
'Power Shift' in East Asia? A Critical Reappraisal of Narratives on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Incident in 2010[†]

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Introduction

Great symbolic value has been invested in the incident between Japan and the People's Republic of China (PRC, China) that began in waters surrounding the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands on September 7, 2010.¹ Although several distinct narratives on the incident have appeared, the leading one essentially interprets its process and fallout as (further) evidence of

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¹ In this article I refer to the disputed islands as 'Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands'. Since I do not take any position on the territorial dispute I merely choose to refer to their names in alphabetical order. In earlier works I called the islands 'Pinnacle Islands' to retain neutrality. See, for example, Linus Hagström, 'Quiet Power: Japan's China Policy in Regard to the Pinnacle Islands', *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2005), pp. 159–88. However, not only is 'Pinnacle' a direct translation of 'Senkaku'; this approach also has not been very influential. A recent exception whereby a piece of work does use the name 'Pinnacle Islands' is that of Paul O'Shea's *Playing the Sovereignty Game: Understanding Japan's Territorial Disputes*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Sheffield, 2011.

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an ongoing 'power shift' in East Asia, or explains it as a consequence of such a 'power shift'.² In this instance, Chinese 'aggressiveness' or 'pressure', and Japanese 'weakness' or 'defeat' are viewed respectively as reflections of 'China's rise' and 'Japan's decline'.

Many indicators seem to corroborate the notion that China is 'rising', Japan is 'declining', and a 'power shift' is occurring, not just in East Asia but also in the world at large. Indeed, one could argue that the historic agglomeration of capability in China over the past three and a half decades has occurred, at least partly, at the expense of other states' relative power.³ The emergence of a 'power shift' narrative is thus fairly intelligible.⁴ Yet, dominant narratives assume a certain power; by 'imposing a meaningful

² The second most dominant one is arguably what could be called a 'domestic politics narrative', wherein both countries' handling of the incident is attributed mainly to domestic factors; in China's case the leadership transition in 2012 and the need to alleviate domestic pressures for an assertive posture against Japan; and in Japan's case, for example, Minister of Transportation, later Foreign Minister, Maehara Seiji's personal intervention. For the latter, see, for example, Shu Ken'ei, 'Senkaku mondai ga utsusu Chugoku no ronri to honne' (China's Logic and Real Intentions as Reflected in the Senkaku Problem), *Gaiko (Diplomacy)*, Vol. 4 (2010), pp. 53–61; Wada Haruki, 'Resolving the China–Japan Conflict Over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands', *History News Network*, October 31, 2010, <http://hnn.us/articles/133059.html>. For the former, see, for example, 'On Track to Succeed Mr. Hu Jintao', *Japan Times Online*, October 21, 2010, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/ed20101021a1.html>; James Manicom, 'Growing Nationalism and Maritime Jurisdiction in the East China Sea', *China Brief: A Journal of Analysis and Information*, Vol. 10, No. 21 (2010), pp. 9–11, http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/cb_010_b2ef4.pdf. In Amako and Tiberghien's accounts 'domestic politics narratives' coexist with a 'power shift narrative'. See Satoshi Amako, 'The Senkaku Islands Incident and Japan–China Relations', *East Asia Forum*, October 25, 2010, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/10/25/the-senkaku-islands-incident-and-japan-china-relations/>; Yves Tiberghien, 'The Puzzling 2010 Diaoyu Crisis: Centrifugal Domestic Politics, Shifting Balance of Power, and Weak Regional Institutionalization', *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, December 24, 2010, <http://asiaquarterly.com/2010/12/24/the-puzzling-2010-diaoyu-crisis-centrifugal-domestic-politics-shifting-balance-of-power-and-weak-regional-institutionalization/>.

³ Yan Xuetong, 'The Rise of China and Its Power Status', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2006), pp. 12–13.

⁴ The power shift thesis has been put forward in, for example, Kentaro Sakuwa, 'A Not So Dangerous Dyad: China's Rise and Sino-Japanese Rivalry', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (2009), pp. 497–528; Jian Yang, 'Japan's Decline Relative to China: Scenarios and Implications for East Asia', *Political Science*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (2010), pp. 146–65. The alleged 'power shift' between Japan and China is taken to be only one facet of a larger global shift of power from the United States or 'the West' to China or 'the BRIC countries' (Brazil, Russia, India, and China). See Daniel Deudney et al., *Global Shift: How the West Should Respond to the Rise of China* (Washington: Transatlantic Academy, 2011). <http://www.transatlanticacademy.org/sites/default/files/publications/GlobalShift%20TA%202011%20Collaborative%20Report.pdf>; John J. Mearsheimer, 'The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (2010), pp. 381–96; David Shambaugh, *Power Shift: China and Asia's New Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Tokyo Foundation, 'Japan's Security Strategy Toward China: Integration, Balancing, and Deterrence in the Era of Power Shift', October 2011, http://www.tokyofoundation.org/en/additional_info/security_strategy_toward_china.pdf. Except where otherwise indicated, all Internet addresses referred to in this article could be accessed on April 25, 2012.

pattern on what would otherwise be random and disconnected' they become a prerequisite both for analysis and policymaking.⁵ The way in which the 'power shift' narrative and its corollaries were reproduced in analyses of the incident in the East China Sea in the autumn of 2010 is a case in point.

The notion that data depend on interpretation to be meaningful—or that they are inherently theory-laden—is compatible with the epistemological core of constructivism, namely the idea that knowledge is socially constructed.⁶ Furthermore, if knowledge is socially constructed, the possibility of reconstruction and reinterpretation follows. In a similar vein, David Campbell states that 'it is possible to construct, in its own terms, a competing narrative that denaturalizes and unsettles the dominant way of constructing the world, thus prying open the space for an alternative interpretation'.⁷ Ian Shapiro even argues that, 'It is intrinsically worthwhile to unmask an accepted depiction as inadequate and to make a convincing case for an alternative as more apt'.⁸ To challenge dominant narratives by way of reconstruction and reinterpretation is meaningful not least because they easily turn into self-fulfilling prophecies in that analysts and actors treat them as 'reality'.⁹ As Hidemi Suganami points out: 'Once we allow for a historical mode of comprehension to operate in substantive IR [International Relations]. . . we should also allow for a critique of history to take root in discussions concerning the nature and role of IR's knowledge claims'.¹⁰

To state that China can be understood as rising, Japan as declining, and the bilateral relationship as undergoing a power shift, is thus not the same as agreeing that these frames can or should be applied indiscriminately. The aim of this article is thus to revisit the incident in September 2010, when a Chinese fishing trawler collided with two Japanese patrol ships in disputed waters, in order to problematise its construction in Japanese and English-language scholarly and media discourses (but not in Chinese discourses), and in Japanese policymaking circles. In pursuing this aim, the article calls renewed attention to the power of dominant narratives in

⁵ Phillida Salmon and Catherine Kohler Riessman, 'Looking Back on Narrative Research: An Exchange', in Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire and Maria Tamboukou, eds., *Doing Narrative Research* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), p. 78.

⁶ Stefano Guzzini, 'A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2000), pp. 156–62.

⁷ David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

⁸ Ian Shapiro, 'Problems, Methods, and Theories in the Study of Politics, or What Is Wrong With Political Science and What To Do About It', *Political Theory*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (2002), p. 608.

⁹ Richard K. Herrmann, 'Linking Theory to Evidence in International Relations', in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons, eds., *Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage, 2002), p. 127.

¹⁰ Hidemi Suganami, 'Narrative Explanation and International Relations: Back to Basics', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2008), p. 348.

steering the social construction of knowledge. It emphasises the role of interpretation in international relations research both by highlighting the narrative process whereby interpretations are turned into facts, and by pointing to the possibility of reinterpretation, or the writing of ‘counter-narratives’.¹¹

The second section summarises available data on the 2010 incident and its aftermath. Since a territorial dispute is essentially a dispute over the interpretation of the historical background and the legal context of a piece of territory,¹² data tend to get entwined with interpretations right from the outset. This article nevertheless attempts to structure these data somewhat chronologically without giving precedence to either side of the story. The third section goes on to recapitulate the interpretations that have most frequently been associated with the data summarised in the second section. In essence, this is where we find the dominant ‘power shift’ narrative and its corollaries. The fourth section then provides a critical reappraisal of extant interpretations along the lines discussed above. In challenging the notion that Beijing was ‘aggressive’, and Tokyo was ‘weak’ or that it ‘lost’, this analysis essentially unsettles the ‘power shift’ narrative, which permeates most previous interpretations of the incident. The critical reappraisal is not produced here from scratch; elements of it have appeared elsewhere.¹³ The contribution of this article is to draw together and expand

¹¹ Michael Damberg, ‘Considering Counter Narratives’, in Michael Bamberg and Molly Andrews, eds., *Considering Counter Narratives: Narrating, Resisting, Making Sense* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), pp. 351–71.

¹² Rather different interpretations of the historical background and the legal context are found in, for example, Inoue Kiyoshi, *Senkaku retto: Chogyo shoto no shiteki kaimai* (*Senkaku Islands: Historical Elucidation on Diaoyu Islands*) (Tokyo: Gendai hyoronsha, 1972); Tao Cheng, ‘The Sino-Japanese Dispute over the Tiao-yu-tai (Senkaku) Islands and the Law of Territorial Acquisition’, *Virginia Journal of International Law*, Vol. 14 (1974), pp. 221–66; Yoshiro Matsui, ‘International Law of Territorial Acquisition and the Dispute over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands’, *Japanese Journal of International Law*, Vol. 40 (1997), pp. 3–31; Unryu Suganuma, *Sovereign Rights and Territorial Space in Sino-Japanese Relations: Irredentism and the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands* (Honolulu: Association for Asian Studies and University of Hawai’i Press, 2000).

