

## **Securitization and De-securitization in the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Territorial Dispute**

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**Abstract:** *Recently, the territorial dispute over the Diaoyu, or Senkaku, Islands in the East China Sea has flamed up between China and Japan. This conflict deserves further attention because of its potential of being the spark to unleash a Sino-Japanese firestorm. However, this was not the first time the two Northeast Asian great power rivals have at least verbally fought over who is the rightful owner to the resource-rich archipelago and surrounding waters. The controversy can be traced from post-World War II, over the 1970s and 1990s, to today. The entire process of this largely verbal fistfight can be best understood through the Copenhagen School's securitization and de-securitization concepts. Japan, being in the role of the administrator, naturally more often desecuritized the issue in the past than did China, while China mostly strategically securitized the dispute. For the current round of escalation over the dispute, interestingly, Japan acted as initial securitizing actor. This paper aims to contextualize the instances in which the territorial dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands has been either securitized or desecuritized by either party. The analysis adds nuances to securitization theory, especially concerning the role of societal uprisings in securitizing a dispute such as the one at hand.*

**Keywords:** *Diaoyu Islands; Senkaku Islands; China; Japan; securitization theory.*

### **1. Introduction**

The great power rivalry between China and Japan has been a hot topic in Northeast Asia for centuries. For a long time before the historically first aggressions between the two countries, their relationship was marked by peace, trade relations, cultural exchange and flowing from that general

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similarities in language, culture and religion. The peace that existed was due to a large part because of China's impressive largeness, civilizational superiority and the hierarchy that existed as a consequence and materialized in the tributary system in which China conducted its foreign relations (Danner, 2013; Kang, 2010). As Richard Chu (2007: 23) correctly explains, the relation between the two Northeast Asian powerhouses can be boiled down to three patterns:

1. China, the stronger of the two neighbors, is never known to have attempted to conquer Japan, the only exception being during the thirteenth century (...) Mongolian (...) rule.
2. China periodically provided Japan with crucial cultural imports that changed the face of Japan (...).
3. Japan's domestic problems often became problems for China.

If the Mongolian attempt to conquer Japan was not the beginning of their rivalry, it was certainly the pirate raidings of the Chinese coast that happened as a consequence of Japan's 'domestic problem' of their warring states period, as they were triggered by having been driven out of Japan by unifying forces under Hideyoshi. The latter tried to invade and conquer China in the late sixteenth century but was stopped on the Korean peninsula by Korean and Chinese forces. While the first example is on a state to non-state actor level, this second example of the so-called Imjin War was the initial conflict on the inter-state level, if one does not count the Mongolian ruled Yuan dynastic attempt to conquer Japan from the Korean peninsula as the first.<sup>1</sup>

As will be elaborated on below, China and Japan clashed in hot wars during the First and Second Sino-Japanese Wars in 1894-95 and 1937-1945, respectively. The historical memory of China being the hegemon on top of the cultural hierarchy in the tributary system up until the mid-nineteenth century, and Japan with its own imperial ambitions having conquered and colonized much of East and Southeast Asia's maritime territories during World War Two.

After the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands were annexed by Japan as a result of the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894/95 together with Taiwan (as China sees it), the international society decided they were to be given back to China after World War Two. This however, was not seen through to completion but rather they were kept under American administration, partly for strategic reasons associated with the Korean War and Communist China's move towards the Soviet Union (USSR), and U.S.-American protection of Republican China on Taiwan (ROC). The islets were transferred to—and since stayed under—Japanese administration during the 1970s. After a flaming up of the territorial dispute here and there, more recently, despite ever-increasing economic interdependence between the two rivals, the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute flamed up again as a result of an ownership transfer from Japanese private owners to the Japanese government in 2012.

The analytical focus of this paper will be the disputed claim of both nations to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, an archipelago of uninhabited islets and rocks in the East China Sea located between the Chinese mainland, the Taiwanese northern coast and the Japanese possessions in the southern Ryukyus. Specifically, this paper will use the theory of securitization and de-securitization of the Copenhagen School to contextualize the recurrent pattern of crises and flamed-up disputes associated with the Chinese and Japanese claims to these islets.<sup>2</sup> This may be the result of domestic political backgrounds related to legitimacy, for example, or the general international environment related to rising ambitions or balance-of-power politics, for example.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The theory which is the basis of this paper is the Copenhagen School's security theory with its concepts of securitization and de-securitization. This theory generally deals with 'the construction (or deconstruction) of security issues' (Chu, 2007: 33), which correlate to the concepts of securitization and de-securitization as used in this paper. Securitization can be defined as the act of elevating an issue from the non-politicized or politicized realm to the

securitized realm (Emmers, 2013: 131-146; Fierke, 2013: 187-204). As such, there are different types of units in this analysis that need definition:

1. *Referent Objects*: things that are seen to be existentially threatened and that have a legitimate claim to survival.
2. *Securitizing actors*: actors who securitize issues by declaring something—a referent object—existentially threatened.
3. *Functional actors*: actors who affect the dynamics of a sector. Without being the referent object or the actor calling for security on behalf of the referent object, this is an actor who significantly influences decisions in the field of security. A polluting company, for example, can be a central actor in the environmental sector—it is not a referent object and is not trying to securitize environmental issues (quite the contrary).<sup>3</sup>

(Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998: 36)

The referent objects could be ‘the state, (...) the nation. For a state, survival is about sovereignty, and for a nation it is about identity’ (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998: 36). However, these referent objects may also be the ‘national economies (economic security) (...) [or] species, or habitats (environmental security)’ (Emmers, 2013: 132). Actors that securitize issues may be ‘political leaders, bureaucracies, governments, lobbyists and pressure groups’ (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998: 40; as quoted by Emmers, 2013: 132). The actual process, as described above of making a politicized threat into a securitized threat, i.e. the process of securitization, is effectively ‘naming a threat as a security threat [which] elevates it above all others. In this elevation the identification of an existential threat, that is, a threat to the survival of a community, justifies a suspension of the normal rules of politics, allowing elites to take extraordinary measures’ (Fierke, 2013: 200). This is, in basic, the first stage of securitization. ‘The second and crucial stage of securitization is completed successfully only once the securitizing actor has succeeded in convincing a relevant audience (public opinion, politicians, military officers, or other elites) that a referent object is existentially threatened.

Only then can extraordinary measures be imposed' (Emmers, 2013: 134). However,

[t]he adoption of extraordinary means is not a requirement. (...) This means that a securitization actor can make successful speech acts while still deciding to address the existential threat through standard political procedures rather than extraordinary measures. Yet it can be argued that a complete act of securitization really consists of and demands both discursive (...) and non-discursive (policy implementation) dimensions. (...) Securitization injects urgency into an issue and leads to sustained mobilization of political support and deployment of resources. It also creates to kind of political momentum necessary for the adoption of additional and emergency measures.'

(Emmers, 2013: 135f.)

This framework of securitization and de-securitization of referent objects by securitizing actors and taking functional actors into account, as well as the insertion of a threat into the non-politicized, politicized and securitized realms, will be used in the following analysis section. In this case study the referent object is the island archipelago in dispute between Japan and China, the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. The de-/securitizing actors are China and Japan, but also Taiwan (another claimant to the archipelago) and the United States (through the alliance with Japan). Functional actors may be by-standers, and actors not directly involved into the dispute, like energy companies, fishers, or other relevant actors.

The suitability of the securitization theoretical framework is especially rectifiable for several reasons. First, although at first sight it seems like a straightforward sovereignty/territorial integrity issue, so under the political security rubric, there are other security interests at work which we can roughly order into the economic, societal and military security rubrics. These are natural resource exploitation opportunities in the East China Sea, like gas and oil, in terms of economic security; national identity dynamics in regards to societal security, especially noticeable by the strong reactions by the populations on

each side through protests and demonstrations to the extent of displaying destructive violence; and military security with regards to each nation sending their coast guards, military ships and aircraft carriers into the disputed waters, as well as the unilateral action on the Chinese side of establishing the Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea. Second, the fact that the dispute over the small island group came up and disappeared from time to time again and again, makes theorizing about it with the securitization and de-securitization concepts nearly ideal. Third, the importance of language to the securitization framework is another factor speaking which speaks for the application of this framework, especially because of the name of the island group as either 'Diaoyu(dao)', if one follows the Chinese claim, 'Diaoyutai', if one follows the Taiwanese claim, or 'Senkaku', if following the Japanese claim.<sup>4</sup> Diplomatically this has become a linguistic concern which is paid detailed attention to by the involved countries, as not to undermine one's own claim.

In the following analysis, the paper looks at the different instances of the securitization and de-securitization of the island dispute at hand. Since this happened very often and with different kinds of intensities, the analysis will focus on the most important ones throughout the over 120 years in which the dispute exists. While the securitization framework is majorly concerned with existential threats taken from the (non-)politicized realm to the securitized realm, the island dispute might not have been perceived as such an existential threat until perhaps recently. Easily described, an issue, like the sovereignty of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, moves onto the security agenda. Nevertheless, securitization theory defines security classically and foremost, as that of the state and its territorial integrity, i.e. its security on its borders versus other states, or in other words, its survival. The island dispute, at the level of China, Japan, or Taiwan claiming it their national territory, it can be said to be existential along the lines of this classical definition of security. In reality, it might not be such an existential threat to the respective countries, given that the islands are uninhabited, but what can count as a fourth point for the use of the securitization framework can be said to be the fact

that the respective countries were actually able to frame this in a way that enticed its populations to *think* that there is an existential threat given—represented by the other country claiming national territory.

### **3. The Respective Claims to the Island Group**

As indicated above, this paper is about the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, an archipelago made up out of five uninhabited islands and what is mostly referred to as three rocks in the East China Sea. Their location is about the same distance from Japan and Taiwan (170 km), the latter of which China considers part of its own. The islands are about double the distance away from Chinese mainland (330 km) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2014).

As the islands are uninhabited, it is not clearly associatable with either country by means of language, nationality, or ethnicity, but needs to be claimed on account of history, international law, or geography. The complicated claims of Japan and China are both in themselves sensical and amount to a legal Mexican stand-off, in effect, as June Teufel Dryer illustrates:

The PRC bases its claim to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands on three arguments. First, China's initial discovery, use, and ownership. Second, the Japanese government's prior acknowledgement of China's claim to the islands. Third, Japan's cession of the islands to China after World War II. Japan's claims also rest on three bases: that Japan has legal title to the islands, which were *terra nullius*, that is unoccupied, when it took them over; that it has administered the islands peacefully for over a century, holding residual sovereignty even while they were under U.S. administration; and that China previously acquiesced to Japan's sovereignty over the islands, which were and are uninhabited.

