

THREATS TO WORLD PEACE IN THE EAST CHINA SEA

The East China Sea has witnessed a spectacular crescendo of geopolitical tensions since the beginning of the month of September and the announcement of the decision by the Japanese government to purchase three islands of the Senkaku archipelago from their private owners for the sum of 2.05 billion yen (21 million euros). Tens of thousands of nationalist demonstrators quickly assembled in major Chinese cities while Japanese economic interests and symbols (Japanese diplomatic representations, cars, and stores) were attacked, sometimes violently, to denounce this “annexation”. In reaction, many Japanese industrial groups have suspended production in their factories under threat of riots and pillaging. Schools were also closed, and Tokyo called upon the Chinese authorities to ensure the security of its citizens given the heightened risk of physical assaults, including in Hong Kong.

At sea, Chinese sent out flotillas of fishing boats and civilian governmental vessels to stake its claim to the archipelago. On 25 September, eight Taiwanese coast guard ships and dozens of fishing boats also made incursions into Japanese territorial waters, provoking a series of incidents with the Japanese coast guards. Chinese authorities furthermore threatened to apply “large-scale” economic retaliations for which Japan would bear “all the consequences”. During a meeting arranged on 25 September on the sidelines of the 67th session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yang Jiechi, ended by reaffirming to his Japanese counterpart, Koichiro Gamba, that the archipelago had been part of the “sacred territory of China since ancient times”.

Patriotic pride and economic stakes

The controversy over the Senkaku islands has been a recurrent source of tension ever since the Republic of China claimed sovereignty over them in 1969 under the name of Tiaoyutai islands. This was followed in 1971 by the People’s Republic of China, under the name of the Diaoyu islands. These small isolated islands were administered by Tokyo since the signing of the treaty of Shimonoseki at the end of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. Uninhabited since the end of the Second World War, the archipelago was ceded back to Japan in 1972, following 25 years of American administration under the Prefecture of Okinawa. Since then, the Senkaku have become a symbol for many nationalist of far right Japanese groups such as the *Uyoku dantai*, who are used to carrying out theatrical actions, including the. Ironically, it was partly to counter a public subscription launched by the nationalist governor of Tokyo Ishihara Shintaro that the Democratic government of Yoshihiko Noda decided to go ahead with the nationalization of the Senkaku islands.

Apart from the symbolic stakes and patriotic pride, the economic aspect has taken on considerable importance in the recent changes to the case. The waters which surround the Senkaku archipelago contain major fishing resources, particularly bonito fish and fishing operations cause regular incidents between Chinese fishermen and Japanese coast guards

despite a bilateral agreement concluded in 1997. Moreover, a report published in 1969 by the United Nations Economic Commission of Asia and the Far East (today called the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific - CESAP) pointed out major hydrocarbon reserves beneath the sea floor of the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) claimed by the two countries, such as the gas field of Chunxiao. As we see, the present crisis cannot be understood outside the context of the for energy resources race in which the regional powers are competing.

Competition for naval supremacy

The Senkaku archipelago is just one of the objectives of the policy of maritime assertiveness and of “defending its vital interests” now being conducted by Beijing. Many territorial disputes in fact put at odds the People’s Republic of China, Taiwan, Viet Nam, the Philippines, Malaysia and the Sultanate of Brunei as they compete for sovereignty over many archipelagos of the South China Sea, including the Spratleys and the Paracels islands. These conflicts regularly set off heated rhetorical exchanges and naval provocations. We note that the latest incidents coincide with the official announcement of the putting into service of the Chinese Navy’s first aircraft carrier, purchased from Ukraine and modernized with domestic Chinese technologies. The “Liaoning” is a symbol of the rapid development of a Blue-water navy for which the ultimate objective is to replace the United States as the guarantor of naval security in the Asia-Pacific area.

The emergence of this offensive diplomacy results in fact from the competition between China and the United States for military supremacy in Asia. In the medium term, the Chinese navy ultimately aims at acquiring several carrier battle groups. In parallel, the defense strategy laid out by Barack Obama in January provides for an increased American engagement in Asia, despite an overall policy of budgetary restrictions. We can also stress that the two candidates for the presidency in the American elections of November have made firmness towards China a structural element of their campaign message. These repeated attacks, like the naval exercises carried out in June and July by the United States together with the Philippines and Japan, have provoked the suspicions of Beijing regarding the nature of American ambitions in the region.

In this context, the persistence of a dispute around the Senkaku islands will constitute a major factor of destabilization in coming years. The risk of a regional war remains weak due to the very close economic ties which unite China and Japan. The demonstrations of intransigence which the two parties have shown have nonetheless caused the United States to worry about the situation and to ask that this conflict be resolved in a peaceful manner. Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell also reminded Beijing that a military attack on the Senkaku would prompt the United States to react by virtue of the mutual cooperation and security treaty which binds it to Japan. As we have said, this option is not the most likely one at the present time. The multiplication of diplomatic crises between the two Asian economic giants could nevertheless become uncontrollable, putting in danger the greatest engine of the world economy.