¹³ Examples include Peter Ennis, ‘Japan Blinked? Look Again’, Dispatch Japan: News and Views on the US, Japan and US–Japan Relations, September 26, 2010, <http://www.dispatchjapan.com/blog/2010/09/japan-blinked-look-again.html>; Sourabh Gupta, ‘China–Japan Trawler Incident: Reviewing the Dispute over Senkaku/Diaoyu Waters’, *East Asia Forum*, December 6, 2010, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/12/06/china-japan-trawler-incident-review-of-legalities-understandings-and-practices-in-disputed-senkakudaiyou-waters/>; Tobias Harris, ‘After the Showdown, Japan, Chinese Leaders Meet’, *East Asia Forum*, October 16, 2010, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/10/16/after-the-showdown-japan-chinese-leaders-meet/>; Wenran Jiang, ‘New Twists over Old Disputes in China–Japan Relations’, *China Brief: A Journal of Analysis and Information*, Vol. 10 No. 20 (2010), pp. 11–13, http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/cb_010_37b83a.pdf; James Manicom, ‘Growing Nationalism’; Aurelia George Mulgan, ‘US–Japan Alliance the Big Winner from the Senkaku Islands Dispute’, *East Asia Forum*, October 26, 2010, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/10/26/us-japan-alliance-the-big-winner-from-the-senkaku-islands-dispute/>; Sun-won Park, ‘The East China Sea Dispute: Short-Term Victory and Long-Term Loss for China?’, Brookings Institution, November 1, 2010, http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2010/1101_east_china_sea_park.aspx?sc_lang=en; Christopher Pokarier, ‘Chinese Hubris Boosts Japan–US Relations’,

on these 'small stories' within an explicit narrative framework.¹⁴ After paying close attention to the narration of the power of nation-states, the fifth section finally goes on to discuss the power of narratives: What are the discursive contexts behind the emergence of the 'power shift' narrative and its corollaries? Furthermore, what political action is legitimised by the materialisation of this narrative?

An anticipated objection is that the re-evaluation undertaken here is largely self-serving. Analysts admittedly 'always choose or sample part of reality to serve as the object of investigation', as Mark Lichbach has noted.¹⁵ Still, the risk of 'selection bias' is arguably less acute here since the article does not strive to validate one theory or analytical framework. Hence it is not an attempt to argue that (for example) 'constructivism' is better suited to explain the trajectory of the incident in question than 'realism', or to offer a 'constructivist' narrative to challenge a 'realist' one. In fact, rather than seeking to explain the process or outcome of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands incident in 2010 or to critique any other explanation of it, the aim is merely to problematise dominant ways in which the incident has been understood and narrated, that is, the way in which data have been attributed meaning.¹⁶ In the spirit of the above quotations from Campbell and Shapiro, the article is merely influenced by constructivism in terms of its epistemological approach. If anything, this article serves as yet another reminder of the ambiguity and partialness of data, and hence the complexity, contingency, and instability of interpretation.

Before we can start, one final point about the relationship between data and interpretation is due. Sino-Japanese relations undoubtedly take place within the framework of a 'grand narrative', or discourse, which constructs the world as consisting of sovereign, territorialised nation-states constantly competing for power and status.¹⁷ Hence, 'China' and 'Japan' could certainly be viewed as interpretations or constructions of the imagination in their own right. This line of thought is pursued in the fifth section, to the

East Asia Forum, September 23, 2010, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/09/23/chinese-hubris-boosts-japan-us-relations/>; Joel Rathus, 'Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands: Has China Lost Japan?', *East Asia Forum*, October 18, 2010, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/10/19/senkaku-diaoyu-islands-has-china-lost-japan/>.

¹⁴ On the notion that dominant narratives can be challenged through the emergence of a plurality of 'small stories', see Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

¹⁵ Mark I. Lichbach, *Is Rational Choice Theory All of Social Science?* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 135.

¹⁶ Hayden White, 'The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory', *History and Theory*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1984), pp. 1–33.

¹⁷ John Agnew, 'The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory', *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1994), pp. 53–80; and various chapters in Simon Dalby and Gearóid Ó Tuathail, eds., *Rethinking Geopolitics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

extent that Japanese narratives on the incident in 2010 reflect discourses on China, which are arguably crucial to the construction of Japanese identity.

The 2010 Incident¹⁸

On the morning of September 7, 2010, a Japanese Coastguard patrol vessel found a Chinese trawler, the *Minjinyu 5179*, operating about 12 km (or 7.45 miles) north-west of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Japanese coastguards asked the trawler to leave the disputed area, but it instead collided with the patrol vessel *Yonakuni*. When coastguards ordered the trawler to stop for inspection, its captain, Zhan Qixiong, refused. During the ensuing chase and interception the *Minjinyu 5179* collided with another patrol boat, the *Mizuki*, before Japanese coastguards boarded the vessel. The captain and 14 crew members were then taken to Ishigaki Island where they were arrested the following day for ‘obstructing the duties of public officials’ and ‘illegal fishing’. That evening, Saiki Akitaka, director general of the Asian and Oceanic Affairs Bureau of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, called Chinese Ambassador Cheng Yonghua to lodge a protest. The next day, the Maritime Safety Agency’s office in Ishigaki charged Zhan and sent him to the Ishigaki branch of the Naha District Public Prosecutor’s Office. A day later the detention was extended.

In response to these events, the Chinese government (henceforth ‘Beijing’) made a series of protests and critical remarks. Between September 8 and 19 it summoned the Japanese ambassador to China, Niwa Uichiro, on no less than six occasions—including a summon by State Councillor Dai Bingguo at 2 o’clock in the morning on September 12—demanding the immediate release of the trawler and its crew and restating China’s ‘historical claim’. The Japanese government (henceforth ‘Tokyo’), meanwhile, claimed to be handling the incident ‘in accordance with domestic law’ [*waga kuni horei ni mototsuki*], sticking to the familiar line that the Senkaku Islands ‘are the inherent territory of our country’ [*waga kuni koyu no ryodo de aru*]; that Japan ‘exercises valid control’ [*yuko ni shihai shite iru*]; and that there ‘exists no issue of territorial sovereignty that needs to be resolved’ [*kaiketsu subeki ryoyuken no mondai wa sonzai shite inai*].¹⁹

The trawler and its crew members were released on September 13, but on September 19 the captain’s detention was extended for another 10 days. Zhan was released, however, on September 24, 2010, five days before the end of the term. Naha Vice-Prosecutor Suzuki Toru stated that, ‘considering

¹⁸ The data have been taken from Japanese and international media.

¹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, ‘Senkaku shoto shuhen ryokainai ni okeru wagakuni junshikan to Chugoku ryosen to no sesshoku jian’ (The Collision Incident between Our Country’s Patrol Vessels and a Chinese Fishing Boat in [Japan’s] territorial Waters off Senkaku Islands), Statement by the Press Secretary, September 25, 2010, http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/danwa/22/dga_0925.html.

the impact on the people of our country and the future of Japan–China relations [*waga kuni kokumin e no eikyo ya, kongo no nicchu kankei o koryo suru to*], [we] judged that it would not be appropriate to continue the investigation any further while keeping the person [captain] in custody'.²⁰ The release was officially determined by the Prosecutor's Office. It was widely suspected that government officials—even Cabinet members—had interfered, but the two main suspects in this respect, then Chief Cabinet Secretary Sengoku Yoshito and Prime Minister Kan Naoto, doggedly denied the rumour.²¹ The investigation continued unabated, but in January 2011 various sources reported that prosecutors were not expected to indict Zhan.²²

The day after Zhan's release Beijing demanded an apology and compensation from Japan for the captain's 'illegal detention'. This claim, however, was roundly rejected as 'groundless, and totally unacceptable' [*konkyo ga naku, mattaku ukeirerarenai*],²³ and on September 27 Tokyo made a counter-claim for damage done to its patrol boats, later estimated at a total of ¥14.29 million.

Beijing suspended intergovernmental talks on matters such as coal, joint gas development in the East China Sea and aviation rights, curtailed Chinese tourism to Japan, and cancelled several Sino-Japanese official and non-official exchanges. Such behaviours were moreover framed as further protests, if not by Beijing then by Tokyo or in the media. For example, the planned visit to Japan in mid-September of vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress Li Jianguo was called off, citing 'various reasons',²⁴ and Beijing suspended an invitation to 1,000 Japanese children to visit the Shanghai World Expo, claiming that it was 'inappropriate to welcome them given the current bilateral climate'.²⁵ Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao refused to meet Prime Minister Kan during a UN development conference in New York on September 22 and on the

²⁰ Kyodo tsushin, 'Chugokujin sencho, shobun horyu de kaiho Naha chicken "Nicchu kankei o koryo"' (Chinese Captain Released with Punishment Pending. Naha District Public Prosecutors Office: "[We] take Japan–China relations into account"), September 25, 2010, <http://www.47news.jp/CN/201009/CN2010092401000480.html>.

²¹ See Yves Tiberghien, 'The Puzzling 2010 Diaoyu Crisis'; Wada Haruki, 'Resolving the China–Japan Conflict Over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands'.

²² BBC News World, 'Japan Drops China Boat Captain Charge', January 21, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-12249794>.

²³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 'The Collision Incident between Our Country's Patrol Vessels and a Chinese Fishing Boat'.

²⁴ 'China Cancels Politician's Visit after Ship Incident: Fallout from Collision Between Vessels Near Senkakus Leads to Decision', *Japan Times Online*, September 15, 2010, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20100915a3.html>.

²⁵ 'China Expo Trip Delayed Amid Row: Beijing Cancels Visit by Young Japanese on Eve of Departure', *Japan Times Online*, September 20, 2010, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20100920x1.html>.

sidelines of an ASEAN+3 meeting in Hanoi on October 29.²⁶ In the wake of the incident, public protests erupted in both countries—especially in China.

