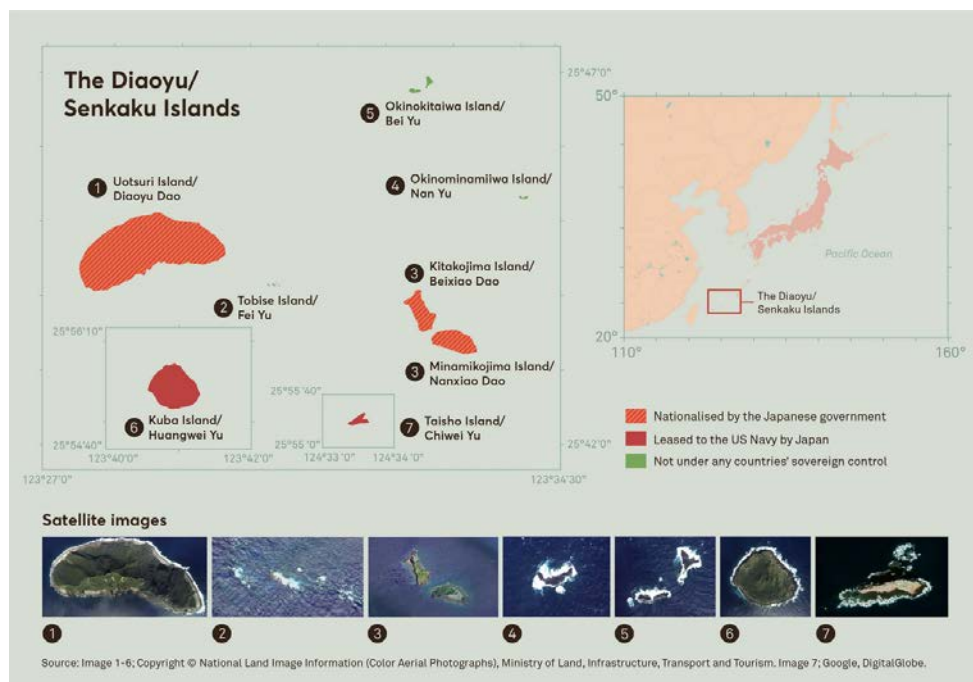


How important could be a small uninhabited archipelago in the middle of the East China Sea that is able to destabilize relations between two of Asia's major powers? The dispute between China and Japan over the Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu in Chinese) is a territorial conflict that has its historical roots dating back to the 19th century, influenced by the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895) and the Potsdam Conference (1945). These islands have been a matter of dispute due to their geostrategic importance and economic relevance.

Geographical Characteristics

The Senkaku/Diaoyu archipelago is formed of five islands and three islets, all of them currently uninhabited, in the East China Sea. The islands are located 140 kilometres southwest of Pengjia, Taiwan, and 170 kilometres north of Ishigaki Island, Japan. Their names and characteristics are:

- A. Uotsuri-jima (1) (In Chinese, Diaoyu Dao). It is the largest island of the group, with an area of 4.3 km² and a maximum altitude of 362 meters.
- B. Kuba-jima (6) (In Chinese, Huangwei Yu). It has an area of 1.08 km² and is located northeast of Uotsuri-jima.
- C. Taisho-jima (7) (In Chinese, Chiwei Yu). It has an area of 0.0609 km². It is the easternmost island of the archipelago.
- D. Kita-kojima (3) (In Chinese, Beixiao Dao) and Minami-kojima (3) (In Chinese, Nanxiao Dao). With 0.31 km² and 0.40 km², respectively.



Mapa 1 / Fuente: [Kontinentalist](#)

In addition to these islands, there are three islets: Tobise (2), Oki-no-Minami-iwa (4), y Oki-no-kita-iwa (5).

Historical Context

During the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the Empire of Japan achieved a relevant victory over the Chinese Qing Dynasty's troops. After the defeat, the Treaty of Shimonoseki was signed on April 17 of 1895. In the treaty, China ceded sovereignty over Taiwan, the Pescadores Islands, and the Liaodong Peninsula to Japan. During the same period, Japan also annexed the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, arguing that they were vacant lands ("terra nullius") and not under the effective control of any state¹. However, China claimed that these islands have always been part of its territory since, according to the Chinese government, its fishermen had used their waters since the 14th century. However, the political and military weakness of the Qing Dynasty, derived of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, prevented an effective protest of the annexation at the time².

At the end of World War II, the Allies agreed at the Potsdam Conference (July 17-August 2, 1945) the terms of Japanese surrender. In the following Declaration of the conference, it was decided that Japan was forced to return all territories conquered by force³. Later, in the Treaty of San Francisco (1951), which made an effective peace between Japan and the Allied powers, established the return of Taiwan to China but did not explicitly mention the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands⁴, that remained under Japanese control during the U.S. occupation. In 1972, the United States, after signing the Okinawa Reversion Agreement, transferred their sovereignty of the islands to Japan⁵.

