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A Regional Security Complex Account of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Conflict

Abstract: This paper considers the recent conflict in the East China Sea between the People's Republic of China and Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. An evaluation of the security dynamics through regional security complex theory, as developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, is undertaken. Regional security complex theory is defined, and the paper assesses the type of regional security subcomplex in Northeast Asia descriptively, and then analyzes the current territorial dispute within this framework. The potential for armed conflict is considered, and while there are many factors that could enable a war over these islands, a non-violent solution is found to be most likely. Ten years after Buzan and Wæver's assessment, this paper revises regional security complex theory's analysis of the region. A lower-level structure in Asia, with singular Northeast, Southeast, and South Asian regional security complexes, and a higher-level structure, moving from an Asian to an Indo-Pacific supercomplex (that includes the United States of America), best captures the security dynamics of 2013 most aptly.

Key words: China, Copenhagen School, Diaoyu Islands, East China Sea, Japan, Senkaku Islands, Nationalism, Northeast Asia, Regional Security Complex Theory, Sino-Japanese foreign relations

以地区安全复合体理论解读钓鱼岛/尖阁诸岛冲突

摘要: 本文分析了中日两国近期围绕钓鱼岛/尖阁诸岛在东海发生的冲突，并利用 Barry Buzan 和 Ole Wæver 提出的地区安全复合体理论，对当前的安全动态进行了评价。本文对地区安全复合体理论进行了定义，并对东北亚地区次级安全复合体的类型进行了描述性的评价，之后在此框架内分析了当前的领土争端。本文还分析了爆发武装冲突的可能性；尽管有众多因素可能引起战争，但达成非暴力解决方案的可能性是最高的。在 Buzan 和 Wæver 提出理论十年之后，本文修正了地区安全复合体理论对该地区的分析。在亚洲地区，存在从东北亚到东南亚再到南亚的地区安全复合体低级结构；以及从亚洲到印度 - 太平洋超级复合体（包括美国）的高级结构，这样的结构最准确的描述了 2013 年的安全动态。

关键词: 中国、哥本哈根学派、钓鱼岛、中国东海、日本、尖阁诸岛、民族主义、东北亚、地区安全复合体理论、中日外交关系

A REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX ACCOUNT OF THE DIAOYU/SENKAKU ISLANDS CONFLICT

Introduction*

In the late summer of 2012, renewed Sino-Japanese tensions over the Diaoyu, or Senkaku Islands, an archipelago under Japanese administration in the East China Sea, dominated the news. Even though there was no actual outbreak of violence between the People's Republic of China (PRC or China) and Japan, the nationalistic reactions from the population of each country were harsh and seemingly out of proportion to actual events. These reactions were triggered by the acquisition of most of the small uninhabited islands, from a private Japanese owner, by the state of Japan. The PRC objected to the purchase and has repeatedly claimed that the islands are Chinese territory. Sino-Japanese conflict over these islands has existed since the end of the Second World War, but such crises have until now been averted.

There is presently, from this historical dispute or conflict, a potential for open violence. This paper analyzes this conflict, within the framework of regional security complex theory. The paper will place the recent conflict between China and Japan within current Northeast Asian regional security dynamics, and make theoretically derived recommendations for its solution.

Regional Security Complex Theoretical Framework

Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's regional security complex theory (RSCT)¹ accounts for the growing regionalization of conflict in the post-Cold War world. Whilst post-Cold War security issues "[would] take on a more regionalized character,"² they argued, the continuing presence of global players could be accounted for by the concept of "penetration"³ into regional security complexes. As such, and in accepting regionalization, and thus a regional focus; domestic and global issues may still be analyzed within the regional framework based analysis. For RSCT region is thus defined as "a distinct and significant subsystem of security relations exist[ing] among a set of states whose fate is that they have been locked into geographical proximity with each other."⁴ The regional security complex (RSC) may be described by the term subsystem; have subcomplexes, and be subsumed into a greater security supercomplex.