In addition to this slew of recriminations and retractions was the detention on September 20 of four employees of the Japanese Fujita Corporation, who were in China preparing to bid for a site on which to destroy chemical weapons that the Japanese army had left behind in 1945, for allegedly entering a military zone on the outskirts of Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province, without authorisation, and for videotaping military targets.²⁷ There was moreover a halt from September 23 to November 19 in the Chinese export of rare earth metals to Japan.²⁸ Observers in Japan and elsewhere have generally construed a connection between these two occurrences and the incident near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in 2010—a matter that will later be discussed in more detail.

Japanese coastguards filmed the incident on September 7, and many Japanese opinion leaders demanded that the tapes be released to prove the point that the Chinese trawler bore responsibility for the incident. The government refused, however, stating that the recording might constitute evidence in a future court case. The viewing of an extract of this material for a small number of Diet members of both government and opposition parties nevertheless took place on November 1. Just three days later someone subsequently found to be a coastguard officer leaked a significantly larger clip on YouTube, and Japanese authorities confirmed its authenticity. The Japanese audience, and many foreign observers, interpreted the material as showing that the Chinese trawler had deliberately ‘rammed’ the Japanese coastguard vessels.²⁹ The Chinese side nonetheless rebutted such an

²⁶ Wen, however, did agree to meet Kan briefly at an ASEM meeting in Brussels on October 4. There was also a short meeting in Hanoi on October 30 lasting about 10 minutes. And Chinese President Hu Jintao eventually agreed to have an informal meeting with Kan on November 13 at the APEC summit in Yokohama.

²⁷ Three of the men were released on September 30. The fourth was let out on bail on October 9.

²⁸ This is a generic term for metals in Group 3 of the periodic system. They are used in a range of advanced products such as hybrid vehicles, computer parts, smart phones, wind turbines, solar panels, energy-saving domestic electronics and guided missiles. Not only Japan but the world at large is currently dependent on Chinese rare earths, as more than 90% of the global supply comes from China.

²⁹ Including one of the anonymous reviewers of this article, who objected to the use here of the term ‘collide’. The leaked videos do indeed seem to show the *Minjinyu 5179* ramming the Japanese patrol vessels. Since, however, the videos do not tell us exactly what happened in the lead-up to the clashes, I retain the more value-neutral term in this article. Moreover, the incident is referred to in Japanese as a *shototsu jiken*, which literally means ‘collision incident’. This term is for example that used in the Japanese *Gaiko seisho 2011 (Diplomatic Bluebook 2011)*. See *Gaiko seisho 2011* (Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011), pp. 3, 17, 23, 35. The English summary also says that the ‘Chinese fishing ship collided with two Japan Coast Guard patrol vessels’. See *Diplomatic Bluebook 2011: Summary* (Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011), p. 7; see also *Defence White Paper 2011* (Tokyo: Ministry of Defence, 2011), pp. 7, 8, 106, 107, 170. For an interpretation that the trawler ‘rammed’ the Japanese patrol boats, see Satoshi Amako, ‘The Senkaku Islands Incident and Japan–China Relations’.

understanding. In the words of Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) spokesman Ma Zhaoxu: 'The patrol vessels of the Japan Coast Guard disturbed, drove away, intercepted, surrounded and held the Chinese fishing boat, which is illegal in itself and severely infringes upon China's territorial sovereignty and the just rights and interests of the Chinese fishermen'.³⁰

Dominant Narrative: 'Power Shift'

Analyses focusing on the incident near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands on September 7, 2010 and its aftermath may not be driven by a unitary aim, but a large majority of them nonetheless narrate the events described above in an uncannily uniform manner, essentially as a reflection of 'China's rise' and 'Japan's decline', or, in short, as (further) evidence of an ongoing 'power shift' in East Asia. Moreover, these narratives were rather consistent in the weeks and months after the incident, and did not obviously change after the video footage was leaked in early November.

New York Times' correspondents in Japan and China immediately set the tone in a series of articles. On September 19 they portrayed the situation as 'a test of wills between Japan, the region's established power and now-fading economic giant, and China, a rising force that feels its time has come to take what it regards as its rightful place in Asia'.³¹ Putting it somewhat differently, in the Sino-Japanese interaction in the autumn of 2010 they saw signs of a 'shifting power balance' in the region.³²

Analysts in Japan and around the globe later rehearsed variations on this theme. For example, Yves Tiberghien asserted that this 'oddly outdated conflict over Westphalian sovereignty in a period of intense globalization' is about 'the shifting balance of power',³³ hence, the 'fundamental shift in the economic and political balance of power between China and Japan'.³⁴ Richard C. Bush III concurred that the clash exposed 'worrisome trends in the East Asian power balance', and that 'China's power in Asia is growing'.³⁵ Iinuma Yoshisuke wrote that the 'recent showdown between Japan and China' 'suggests the possibility of a major change in the pattern that has

³⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Ma Zhaoxu's Remarks', September 20, 2010, <http://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2535/t753988.htm>.

³¹ Martin Fackler and Ian Johnson, 'Arrest in Disputed Seas Riles China and Japan', *New York Times*, September 19, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/20/world/asia/20chinajapan.html>.

³² Martin Fackler and Ian Johnson, 'Arrest in Disputed Seas'; Martin Fackler and Ian Johnson, 'Japan Retreats with Release of Chinese Boat Captain', *New York Times*, September 25, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/25/world/asia/25chinajapan.html>.

³³ Yves Tiberghien, 'Disputed Islands Crisis Between Japan and China: Power Shift and Institutional Failure', *Asia Pacific Memo*, No. 24 (2010), <http://www.asiapacificmemo.ca/japan-china-islands-crisis-institutional-failure>.

³⁴ Yves Tiberghien, 'The Puzzling 2010 Diaoyu Crisis'.

³⁵ Richard C. Bush III, 'China-Japan Security Relations', *Brookings Policy Brief*, No. 177 (2010), http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2010/10_china_japan_bush.aspx.

existed since the two nations resumed diplomatic relations in 1972'.³⁶ And Jaeho Hwang concluded from the incident that 'China was able to display a dominant position over Japanese politics and economy'.³⁷ The *Washington Post* editorialised about the incident under the headline 'Rising Power'.³⁸ Soeya Yoshihide asserted that one lesson to be learnt from this incident is that 'the rise of China and its increasingly assertive diplomacy are casting a shadow over the horizon of a new international order'.³⁹ Among Amako Satoshi's four interpretations of the incident, moreover, was one that 'it was a manifestation of a rising China's great-power-hegemonic-consciousness'.⁴⁰ Finally, Hakamada Shigeki, compared Japan's response with a 'meltdown', because '[t]he sovereignty of Japan melted down' as a consequence of it.⁴¹

These interpretations were backed up with the help of others, epitomised in the juxtaposition by Tanaka Hitoshi, a former Japanese deputy minister of foreign affairs, of 'China's growing assertiveness' and 'Japan's weak diplomacy'.⁴² On the one hand, there was the understanding that China's response was 'extremely hysterical', in the much-cited terminology of then Japanese Foreign Minister Maehara Seiji.⁴³ Other observers likened China's 'sharp reaction'⁴⁴ to '20 tits for a tat',⁴⁵ and pointed out that it was 'unprecedented' and 'harsh',⁴⁶ 'aggressive',⁴⁷ 'high-handed',⁴⁸

³⁶ Yoshisuke Inuma, 'Tip of the Iceberg: Senkakus Reflect Bigger Change in Sino-Japan Ties', *The Oriental Economist*, Vol. 78, No. 11 (2010), pp. 8–9.

³⁷ Jaeho Hwang, 'Understanding China's Recent Foreign Policy Through Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands', *MCSS Papers*, January 27, 2011, http://www.mcsstw.org/www/print.php?article_id=605.

³⁸ *Washington Post*, 'Rising Power', September 27, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/26/AR2010092603022.html>.

³⁹ Yoshihide Soeya, 'Fishing for Lessons: The Latest China–Japan Rift', *Global Asia Forum*, 2010, http://www.globalasia.org/Global_Asia_Forum/Fishing_For_Lessons_The_Latest_China_Japan_Rift.html?w=soeya.

⁴⁰ Satoshi Amako, 'The Senkaku Islands Incident and Japan–China Relations'.

⁴¹ Shigeki Hakamada, 'Meltdown of Japan', *Global Forum of Japan*, December 31, 2010, <http://www.gfj.jp/eng/commentary/101231.pdf>.

⁴² Hitoshi Tanaka, 'The Senkaku Islands and Mending Japan–China Relations', *East Asia Insights*, November 2010, <http://www.jcie.org/researchpdfs/EAI/5-5.pdf>, p. 2.

⁴³ Kiyoshi Takenaka, 'Japan PM Wants China to Ensure Citizens' Safety', Reuters, October 18, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/10/18/us-japan-china-idUSTRE69H05P20101018>.

⁴⁴ Mike Mochizuki, 'China over-reached', *The Oriental Economist*, Vol. 78, No. 10 (2010), p. 6.

⁴⁵ Mark Schreiber, 'Weeklies, Tabloids Hawkish over China', *Japan Times Online*, October 10, 2010, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/fd20101010bj.html>.

⁴⁶ Yoichi Kato, 'China's Naval Expansion in the Western Pacific', *Asahi Shimbun*, January 29, 2011, <http://www.asahi.com/english/TKY201101280301.html>, accessed on June 1, 2011.

⁴⁷ Jaeho Hwang, 'Understanding China's Recent Foreign Policy'.

⁴⁸ Mineo Nakajima in Alex Martin and Kanako Takahara, 'Friction Cited in Move to Free Chinese Skipper', *Japan Times Online*, September 25, 2010, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20100925a1.html>; Dingli Shen, 'A Chinese Assessment of China's External Security Environment', *China Brief: A Journal of Analysis and Information*, Vol. 11, No. 5 (2011), p. 6.