China protested. It claimed that the islands were historically linked to Taiwan and also had to be returned. However, following the Okinawa Review agreement, Japan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) reestablished diplomatic relations by signing the Sino-

¹ Descifrando la Guerra. (2021a). *La disputa sobre las islas Senkaku/Diaoyu I: La posición china*. <https://www.descifrandola guerra.es/la-disputa-sobre-las-islas-senkaku-diaoyu-i-la-posicion-china/>

² BBC News Mundo. (2012, 14 of September). *China y Japón: Preguntas y respuestas sobre la disputa por las islas*. BBC. https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2012/09/120914_china_japon_islas_q_and_a_ar

³ Descifrando la Guerra. (2021b). *La disputa sobre las islas Senkaku/Diaoyu II: La posición japonesa*. <https://www.descifrandola guerra.es/la-disputa-sobre-las-islas-senkaku-diaoyu-ii-la-posicion-japonesa/>

⁴ StratCom Centre of Excellence. (2021). *Senkaku Crisis Analysis Report*. https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/senkaku_crisis.pdf

⁵ Parlamento Europeo. (2021). *El conflicto en las islas Senkaku*.

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)696183](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2021)696183)

Japanese Joint Communiqué.

It is important to mention that during the negotiations both countries avoided dealing directly with the status of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, which was interpreted as a strategy to prioritize economic and political cooperation⁶.

In fact, in 1978, members of a Japanese nationalist group with ties to the yakuza group Sumiyoshi-kai, known as the "Nihon Seimensha" (Japan Youth Federation), landed on Uotsuri-jima/Diaoyu Dao Island and built a lighthouse⁷. Although the action provoked protests from both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC), it did not prevent the signing of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between China and Japan, in the same year. The then Chinese vice Premier, Deng Xiaoping, suggested that the dispute would be left for future generations, to avoid a direct confrontation at that time. It was a pragmatic approach, since the aim was prioritizing the country's economic modernization, without generating friction with Japan⁸. In 2005, the Japanese government assumed control of the lighthouse built in 1978.

Despite the implicit agreement to postpone the dispute, over the Senkaku/Diaoyu, the tensions because of the Islands returned in the 1990s. Already in early 1992 there were quite a few conflicts between Japanese and Taiwanese fishing boats, but the biggest problems would come four years later. In July 1996, the same Japanese nationalist group built another lighthouse on Kita-kojima/Beixiao Dao Island. Two months later, on October 7, some demonstrators from the PRC and Hong Kong started another protest over the new infrastructure. Members of the "*Bao-Diao Movement*" (Diaoyu Islands Defense Movement), a Chinese and Taiwanese nationalist group created in the 1970s to defend Chinese sovereignty over the islands⁹, placed some flags of Taiwan and the PRC on the main island¹⁰. The protesters were quickly evicted by the Japanese Coast Guard, prompting the Chinese government to intensify its claims on the sovereignty of the archipelago. A year later, China and Japan established a fisheries agreement to regulate

⁶ Parlamento Europeo. (2021). *El conflicto en las islas Senkaku*.

⁷ Taipei Times. (2003, 26 of August). *Japanese nationalists visit disputed Tiaoyutai island*. <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2003/08/26/2003065276>

⁸ BBC News Mundo. (2012, 14 de septiembre). *China y Japón: Preguntas y respuestas sobre la disputa por las islas*. BBC.

⁹ Dashorst, B. (2020, 26 of August). *Baodiao and the history of postwar Taiwanese leftist thought*. New Bloom Magazine. <https://newbloommag.net/2020/08/26/baodiao-postwar-tw-leftist-thought/>

¹⁰ Wani, Y. (2012, 8 of July). *The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute and the evolution of the Sino-Japanese relations*. The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus. <https://apjif.org/2012/10/28/wani-yukio/3792/article>

the exploitation of marine resources in the area, without addressing the issue of territorial sovereignty. However, this agreement not only failed to reduce mutual distrust, but also drew criticism from both countries¹¹. In 1998, Jiang Zemin made the first official visit by a Chinese head of government to Japan. During the visit, he addressed that Japan needed to acknowledge its historical responsibility in World War II. This generated friction during negotiations on economic cooperation and regional security¹².

At the beginning of the 21st century, China and Japan held bilateral meetings in the framework of international forums such as ASEAN+3 and APEC. However, despite diplomatic efforts, lack of trust and pressure from nationalist sectors in both countries prevented any progress on the territorial dispute¹³.

Arguments of the Parties

Japan argues that the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands archipelago is part of its territory, based on the Principle of Effective Occupation and its continuous administration since the 1972 Okinawa Reversion¹⁴. According to the Principle of Effective Occupation, in the jurisprudence of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), a state must show continuous and effective control over a territory in order to claim it. Japan has administered the islands and their waters since before the U.S. occupation, assuming direct control of them since 1972, reinforcing its position. The Japanese position also argues that there have been no previous claims by China until the seventies, when possible energy resources were discovered in the area.

