

Matches and gunpowder: the political situation in the East China Sea

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has unquestionably risen to prominence in many different ways. Over the past decades China has firmly established itself as a major actor in both regional and global affairs, much to the discomfort of its neighbours and nemeses: Japan and Taiwan. The balance on the economic, political and military scales is shifting ever further in favour of the Middle Kingdom, which has already resulted in episodes of intense friction (e.g., the reignited Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute in 2011). Indeed, old grudges and a new division of power harness the potential to threaten regional security across the East China Sea. In his works, Richard Bush discerns the causes of contemporary and (expected) future friction through the role each actor plays, while addressing the possible scenarios for crises and solutions. As such, he provides an indispensable framework for those interested in East Asian political affairs.

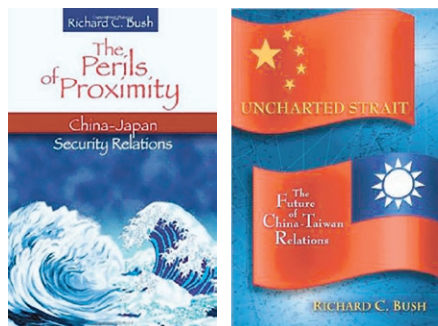
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Reviewed publications:

Bush, R.C. 2010. *The Perils of Proximity: China-Japan Security Relations*, Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, ISBN: 9780815704744 (hb)

Bush, R.C. 2013. *Uncharted Strait: The Future of China-Taiwan Relations*, Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, ISBN: 9780815723844 (hb)



A barrel of gunpowder

The current tense situation across the East China Sea is a remnant of a 20th century filled with conflict. Shortly after the Nationalists ended the Emperor's reign in 1911, China entered a state of intense civil war between the Nationalists of Chiang Kai-Shek and the Communists of Mao Zedong. In a spirit of opportunist imperialism, Japan took advantage of China's internal struggles to occupy and subsequently ravage part of the country between the years 1937 and 1945. After Japan was defeated and World War II brought to an end, civil war continued in China until the Nationalists were forced to flee to the island of Taiwan. In 1949 the Communists founded the PRC on the Mainland, while the Nationalists' Republic of China (ROC) continued to exist merely on Taiwan. As the Cold War engulfed East Asia, contradictory economic and political models saw the countries grow apart even further. While the PRC walked along the path of totalitarian communism, the ROC and Japan (gradually) walked towards liberal democracy, taken by the hand by the United States (USA). With past conflicts not resolved, the East China Sea currently compares to a barrel of gunpowder; there is always the potential that tension might combust into another violent chapter in regional history.

Playing with matches

In the latter half of the 20th century, Japan and Taiwan sped away from China in terms of economic and military development as a result of being backed by the USA. While Japan quickly boasted the second economy in the world, Taiwan ultimately thrived on the spoils of manufacturing consumer electronics, as it became known as one of the Asian Tigers. In addition, Tokyo and Taipei could both militarily outclass Beijing by means of their alliance with Washington.

Consequently, China was forced to play inferior to its neighbours and historical adversaries for decades.

Nevertheless, once China's potential started developing in the late 70s, so did its political influence over the region. Particularly during the past decade, when it continuously demonstrated a rapid pace of economic development to ultimately overhaul Japan and become the world's second economy, the balance has tilted evermore in favour of the People's Republic of China. This has resulted in an increasingly strong foothold of the Chinese in regional, international affairs. Officials are currently busy defining a new regional hierarchy in which they aim for China to assert the top position. In doing so, they often implement methods of political and economic coercion that border dangerously close to what is acceptable by its neighbours – and occasionally even cross that line. Across the East China Sea and Taiwan Strait, Japanese and Taiwanese officials and civilians have reacted to the inherent re-division of power in a similarly strong fashion. On both island nations there have been pre-emptive defensive-aggressive moves on the political and civilian level. For instance, recently Japanese politicians have openly questioned the limitations implied by their current constitution, which forbids Japan from having a military system that is capable of doing more than defending their homeland. In Taiwan, results in contemporary democratic elections have shown that the Taiwanese people do not wish to lose their independence. Through all these methods and moves, the Chinese, Japanese and Taiwanese continue to play with matches in the easily combustible East China Sea region.