RSCT is a hybrid theory. It integrates elements commonly associated with neorealism and constructivist theory.⁵ It is neorealist because it acknowledges that the distribution of power

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¹ See Barry Buzan, and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: the structure of international security* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

² Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: a new framework for analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998), 9.

³ See Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, 46-47.

⁴ Barry Buzan, *People, States, and Fear: an agenda for international security studies in the post-Cold War era, 2nd edition* (Brighton, UK: The Harvester Press, 1991 [1983]), 186.

⁵ Obviously, neorealism and constructivism cannot be reduced to merely distribution of power and patterns of amity and enmity, respectively, but are much more complex than that. For a good account of competing

and geographical factors play a substantial role. In a neorealist sense, it also accounts for some systemic and polarity concerns—however the regional level is paramount.

The regional level is given primacy because insecurity, RSCT argues, is created by near threats; they arise from proximity, and not from distant countries. Based on this, the world may be understood as several RSCs—Asia, for example, having a South Asian RSC, or an East Asian RSC. The East Asian RSC may then be divided into the Southeast and Northeast Asian regional security subcomplexes. The Northeast Asian regional security subcomplex is the focus of this paper.

Constructivist theory forms the second part of hybrid RSCT. This part identifies that patterns of amity and enmity should be given relevance in the analysis of a RSC. In addition, securitization and de-securitization warrants that security issues should not be analyzed separately.⁶ Thus, beside military capacity or balance of power, RSCT having been hybridized from neorealism and constructivism, accepts that social, political, economic, and environmental issues must be taken into the equation, and especially those that are regionally relevant.

Thus RSCT considers the following variables, whilst being regionally fixated: social construction and patterns of amity and enmity, the boundary of the RSC, the anarchic structure of the system, and the polarity as in the distribution of power between the states in a RSC.⁷ Finally RSC theorists and RSCT, in studying specific RSCs may describe them with terms along a continuum, such as ranging from conflict formation to security community.⁸

With this understanding of RSCT therefore, three key reasons may be clearly stated which make it especially apt to be used for the analysis of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands conflict. Firstly, the conflict is of a regional nature, and yet the role of the United States of America (US), in particular, its *penetration* of the Northeast Asian regional security subcomplex (NARSSC), primarily via its alliance with Japan, is a significant factor that may be accounted for through the use of RSCT. Secondly, RSCT's emphasis on patterns of amity and enmity is highly relevant for the study of Sino-Japanese relations which are profoundly historically and emotionally *loaded*. RSCT allows for consideration and analysis of the history of East Asian relations. Finally, the neorealist component of RSCT links these non-conventional social concerns, to the reality of power capabilities, such as nuclear weapons, and gives RSCT the ability to predict based upon power relations.

Northeast Asian Regional Security Subcomplex Defined

What are the regional dynamics of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands conflict as seen through RSCT? Within the NARSSC, to effectively treat it as its own RSC, what is of relevance? The relations and capacity of states/nations within this RSC—China, Japan, the Democratic

explanations of international security, see, for example, Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, 6-14. For a better definition of neorealism, see, for example, Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1979); for a better definition of constructivism in relation to security, see, for example, Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: norms and identity in world politics* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996).

⁶ See Ole Wæver, "Aberystwyth, Paris, Copenhagen: The Europeaness of new 'schools' of security theory in an American field." In Arlene B. Tickner, and David L. Blaney, eds., *Thinking international differently* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2012).

⁷ See Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, 53.

⁸ See *ibidem*, 53, or Buzan, *People, States, and Fear*, 186-229.

People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the Republic of China (Taiwan)—clearly define it as a great-power-competition-RSC. There is a rivalry between Japan and China which defines the NARSSC, as opposed to RSCs which are centered on one power, such as the European Union in Europe or the US in North America. In addition, the rivalry is insulated, as its proximity to other great powers is buffered by the great geographic size/importance and inverse power of regional neighbors Mongolia, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, and the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. The recent historical dynamics of security relations are moving from security regime to conflict formation, and are far from a security community. This is even though there has been little violent conflict since the early/mid-1950s; but feasibly the region could move towards a security regime; however, recent events have the RSC moving closer to conflict formation again.⁹

Looking at the dynamics within the different sectors of security-related issues in Northeast Asia, a more holistic picture of the (lack of) integration of the RSC may be assessed.¹⁰ Economically, a trilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the ROK, China, and Japan has been in negotiation since 2009 but so far without much materialization.¹¹ Integration on this economic level happens, though, more within the East Asian RSC (i.e. together with the Southeast Asian states in such institutions as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN], the ASEAN Regional Forum, or the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum.