The People's Republic of China, on the other hand, argues that these islands have historically been part of its territory using historical Ming Dynasty's maps as evidence¹⁵. Relying on the ICJ Principle "Uti Possidetis Iuris", which holds that colonial boundaries must be respected after the independence of a territory, according to the Chinese argument, since these islands are historically part of Taiwan, they would be Chinese sovereignty.

¹¹ Descifrando la Guerra. (2021b). *La disputa sobre las islas Senkaku/Diaoyu II: La posición japonesa*.

¹² Organización de las Naciones Unidas (ONU). (2021). *Derecho internacional y disputas territoriales en Asia-Pacífico*. ONU. <https://www.un.org>

¹³ Parlamento Europeo. (2021). *El conflicto en las islas Senkaku*.

¹⁴ Embajada de Japón en España. (2021). *Preguntas y respuestas sobre las islas Senkaku*. <https://www.es.emb-japan.go.jp/politicaexterno/territorio/senkaku/question-and-answer.html>

¹⁵ Descifrando la Guerra. (2021a). *La disputa sobre las islas Senkaku/Diaoyu I: La posición china*.

This same line of argument is the one used with the islands in the South China Sea. The PRC claims that, after World War II, the territorial cession was misinterpreted, as the islands were to be returned along with Taiwan to its sovereignty.

Japan has proved continuous administration of the islands, in terms of effective occupation and international recognition, which strengthens its argument legally. As mentioned in the previous section, the omission of the islands from the Treaty of San Francisco (1951) kept the dispute open over their status after World War II, giving the opportunity to China to rise their interpretation. The lack of a legal resolution has allowed both nations to maintain their positions.

According to the United Nations Charter, Article 2.3 establishes mechanisms to resolve territorial disputes through a peaceful system, avoiding the use of force. However, both countries have avoided taking the case to the ICJ, opting for diplomatic demarches and shows of force¹⁶.

The most relevant aspect of the conflict is not the archipelago itself, but the dispute over the territory that surrounds the islands. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) establishes the so-called Exclusive Economic Zone. This extends up to two hundred nautical miles, about three hundred and seventy kilometres, from a country's baseline. In this zone, the possessor state has the exclusive right to exploit and explore natural resources, both in the water column and on the seabed. However, it must allow free navigation and overflight of the zone by aircraft from other countries.

Conflict in the 21st Century

The conflict, derived from the territorial dispute between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, which had been freeze, flaring up again in 2010. This year marked the height of hostility between the two powers, due to a series of incidents that significantly strained diplomatic relations. The repercussions of this confrontation severely affected the stability of the Asia-Pacific region.

The most significant incident occurred on September 7, 2010, when a Chinese fishing vessel, the Minjinyu 5179, collided with two Japan Coast Guard patrol boats in waters near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. The Japanese Coast Guard detained the ship's

¹⁶ StratCom Centre of Excellence. (2021). *Senkaku Crisis Analysis Report*.

captain, Zhan Qixiong, and his crew, claiming that the fishing vessel had made dangerous manoeuvres against their patrol boats¹⁷. When the arrest was made public, the People's Republic of China reacted immediately, summoning the Japanese ambassador to Beijing and demanding the unconditional release of the captain along with the entire crew. The Chinese Foreign Ministry called the action a violation of its territorial sovereignty¹⁸.

Following Japan's initial refusal, on September 15, 2010, China decided to increase the pressure by decreeing a series of economic measures, including the suspension of rare earth mineral exports to Japan. These were and are essential for the production of advanced technology such as electronic components and batteries¹⁹. Five days later, China also canceled high-level bilateral meetings and delayed negotiations regarding the joint exploitation of gas fields in the East China Sea²⁰. These measures increased regional tension and severely affected trade relations between the two nations. Finally, on September 24 of that year, due to diplomatic and economic pressure, Japan decided to release Zhan Qixiong. The decision was justified by citing the need to preserve the stability of bilateral relations. However, the Japanese government clarified that the measure did not imply recognition of Chinese sovereignty over the islands²¹.

Two years later, on August 15, 2012, a group of fourteen Chinese activists from the Action Committee for Defending the Diaoyu Islands set sail from Hong Kong with the goal of reclaiming and reaffirming China's sovereignty over the islands. Despite repeated warnings from the Japanese Coast Guard, five of the activists managed to land on Uotsuri-jima/Diaoyu Dao, the largest island in the archipelago. When they landed, they waved Chinese flags and proclaimed that the territory belonged to them. Japan responded by arresting the activists for illegal entry and transporting them to Okinawa for interrogation²². The arrests sparked widespread outrage in China, with several demonstrations held in various cities, some of which culminated in attacks on Japanese businesses. This action was responded with several demonstrations on Japanese soil.