'very tough',⁴⁹ 'unusually tough',⁵⁰ 'hard-line',⁵¹ 'fierce' and 'violent',⁵² and the equivalent of 'bullying'⁵³—in other words, many people within and outside of Japan were taken aback by the 'ferocity of the Chinese response' and the 'avalanche of pressure',⁵⁴ and by 'China's hard-line claims and threat behaviours'.⁵⁵

On the other hand, there was the understanding that Japan 'gave in',⁵⁶ 'backed down',⁵⁷ 'yielded',⁵⁸ or experienced a 'defeat'⁵⁹ or a 'humiliating retreat',⁶⁰ and came off looking 'weak',⁶¹ that the outcome was 'a national disgrace';⁶² and that the Kan Cabinet's 'mishandling',⁶³ of the incident was 'clumsy' or 'poor',⁶⁴ 'weak-kneed',⁶⁵ 'wishy-washy',⁶⁶ reeking of 'incompetence',⁶⁷ or a 'fiasco' [*daishittai*],⁶⁸ and that it could be likened to Hatoyama Yukio's 'amateurism' in handling the Futenma issue as prime

⁴⁹ Richard Katz, 'Yes He Kan? Or, No He Kan't? Moment of Truth', *The Oriental Economist*, Vol. 78, No. 10 (2010), p. 2; Nakanishi Terumasa, *Tsuyoi Nippon o mesazu michi: Sekai no ikkyoku toshite tate (The Road towards a Strong Japan: Stand Up as a Pole in the World)* (Tokyo: PHP kenkyujo, 2011), p. 57.

⁵⁰ Ko Hirano, 'China Using Standoff to Test Japan', *Japan Times Online*, September 21, 2010, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20100921a5.html>.

⁵¹ Tokyo Foundation, 'Japan's Security Strategy Toward China', p. 1.

⁵² Kitaoka Shin'ichi, *Gurobaru pureiwa toshite no Nihon (Japan as a Global Player)* (Tokyo: NTT Shuppan, 2010), p. 323.

⁵³ Robert G. Sutter, 'US Reengagement in the Asia-Pacific Region: Where Does Taiwan Fit?', *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, No. 72 (2010), <http://www.eastwestcenter.org/fileadmin/stored/pdfs/apb072.pdf>.

⁵⁴ *The Economist*, 'China's Spat with Japan: Out But Not Over', September 24, 2010, http://www.economist.com/blogs/asiaview/2010/09/chinas_spat_japan?page=46.

⁵⁵ Keizo Nabeshima, 'Asian Military Balance Destabilized by China's Military Expansion', *JFIR Commentary*, Vol. 4, No. 5 (2011).

⁵⁶ Robert Dujarric, 'Enhancing Japan's position in the Senkaku Dispute', *PacNet*, No. 50, October 15, 2010, <http://csis.org/files/publication/pac1050.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Martin Fackler and Ian Johnson, 'Japan Retreats with Release'; Masami Ito, 'Senkaku Spat Hurt Beijing as Well', *Japan Times Online*, September 30, 2010, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20100930f1.html>.

⁵⁸ Toshikazu Inoue in Alex Martin and Kanako Takahara, 'Friction Cited in Move to Free Chinese Skipper'.

⁵⁹ Yoichi Funabashi, 'Japan-China Relations Stand at Ground Zero', *Asahi Shimbun*, October 9, 2010, <http://www.asahi.com/english/TKY201010080462.html>, accessed on February 1, 2012.

⁶⁰ Martin Fackler and Ian Johnson, 'Japan Retreats with Release'.

⁶¹ *The Economist*, 'China's Spat with Japan'.

⁶² Yoichi Funabashi, 'Japan-China Relations Stand at Ground Zero'.

⁶³ Richard Katz, 'Yes He Kan?', p. 1; Mike Mochizuki, 'China over-reached', p. 7.

⁶⁴ Yoichi Funabashi, 'Japan-China Relations Stand at Ground Zero'.

⁶⁵ Maya Kaneko, 'Kan Wins Points for Damage Control But Still Lacking Long-Term Strategies', *Japan Times Online*, November 15, 2010, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20101115a6.html>.

⁶⁶ Maya Kaneko, 'Ishigaki Fishermen Fret Over Senkaku Encroachment', *Japan Times*, December 8, 2010, p. 3.

⁶⁷ Jaeho Hwang, 'Understanding China's Recent Foreign Policy'.

⁶⁸ Nakanishi Terumasa, *The Road towards a Strong Japan*, p. 50.

minister between 2009 and 2010 (discussed in more detail below).⁶⁹ In short, the incident exposed the ‘weakness’ of Japanese diplomacy.⁷⁰

Similar assessments and interpretations—the ‘harshness’ of the Chinese response and Japan’s ‘defeat’ (although not necessarily the logical consequence, or perhaps prerequisite, of ‘Japan’s decline’)—could also be detected in Diet debates from late September onwards. To quote just a few isolated but representative examples, in the meeting of the Foreign Policy and Security Committee of the House of Councilors on September 28, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) member Sato Masahisa stated: ‘It really looked as if Japan’s stance was distorted due to Chinese pressure, and as a result Japan gave the world the impression that [it] caved in to pressure [*atsuryoku ni kusshite shimau*], just being squeezed just a little’.⁷¹ In the same meeting Yamamoto Kanae of the Komei Party said she agreed with Professor Sakamoto Kazuya of Osaka University that this was ‘a diplomatic defeat [*gaikotekina haiboku*] as [we] lost to Chinese pressure’. And in the Budget Committee meeting of the House of Representatives of September 30 the chairman of the LDP’s Foreign Policy Section, Onodera Itsunori, stated that ‘this series of events is the greatest diplomatic defeat of the post-war period’ [*senjo saidai no Nihon gaiko no haiboku*].

Interviews with Japanese Diet members in the winter of 2010 produced comparable statements, primarily projecting an image of China as ‘arrogant’ [*goman*], but also as ‘aggressive’ ‘assertive’ and ‘selfish’ [*migatte*];⁷² and describing its response as ‘high-handed’ [*koatsuteki*],⁷³ as ‘exceeding common sense’,⁷⁴ and as a reflection of ‘hegemonism’ [*haken shugi*].⁷⁵ While Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) members primarily criticised the Chinese response, opposition party members seemed equally or more inclined to evaluate the Kan Cabinet’s handling of the issue. LDP faction leader Nukaga Fukushima’s assessment was particularly harsh. He portrayed it as ‘unprincipled’ [*ri’nen o motte inai*], ‘lacking awareness’ [*ninshiki busoku*], ‘lacking knowledge’ [*chishiki busoku*], ‘superficial’ [*hisoteki*], ‘naïve’ [*chisetsu*] and ‘very incomprehensible’ [*hijo ni wakannikui* and *fukaka*].⁷⁶ Others

⁶⁹ Richard Katz, ‘Yes He Kan?’, p. 1.

⁷⁰ Masami Ito, ‘Senkaku Spat’.

⁷¹ All deliberations in the Diet can be searched and downloaded at Kokkai kaijiroku kensaku shisutemu (a search system for Diet protocols), <http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/>.

⁷² Just ‘arrogant’: author’s interview with Watanabe Shu, DPJ Diet member, Tokyo, December 9, 2011. ‘Arrogant’, ‘aggressive’ and ‘assertive’: author’s interview with Nagashima Akihisa, Tokyo, December 9, 2010. ‘Arrogant’ and ‘selfish’: author’s interview with Matsubara Jin, DPJ Diet member, Tokyo, December 7, 2010.

⁷³ Author’s interview with Yatagawa Hajime, DPJ Diet member, Tokyo, December 3, 2010.

⁷⁴ Author’s interview with Nukaga Fukushima, LDP Diet member, Tokyo, December 6, 2010.

⁷⁵ Interview with Watanabe Shu.

⁷⁶ Interview with Nukaga Fukushima.

called the Kan Cabinet's response 'extremely poor' [*hijo ni mazukatta*],⁷⁷ and 'all too sloppy' [*darashinasasugiru*]—a response which 'completely neglected Japan's sovereignty' [*kanzen ni Nippon no shuken o naigashiro*],⁷⁸ and which is thus described as the 'fiasco of post-war Japanese diplomacy' [*sengo Nippon gaiko no daishittai*].⁷⁹

Similar sentiments were also aired in the Japanese press, and not just in the right-wing tabloids, although they were allegedly 'the most vociferous in [their] denunciations of the government's handling of the affair'.⁸⁰ The tabloid *Fuji*, for instance, on October 1 described the decision to release Zhan as 'kowtow diplomacy' [*dogeza gaiko*], and Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro remarked in *Shukan Bunshun* on October 7 that '[w]hat China's doing is no different from gangsters. If Japan does nothing, it will suffer the same fate as Tibet'. Writer Sakurai Yoshiko, moreover, warned in the *Shukan Post* on October 8 that 'If Japan gives in on the Senkakus, China will come to grab Okinawa next'.⁸¹

The interpretations laid out in the preceding paragraphs were essentially based on yet other interpretations—most importantly that China 'retaliated' by detaining the four Japanese nationals,⁸² and that it 'put pressure' on Japan to release Zhan by putting a halt on its rare earth exports to Japan for two months.⁸³ The interpretation was probably reinforced by comments such as Prime Minister Wen's on September 21 that 'If Japan clings to its

⁷⁷ Author's interview with Hiranuma Takeo, Diet member for the Sunrise Party of Japan, Tokyo, December 9, 2010.

⁷⁸ Author's interview with Eto Seiichi, LDP Diet member, December 8, 2010.

⁷⁹ Author's interview with Ishihara Nobuteru, LDP Diet member, Tokyo, December 8, 2010.

