



# Rising above the rocks in the East China Sea

*Could splitting or sharing island ownership offer China and Japan a solution to the Diaoyu Dao / Senkaku standoff?*

GODFREY BALDACCHINO

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, NATIONAL SECURITY | ASIA, EAST ASIA

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**There are options open to China and Japan to resolve their differences over the uninhabited Diaoyu Dao / Senkaku islands. But they require a little creative thinking, Godfrey Baldacchino writes.**

Once again, Tokyo and Beijing are sabre-rattling over a bunch of uninhabited rocks in the East China Sea. Expect more of the same.

In August 2016, the People's Republic of China (PRC) concluded naval exercises, both in the mid-Pacific as part of the biennial Rim of the Pacific exercise, or [RIMPAC](#), jointly with the US Navy and vessels from 25 other countries, including Japan, as well as individually in the Sea of Japan. At the same time, the Japanese Government has protested against the presence of some 230 Chinese (mainly fishing) vessels in or near what Japan claims as its territorial waters around what it calls the Senkaku islands. Japan notionally administers these islands as part of Ishigaki City, in Okinawa Prefecture; but China (including Taiwan/ROC) claims that these islands, which it calls Diaoyu Dao, have been Chinese territory for centuries, first lodging such a claim officially in 1971.

China claims that, in 1978, the respective leaders of the two neighbouring states had 'agreed to disagree' as to the issue of ownership over the islands. So Beijing was angered when the Noda Government of Japan unilaterally committed an act of implicit sovereignty in 2012: by purchasing the islands from private hands (to prevent them from falling into the hands of a nationalist hawk). And in 2013, Beijing declared an Air-Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over what Japan considers its territorial waters around these same islands.

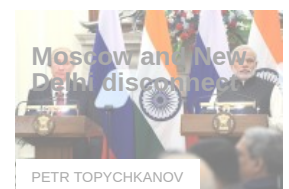
## About the Author



### Godfrey Baldacchino

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Episodes of Japanese and Chinese Coast Guard vessels skirmishing in the waters off Diaoyu Dao/Senkaku, as well as military aircraft venturing into contested air space and begetting scrambled jets from the other side in response, have raised the spectre of regional, even global conflict, which could result even from human error or accident. Yet it seems that these actions have subsided to a dull and ritual theatre. The latest spat is no more dramatic. All along, Tokyo has refused to admit or concede that it has a territorial dispute with China over these islands.

This intricate *pas de deux* has had many, including the media, worrying about a potential escalation to World War III: the US is committed to defending Japan via the US-Japan Mutual Defence Treaty; and, while the US has steered clear of issues of recognition over the disputed archipelago, US President Obama [explicitly mentioned the Senkakus](#) – using only their Japanese name – as falling within the purview of that Treaty in April 2014.

There are many ways of analysing this low-key but potentially explosive confrontation: the islands are uninhabited; they are small; they command no natural resources; and any oil and sub-seabed resources in their territorial seas are not worth mining in the current market. Yet, nationalist fervour can be, and has been, easily fanned: the 2012 ‘nationalisation’ of the islands was met by protests and the vandalism of Japanese products in China. People have died trying to land on the islands to plant flags.

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With this in mind, and with no resident islanders to deal with, it appears that both sides have opted for the current stalemate as the solution in the short to medium term. The risks of escalation from keeping the status quo are considered minimal; and the occasional spat whips up domestic support for public policy, thus boosting the popularity and benefiting the Xi Jinping and Shinzo Abe governments who both wish to see their countries gain respect in military terms.

Of the two countries, I would argue Japan is the one least experienced in bilateral accommodation. It is a strongly unitary state. It maintains *de facto* territorial disputes with three separate countries – the other two being with Korea over Dokdo/Takeshima; and with Russia over Iturup, Kunashir, Shikotan and Habomai in the Southern Kurils. China, in contrast, is a sprawling continental nation that has land borders with 14 countries; and while some remain, many disputes about such borders *have* been resolved. Notably in the context of the tiff in the East China Sea, China has resolved all land border issues with Russia, including splitting ownership of the sedimentary island of *Bolshoi Ussuriiski* (to Russia) or Heixiazi (to China), along the Amur River.

Splitting small island ownership as a solution when all else fails may have a relevance to the Diaoyu Dao/Senkaku affair. After all, a bunch of uninhabited islets does offer an exceptional opportunity to both governments to ‘rise above the fray’ and craft a ‘win-win’ solution that completely avoids having to allocate the islands to one country or the other; indeed, this may be one reason why neither side is keen on submitting the affair to international arbitration.

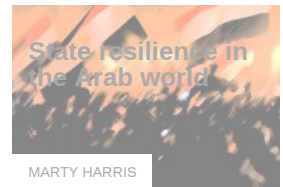
Examples from history bring up many cases of small islands becoming objects of ‘creative governance’ – and splitting is just one of these ‘solutions’, as with the fissure between the Gilbert and Ellice Islands (leading to the modern-day sovereign states of Kiribati and Tuvalu). There are the additional examples of the shared Caribbean island of St Martin; the alternating periods of sovereignty over Pheasant Island (on the French/Spanish border); the condominium of the New



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Hebrides (modern-day Vanuatu); and the distinction between sovereignty over and the jurisdiction of Åland (Finland).

But perhaps, the best potential outcome of all would be to imagine the Diaoyu Dao/Senkaku islands – with their rich marine environments and one of only two remaining sites for the breeding of the short-tailed albatross (*Phoebastria albatrus*) – becoming a binational nature reserve or even a UNESCO World Heritage Site. That would give the decades of theatrical performance in the East China Sea a happy ending.

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## One Response



Stephanie Douglas  
SEPTEMBER 15, 2016

Fascinating article not only on the importance island hold for others, but how even uninhabited islands with no natural resources to speak of, holds people's attention. In this case, they are being used by Japan and China as chess pieces in a multidimensional game. Baldacchino, with his clarity of prose and his very [Show more](#)

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