(Teufel Dreyer, 2012: 83)

One can add to this that mainland China's claim also rests on the fact that the islands belong to its 'province' of Taiwan, as they were administered together, historically

(Smith, 2013: 27-44, 32). Along the same lines, Japan claims the Senkakus to be part of its Ryukyu Islands, together with Okinawa. Also, Japan—as being the administrator of the islets—does not acknowledge that other nations lay claim to its territory, i.e. it does not see a dispute where there actually is one (Suganuma, 2000; Suganuma, 2007: 155-172).

Another factor that worsens the resolution of this dispute is of course that China's ambitions are growing together with the growth of its power which leads it to be more assertive. Combined with Japan administrating the islands and not seeing itself forced to compromise on the question of ownership of the islands, this situation shows many factors that could amount to an armed conflict in the near future. The importance of the islands themselves can only said to be geoeconomically and geostrategically to be of concern. China, in its naval ambitions, sees itself circled by an island chain of the Japanese islands, Taiwan, Philippines, and the Indonesian islands, i.e. the islands that circle the East and South China Seas. Taiwan is seen by mainland China as its own sovereign territory, but *de facto* it is of course not. That situation would make the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands strategically important to China as to be able to get through this island chain that has—in China's eyes—potential for supporting a naval blockade against it. The importance of the islands as a possible future conflict over them has also relevance to the United States which—while generally staying neutral over the sovereignty of the islands—has asserted that '[t]he Senkakus fall within the scope of Article 5 of the 1960 U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security' (U.S. Department of State, 2010; as quoted by Smith, 2013: 40); this would mean, if Japan and China would entangle themselves into a conflict over the islands, that the United States would have to intervene on the side of Japan (Danner, 2014). While the backing of Japan seems like predictable balancing behaviour, given the rise of China in Asia, the danger is that Japan's behaviour becomes too assured dealing with the new Chinese assertiveness.

#### **4. Securitization and De-securitization in the Diaoyu/Senkaku Island Dispute**

##### **4.1. Phase One: post-World War Two to early 1970s**

As indicated above, the islands had been in Japanese possession since the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894/95. Whether Japan unilaterally annexed the islets, or they were ceded by China through the Treaty of Shimonoseki/Maguan, remains controversial, and the view one takes depends on the claim one follows. Japan, obviously, sees the Senkakus separate from Taiwan, as their claim is that they belong with the Ryukyus; so, for Japan, the islets were not transferred with the treaty that ended the First Sino-Japanese War but the annexation of them was an action that had happened before and separate from the peace treaty of 1895 (Yu and Kao, 2007). For China, the Diaoyu islands were ceded to Japan together with Taiwan (Lee and Ming, 2012). Logically, when the colonies of Japan on former Chinese imperial soil were to be transferred back to China after World War II, the Chinese thought that the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands were transferred back to them with Taiwan, as they historically were administrated together with Taiwan within the Chinese empire, and thought to have been ceded as colony to Japan as consequence of the 1894/95 war. This was not the case but Taiwan was also not an actual part of the Chinese mainland after the Chinese civil war, either, since the Republicans sought refuge there. To both Chinese sides, unification of China was and is, for the most part, a goal for the middle to far future, and as seen from 1950 Cold War East Asia, this was to be more likely in the far future, as was the reversion of the Diaoyu islands, then, to the Chinese mainland. Likely, this can be seen as one of the reasons why the Chinese did not express their dissent in the United States administrating the islands after World War Two.

What actually happened after the end of World War Two, was that the U.S. administrated the Senkakus together with Okinawa and the Ryukyus, taking them over from Japan and as they had administrated them. This was to be temporary as a result of the American occupation of Japan and the later ensuing Korean War. The securitization and de-

securitization processes were not really existent on the Chinese and Japanese sides as of then—not surprisingly so, since China and Japan had domestic issues to resolve at the time, for example.

What triggered these processes in the early stages were several undertakings: Probably foremost, the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE)<sup>5</sup> carried out a survey of the potential natural resources usable for energy production in the maritime areas of Asia, among them the East China Sea. And ever '[s]ince ECAFE disclosed its survey results with regard to the East China Sea in 1968, the clash between China and Japan regarding the disputed islands has been deepening' (Suganuma, 2007: 159). The Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan which at this time represented Chinese interests through the seat in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) layed claim to the islands after this came to their knowledge, supported by mainland China (Durdin, 1970: 32). This was the first instance in which protest was recorded concerning the sovereignty of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, i.e. after 'the discovery of an underwater oil field, thought to be one of the ten largest in the world, in the area' (Teufel Dreyer, 2012: 85).