Societally, violent events prior to, but most recently from the Second World War period, have resulted in repercussions of resentments that are an immense issue for regional security (i.e. regional societal responses to Japanese Prime Minister Abe's recent visit to the Yasakuni Shrine an exemplar of resentment and repercussion). This concerns Japanese war crimes during the occupation of China, its general militarism and imperialism during that era, but also a historically strong China which with the current (re-)rise of China is coming to the fore again. Nationalism may easily endanger the relations within the RSC.

However, inversely, there are many cultural and other similarities that are shared among the nations in the NARSSC, concerning beliefs (for example Confucianism, Buddhism) or linguistic roots. Regional environmental security and natural catastrophes are an ever looming common danger (for example, earthquakes or tsunamis).¹² On the integrative side of environmental security cooperation, there are some initiatives present, such as the Northwest Pacific Action Program or the Northeast Asian Sub-regional Program for Environmental Cooperation.¹³

However, the common regional interests that bind to build the capacity to manage regional political security issues are greatly undermined by the lack of political integration, which is militated against by the societal insecurity and the generated patterns of enmity. Presently

⁹ E.g. the North Korean nuclear ambitions, its new leadership, and the present conflict.

¹⁰ See Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*.

¹¹ This is even though Japan and China are each other's number one trade partner, when looking at single countries.

¹² China has largely neglected environmental security in the past and rather seems to react to the past maladministration of its resources. Regionally seen, however, by the relocation of factories of Korean and Japanese businesses into the Chinese mainland, or their investment into factories there, Japan and Korea must be said to bear part of the blame that Chinese environmental pollution contributes to global warming.

¹³ See Lee Tai Hwan, "Regional Cooperation in Northeast Asia," In Yunling Zhang, ed., *Emerging East Asian Regionalism: trend and response = Dong ya qiu yu zhu yi: qiu shi yu hui ying*, (Beijing: World Affairs Press, 2005).

penetration of the NARSSC provides stability. By neorealist superpower measures of missiles and bombs, the US projects power and penetrates the region with security guarantees to the ROK, Japan, and *de facto* to Taiwan.

Militarily, at the regional level, Lanteigne's work is a common example of scholars who profess that China has shown "a strong post-Cold War aversion to alliances"¹⁴ which also weighs against the formation of a security regime in the NARSSC. China has developed nuclear weapons as an ultimate defense, and although Japan has not, Japan still has a nuclear technology capability that could be converted into useable nuclear weapons in a matter of months, if it believed there a need arising from dynamics in the DPRK or China. In the interim, Japan may presently rely on the US's nuclear umbrella.

The Dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Contextualized in NARSSC Dynamics

The NARSSC is arguably moving towards a conflict formation RSC because of the lack of institutions supporting stability and interdependence between the units. The main problem behind the lack of institutions is the societal security concerns underlying collective memory of the populations of the states involved. The vicious cycle in the great power regional rivalry is the Japanese fear of an all-to-powerful rising China necessitating Japan to become more involved; fear of China "help[s] erode Japan's isolationism and induce[s] Tokyo to become more involved in multilateral security policy-making, thereby increasing Japan's influence in the international arena" argues Ong.¹⁵ Japanese increasing involvement evokes Chinese fears and cyclically Japan is drawn into further great power regional rivalry. Thus, Japan may seek to "enhance [its] international role while maintaining its status as a pacifist state" argues Tamaki.¹⁶ Thus the US's role in the region should be seen as inherently positive by both states, as providing stability through its alliances. Recently, it also has been influencing Japan to enter into FTA negotiations with its neighbors.¹⁷ The first step to build more confidence could be the announced trilateral FTA. However, Japan may be reluctant to join into an FTA with its neighborhood because security-wise it has less leeway militarily than its neighbors because of its 'comprehensive security' approach to defense.¹⁸