⁸⁰ Mark Schreiber, 'Weeklies, Tabloids Hawkish over China'.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Satoshi Amako, 'The Senkaku Islands Incident'; Frances M. Rosenbluth, 'Japan in 2010', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (2011), p. 51; *The Economist*, 'China's Spat with Japan'; Martin Fackler and Ian Johnson, 'Japan Retreats with Release'; Yoichi Funabashi, 'Japan–China Relations'; Wenran Jiang, 'New Twists over Old Disputes'; Yoichi Kato, 'China's Naval Expansion'; Mark Schreiber, 'Weeklies, Tabloids Hawkish over China'; Policy Council of The Japan Forum on International Relations, 'Expansion of China and Japan's Response', *Policy Recommendations*, No. 35 (2012), p. 1, <http://www.jfir.or.jp/e/pr/pdf/35.pdf>; Hitoshi Tanaka, 'The Senkaku Islands'; Yves Tiberghien, 'The Puzzling 2010 Diaoyu Crisis'.

⁸³ Satoshi Amako, 'The Senkaku Islands Incident'; Satoshi Hara, 'Is China Reasonable and Trustful? Lessons to Learn from the Senkaku Islands Incident', *JFIR Commentary*, January 26, 2011, <http://www.jfir.or.jp/e/commentary/110126.pdf>; Gavan McCormack, 'Small Islands-Big Problem: Diaoyu/Senkaku and the Weight of History and Geography in China–Japan Relations', *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, No. 9 (2011), <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Gavan-McCormack/3464>; Masashi Nishihara, 'Better Japan–China Ties Depend on Beijing', *PacNet*, No. 59 (2011), <http://cis.org/files/publication/-pac1159.pdf>; *The Economist*, 'China's Spat with Japan'; Martin Fackler and Ian Johnson, 'Japan Retreats with Release'; Yoichi Funabashi, 'Japan–China Relations'; Jaeho Hwang, 'Understanding China's Recent Foreign Policy'; Yoshisuke Inuma, 'Tip of the Iceberg'; Masami Ito, 'Senkaku Spat'; Jiang, 'New Twists over Old Disputes'; Yoichi Kato, 'China's Naval Expansion'; Policy Council of The Japan Forum on International Relations, 'Expansion of China and Japan's Response', p. 1; Frances M. Rosenbluth, 'Japan in 2010'; Mark Schreiber, 'Weeklies, Tabloids Hawkish over China'; Dingli Shen, 'A Chinese Assessment of China's External Security Environment'; Hitoshi Tanaka, 'The Senkaku Islands'; Yves Tiberghien, 'Disputed Islands Crisis'; Yves Tiberghien, 'The

mistake, China will take further actions and the Japanese side shall bear all the consequences that arise'.⁸⁴ In fact, some even believed that Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's historic visit to the disputed South Kuril Islands/Northern Territories on November 1, 2010 was coordinated with Beijing during a summit in late September.⁸⁵

Furthermore, there was the widespread interpretation that the decision to release Zhan was taken not by prosecutors but by Prime Minister Kan or his Cabinet, and that it was a sign of weakness and lack of responsibility on their part to infer that prosecutors could have the authority to make a decision of such crucial impact on Japanese diplomacy.⁸⁶

Critical Reappraisal

Although it seems reasonable to interpret the large number of protests and the suspension of various bilateral exchanges—notably the talks on joint gas development that Tokyo was keen to have—as 'strong' Chinese reactions amounting to attempts to exert influence vis-à-vis Japan, this is not enough to construct the 'power shift' narrative. The aim of this section, therefore, is to perform a critical review of the interpretations laid out in the preceding section. Essentially, it addresses the question of whether or not the process of and fallout from the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands incident in September 2010 must be interpreted as 'Chinese aggressiveness' and Japanese 'defeat'—as China 'gaining' and Japan 'losing'—and as further evidence of an ongoing 'power shift' in East Asia.

Puzzling 2010 Diaoyu Crisis'; Tokyo Foundation, 'Japan's Security Strategy Toward China', p. 14; *Washington Post*, 'Rising Power'.

⁸⁴ *China Daily*, 'Wen Urges Skipper's Immediate Release by Japan', September 22, 2010, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-09/22/content_11338036.htm. An even harsher statement was made by a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman, see Ben Blanchard and Linda Sieg, 'China Suspends Contacts as Japan Boat Row Deepens', Reuters, September 19, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/09/19/us-japan-china-idUSTRE68I06520100919>.

⁸⁵ Takahashi Masayuki, 'Senkaku yowagoshi gaiko no tsuke: Rodaitoryo Hopporyodo homon' (On the Account of the Weak-Kneed Senkaku Diplomacy: Russian President's Visit to the Northern Territories), *MSN Sankei nyusu*, November 6, 2010, <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/politics/news/110115/plc11011517450018-n1.htm>; Yves Tiberghien, 'The Puzzling 2010 Diaoyu Crisis'.

⁸⁶ Shigeki Hakamada, 'Meltdown of Japan'; Gavan McCormack, 'Small Islands'; Alex Martin and Kanako Takahara, 'Friction Cited in Move to Free Chinese Skipper'; Mike Mochizuki, 'China over-reached', p. 6; Hitoshi Tanaka, 'The Senkaku Islands', p. 2. Criticism along these lines was also raised in the meetings of many different Diet committees in the autumn of 2010. See the Budget Committee meeting of the House of Representatives on September 29, 2010, for a few exchanges that are representative of the discourse at large, for example, remarks by the LDP's Onodera Itsunori and Shiozaki Yasuhisa. In several interviews with Diet members in December 2010, including people from the DPJ, similar disapproval of the release and of the Kan Cabinet's potential involvement was voiced. The word 'strange' [*okashii*] to describe the Cabinet's handling of the issue appears in several interviews, for example, in author's interview with Kishi Nobuo, LDP Diet member, Tokyo, December 6, 2010; and in interviews with Yatagawa Hajime and Matsubara Jin.

Chinese 'Retaliation'? The Detention of Japanese Nationals

As earlier mentioned, there is a widespread interpretation that the Chinese authorities 'retaliated' against the arrest and detention of Zhan, the Chinese captain, by detaining four Japanese Fujita employees on charges of unlawfully videotaping military targets in Hebei Province. After his release on October 9, detainee Takahashi Sadamu was asked at a press conference in Tokyo to explain why he had been held in custody longer than his colleagues, who had been released on September 30. He replied: '[I] cannot explain, but [I] guess it was because I was the one [doing the] videotaping'. Moreover, there is reportedly a part in the confiscated video where the Chinese interpreter can be heard to say 'restricted military zone' [*gunji kinku*], but Takahashi said that he 'did not notice' [*kidzukanakatta*] the interpreter's warning or a sign bearing the same written message.⁸⁷

In response to the direct question whether or not the four Japanese nationals could have been released earlier under different circumstances, China's ambassador to Japan Cheng Yonghua replied: 'That's perhaps a guess, but it's clear that [they] had entered a military-controlled area'.⁸⁸ The question is, then, whether or not the Chinese treatment of the Fujita employees was any different from that meted out during similar past incidents. Such comparison, however, is complicated by the fact that both earlier cases of Japanese persons trespassing on restricted zones (in 1996 and 2002) involved Japanese military attachés, for whom long detentions would have violated the Vienna Convention. Both, therefore, were expelled.⁸⁹

To sum up, it seems beyond doubt that the four Japanese men actually entered a restricted military zone without permission and, moreover, videotaped their passage there. Chinese authorities certainly did not orchestrate the incident. Available data also work against the interpretation that the detention was mere 'retaliation'. In fact, there was a fairly solid case for taking the four Japanese nationals into custody. Given the gravity of the accusation one could perhaps even argue that Chinese authorities showed leniency in releasing the four relatively quickly and without pressing charges. To conclude, no evidence has been presented to support the interpretation that the Fujita employees were arrested as an act of retaliation, but that is not to say there is any evidence that they were not. The bottom line of this paragraph is to acknowledge that uncertainty.

⁸⁷ *MSN Sankei nyusu*, 'Kaiho no Fujita shain kikoku: kinshi kuiki kanban wa "kidzukanakatta" to kyocho' (The released Fujita Employee Returns: [He] Emphasized "[I] didn't notice the prohibited area sign"), October 10, 2010, <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/affairs/news/110122/crm11012203280074-n1.htm>, accessed on June 1, 2011.

⁸⁸ Author's interview with Cheng Yonghua, China's ambassador to Japan, Tokyo, December 6, 2010.

⁸⁹ 'Why China Asks Japan to Recall its Military Attache?', *People's Daily Online*, November 22, 2002, http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200211/22/eng20021122_107310.shtml.

Chinese 'Pressure'? The Halting of Rare Earth Metal Exports

There was also the widespread interpretation that China 'put pressure' on Japan to release Zhan by halting rare earth metal exports to Japan for two months. Although it appears that Chinese Customs officials actually prevented rare earths from being loaded on ships bound for Japan, Chinese authorities have consistently denied the existence of an embargo; also that the hiatus in these exports had any connection with the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute.⁹⁰

Although the timing of the export halt might seem to imply a connection, there are certain data that favour Beijing's side of the story. *Asahi Shimbun* reported in mid-August 2010 that Beijing had decided on a 40% cut in the export of rare earth metals in the second half of that year, quoting environmental reasons. This decision allegedly 'came as... a shock' to Japanese Industry Minister Naoshima Masayuki and 'caused panic in Japan'—the world's biggest importer of rare earth metals. On August 18, the parliamentary secretary of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, Kondo Yosuke, travelled to Beijing in an unsuccessful attempt to maintain exports at the 2009 level.⁹¹ Ten days later, at a Japan–China High-Level Economic Dialogue meeting, Naoshima reportedly asked Chinese Minister of Industry and Information Li Yizhong and Commerce Minister Chen Deming to reverse the decision, but the effort was again unavailing. The Chinese side restated the environmental argument and also emphasised fears of over-exploitation of resources.⁹² In mid-October China 'quietly' halted some rare earth shipments to the United States and Europe as well.⁹³ Beijing stated that it would resume the exports on October 28, and effectively did so to Japan on November 19, 2010.⁹⁴

Articles in Japanese, Chinese and international media concur that the rare earths issue appeared well in advance of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands incident in 2010, and that Japanese government officials had already expressed serious grievances about it in August 2010. Various Japanese news sources

⁹⁰ Interview with Cheng Yonghua.