Also, the United States was in negotiation with Japan with regard to the reversion of the Okinawa and Ryukyu administration that the U.S. had assumed after World War Two. 'The Beijing government watched U.S.-Japanese negotiations over the return of Okinawa to Japan closely, but said nothing about the Diaoyu/Senkaku implications of reversion until the oil discovery. (...) By 1970[, i.e. after discovery of natural resources in the waters near it], however, Chinese media were describing these islands as China's sacred territory' (Teufel Dreyer, 2012: 85). The United States was well aware that, while Okinawa and the Ryukyus were rather clear cases of belonging geographically, historically and legally to Japanese territory, the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands were a vague case. Accordingly, the United States did not want to settle the sovereignty of the islands and was cautious about emphasizing that Japan would only receive the administrative rights back from the

U.S. and that the sovereignty of the islands shall be determined at a later date. The U.S. was so careful about the issue, since in the background many forces were demanding sovereignty over the islands (Blanchard, 2000; Granados, 2014). Japan and Taiwan/China for their parts, but also the Chinese population and diaspora through an overseas movement which essentially reinforced pressure on all involved to take stands:

In October 1970, some overseas Chinese, in particular Chinese students in North America, along with people in Taiwan and Hong Kong, joined hands to form the *Bao Diaoyutai Yundong* [保钓鱼台运动 or 保钓运动], or the “Protect the Diaoyutai Movement”, headquartered at the University of Chicago in the United States.

(Suganuma, 2007: 159)

This is a case—evaluating these two developments together—in securitization theory in which the people, or rather a part thereof, join Taiwan and China as securitizing actors, in this case the Chinese (overseas) population. Japan and the U.S. acted as desecuritizing forces here, as, for example, ‘Japan specifically requested the United States not to call attention to any controversy during encounters with the news media (...)’. The American side responded by ‘revising somewhat’ its press guidance, although it insisted to Tokyo that such actions did not imply any change in policy. Similarly, in April 1972, the State Department advised Henry Kissinger to avoid the ‘volatile nationalistic’ Senkaku/Diaoyu issue, by focusing “as little public attention on it as possible” (Smith, 2013: 36; quoting U.S. Department of State, 1972). In other words, the U.S. and Japan acted hand in hand to desecuritize the issue, working against the Chinese state and interest group actors. Given the alliance that the U.S. and Japan found and find themselves in, which also obliges the U.S. to come to Japan’s help, if there was a war over the Senkakus, and given Japan’s administrative control over the islands, their de-securitization of the sovereignty dispute is to be expected. The U.S. tried and tries to stay neutral on the sovereignty issue but, as June Teufel Dreyer asserts, ‘the U.S. *implicitly* included the Diaoyu/Senkaku group in the minor islands it had determined were under Japanese sovereignty’(Teufel Dreyer

2012: 84; italics added) as such a determination was pending from previous treaties (Cairo 1943, Potsdam 1945 and San Francisco 1951) (Hara, 2001). The U.S. was never neutral though on the rightfulness of the islands belonging under Japanese administration which it affirmed and affirms to this day, as well as accepting as to go as far as to join on Japan's side in case of armed conflict over them (Japan and the United States of America, 1960: 188).

Another development that was underway was the above-mentioned negotiations on starting official diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and Japan. Paul Smith (2012: 36f.) writes on this:

[I]n 1972, Beijing and Tokyo entered into the negotiations that would eventually lead to the opening of official diplomatic relations. The year had begun with China reasserting its claim over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Beijing argued that the islands were Chinese territory during the Ming dynasty and had been included with Taiwan when the latter was ceded to Japan in 1895. As negotiations between the two countries proceeded, both sides realized they could not reach a mutually agreeable settlement. Premier Chou En-lai reportedly downplayed the issue by stating that the islands were difficult to find on a map given their small size. Eventually the Chinese government agreed to set the dispute aside so that it could be addressed at a later date.

Essentially, China kept the Diaoyu sovereignty issue securitized since after the above-mentioned discovery of natural resources, while the U.S./Japan were trying their best to desecuritize it, or even keep it in the non-politicized realm. China, after beginning negotiations with Japan, reasserted its sovereignty claim, kept the islands on its security agenda, but reportedly agreed with Japan on their disagreement on this sovereignty problem, and decided to shelve the issue, i.e. keep it a pending matter until final resolution. At this time, quite clearly, Japan was in a more powerful position as the ally of one of the superpowers, while China was not in good terms with the Soviet Union anymore at this point, besides lacking economic strength

domestically. China, thus, joined the U.S. and Japan in de-securitizing the issue because it saw better relations with Japan as the more important aim, perhaps also simply using the Diaoyu issue as bargain in the negotiations. Being in the junior position, this was the best choice for China at the time, which, in China's view, did not end the issue, since, among other things, a peace treaty was not signed with Japan as of yet, in which the claim to the archipelago could possibly be resolved. Nevertheless, the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute was effectively desecuritized in 1972 for a couple of years after what Min Gyo Koo (2010: 112) calls the 'first round of dispute', with

[t]he obvious intent (...) to prevent the oil dispute from affecting the détente between Washington and Beijing. (...) Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai (1949-76) said: "There is no need to mention the Diaoyu Islands. It does not count as a problem of any sort compared to recovering normal diplomatic relations[,]" (...) thereby shelving territorial issues as well as other thorny bilateral problems.

This statement of Zhou Enlai concluded the first big incident of securitization and desecuritization of the island sovereignty dispute.

