exercises were focused on small island defense and recapture methods (O'Shea, 2015).

On every occasion, Japan has stressed that the drills were not thought scenarios involving any specific country. Nonetheless, because of the specific focus of each exercise and the collaboration with the U.S., it is not rare that China expressed its concern and categorized the drills as a "provocative action" (Reuters, 2013).

4.5.1 True neutrality or hidden agenda?

While presenting an apparent neutral stance on the dispute, in practice the United States seeks a favorable outcome for Japan, albeit in a discreet manner. Since the beginning of the conflict, the United States has publicly encouraged the parties involved to reach an agreement and resolve the conflict peacefully. In parallel, however, there has been an increase in trade between Japan and the United States in air and naval equipment. In addition to conducting revisions of security treaties to improve defense strategy (Manyin - CRS, 2021).

Thus, little by little, the alliance between the United States and Japan is being strengthened through trade and security agreements. Thus, according to alliance theory, we can conclude that the alliance between the two countries is a combination of the different definitions presented by the most prominent theorists. First, both countries

created an alliance based on the balance of power, since, after Japan's economic growth in the 1980s, it became the Asian power by default. In addition, the more practical definition of Arnold Wolfers (1968:268), which states that alliances are based on military support between two countries, is also fulfilled, an aspect that this alliance also fulfills.

Finally, Waltz and Walt believed that alliances were created to deal with potential threats, a category that could be applied in this particular case. In the event that Japan sees China's claims and actions as a threat to the integrity of its borders, it will look to the United States to deepen its alliance and secure protection in case the dispute escalates into armed conflict. However, if we look at it from the U.S. point of view, we might infer that they are exploiting their alliance with Japan to present a united and potent front to dissuade China from taking a more confrontational path to conflict resolution. In any case, whatever the U.S. objective, its actions translate into a double standard, as it proclaims its desire for a peaceful resolution of the conflict, but at the same time assists in the development and military reinforcement of Japan through trade (Manyin - CRS, 2021).

In recent years, the Japan-U.S. alliance has followed Waltz and Walt's definition rather than that of previous scholars. Thanks to China's great economic development, it has caught up with the United States, even surpassing it on several occasions as an economic power. This is why, seeing China as a threat to their influence in Asia, they squeeze their alliance with Japan to the maximum. So, looking at the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute, if it is resolved in Japan's favor, it will indirectly benefit the United States as well since it will expand the territory covered by the security treaty and consequently the territory of action.

Over the years the neutrality mask of the United States over the issue of the sovereignty of the islands has been slowly falling off. Little by little American vessels are seen in the area, even after China established the ADIZ, two American B-52 aircraft flew over the area (Oliveira, 2022). Thus, we can see that the United States is actually interested in the islands and in the area, beyond just giving support to Japan because of the Mutual Security Treaty, so the reality is that there is indeed a hidden agenda regarding the conflict.

The U.S. opinion is leaning to a favorable result for Japan, as already mentioned. If the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands issue is solved in favor of Japan's sovereignty claims, the United States will indirectly get closer to China's borders, broadening its influence zone and

reducing China's maritime expansion. Furthermore, it will control the strategic trade routes in the region, consolidating the American influence and control in the East Asian region. It is also worth mentioning that, considering the U.S. opinion on the Taiwan issue, the real goal if the U.S. gets really involved in the Diaoyu/Senkaku issue, is possibly the protection of what they consider an independent area, and ally of the country.

Moreover, going a step further, the United States must also be considered as an actor in the dispute, not only because of its commitments due to the alliance with Japan, but also because of what it could mean if the country did not fulfill them. We are talking about the fact that, if the United States does not get actively involved in the hypothetical situation of armed conflict, this could mean the end of its alliance with Japan, since it would have not followed through and met with what article V of the Security Treaty establishes. In addition, it would not comply with the image of a strong power that it is trying to project in the area and would therefore lose legitimacy in the eyes of other countries in the region (O'Shea, 2015).

5 Conclusion

Having explored the arguments of all three parties involved in the dispute, there are three explanations as to why the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands issue remains a major security issue in China-Japan relations during the 21st century. The three explanations form a web of national and international interests that make the issue more complex than it might appear to be.

The use of the securitization theory and the national identities theory have made it possible to analyze the dynamics of the actors in this issue from a social constructivist point of view. For both Japan and China, the history and symbolism of the islands are essential to their arguments. According to both sides, these islands are historically inherent territory theirs and should be under their sovereignty and not in the control of the opposing side. History is an indisputable part of the construction of their identities at the national and international level, so their historical past has marked political decisions today. On the one hand, China has tried to replace its image as a weakened country after the numerous humiliations suffered during the colonialism period, projecting an image of a country with exponential economic development, and participating more and more in international affairs. Finally obtaining the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands would be one more achievement in the long road it has slowly been building.

On the other hand, Japan, before the Second World War and later on during the 1970s and 1980s, became the power par excellence in the East Asian region. Its rapid economic development and its alliance with the United States made the country the benchmark of modernity and development. However, its image was eclipsed during the 2000s by the expeditious Chinese development. Thus, maintaining control of the islands and even gaining official sovereignty over them would be a victory in the reconstruction process of Japan's image as an Asian power.

Moreover, the many surveys of the region, although not as optimistic as the one from 1968, have stated there are resources to be exploited, thus adding economic and energy interests into the historical and identity arguments already presented.

At the same time, using a totally different perspective has allowed to incorporate the alliance between Japan and the United States into the dynamics of the dispute. From the alliance theory point of view, and looking at joint statements, plus the bilateral treaties

between both countries, it is concluded that the islands are included in the territory covered by the Treaty of Security. Thus, theoretically obligating the U.S. to get involved in case the status quo of the islands is changed unilaterally. Despite, the situation right now being on standby, since the U.S. has, on numerous occasions, declared its neutrality over the sovereignty issue, the context has been changing slowly. Due to the increasing interest of the United States in the region, mostly because the ups-and-downs in the Sino-American relations over the past years. Therefore, if the dispute was solved in favor of Japan, thanks to its alliance with the U.S., the latter would see its influence zone widened.

Due to time constraints, many ideas remained to be deeply explored for the future. In the paper national identities have been mentioned, nonetheless, the dynamics of nationalisms of China, Japan, and the U.S, could also be an interesting focus. Nationalisms are a very important aspect to take into consideration when analyzing any aspect in the geopolitical context, and those of China and Japan are especially interesting due to their millennia of history. Furthermore, during the analysis, it was mentioned how other issues replaced the dispute, like the Covid-19 pandemic. Looking at how the regional dynamics have changed after the Covid-19 and how these changes affect the dispute would also be a very interesting and enlightening perspective.

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