⁹¹ Tatsuo Kotoyori, Noriyoshi Ohtsuki and Takeshi Kamiya, *Asahi Shimbun*, 'Japan Alarmed by China's Policy on Rare Metals', August 21, 2010, <http://www.asahi.com/english/TKY201008200252.html>.

⁹² Tatsuo Kotoyori, Koichi Furuya and Takeshi Kamiya, 'Chinese Adamant on Rare-Earth Metal Cuts', *Asahi Shimbun*, August 30, 2010, <http://www.asahi.com/english/TKY201008290151.html>; Beibei Huang, 'China, Japan Debate Restrictions on Rare Earths Exports', *People's Daily Online*, August 30, 2010, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90778/90861/7122382.html>.

⁹³ Keith Bradsher, 'China Said to Widen Its Embargo of Minerals', *New York Times*, October 19, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/20/business/global/20rare.html?_r=1.

⁹⁴ Keith Bradsher, 'China Is Said to Resume Shipping Rare Earth Minerals', *New York Times*, October 28, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/29/business/energy-environment/29rare.html?pagewanted=all>; Keith Bradsher, 'China Restarts Rare Earth Shipments to Japan', *New York Times*, November 19, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/20/business/global/20rare.html>.

moreover report that the two issues were first lumped together in the *New York Times* on September 22.⁹⁵ The rare earths issue was undoubtedly connected with the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands incident in 2010, but as with the detention of the Fujita employees described above, it is highly uncertain whether it was Beijing, journalists, or some other entity that construed the linkage in the first place.

'Weak' Japan? The Release of the Chinese Captain

Turning to the interpretation that Tokyo was 'weak' or experienced a 'defeat', one wonders: as compared to what? In this context it is noteworthy that Japanese coastguards merely turned away Taiwanese and Hong Kong-based ships that tried to enter what Tokyo considers to be the islands' territorial waters in 1996, 1997 and 2006,⁹⁶ and arrested and immediately deported activists from the PRC on March 24, 2004. On June 10, 2008, moreover, a Taiwanese sport-fishing vessel sank after colliding with a Japanese patrol ship. Although the Japanese authorities started out by arresting the captain, about a week later Tokyo expressed regret over the collision and offered to compensate him financially for the sinking of his ship.

In the light of this, the initial response of Japanese authorities to the September 2010 incident—arresting and detaining the Chinese skipper 'in accordance with domestic law'—could clearly be interpreted as 'stronger than before' rather than 'weak'. By arresting and detaining Zhan, Japanese authorities took unprecedented measures that arguably violated 'the political aspects of the understandings that flowed from the 1997 Fishery Agreement' between Japan and China: 'Under this regime, flag-state laws (that is PRC jurisdiction), not coastal state laws, were deemed to apply to fisheries-related activities in the "area surrounding the islands."' ⁹⁷ Japanese authorities arguably also contravened a secret understanding since 2004 whereby Tokyo agreed to refrain from making any arrests and Beijing agreed to prevent activists from going to the islands.⁹⁸ Although it is outside the scope of this article to hypothesise why the Japanese response

⁹⁵ *MSN Sankei nyusu*, 'Chugoku ga Nihon muke reasu zenmen kin'yu Senkaku oki shototsu mondaide, beikan hodo' (China [has installed] a full export embargo due to the collision problem offshore Senkaku, [according to] US newspaper reporting), September 23, 2010, <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/world/news/110119/chn11011911110026-n1.htm>, accessed on February 1, 2012.

⁹⁶ Hong Kong activist David Chan drowned on September 26, 1996 after jumping into the water when Japanese coastguards prevented his boat from landing on one of the disputed islands.

⁹⁷ Sourabh Gupta, 'China–Japan Trawler Incident'; James Manicom, 'Growing Nationalism and Maritime Jurisdiction in the East China Sea', p. 11.

⁹⁸ Senkaku mondai shuzaihan (The Reporter Squad for the Senkaku Problem), 'Nicchu "Senkaku mitsuyaku" atta' (There Was a Secret Japan–China Agreement over the Senkaku Islands), *Aera*, October 25, 2010, pp. 14–15.

was different this time, it was arguably the unfamiliar qualities of that response that produced the comparatively large number of Chinese protests, as well as their harsh wording.⁹⁹

As discussed earlier, however, the interpretation of Japanese ‘weakness’ or ‘defeat’ might rather derive from circumstances surrounding the release of the captain, that is, the fact that the Naha prosecutors alluded to Japan–China relations as a major reason behind it. Since it was arguably beyond their authority to take political or diplomatic considerations into account, this statement implied the possibility of political intervention. Delegating the matter to prosecutors, in turn, showed the ‘weakness’ of the political leadership, and letting the Chinese captain off the hook prematurely marked Japan’s ‘defeat’.

One could nevertheless argue that had politicians publicly meddled in the release it would have negated the claim that the Japanese authorities handled the matter ‘in accordance with domestic law’. Such a move could have been interpreted as tacit recognition that there is indeed an international political aspect to the Senkaku Islands, which could, in turn, imply that they differ from other parts of Japanese territory where domestic law can readily be applied. From the point of view of Japanese government policy, the reference to bilateral relations was clearly a mistake on the part of the prosecutors, but it is not in itself evidence of political intervention. Moreover, I largely agree with Peter Ennis that the arrest and detention demonstrated Japan’s actual control of the islands.¹⁰⁰ Sun-won Park goes one step further by arguing that through their handling of the incident Japanese authorities ‘will be able to claim that its sovereign jurisdiction over the islands is now fait accompli, which is one of most important factors if the International Court of Justice should consider the issue in the future’.¹⁰¹

There is also no need to interpret the subsequent presence of Chinese fishery surveillance vessels in disputed areas as evidence of a more aggressive China, or of Japan’s failure to secure its territory. This could equally well be understood as the Chinese authorities’ greater endeavours to monitor Chinese fishing vessels’ activities in efforts to prevent the occurrence of another incident,¹⁰² Japanese authorities having demonstrated in 2010 that they might well prosecute the next Chinese captain who strays into disputed waters.

Japan ‘Lost’? Verbal and Ideational Battles

Some observers argue that Beijing did at least manage to demonstrate to the world through its handling of the incident that there is a territorial dispute

⁹⁹ Yves Tiberghien, ‘The Puzzling 2010 Diaoyu Crisis’.

¹⁰⁰ Peter Ennis, ‘Japan Blinked?’.

¹⁰¹ Sun-won Park, ‘The East China Sea Dispute’.

¹⁰² Mike Mochizuki, ‘China over-reached’, p. 7.

within Sino-Japanese relations.¹⁰³ But one could nonetheless doubt that the competing claims over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands were not internationally known pre-September 2010. In fact, the latest incident merely witnessed a continuation of the same kind of verbal or ideational sparring that has characterised the past 40 years of parallel Japanese and Chinese claims.¹⁰⁴ Whereas Beijing's long-standing goal is to 'goad Japan into saying there is a territorial dispute',¹⁰⁵ or into agreeing that the 'dispute is shelved' in line with Deng Xiaoping's suggestion in 1978, Tokyo wants Beijing 'to accept the fact that they control the islands'.¹⁰⁶

Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism—and from September 17, Foreign Minister—Maehara Seiji, for one, constantly reiterated the Japanese position throughout the first few weeks after the incident. For instance, he stated on no less than 25 occasions in Diet debates between September 10 and November 16, 2010 that there 'exists no dispute'.¹⁰⁷ Representatives of all political parties represented in the Diet also voiced support for this policy. The logical consequence of this policy was, again, to deal with the Chinese claim 'in accordance with domestic law'. Maehara, moreover, did his best to counter the Chinese claim that 'the issue has been shelved', stating in a meeting of the House of Representatives Security Committee on September 21 that 'it is not the case that Japan agreed with China [about this] [*goishita to iu jijitsu wa gozaimasen*].

The name by which the islands are referred to internationally is very clearly a marker of either side's success in securing acceptance of its standpoint. A search on media search engine Factiva.com shows that global news sources represented in the database have not clearly favoured one name over another in the wake of the incident. A slight tendency in favour of 'Senkaku' over 'Diaoyu'/'Tiaoyu' seems to relate only to the fact that Japanese news sources have a larger share than Chinese ones of the general bulk of news reporting. Moreover, most news sources that do not originate in China or Japan mention both names. On balance, there is little evidence that China succeeded in strengthening its hand in these ongoing ideational battles through the incident in 2010.

¹⁰³ Yoichi Funabashi, 'Japan–China Relations'. This was also argued in an interview with Ishihara Nobuteru.

¹⁰⁴ Linus Hagström, 'Quiet Power', p. 161.

¹⁰⁵ Ko Hirano, 'Kan-Wen Talks Help Ties: Experts', *Japan Times Online*, October 7, 2010, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20101007a4.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Martin Fackler and Ian Johnson, 'Arrest in Disputed Seas'.

¹⁰⁷ This position was repeated elsewhere too, for example, in an interview in the journal *Gaiko*. Maehara Seiji, 'Keizai gaiko o jiku ni, hirakareta kuni o mezasu' (Aiming for an Open Country around the Axis of Economic Diplomacy), *Gaiko (Diplomacy)*, Vol. 4 (2010), pp. 7–8. For a critical view of this policy, see Kazuhiko Togo, 'Japan Must Acknowledge 'Territorial Issue' over Islands', *East Asia Forum*, October 15, 2010, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/10/14/japan-must-acknowledge-territorial-issue-over-islands/>.

The preceding subsections have critically reappraised the notion that Beijing ‘behaved aggressively’ and that Tokyo was ‘weak’ or ‘lost’ subsequent to the collision in the East China Sea in September 2010, and have emphasised the ambiguity of the available evidence. The following subsections try to take the argument one step further by asking if Tokyo did not actually secure a few ‘gains’ through the incident.