#### **4.2. Phase Two: the late 1970s**

The next development, or what Koo calls the 'second round of dispute', followed from the above Sino-Japanese diplomatic normalization, as China and Japan began their peace negotiations afterwards. Naturally, this eventually ended in the 1978 Sino-Japanese peace treaty (Koo, 2010: 112-114). Before that, though, as Koo (2010: 113) explains,

on April 7, 1978 when a group of anti-[peace treaty] Japanese politicians, consisting mostly of rightwing and pro-Taiwan LDP members, urged that the Senkaku matter be resolved as part of the [peace treaty] negotiations. During this period, the Soviet Union was negotiating a similar treaty with China's arch enemy, Vietnam. Those Japanese politicians believed that China would desperately need Japan's support for the anti-hegemony clause, thus motivating Beijing to compromise over the offshore islands.

However, raising the sovereignty issue at a very sensitive moment in the PFT negotiations caused a virtual collapse of the talks and the contending sovereignty issue soon became the focus of the day.

In other words, Japan actually securitized the Senkaku islands dispute in 1978 as it saw an opportune moment to do so. The reaction of the Chinese in form of their leader, Deng Xiaoping, was to put the Chinese weight against the Japanese claim, and, in effect, securitize the issue themselves: ‘in April of that year[,] Japan was surprised by the sudden arrival of an armada of Chinese ships and smaller vessels. (...) Japan demanded an explanation from the Chinese side, which described the affair as an ‘accident.’ Four days later, most of the ships and vessels had withdrawn, although the effects of the incident (...) would last for months’ (Smith, 2013: 37). Even though Deng Xiaoping was more interested in better relations with Japan and locking in the peace treaty, he saw himself forced to react to the Japanese securitization of the island dispute for domestic reasons. Still, the conflict was of short duration, as they went on with peace negotiations after a couple of months again. Finally, in October 1978, the peace treaty was ready to be signed, and—in regards to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute—it turned out to be de-securitized again with the conclusion of talks, as it did in 1972. Deng Xiaoping commented at the end of the process:

It is true that the two sides maintain different views on this question.... It does not matter if this question is shelved for some time, say, ten years. Our generation is not wise enough to find common language on this question. Our next generation will certainly be wiser. They will certainly find a solution acceptable to all.

(Pan, 2007: 74; quoted from Lo, 1989: 171f.)

One can talk about the figure of ‘shelving’ the sovereignty issue here again. Not only did China securitize and eventually desecuritize the issue in the 1978 instance, but Japan acted very similarly. Whereas Japan was very interested in not securitizing the territorial dispute in the early 1970s, it did securitize it in 1978 but eventually also desecuritized it. Sovereignty was not finally resolved in 1978

but the islands stayed under Japanese administration, and the larger picture of better relations was considered more important. In a way, what happened to China/Taiwan in the early 1970s, i.e. that an 'ultranationalist group could hijack [the] Sino-Japanese relationship' (Koo, 2010: 113), happened to Japan in 1978, too. They were, for example, able to '[erect] a lighthouse on Uotsuri Island in the Senkaku group in an effort to reinforce Japan's territorial claim to the islands, apparently without government opposition[, which] (...) would become the focal point of the island dispute a decade later' (Koo, 2010: 114). In so far, (a part of the) Japanese people were securitizing actors in this second instance as well, and actually the ones that initialized the securitization of the dispute, leaving the governments only reacting. The first reactions of the governments was seemingly welcoming the securitization of the dispute, though, as to speak to nationalistic senti-ments in their respective countries. In the end, the state actors desecuritized the issue, though, and rationalism won over emotion.

#### **4.3. Phase Three: 1990s and 2000s**

The Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute stayed hot in some nationalist groups emotions, though, and in what Koo calls 'round three' of the dispute of 1990-91, it was re-securitized by another Japanese ultranationalist group which wanted to corroborate the territorial belonging of the islands to Japan by renovating the 1978 built lighthouse for it 'to meet the safety agency's technical standards and applied for official recognition' (Strecker Downs and Saunders, 1998/99: 128). The Japanese government joined the securitization process by accepting this application for certification, i.e. for the lighthouse to be actually used with a beacon (Strecker Downs and Saunders 1998/99: 127-31). Reacting to this, especially Chinese in Taiwan and Hong Kong started to protest and also attempt to exert similar actions on the islands themselves; mainland Chinese protests followed suit, as well (Strecker Downs and Saunders, 1998/99: 116f.). Even though the involved state actors capitalized on nationalistic emotions again, soon, the governments desecuritized the dispute again, and contended to concentrate on the ever-growing economic relations again.

Whereas Taiwan was not an actor in 1978, it became a securitizing actor again in this 1990/91 dispute. Ultimately, de-securitization occurred, when 'the Japanese government rejected the lighthouse application by *Nihon Seinensha*' (Strecker Downs and Saunders, 1998/99: 118).