¹⁷ BBC News Mundo. (2010, 19 of September). *China y Japón en disputa por islas*. BBC.

https://www.bbc.com/mundo/internacional/2010/09/100919_china_japon_senkaku_diaoyu_wbm

¹⁸ Descifrando la Guerra. (2021a). *La disputa sobre las islas Senkaku/Diaoyu I: La posición china*.

¹⁹ BBC News Mundo. (2013, 9 de febrero). *China y Japón: Tensiones por las islas Senkaku*. BBC.

https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2013/02/130209_internacional_china_japon_senkaku_diaoyu_tensiones_tsb

²⁰ CNN Español. (2021, 16 of September). *Japón traza una "línea roja" en la disputa con China por las islas*

Senkaku. CNN. <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2021/09/16/japon-linea-roja-disputa-de-la-islas-senkaku-con-china-trax/>

²¹ Embajada de Japón en España. (2021). *Preguntas y respuestas sobre las islas Senkaku*.

²² BBC News Mundo. (2013, 9 of February). *China y Japón: Tensiones por las islas Senkaku*. BBC.

The growing diplomatic pressure from both countries led the Japanese government to deport the activists two days later, in an attempt to avoid further escalation²³.



Imagen 1 / Fuente: Diaoyu, agosto de 2012 / Masataka Morita / AP

On August 19, 2012, in response to the actions of Chinese activists, a group of one hundred and fifty Japanese activists, including several local politicians and members of nationalist groups, went to Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands with the objective of reassert Japanese sovereignty over the archipelago. When they reached the vicinity of the islands, ten of them swam to Uotsuri Island, where they raised Japanese flags and sang the national anthem²⁴. This time, the Japanese authorities did not detain the participants, prompting the Chinese government to condemn the event as a provocation. In addition, protests in several Chinese cities intensified again, with acts of violence against Japanese companies and citizens²⁵.

In September 2012, the dispute escalated again when the Japanese government, led by Yoshihiko Noda, announced the purchase of three of the islands (Uotsuri-jima/Diaoyu Dao, Kita-kojima/Beixiao Dao and Minami-kojima/Nanxiao Dao) from the Kurihara family, private owners of these islands. The purchase was carried out under the argument of maintaining a stable and peaceful administration, an action that took place after Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara tried to buy them with public funding. This sparked another

²³ Descifrando la Guerra. (2021b). *La disputa sobre las islas Senkaku/Diaoyu II: La posición japonesa*.

²⁴ BBC News Mundo. (2012, 14 of September). *China y Japón: Preguntas y respuestas sobre la disputa por las islas*. BBC.

²⁵ CNN Español. (2021, 16 of September). *Japón traza una "línea roja" en la disputa con China por las islas Senkaku*. CNN.

wave of mass protests in China, as it felt its sovereignty was being violated, as well as an increase in Chinese military maritime activity in the region²⁶.

Clashes between activists from the two countries increased tensions and strained diplomatic relations between China and Japan. Beijing demanded the immediate release of the Chinese activists and reiterated that the islands are part of its sovereign territory. Tokyo, for its part, argued that the arrest had been carried out in accordance with Japanese law, as the islands are under its legitimate administration²⁷. The United States called for restraint, expressing concern about the possible escalation of the conflict. Although officially Washington is neutral on the question of the sovereignty of the islands, it has remarked that the US-Japan Security Treaty includes the defense of the archipelago in case of an external attack²⁸.

On the military front, the 2012 incidents resulted in an increased presence of Chinese Coast Guard vessels in the area and increased incursions by Chinese military aircraft into the airspace near the islands²⁹. Japan responded with air and sea patrols in the area, while increasing its defense cooperation with the U.S. and other allies in the region³⁰.

In November 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe met at the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit in Beijing. This meeting was the first between leaders of the two countries after years of tensions. During the meeting, it was agreed to establish communication mechanisms to avoid incidents in the East China Sea³¹. A year later, China and Japan established an emergency communication line between their armed forces to avoid clashes in the area. This agreement, although crucial for crisis management, did not resolve the sovereignty dispute over the islands.

Following Shinzo Abe's departure from the post of prime minister in 2020, Japan continued its diplomatic efforts for a peaceful resolution of the dispute. In October 2021, under the leadership of Yoshihide Suga, a telephone call was held with his Chinese

²⁶ BBC News Mundo. (2012, 14 of September). *China y Japón: Preguntas y respuestas sobre la disputa por las islas*. BBC.

²⁷ Parlamento Europeo. (2021). *El conflicto en las islas Senkaku*.

²⁸ BBC News Mundo. (2013, 9 of February). *China y Japón: Tensiones por las islas Senkaku*. BBC.

²⁹ StratCom Centre of Excellence. (2021). *Senkaku Crisis Analysis Report*.

³⁰ Descifrando la Guerra. (2021b). *La disputa sobre las islas Senkaku/Diaoyu II: La posición japonesa*.