Historically, since the 1894/95 Sino-Japanese War, the administration of the eight islands of Diaoyu/Senkaku have not been under Chinese control but were administrated within a Taiwanese district under Japanese tutelage.¹⁹ After Japan was defeated to end the Second World War within the NARSSC, it was decided by the victorious US to give them back to China but the political circumstances of the Cold War did not warrant US to do so given the Chinese Communist Party victory to secure mainland China and create the PRC in 1949. Thus until the 1970s, the uninhabited Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands remained within US

¹⁴ Marc Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy: an introduction* (London: Routledge, 2009), 66.

¹⁵ Russell Ong, *China's Security Interests in the Post-Cold War Era* (Richmond, VA: Curzon, 2002), 82.

¹⁶ Taku Tamaki, "'Surrounding Areas' and the Recalibration of Japan's Threat Perception," *East Asia*, 29 (2) (2012): 187-213, 187.

¹⁷ Takashi Terada, "Northeast Asia's eternal triangle is really an American affair of sorts," (July 18, 2012); retrieved 10-15-2012, from <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/07/18/northeast-asia-s-eternal-triangle-is-really-an-american-affair-of-sorts/>.

¹⁸ Glenn D. Hook, Julie Gilson, Christopher W. Hughes, and Hugo Dobson, *Japan's International Relations: Politics, Economics and Security* (London: Routledge, 2001).

¹⁹ See, for example, S.C.M. Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895: perceptions, power, and primacy* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

administration together with nearby Okinawa. Then the US transferred the administration to the Japanese where it has remained ever since.²⁰

At the same time, the 1970s saw a normalization of Sino-Japanese relations; both agreed—since they disagreed over the islands—to simply deal with the issue later and concentrate on the bettering of relations in general. However, especially during the 1990s and mid-2000s conflict over the islands arose again.²¹ The islands had remained in private hands until recently officially purchased, from the private owner, by the Japanese government. This, in turn, triggered nationalist reactions in both countries, and led to ships being sent to the waters around the archipelago to mark each country's position non-violently.

However, what has happened so far in the Diaoyu/Senkaku Island conflict is not escalation when only military actions are considered; they were metaphorical of their conflicting opinions built over decades. Although China is trying to rise peacefully and focus its militarizing efforts on increasing asymmetric capabilities, such as cyber warfare, until the People's Liberation Army is fully up to par with the US, this territorial dispute shows how China is not completely satisfied with the status quo in the case of Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. However, China is trying to play the role of not being a revisionist power and being acceptant of the status quo—a neo-Bismarckian giant, to not scare others off.

The societal security concerns matter for this conflict on a variety of levels. Should China lose the islands in a settlement, it could have implications also for its claims to suzerainty over a plethora of *de jure*-autonomous territories on the Chinese mainland, and possibly trigger a new wave of demonstrations in Tibet and Xinjiang. Secondly, there is a more than latent nationalism in China with a population that is very proud of their country's economic growth over the last three decades. Increasingly, Japan is employed publically in China to define Chinese identity against the 'other', being Japan. This part of societal security concerns is the more urgent and alarming part which could lead to an escalation of the conflict.

Importantly, the economic security sector concerns surrounding the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands conflict are threefold: First, the archipelago and its surrounding waters are resource-rich with gas and oil reserves that are attractive to both states to calm their energy hunger. Second, this conflict could earnestly impair the continuation of the initial phase of the trilateral FTA talks.²² Third, during the nationalistic demonstrations following escalation of the conflict, there were reports of overt anti-Japanese acts in China that went as far as plundering Japanese electronics stores, setting Japanese cars on fire and even hitting innocent Japanese citizens residing in China, as well as people calling for a boycott. The potential for such demonstrations was present throughout the last years, but the Chinese government did not permit them to materialize into anything significant to the NARSSC.

²⁰ See Paul J. Smith, "The Senkaku/Diaoyu Island Controversy: a crisis postponed," *Naval War College Review*, 66 (2).