The years 1996 and 1997 mark an important, and fourth, instance of the securitization and de-securitization of the dispute, which became securitized again by ultranationalist interest group action: 'The 1996 dispute over the Diaoyu Islands began when the right-wing Japan Youth Federation erected a second makeshift lighthouse on July 14 to buttress Japan's sovereignty claim. On July 20 Japan ratified the Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), declaring a 200-nautical mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) that included the Diaoyu Islands' (Strecker Downs and Saunders 1998/99: 133). It might be the case that these two actions by an interest group and the respective state are not related but it would be a coincidence, if they were not. The pattern from 1978 and 1990 remains in this fourth instance, too, in that the securitization process is initiated by a part of the people, an interest group, and picked up by a state actor. But not only the Japanese nationalist groups were continuously active but also, 'even though mainland Chinese usually maintained a low profile on the Diaoyu disputes, overseas Chinese, in particular in Taiwan and Hong Kong, once again joined forces to provide momentum to the *Bao Diaoyutai Yundong*' (Suganuma, 2007: 160). The drowning of David Chan, one of the activists from Hong Kong, made the anti-Japanese protests even worse (Koo, 2010: 123). The state-to-state issue of the EEZ was added now to the dispute and made the Diaoyu/Senkaku sovereignty claims even more important than they already were, as based on their belonging to China or Japan, their EEZ would change. The two states, once more, agreed to disagree on problems of determining sovereignty:

Japanese Prime Minister Hashimoto's visit to Beijing in September 1997 and Chinese Premier Li Peng's reciprocal friendly gesture in November manifested their mutual efforts to restore good Sino-Japanese ties. The immediate payoff was a new bilateral fishery agreement signed on November 11, 1997. The new fishery agreement chose to

shelve the thorny sovereignty issue, while the areas near the disputed islands became subject to tight and carefully coordinated management by both governments.

(Koo, 2010: 126)

Thus, de-securitization took place, again, by the rational state actors, which, however, capitalized on a securitization process that the people had started and exacerbated.

For what Koo calls the ‘fifth round of dispute’ in the years 2004 and 2005, re-securitization of the island dispute originated in the re-rental of three of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the year 2002:

The Japanese government considers itself the owner of one islet in the group, Chiwei, while the others are privately held. In October 2002, for example, once again the Japanese government registered, and flaunted, its ‘rental’ (from private owners) of three of the five disputed islands ([D]iaoyu Dao; [B]eixiao Dao; [N]anxiao Dao) under a 22 million Japanese yen contract, for the period of April 1, 2002 through March 31, 2003. This move by the Japanese government sparked protests from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

(Suganuma, 2007: 160)

Interest groups, as well as the more general population were enticed by this re-securitization of the dispute, especially ‘erupt[ing] inside China during the Asian Football Cup in 2004’ (Suganuma, 2007: 160). The suicide of a Japanese consular envoy in 2004 was also related to the escalation of the island dispute as Chinese officials reportedly tried to blackmail him to disclose classified ‘information regarding Japan’s policy on the Diaoyu Islands dispute’ (Suganuma, 2007: 161). On a state-to-state level, China surprised Japan by having ‘beg[un] to develop a natural gas field exploration project in the East China Sea—the Chunxiao oil and gas fields’ (Suganuma, 2007: 162). The two countries, seeing that there was a need to tone the dispute down, came to agree to hold talks over ‘how to define

the EEZ boundary between the two countries, and whether to jointly explore petroleum resources and how. However, neither side seemed to be prepared to concede but instead insisted on its own position over the EEZ boundary. Beijing repeated its invitation for joint exploration but Tokyo rejected the offer by demanding China provide data of the gas fields first' (Liao, 2008: 66). A number of rounds of talks were held that eventually led to Japan accepting joint-development of gas and oil resources on the Chinese side which they were to have talked about in meeting in October 2005, had it not been for 'Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visit[ing] the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, on 17 October, for the fifth time since he took over office in 2001[which] (...) not only made the new round of talks impossible, but also led to [Beijing] (...) giv[ing] up hope to improve its ties with Tokyo as long as Koizumi remained in power' (Liao, 2008: 67). The fifth round of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute therefore almost ended with a diplomatic ice age between the two East Asian powerhouses. In 2006, after more rounds of talking about joint development and disagreement about the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands sovereignty, de-securitization can be said to have occurred, when the China and Japan reached a 'consensus (...) to set up a mechanism to avoid "contingencies" in the East China Sea' (Liao, 2008: 68). What concerns the popular anti-Japanese protests in China, '[c]ontrary to the usual impressions, the Chinese Government tried to stop and contain [them] (...), urging the people to be rational' (Hsiung, 2007: 19n22).

#### **4.4. Phase Four: current dispute**

Interestingly, Japan now—over forty years after the first round of dispute—'claim[s] that there was no formal agreement to "shelve" or put the issue aside in 1978 and that in fact no controversy exists' (Smith, 2013: 37). The current, sixth, round of securitization and de-securitization processes can perhaps be said to have begun in 2010, when plans for the mutual exploitation of the natural resources in the East China Sea were again frustrated in September that year because of the 'collision between a Chinese fishing boat and two Japanese Coast Guard vessels off the Diaoyu