First Japanese ‘Gain’: US Reassurances

US policy in regard to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands has been marked by inconsistency since their return to Japan in 1972, as part of Okinawa Prefecture. Upon the return of the islands, 27 years after they had been occupied and used by the US military for training exercises, Secretary of State William Rogers stated:

this [reversion] treaty does not affect the legal status of those islands at all. Whatever the legal status was prior to the treaty is going to be the legal situation after the treaty comes into effect.¹⁰⁸

Over the years other US officials reiterated the policy that Washington takes no position on the sovereignty issue.¹⁰⁹ Since US naval deployments in East Asia was deemed crucial in the event of an armed conflict over the islands, there was much Japanese dissatisfaction with this ‘neutrality’. In an interview a few years ago, former Administrative Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Saito Kunihiko harshly criticised US policy on the islands after the return of Okinawa as ‘disorganised’ [*mittomonai*].¹¹⁰ In response to Japanese expressions of discontent, in November 1996 US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt M. Campbell signalled a change of policy:

the Okinawa Reversion Treaty of 1972 stipulates that the Senkaku Islands be placed under the administration of Japan. With regard to this issue, [the United States] responsibility for the maintenance of security is clearly defined.¹¹¹

Because it reaffirmed the US readiness to defend the islands in the event of armed confrontation with China, this statement ‘partly ameliorated’ the concern of the Japanese government.¹¹² The George W. Bush administration maintained this stance. In August 2010, however, it was reported that the Obama administration had decided to return to the previous policy of not

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Jean-Marc F. Blanchard, ‘The U.S. Role in the Sino-Japanese Dispute over the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands 1945–1971’, *China Quarterly*, No. 161 (2000), p. 120.

¹⁰⁹ Han-yi Shaw, *The Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands Dispute: Its History and an Analysis of the Ownership Claims of the P.R.C., R.O.C., and Japan* (Baltimore: School of Law, University of Maryland, 1999), p. 126; Unryu Suganuma, *Sovereign Rights*, p. 135.

¹¹⁰ Author’s interview with Saito Kunihiko, former administrative vice-minister of foreign affairs, Tokyo, June 2, 2002.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Han-yi Shaw, *The Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands Dispute*, p. 126, brackets in original.

¹¹² Han-yi Shaw, *The Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands Dispute*, p. 126.

stating 'explicitly that the Senkaku Islands . . . are subject to the Japan–U.S. security treaty'.¹¹³

In this regard, the incident in September 2010 could be regarded as a 'policy window' for Tokyo, because over the next few weeks it was instrumental in securing various US statements to the effect that the Senkaku Islands and nearby waters are covered by Article 5 of the security treaty, which obligates the USA to defend them. The most unambiguous statement came in late October, when US Secretary of State Hillary R. Clinton 'clearly' emphasised that the islands 'fall within the scope of Article 5 of the 1960 U.S.–Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security . . . [and that t]his is part of the larger commitment that the United States has made to Japan's security'.¹¹⁴ With this statement Washington arguably 'strengthened its commitment',¹¹⁵ and this was a 'positive thing for Japan'.¹¹⁶

Second Japanese 'Gain': Futenma as a 'China Issue'

In its election manifesto in 2009, the DPJ vouchsafed to 'oversee the re-organisation of the US army and [the question of] what US bases in Japan should be like'.¹¹⁷ This paraphrased the ambition to renegotiate the accord for the relocation of the US Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Okinawa, which was struck between the USA and Japan with the LDP at the helm in 2006. The accord foresaw the relocation of the station from Ginowan to Henoko Bay in Nago, northern Okinawa, by 2014.

When the DPJ came to power, however, different Cabinet members began to voice differing opinions on the relocation issue. Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio, for one, kept making assurances that he was contemplating various options, but he failed to produce a concrete plan. In early May 2010, Hatoyama finally yielded to massive pressure, domestically and from the United States, and acknowledged that the base could not 'realistically' be moved due to the necessity to 'maintain the Japan–US alliance as a deterrent force'.¹¹⁸ Hatoyama resigned less than a month later, and the fact that he had broken his campaign promise was cited as a main reason.

As Hatoyama's successor, Kan Naoto immediately confirmed the original deal on Futenma, while regretting the DPJ's failure to honour its pledge.

¹¹³ 'U.S. Fudges Senkaku Security Pact Status', *Japan Times Online*, August 17, 2010, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20100817a1.html>.

¹¹⁴ US Department of State, 'Joint Press Availability with Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara', October 27, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/10/150110.htm>.

¹¹⁵ Professor Kubo Fumiaki of Tokyo University quoted in Masami Ito, 'Senkaku Spat'.

¹¹⁶ Mike Mochizuki, 'China over-reached', p. 7.

¹¹⁷ Minshuto (Democratic Party of Japan), *Seiken kotai: Minshuto no seiken seisaku manifesto (Change of Government: The DPJ Government's Policy Manifesto)* (Tokyo: Minshuto, 2009), p. 22.

¹¹⁸ Martin Fackler and Hiroko Tabuchi, 'Japanese Leader Backtracks on Revising Base Agreement', *New York Times*, May 4, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/05/world/asia/05japan.html>.

Although the discontent in Okinawa lingered, in late September and early October the Okinawa Prefectural Assembly and the mayor and City Assembly of Ishigaki adopted resolutions demanding that the central government restate its claim to the Senkaku Islands and ‘beef up security and surveillance’ in the area.¹¹⁹ The governments of Japan and the United States arguably also took advantage of the situation to gain support for current US force structures in Okinawa. Prime Minister Kan, for example, was quoted in mid-November as expressing his ‘appreciation for the consistent support of the U.S. amid Japan’s various problems with China and Russia’, adding that ‘I myself and many Japanese people as well as neighbouring countries recognized the further importance of the U.S. military presence for the peace and security of the region’.¹²⁰ Furthermore, before leaving his assignment as commander of US forces in Japan, Lt Gen. Edward A. Rice Jr said à propos the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands incident that ‘[i]t is just very difficult to speculate or hypothesize about what we might do in a given scenario’, and ‘[i]t is exactly why it is important for us to have flexible capabilities to include a basing structure that allows us to organize our forces to the requirements of a specific contingency’.¹²¹

A few months after the incident DPJ Diet member—at the time of writing in April 2012 Nuclear Disaster Minister and Minister of the Environment—Hosono Goshi emphasised that Japan needs to prepare for the hypothetical scenario of the Senkaku Islands being taken by China. In that context, he stated:

the meaning of US army deployments in Japan is not small; moreover, the significance of [the US military] being in Okinawa is extremely large. And so, we were made to realise [*kidzukasareta*] an option; i.e. to let the US army be stationed in Japan and, moreover in Okinawa, close to Senkaku, or . . . to defend [the islands] again by ourselves and take them back . . . [I] think this incident made Japan realise this option.¹²²

As Okinawa was returned to Japan in 1972, US policymakers allegedly believed that it would serve US regional interests to leave the question of sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands unresolved, because ‘a territorial dispute between Japan and China, especially over islands near Okinawa, would make the US military presence in Okinawa more acceptable to Japan’.¹²³ Although the latest incident amply demonstrated the

¹¹⁹ ‘Ishigaki Wants Senkaku Security’, *Japan Times Online*, October 5, 2010, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20101005a7.html>.

¹²⁰ Masami Ito, ‘Kan Thanks Obama for U.S. Siding with Japan’, *Japan Times Online*, September 29, 2010, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn2010114a3.html>.

¹²¹ Masami Ito, ‘Senkaku Challenge Surmountable: Departing U.S. Forces Commander’, *Japan Times Online*, October 22, 2010, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20101022a6.html>; Aurelia George Mulgan, ‘US–Japan Alliance’.

¹²² Author’s interview with Hosono Goshi, DPJ Diet member, Tokyo, December 9, 2010.

¹²³ Kimie Hara, *Cold War Frontiers in the Asia-Pacific: Divided Territories in the San Francisco System* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. 181.

continued relevance of this anticipation, it did not just reconfirm the systemic advantage of the United States;¹²⁴ it also helped the Kan Cabinet to keep the base issue away from the centre of the Japanese political agenda and to put Japan–US relations back on an even keel. In Aurelia George Mulgan's words, the incident '[had] become a factor in the mix of considerations determining the resolution of the Futenma base issue'.¹²⁵ To conclude, both Washington and Tokyo took advantage of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands incident in 2010 in an attempt to frame Futenma as a 'China issue'.

Third Japanese 'gain': Japanese Security Policy Change

That many Japanese policymakers view China as a 'threat' can be inferred from different sources.¹²⁶ Yet this view has seldom been voiced publicly by Japanese officials or in policy documents.¹²⁷ Thus far Tokyo has been extremely reluctant to justify any changes in its foreign security policy due to the emergence of a 'Chinese threat'.¹²⁸ It has instead typically emphasised 'the necessity of keeping the focus' [*chumoku shite iku hitsuyo ga aru*] on Chinese military developments and the activities of the People's Liberation Army.¹²⁹ The introduction of new National Defence Program Guidelines (NDPG) in 2004 is a case in point.¹³⁰

The Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands incident in 2010 occurred about a year after the DPJ had come to power, in an environment where the new government was again deliberating a new, updated NDPG. The revised document, which was enacted in December 2010, described China's military development in stronger terms than any prior NDPG, calling it 'a concern [*kenen jiko*] of the international community and the region'.¹³¹ Importantly, the NDPG of 2010 rejected the long-held Basic Defence Force Concept [*kibanteki*

¹²⁴ Wenran Jiang, 'New Twists over Old Disputes', p. 13.

¹²⁵ Aurelia George Mulgan, 'US–Japan Alliance'.