²¹ For a fuller historical account, see *ibidem*.

²² Yonhap News Agency, "Territorial Dispute May Affect Launch of Northeast Asia FTA Talks: official," (September 26, 2012); retrieved 10-28-2012, from <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/business/2012/09/26/5/0502000000AEN20120926008500320F.HTML>.

An RSCT Prediction for the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Conflict

Predicting whether or not there will be armed conflict over this island dispute, there are certainly some factors that warrant such fears. On a domestic level, nationalism is on the rise in both nations. Further, neither within NARSSC, nor within the East Asian RSC is there multilateral security institutions set-up through which a conflict could be discussed and solved. The lack of integration in Northeast Asia, generally, is dangerous concerning this dispute. The general patterns of enmity between the two nations also increase the likelihood of misperception, and emotions and honor playing a role in the formation of a conflict.

However, there are many factors that positively constrain actions leading to violence. Domestically, the focus on economic development should keep, especially China, from engaging in too offensive actions. Further integration through a Northeast Asian FTA or of Northeast Asian states within ASEAN could also avert violence between China and Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Importantly and based on the logic of the neorealist theoretical part of RSCT, the fact that China is a nuclear power and Japan is under the nuclear security umbrella of the US should mitigate against direct conflict between the two. Significantly therefore the penetrating role of the US in Northeast Asia provides stability through its alliance with Japan and a positive effect through pushing its ally towards a FTA with China and the ROK.

All in all, RSCT has no clear predictive power in the case of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands conflict. A tentative prediction would be that there will not be direct conflict over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands that is willingly initiated by both. However, a conflict commenced via misperception or chance cannot be totally ruled out, which is also the nature of a subcomplex like the Northeast Asian one that is in conflict formation and dictated by a rivalry between two powers with a deep-seated history.

Conclusion

For a broader conclusion on the current conflict of the East China Sea islands in question, we should take the role of the US into account. For the successful prevention of a conflict over the islands, the US will have to actively manage Northeast Asian security relations—by being primarily a balancer. The US provides stability by its presence and alliance in and with the ROK and Japan, respectively, deterring China and the DPRK. The US could take a role much like the United Kingdom in the concert of Europe after the Napoleonic Wars up until the Second World War.²³ Such management, via penetration into the NARSSC, if successful, may prevent violent actions over these islands that are contested within a broader Sino-Japanese regional rivalry.

Theoretically, the rise of China has made the higher-level Asian supercomplex more important than the lower-level RSC (i.e. the South Asian and East Asian RSCs, or regional security subcomplexes, such as the SARSS and the NARSS). Buzan and Wæver's analysis of East Asian regional security dynamics merging the latter two before 1990 separately existing RSCs into a single East Asian RSC might have been correct in 2003 due to the fact that relations of China with ASEAN were at their high. However, relations of China with ASEAN have deteriorated since, and are now at a low. Conflicts in the South China Sea (China with

²³ See, e.g., Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

Southeast Asian states) and in the East China Sea (between China, ROK, Japan, and Taiwan) are isolated in the respective Southeast Asian and Northeast Asian regions. On the other hand, the US has announced, and also acted upon a pivot to Asia, or rebalancing, foreign policy shift from the Middle East to Asia, and its efforts to forge a Trans-Pacific FTA—promising to be a more active actor in its backyard. Also, the rise of China ever increases the importance of the higher-level regional security complex, which is what Buzan and Wæver called the Asian supercomplex.

These four dynamics warrant a re-evaluation of Buzan and Wæver's 2003 assessment. On the one hand, the analysis of this paper suggests that the singular RSCs in Asia are becoming more important (i.e. to think of Asia as South Asian, Northeast Asian, and Southeast Asian RSCs again). On the other hand, there are dynamics—the ever stronger involvement of the US in the Asia-Pacific, FTA plans including states across the Pacific, and the rise of China involving all countries of Asia—which warrant replacing Buzan and Wæver's Asian supercomplex with an Indo-Pacific supercomplex in which the US is a full actor.