Islands' (Wang, 2010). Japan, subsequently, detained the responsible Chinese captain but eventually released him after about two weeks again (Fackler and Johnson, 2010). China acted as a much more forceful securitizing actor in this renewed dispute over the islands, 'block[ing] crucial exports to Japan of rare earths, which are metals vital to Japan's auto and electronics industries' (Fackler and Johnson, 2010), for example. China had been growing economically in strength for decades, of course, and was one of the countries of which the economy came back quite quickly after the 2008 global financial crisis. This led many in China to believe that the U.S. was now definitely in relative decline, and China was gaining in power, and therefore should throw around its weight internationally more assertively. One consequence was a change in policy towards the islands under analysis here to reflect this new assertiveness, as Kei Koga (2010) notes:

China's assertiveness over its territorial sovereignty is growing. It is well known that China has been traditionally sensitive to territorial sovereignty, notably concerning Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang; yet this year, a similar level of sensitivity extended to the South China Sea and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands as its 'core interests'—non-negotiable interests. In fact, Chinese officials asserted in March [2010] that (...) the East China Sea, including the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, was newly added to the list of China's 'core' interests, according to the South China Morning Post. As China asserted in the case of the Senkaku/Diaoyu territorial dispute between Japan and China, if Beijing perceives interference of its territorial integrity by a third party, it will use any means, including diplomatic, economic and military, to defend it.

The time during the incident and the following months following were marked by nationalistic protests in both countries. As noted above, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, and other U.S. government officials, backed the Japanese side through confirmation of the Senkakus as defensible territory under their mutual treaty. Eventually, the situation appeared to have stabilized again to the extent that actually a celebratory visit of a Chinese delegation to Japan

commemo-rating forty years of official Sino-Japanese relations was planned for 2012. However, as with the earlier plans for joint-development of natural resources in the East China Sea, something thwarted these plans. The escalation in 2012 seems to have begun with the plan of an ultranationalist Japanese group in April 'to purchase the islands with cash collected in a national fund-raising campaign' (Smith, 2013: 27). This, in turn, sparked activists from Hong Kong to travel to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands again. In essence, parts of the population began the re-securitization of the dispute in 2012. August saw many anti-Japanese protests in China and perhaps drew in the government of Japan with action of their own: As explained above, the Japanese government used to merely rent the rights on some of the Senkaku islets. 'On 11 September 2012, the Japanese government signed a contract worth 2.05 billion yen (\$26.1 million) with Kunioki Kurihara, a private businessman, to purchase three of the five main islands that constitute the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island group, an action that effectively nationalized the islands' (Smith, 2013: 27). The Chinese government went on to cancel the planned celebration of four decades of Sino-Japanese relations. Whether or not the Japanese government thought that nationalizing the islands would create precedents and eventually desecuritize the dispute remains conjecture; Japan's actions to buy them certainly did the opposite and intensified the situation. The Chinese protests exerted destructive energy not only against Japanese cars and goods but also Japanese expats living in China. On many occasions since this, Chinese and Taiwanese military ships, including the Chinese aircraft carrier, regularly enter the waters around the archipelago more often, as to show protest of Japan's purchase of the islands (Takenaka and Kaneko, 2012).

The situation continued to be precarious throughout 2013 and worsened towards the end of the year until it reached a low point in 2014. Also, the use of Chinese and Japanese names for the islands has always been controversial since the first dispute over them in the late 1960s but remains so in this sixth round, too: In January of 2013, a '1950 document showing that China used to view

the Japan-controlled Senkakus as part of the Ryukyu Islands, or modern-day Okinawa Prefecture[, which] (...) reportedly used Japanese names, including Senkaku, to refer to the islets[,]’ (Jiji, 2013) was said to have been found in the diplomatic archives of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In late November 2013, China unilaterally set up an ADIZ over the East China Sea, roughly correlating to the EEZ it claims and its continental shelf. The U.S. reacted with protest and sent a military plane into the ADIZ. This did not really desecuritize this dispute but rather the opposite. Otherwise and especially before, the U.S. tried to act as a desecuritizing force by, for example, backing Japan with statements that armed conflict over the Senkakus would involve the United States through the alliance with Japan as recorded in the 1960 treaty (Whitlock, 2012); in other words the U.S. was and is promoting stability in the heated dispute by supporting the balance of power in Asia in supporting the weaker side, that of Japan. Even though Taiwan also sent its coast guard to record its protest, the Taiwanese government also tried to desecuritize the escalating dispute with the East China Sea Peace Initiative (Chen, 2013).

This newest round of dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands has so far not been desecuritized. What seems to have changed is the Chinese policy as a result of perceived relative gains amidst the 2008 financial crisis, president Hu, ‘[i]n July 2009, (...) set[ting] out a policy of “what must be done must be done proactively” (...) signal[ing] that China no longer worries about launching disputes with other nations’ (Shimbun, 2014). This policy was kept up and fortified by president Xi as ‘Chinese Dream’, recently (Shimbun, 2014). The announced increases in military budget spending by both sides, Japan and China, worsen the situation, too (Wong, 2014). Some observers have alleged that Japan’s prime minister Abe is exploiting the near-Cold War relations with China—some have described it as the low point in relations since after World War Two—in order to realize a three year plan that would see the constitutional restriction to the use of force in Japan removed, and Japan heavily rearmed by 2015 (Takahashi, 2014). Nevertheless, China tried to keep the anti-Japanese protests, while not forbidding them, under relative control, although control seemed to

have been lost in some cases during the height of the conflict.