³¹ CNN Español. (2021, 16 of September). *Japón traza una "línea roja" en la disputa con China por las islas Senkaku*. CNN.

counterpart to discuss the need to maintain stability in the region and strengthen bilateral ties³². In 2022, as part of the 50th anniversary of the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between China and Japan, the leaders of both countries held a virtual meeting. Both Xi Jinping and the new Japanese President, Fumio Kishida, emphasized the importance of economic cooperation and the prudent management of territorial differences. However, China's increased military presence in the region has generated new frictions³³.

Currently, Japan's unstable political situation may work against it as China, relying on its growing military might, may see an opportunity to make a stronger claim to the territory's sovereignty. This is because China has traditionally always preferred to deal with strong leaders. The minority government of Ishibe Shigeru with little parliamentary support and no strong position on the Taiwan issue contrasts with that of Shinzo Abe. The latter, a member of a Liberal Democratic party movement called Seiwa Kai, advocated a strong nationalist sentiment that prioritized defense and economic relations, making interactions with the Chinese president more fruitful.

However, in the months leading up to Donald Trump's presidential election, a little approach was seen between the two Asian powers. This was due to the possibility of a tariff war at the time, a reality that has materialized since the president took office. This purely commercial approach seeks new markets, although it is unlikely to take form. Firstly, because China is demanding recognition of its sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and secondly because, according to the latest surveys, the Japanese population's animosity towards the expansionist policy of its big neighbor is close to 80%. Furthermore, in March, Donald Trump commented on the need to strengthen bilateral ties with Japan to counter China's growing presence in the East China Sea³⁴.

³² Parlamento Europeo. (2021). *El conflicto en las islas Senkaku*.

³³ Organización de las Naciones Unidas (ONU). (2021). *Derecho internacional y disputas territoriales en Asia-Pacífico*. ONU.

³⁴ Hunnicutt, T., Brunnstrom, D., & Nomiya, C. (2025, 8 of February). *Trump touts close Japan ties but pushes for 'even' trade balance*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-meets-japans-ishiba-china-trade-war-simmers-2025-02-07/>

Military Interest of the Region

Although uninhabited, small in area, and mainly rocky in nature, the location of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands gives them great geostrategic interest. This location is key to the defense strategy of Japan and the United States in the East China Sea, as both countries maintain a security alliance under the Mutual Security Treaty of 1960. Several important international trade routes pass through the archipelago's waters, in addition to areas rich in fishery resources and potential hydrocarbon deposits. For China, control of this area would not only allow access to all these resources but would also give it an advantage in terms of power projection and surveillance in the region³⁵. A Chinese takeover of these islands could alter the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region, as it would open the door to the Pacific Ocean for the PRC Navy.

China's official position³⁶ on the Diaoyu Islands states that they are an integral part of its national territory, as is Taiwan. Military presence in the area is justified as a measure to protect its territorial integrity. This approach attempts to align with the principle of territorial integrity, which is recognized in international law. This establishes the right of a state to preserve and control its territory in the face of external interventions³⁷. China's military presence in the area seeks to balance the influence of other powers, especially the United States, which maintains a security alliance with Japan and another with South Korea. By strengthening its military position in the vicinity of the islands, the Asian giant aims to deter foreign intervention, demonstrating its ability to defend its territorial claims³⁸.

Control of the islands would make it possible for China to extend its defensive perimeter and establish a forward military presence in the East China Sea. This would facilitate patrol, surveillance and quick response operations in an area critical to its strategic interests³⁹. With this access, it would be possible to project greater power in the area, very close to Taiwan. Furthermore, it would strengthen its ability to control maritime and air traffic in one of the world's busiest trade routes.

³⁵ Descifrando la Guerra. (2021a). *La disputa sobre las islas Senkaku/Diaoyu I: La posición china*.

³⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2024, 6 de junio). *China's position on the Diaoyu Dao issue*. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/diaodao_665718/pl/202406/t20240606_11378063.html

³⁷ Organización de las Naciones Unidas (ONU). (2021). *Derecho internacional y disputas territoriales en Asia-Pacífico*. ONU.

³⁸ Parlamento Europeo. (2021). *El conflicto en las islas Senkaku*.

³⁹ StratCom Centre of Excellence. (2021). *Senkaku Crisis Analysis Report*.

In order to achieve the military objectives described above, the People's Republic of China has carried out several actions:

- A) Maritime and air patrols: With the aim of reinforcing their presence and sovereignty, Chinese naval and air forces conduct regular patrols in the islands' region. Chinese units conducting these patrols often have tense encounters with their Japanese counterparts⁴⁰ when they encounter each other in the disputed waters.
- B) Establishment of Air Defense Identification Zones (ADIZ): In November 2013, China declared an Air Defense Identification Zone over an area encompassing the islands, requiring foreign aircraft to identify themselves before crossing. This move was met with criticism from Japan, as it was seen as an attempt to control airspace in the region⁴¹.
- C) Military exercises and force deployment: To demonstrate the country's ability to deploy forces in the region, China has conducted military exercises in the East China Sea, including naval and air maneuvers, simulating scenarios of defense and recovery of island territories⁴².