Current regional implications

It has been mentioned that the reevaluation of regional hierarchy results in a series of implications regarding the security of the East China Sea region. Perhaps the most significant is that of Taiwan's independence. Currently, the PRC refuses to acknowledge the ROC as a sovereign political entity, indeed, it considers Taiwan to be a renegade province. Naturally, the Taiwanese government begs to differ as its fears that assimilation into the PRC's political and economic system will prove disastrous for the well-being of the country and its residents. Neither party therefore is particularly prone to make a concession regarding this matter. Taiwan has its powerful economy and backing from Japan and the USA to stand on, however, the increase of China's global importance (including for the USA) means that Taiwan's case continues to weaken. In fact, China seems to have implemented strategies of 'soft coercion' through political and economic channels already, questioning Taiwan's capabilities of existing as a sovereign nation. It is paramount that both China and Taiwan handle this issue with utmost care in order to prevent escalation of their political dispute into a military showdown; however, it seems that both have too much to lose at this moment to engage in armed conflict.

The above issue does not merely provide friction between China and Taiwan; indeed, it is in Japan's best interest that Taiwan remains a sovereign nation as well, according to officials. Similar to China and Taiwan, Japan is heavily dependent on access to seaways to support its economic development. Would Taiwan be incorporated into One China then Japan is expected to suffer the consequences in an economic sense as a result of the Taiwan Strait becoming a domestic instead of an international sea-lane. Furthermore, the territory of their nemesis would virtually expand onto their doorstep, as the island of Taiwan lies relatively close to the Japanese Ryukyu islands. As their political relationship is still far from smooth, an issue annually tested by Japanese officials visiting the Yasukuni shrine, the mere prospect of a Chinese expansion towards the Japanese homeland indiscriminately leads to increased political friction between the two.

Another issue that involves China, Japan and Taiwan is the access to possible oil and gas reserves under the East China Sea bed. In response to an ever-increasing demand for fossil fuels to support continuous economic development, particularly regarding rapid economic growth in the PRC, the right to exploit possible oil and gas reserves is rather important to officials in each of the countries. Recent friction concerning the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands therefore was not just the result of territorial demarcation by China and Japan, and to a lesser extent Taiwan, but most certainly represented a struggle for access to these possible reserves (albeit through territorial demarcation) as well.

Possible solutions

According to Richard Bush the numerous episodes of political friction between China, Japan and Taiwan reveal the fragile state of international relations along the East China Sea, however, it does not imply that the only possible future scenario that would solve this friction is full-on military action between these actors that would eventually lead to the hegemony of one of them. Indeed, all parties have too much to lose in this scenario, particularly in terms of the stability of their economic development and their internal and international political credibility and support.

Perhaps there will never be a completely satisfactory solution for all parties involved, since consensus is hard to achieve when all maintain opinions that are as impregnable as they are opposite. The most viable option might consist of mutual engagement in certain confidence-building measures on all fronts, which includes political, military and economic cooperation. Once officials will start trusting each other more on these matters, the public might follow and the general tendency of distrust could be (partly) removed. China and Taiwan, on account of their shared Chinese heritage, have ventured down this path already with significant successes. Nevertheless, their relationship remains sensitive and minor bumps still have the power to prove that old habits die hard. Among all three nations, there will be a pace at which confidence-convergence remains comfortable, however, this most likely is slower than the current pace of political and economic developments. Therefore, it is paramount that officials (including those of the fourth and fifth important actors: South Korea and the USA) continue to value future perspectives while trying to close sensitive chapters from the past together to reduce any official or civilian suspicion before it occurs. It will not provide a definite solution per se, yet it will contribute to an improved stability of the current status quo.

Concluding remarks

While China asserts its leading role in the regional (and possibly global) hierarchy, the circumstances demand a reevaluation of political relations between the main actors. China, Japan, Taiwan and the United States all need to reconsider their positions in order to not impair regional security in the East China Sea. As Richard Bush perfectly illustrates in *Perils of Proximity* and *Uncharted Strait*, this causes serious issues that mainly result from unresolved past conflicts. Perhaps the single most important is Taiwanese sovereignty; where China aims to incorporate Taiwan within its 'One China' principle and fulfil its political ambitions as such, both Taiwan and Japan aim for an independent Republic of China, which they feel would guarantee the security of their economic activities and their populations. With some of the world's major actors involved in political struggles in a region that some dub the centre of gravity of the current Asian century, a comprehensive insight into the historical context and former political relations in the East China Sea region should perhaps be considered essential to the current and future generation of politicians and officials around the globe. Both in *Perils of Proximity* and *Uncharted Strait* Richard Bush manages to provide exactly that insight, in fact, his works strongly complement each other to perhaps even go beyond that level.

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Above: Twenty-six ships from the U.S. Navy and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force in the South China Sea. (U.S. Navy photo by Chief Mass Communication Jennifer A. Villalovos /Released)