## **5. Conclusion**

Having analyzed all six episodes of the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute using the securitization framework, several insights could be taken from it: In most instances, it was a part of the populace (nationalist activists in almost all instances) that initiated securitization of the dispute, whereas the state would usually desecuritize it in the end (China at end of the first two rounds of dispute; Japan at end of rounds three and four; both at end of the fifth), while capitalizing at times on the raging dispute for the purpose of putting itself in a better negotiating/bargaining position (China in 1972 and 1978; China and Japan at present). Also, the linguistic element of the name used to refer to the islands has become more and more important as to corroborate one's claim to them (Senkaku for Japan; Diaoyu for China/Taiwan). The recurrent flaring-up and toning-down of the territorial dispute can be readily said to be the forces of securitization and de-securitization by the actors involved. Also, whereas in most other securitization cases, the government identifies the existential threat and, perhaps, awakens nationalistic sentiments, in the Diaoyu/Senkaku case it is mostly the other way around.

The accounting for different security complexes in securitization theory makes theorizing about this dispute more rigorous, i.e. economic security concerns in relation to the gas and oil fields in the East China Sea, societal security concerns in relations to the heated nationalistic protests initiating and worsening each round of dispute, as well as the respective governments capitalizing of them for their own legitimacy, which is more so in the complex of political security concerns. Military security concerns could be said the, especially recent, use and abuse of the territorial dispute for military budget increases or the lift of the self-defense clause in the Japanese constitution, but also a rudimentary level, the defense of the nation-state's borders because it is a classic issue of territorial integrity to both but

more so Japan since it holds administrative rights over the archipelago.

Whereas especially in the first five episodes of the dispute, we can call the flaming-up of it a qualified securitization, since there were almost at all times larger security concerns than that particular island dispute, it nevertheless remains a securitized territorial dispute in those instances. However, the current, sixth episode of it, is in so far different that it is identifiable with the securitization concept as being ‘a threat as a security threat [which] elevates it above all others. In this elevation the identification of an existential threat, that is, a threat to the survival of a community, justifies a suspension of the normal rules of politics, allowing elites to take extraordinary measures’ (Fierke, 2013: 200). For China, this is less relevant since it is an authoritarian state; perhaps it can be said to be beneficial for the legitimacy of the new leadership under president Xi, but otherwise the Chinese elites did not need to persuade their population, or the ones protesting at least, that this is in fact a threat to its territorial integrity. As both governments partly capitalized on nationalistic protests, the legitimacy argument can be said to apply to both. For Japan, the above definition of securitization and its utility as ‘justif[ying] a suspension of the normal rules of politics, allowing elites to take extraordinary measures’ (Fierke, 2013: 200) suitably applies to the current dispute as far as Abe’s plans to remove military restrictions stemming from the pacifist Japanese constitution using the Senkakus and Chinese antagonism. However, the unilateral set-up of the ADIZ by China, the high increase in military budget, or ‘preparing for a “short and sharp” war with Japan’ (FlorCruz, 2014), can be equally argued to fall under such a category.

Even though it seems as though a de-securitization of the dispute may be not imminent, it would seem rational for the involved states to recollect themselves again and focus on mutual trade relations which are so important to the world economy. But to many observers, these eight islets and rocks have the potential to be to a Third Sino-Japanese War what the assassination of the Austrian archduke and his wife was to World War One: the spark to the fire (D.Z., 2013).

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## **Notes**

- 1 A Realist approach would likely do so, for example, as it sees the state as a unitary, monolithic actor. China was ruled by foreigners but the administration apparatus stayed the same and a Chinese dynasty was set up which in Chinese history is not seen as any different than other dynasties—except for the fact that the ruling family, or ethnicity, was not originally Chinese. The Qing dynasty which came three centuries after the Mongolian Yuan was equally one of foreign rule by Manchus. Nevertheless, it is considered a Chinese dynasty, and the fact that under this, last Chinese dynasty China had reached its largest territorial expansion is now-a-days actually determining in the territorial claims the Communist Chinese government is trying to make, as they base it on the historical map of the Qing dynasty.
- 2 Naturally, these islets can only stand as an example of securitization and de-securitization within the Sino-Japanese foreign affairs context. Another example one could have analyzed would have been the visits of Japanese members of government, especially Prime ministers, to the Yasukuni shrine which commemorates Japanese soldiers that fell victim to armed conflict. The fact that both nations make claim to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, have maritime access to them, and therefore can actively initiate and terminate physical or verbal action concerning them makes the choice of these islands as case study a better choice than the Yasukuni shrine, since

action can only be initiated, or not, by Japan, and China can merely react, or not.

- 3 Besides these, referent objects could also be what Ralf Emmers refers to as ‘the state (military security); national sovereignty, or an ideology (political security); (...) [and] collective identities (societal security)’ (Emmers 2013: 132).
- 4 ‘Senkaku islands’ is the Japanese term for the whole island group while they use different names for the singular islands. However, the Chinese name can be misleading, as the largest island in the archipelago is also called ‘Diaoyu(dao)’. In essence, the Chinese name is a *pars pro totum* and the only way in which the archipelago differs from the singular island of ‘Diaoyu’ is the pluralization of the term.
- 5 This is the historical name of the agency. Now it is called Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

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