For its part, Japan considers the location of the islands essential for its national defense⁴³. It is a strategic position for the protection of the Okinawa archipelago and the projection of its influence in the region. In addition, the islands represent an important point of contention against the growing Chinese military presence. To ensure their control, the following countermeasures have been taken:

- A) Increased military presence: Tokyo has increased maritime patrols by its Coast Guard in disputed waters to monitor the activity of Chinese vessels. It has strengthened its military presence in Okinawa, deploying nearby islands such as Yonaguni and Ishigaki, anti-ship missiles and air defense units⁴⁴.

⁴⁰ BBC News Mundo. (2013, 9 of February). *China y Japón: Tensiones por las islas Senkaku*. BBC.

⁴¹ CNN Español. (2021, 16 de septiembre). *Japón traza una "línea roja" en la disputa con China por las islas Senkaku*. CNN.

⁴² StratCom Centre of Excellence. (2021). *Senkaku Crisis Analysis Report*.

⁴³ Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores de Japón. (2025). *Japan's basic position on the Senkaku Islands*. Gobierno de Japón. <https://www.es.emb-japan.go.jp/politicaexterior/territory/senkaku/about.html>

⁴⁴ Essig, B. Ogura, J. Jozuka, E. (2022, 18 of April). *Yonaguni: Japón aumenta tropas en islas Nansei en medio de tensiones con China*. CNN Español. <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2022/04/18/yonaguni-tropas-militar-islas-nansei-aumentan-tensiones-japon-china-trax>

- B) Seeking international support: On multiple occasions, the U.S. government has reaffirmed that the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are protected under Article 5 of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty (1960), committing to their defence in the event of aggression. This security commitment has led to increased joint military exercises and modernization of Japanese forces, including the purchase of F-35 fighters and advanced destroyers⁴⁵.
- C) Regional security cooperation: Japan has intensified its security cooperation with other nations, such as Australia, with which it has carried out several military exercises. Also noteworthy is the country's presence in the QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) alliance, a strategic group aimed at countering Chinese influence in the region⁴⁶.

Economic Relevance of the Region

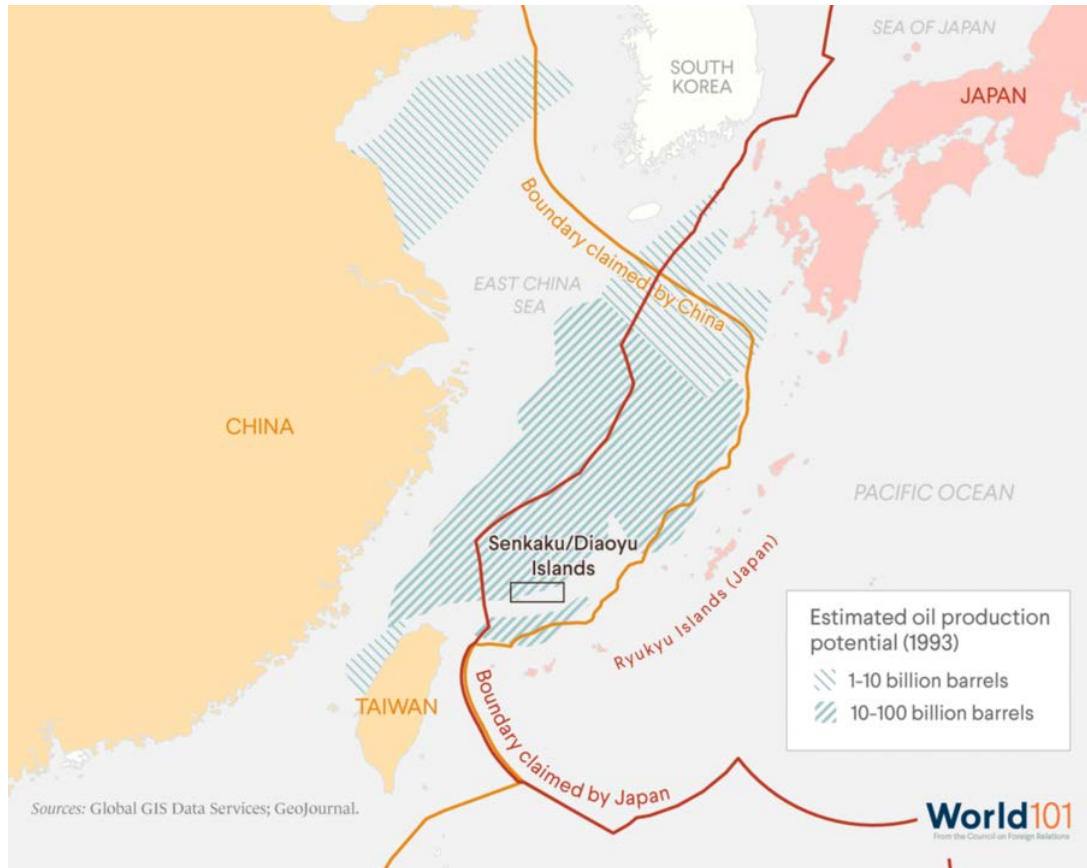
Oil and Natural Gas Reserves

In 1995, China discovered the Chunxiao natural gas field near the midline proposed by Japan as the boundary of both countries' EEZs. In addition, the East China Sea is considered as an area with potential for hydrocarbons. Studies conducted by the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) indicate that the subsoil of the East China Sea may contain large quantities of energy resources, especially natural gas. The area could contain more than 20 billion cubic meters of natural gas⁴⁷.

⁴⁵ Zona Militar. (2025, 13 of January). *Japón confirma demoras en la entrega de los primeros cazas F-35B que equiparán a los portahelicópteros de las Fuerzas de Autodefensa*. Zona Militar. <https://www.zona-militar.com/2025/01/13/japon-confirma-demoras-en-la-entrega-de-los-primeros-cazas-f-35b-que-equiparan-a-los-portahelicopteros-de-las-fuerzas-de-autodefensa/>

⁴⁶ Zona Militar. (2024, 23 of February). *Las armadas de Japón, EE. UU. y Australia realizan un ejercicio naval combinado en el océano Índico*. Zona Militar. <https://www.zona-militar.com/2024/02/23/las-armadas-de-japon-ee-uu-y-australia-realizan-un-ejercicio-naval-combinado-en-el-oceano-indico/>

⁴⁷ U.S. Energy Information Administration. (2024, 1 of July). *East China Sea*. U.S. EIA. https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/regions-of-interest/East_China_Sea



Mapa 2 / Fuente: World101

The interpretation and application of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is central to the dispute. China argues that its continental shelf extends naturally to the Okinawa Trench, which would justify a wider EEZ. Japan, on the other hand, advocates the middle line equidistant between the coasts of both countries. In addition, the Japanese have repeatedly expressed concern about Chinese drilling in the Chunxiao field, as it may extract gas from reserves that extend to the Japanese side of the proposed midline. Although the field is located on the Chinese side of this line, Japan argues that the underlying geological formations could extend into its EEZ, which would justify a shared resource claim. In 2008, it was agreed to jointly exploit the gas fields, but differences on implementation have prevented significant progress⁴⁸.

The exploitation of these resources could have a significant economic impact for both nations. The development of oil and gas fields would provide an additional source of energy, reducing dependence on imports. The value of these reserves is estimated to be

⁴⁸ Parlamento Europeo. (2021). *El conflicto en las islas Senkaku*.

worth billions of dollars, depending on international oil and gas prices⁴⁹.

Fishery resources

In addition to hydrocarbons, the East China Sea is one of the most productive fishing areas in the world. This region supports and generates employment for coastal communities in both countries, providing an important source of food. In Japan, the prefectures of Okinawa and Kagoshima depend on fishing in these waters to sustain their economies. At the same time, Zhejiang and Fujian, the Chinese coastal provinces consider the same waters crucial for their livelihood⁵⁰.

Fishery resources have been a recurring source of tension between China and Japan. Both countries have accused each other's fishermen of illegal incursions into their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). In an effort to mitigate these conflicts, in 1997, China and Japan signed a fisheries agreement establishing areas of shared fishing and mechanisms for cooperation⁵¹. However, current territorial disputes have hampered the effective implementation of the agreement, and fisheries-related incidents continue to be a source of diplomatic friction⁵². The waters around the islands are home to a variety of commercial species, including sardines, mackerel, hake and squid. These species are critical to the fishing industries, and their catch represents a significant portion of national fisheries production in both countries. In 2010, total fishery production in the East China Sea was estimated at approximately six million metric tons, with an economic value of about ten billion US dollars⁵³.

In an attempt to regulate fishing activity in the area, Japan and Taiwan signed an agreement in April 2013. With this agreement, Taiwanese fishermen were given access to new fishing areas, making the zone 1,400 square nautical miles. The agreement also established a joint fisheries commission to manage fisheries issues in the disputed

⁴⁹ Organización de las Naciones Unidas (ONU). (2021). *Derecho internacional y disputas territoriales en Asia-Pacífico*. ONU.

⁵⁰ Parlamento Europeo. (2021). *El conflicto en las islas Senkaku*.

⁵¹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). (1997, 11 of November). *Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of Japan on fishery cooperation*. FAOLEX. <https://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/es/c/LEX-FAOC140357>

⁵² CNN Español. (2021, 16 of September). *Japón traza una "línea roja" en la disputa con China por las islas Senkaku*. CNN.

⁵³ BBC News Mundo. (2012, 14 of September). *China y Japón: Preguntas y respuestas sobre la disputa por las islas*. BBC.

areas⁵⁴. Obviously, this agreement was not well received in the PRC, which caused an escalation of tension in the area.

Another incident took place in August 2016, when a Chinese coast guard ship escorted 300 Chinese-flagged fishing vessels into the waters of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. For four days, a total of fifteen Chinese Coast Guard ships, entered those waters⁵⁵. Recently, in January 2024, The Chinese Coast Guard ordered a Japanese fishing vessel to leave the waters surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Archipelago, along with several Japanese Coast Guard patrols⁵⁶. This incident is a sign of the continuing friction between the two Asian powers over fishing rights and territorial sovereignty in the area.

Management of fishery resources in the waters of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands presents several challenges:

1. Lack of dispute resolution mechanisms: Although a fisheries agreement between Japan and China has existed since 1997, it lacks an effective mechanism for resolving disputes. Furthermore, rising bilateral tensions and a lack of mutual trust leave the pact ineffective in addressing future situations.
2. Increasing Chinese maritime presence: The continued presence of China Coast Guard and Maritime Militia vessels in the archipelago waters, usually escorting Chinese fishing boats, has increased mistrust, making it difficult to distinguish between legitimate fishing activities and state-supported operations⁵⁷. In addition, the ships that are recently encroaching into the disputed waters are armed which complicates the peaceful resolution of possible incidents⁵⁸.
3. Illegal fishing: The high demand for seafood has led to excessive pressure on fish stocks, putting the area's long-term sustainability at risk. Furthermore, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing is a growing concern. According to

⁵⁴ Política China. (2013). *Taiwán y Japón firman acuerdo sobre derechos de pesca*. <https://politica-china.org/areas/taiwan/taiwan-y-japon-firman-acuerdo-sobre-derechos-de-pesca>

⁵⁵ Neil, A. (2017, 31 of May). *La creciente preocupación que provoca la tensión militar entre China y Japón por el dominio de los mares*. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-40080462>

⁵⁶ Europa Press Internacional. (2024, 28 of January). *China ordena a un barco pesquero japonés abandonar las aguas de las islas Senkaku*. <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-china-ordena-barco-pesquero-japones-abandonar-aguas-islas-senkaku-20240128063346.html>

⁵⁷ Neil, A. (2017, 31 of May). *La creciente preocupación que provoca la tensión militar entre China y Japón por el dominio de los mares*. BBC.

⁵⁸ Katsuhisa, S. (2021, 15 of April). *Japón, ante un reto cada vez más difícil en aguas de las islas Senkaku*. Nippon.com. <https://www.nippon.com/es/in-depth/d00698/>

reports from the United Nations General Assembly, these practices fail to comply with measures adopted by international bodies.

Conclusion

The conflict over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands is one of the most complex territorial disputes in Asia, as it brings together historical, political, economic and military factors. Since the restoration of diplomatic relations between China and Japan in 1972, the islands have been a source of constant tension, with episodes of diplomatic crisis and an increasing military presence in the region. While Japan claims sovereignty over them since 1895 and that they were reintegrated after the Second World War, China argues that the islands were historically part of its territory and that they were usurped. Throughout the twenty-first century, diplomatic meetings have attempted to mitigate conflict, but progress has been limited. The purchase of three of the islands by the Japanese government in 2012 exacerbated tensions, generating strong reactions from China, which have included popular protests and economic sanctions.

The Senkaku/Diaoyu region has not only symbolic and strategic value, but also economic. It is estimated that the marine subsoil of the area contains significant hydrocarbon reserves, which has motivated both countries to claim their sovereignty more firmly. In addition, fishing in the area is one of the most productive in the world, adding another level of dispute. The overexploitation of marine resources and illegal fishing have been the cause of constant clashes between China and Japan, generating a scenario where international cooperation is essential to avoid the depletion of these resources.

From a military perspective, the growing presence of ships and aircraft from both China and Japan has transformed the region into a potential focus of conflict. China has stepped up its presence in the area and is pursuing a strategy where the coast guard is used to challenge the Japanese administration of the islands, without reaching an open military confrontation. For its part, Japan has strengthened its security by increasing its military presence in the area and seeking regional strategic alliances such as the QUAD. Furthermore, it has the support of the United States, which has repeatedly reiterated that the Security Treaty between the two countries covers the islands. This balance of power has prevented direct clashes, but it has also heightened tensions in the region, increasing the risk of an incident that could trigger a larger crisis.

Diplomatic negotiations have been intermittent, and although several channels of communication have been established, the core of the conflict has not been resolved. In 2014, Xi Jinping and Shinzo Abe established a dialogue mechanism to try to avoid incidents in the region, but a lack of mutual trust has limited its effectiveness. In 2022, during the 50th anniversary of the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between China and Japan, efforts were made to strengthen economic cooperation and manage the dispute peacefully, although without significant progress. The positions of both countries, coupled with China's growing geopolitical influence in the region, Donald Trump's return to power and the onset of a tariff war, makes the possibility of a negotiated solution in the short term unlikely.

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