¹²⁶ Linus Hagström, 'Sino-Japanese Relations: The Ice that Won't Melt', *International Journal*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (2008/2009), pp. 223–40; Linus Hagström and Björn Jerdén, 'Understanding Fluctuations in Sino-Japanese Relations: To Politicize or to De-Politicize the China Issue in the Japanese Diet', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (2010), pp. 719–39.

¹²⁷ Notable exceptions include then Foreign Minister Aso Taro's remarks in 2005 and 2006. See Linus Hagström, 'Sino-Japanese Relations', p. 225.

¹²⁸ Arguably, North Korea has provided a fig leaf for Japanese military modernisation instead. See Linus Hagström and Christian Turesson, 'Among Threats and a "Perfect Excuse": Understanding Change in Japanese Foreign Security Policy', *Korean Journal of Defence Analysis*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (2009), pp. 297–314.

¹²⁹ Japan's Defence Agency, *Boei hakusho 1999 (Defence of Japan 1999)* (Tokyo: Japan's Defence Agency, 1999), chapter 1, section 3.4.3; Ministry of Defence, *Boei hakusho 2007 (Defence of Japan 2007)* (Tokyo: Ministry of Defence, 2007), p. 55.

¹³⁰ Prime Minister's Office, 'Heisei 17 nendo iko ni kakawaru boei keikaku no taiko ni tsuite' (About the Defence Planning Outline for Year Heisei 17 onwards), December 10, 2004, <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/kakugikettei/2004/1210taikou.html>.

¹³¹ Prime Minister's Office, 'Heisei 23 nendo iko ni kakawaru boei keikaku no taiko ni tsuite' (About the Defence Planning Outline regarding Year Heisei 23 onwards), December 17, 2010, <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/kakugikettei/2010/1217boeitaikou.pdf>, p. 3.

boeiryoku], which epitomised Japan's minimalist defence strategy in the post-war period, and introduced a 'Dynamic Defence Force' concept [*doteki boeiryoku*].¹³² It was accompanied by an overhaul of Japan's military strategy and capability, with military weight shifting from Hokkaido to the Nansei Islands—which stretch from the southern tip of Kyushu to Taiwan—and with important upgrades in the country's naval and coastguard capability. The number of submarines, for example, was set to increase from 16 to 22, and the number of Aegis-equipped destroyers from four to six.

There is no doubt that the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands incident triggered even greater Japanese apprehensions about China from an already significant level.¹³³ Although a defence policy shift had been under way for some time, the new mood after the incident foreshadowed and arguably also facilitated the enactment of a rather altered NDPG.¹³⁴ A Japanese professor who spent time with Sengoku in the autumn of 2010 claims that the then chief cabinet secretary also changed his mind about China after the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands incident and that this change was reflected in the NDPG.¹³⁵ According to Hosono Goshi the incident 'created a flow where [we] have to equip [*sobi*] [ourselves] more carefully', for example, through 'strengthening the coastguard' and 'altering the disposition of the SDF [Self-Defence Forces] southwards'.¹³⁶ Many other DPJ Diet members concur that the incident amply demonstrated the need to move more SDF troops within close range of the islands because,¹³⁷ as DPJ Diet member—at the time of writing Senior Vice-Minister for Defence—Watanabe Shu put it, 'the current enemy [*teki*] isn't Soviet or Russia; the enemy [*teki*] is China'.¹³⁸ To conclude, the 2010 collision had an impact on public perceptions and affected the direction in which the DPJ wanted to take security policy. It also presented an opportunity to sell a more active security policy to the Japanese people in the form of the new updated NDPG.

¹³² Prime Minister's Office, 'About the Defence Planning Outline Regarding Year Heisei 23 Onwards', pp. 5–6.

¹³³ For example, the Japanese Cabinet Office's annual opinion poll in the autumn/winter of 2010 demonstrated that 77.8% of the Japanese population had negative feelings toward China (increasing from 58.5% in 2009 and 66.6% in 2008). Cabinet Office, *Gaiko ni kansuru yoron chosa (Public Opinion Poll on Diplomacy)*, 2010, <http://www8.cao.go.jp/survey/h22/h22-gaiko/>. The annual poll by Genron NPO in 2012 moreover found that 84.3% of the Japanese have a negative impression of China, while 64.5% of the Chinese have a negative impression of Japan, see Genron NPO, *Dai 8 kai Nicchu kyodo yoron chosa kekka (The Results of the 8th Joint Japan–China Opinion Poll)*, p. 2, <http://www.genron-npo.net/pdf/forum2012.pdf>.

¹³⁴ Yoichi Kato, 'China's Naval Expansion'.

¹³⁵ Conversation with a Japanese professor in June 2011.

¹³⁶ Interview with Hosono Goshi.

¹³⁷ Interviews with Yatagawa Hajime, Matsubara Jin, Nagashima Akihisa and Watanabe Shu. Some representatives of the opposition parties are more extreme to the extent that they favour deployment of the SDF on the Senkaku Islands. Author's interview with Eto Seishiro, LDP Diet member and vice-speaker of the House of Representatives, Tokyo, December 3, 2010.

¹³⁸ Interview with Watanabe Shu.

Narrative, Discursive Context, Power, Identity

By compiling data on the incident in September 2010 and its aftermath, the second section of this article aimed to demonstrate what John Ratcliffe and others have previously pointed out—namely, that 'data do not speak for themselves'.¹³⁹ The chronology presented there hopefully did not convey much meaning in itself, other than reinforcing that the way in which these data can be interpreted is fundamentally influenced by the fact that the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands are disputed territory. This simple fact goes to the heart of the question of whether the Chinese captain recklessly rammed the Japanese coastguards who were trying to enforce Japanese law, or rightfully resisted their intrusion into Chinese territorial waters.

The third section emphasised that the dominant interpretation of the incident is permeated with a 'power shift' narrative, which in this particular case rests on several other layers of interpretation. Although the reasonableness of each layer ideally depends on the one that logically precedes it, texts analysing the Sino-Japanese interaction in the autumn of 2010 seem rather to proceed 'backwards'; 'power shift', and the nexus of 'aggressive China' and 'weak/defeated Japan' hence serve as a sort of lens, or implicit theory, through which the data are interpreted. By critically reappraising and severing the link between data and interpretations, however, the preceding section demonstrated that one does not necessarily have to interpret China as 'aggressive' and Japan as 'weak' or 'defeated', or, in sum, the process of and fallout from the incident in 2010 do not necessarily need to be understood as further evidence of 'China's rise', 'Japan's decline', and the advance of a regional 'power shift'.

Catherine Riessman notes that narratives 'must always be considered in context' because they exist 'at a historical moment with its circulating discourses and power relations'.¹⁴⁰ So how can one understand the emergence of the 'power shift' narrative, which so effectively steered interpretations of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands incident? There is clearly the discursive context of international relations scholarship where many theories—notably strands of realism—ascribe states power, or the status of 'great power'/'superpower', primarily in regard to their properties.¹⁴¹ 'China's rise' is most commonly represented in this discourse by the enormous increases in its gross domestic product (GDP) and defence spending since the launch of the reform and

¹³⁹ John W. Ratcliffe, 'Notions of Validity in Qualitative Research Methodology', *Science Communication*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1983), p. 149.

¹⁴⁰ Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), p. 8.

¹⁴¹ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979); see Linus Hagström, 'Relational Power for Foreign Policy Analysis: Issues in Japan's China Policy', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2005), pp. 395–430.

opening-up agenda in 1978.¹⁴² Calculated in USD, Chinese GDP more than doubled in nominal terms between 1991 and 2000 (from \$371.20 billion to \$794 billion), and in the following nine years until 2009 it increased by 557% calculated in USD (to \$4.42 trillion). The Chinese defence budget in 2009 was moreover 485% larger than that of 2000 (an increase from \$14.5 billion to \$70.3 billion), and the defence budget in 2000 was 237% larger than that of 1991 (when it stood at \$6.11 billion).¹⁴³

'Japan's decline', in contrast, generally refers to the economic malaise that has haunted Japan for well over two decades—a combination of low economic growth, high public debt, deflation and serious problems related to demography and governance. One often hears of 'Japan's lost decade', but since economic, social, and political problems have been lingering and allegedly getting worse since the bursting of the 'economic bubble' in the late 1980s, some are now inclined to put 'decade' in the plural.¹⁴⁴

'Power shift', finally, refers to the combined effect of these two developments, most potently symbolised by China's succeeding Japan in 2010 as the world's second largest economy. In other words, the relative distribution of regional power is believed to be shifting in China's favour, and thereby greatly affecting East Asian affairs.¹⁴⁵ The ongoing power shift is arguably reflected *par excellence* in the islands dispute, because China's naval capability has ballooned in recent decades and there is also an understanding that its maritime strategy has become markedly more ambitious.¹⁴⁶ Frequently cited examples include the growth in Chinese fishing activity in

¹⁴² Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), chapter 3; David Kang, *China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 12–16.

¹⁴³ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1992–1993* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 143–5; *The Military Balance 2001–2002* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 188; *The Military Balance 2010* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 398.

¹⁴⁴ Fumio Hayashi and Edward C. Prescott, 'The 1990s in Japan: A Lost Decade', *Review of Economic Dynamics*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2002), pp. 206–35. There also exists a literature, which emphasises 'Japan's rise' in security policy terms, and it exists parallel to the literature on 'Japan's decline Relative to China'. The changes in Japanese security policy that tend to exemplify that 'rise', however, have allegedly to a great extent been spurred by 'China's rise'. Kenneth B. Pyle, *Japan Rising: The Resurgence of Japanese Power and Purpose* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007); Richard J. Samuels, *Securing Japan: Tokyo's Grand Strategy and the Future of East Asia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007); and Christopher W. Hughes, *Japan's Remilitarisation* (Oxon and New York: Routledge and London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2009). For a critique of the way that this literature overemphasises Japan's 'remilitarisation', see Linus Hagström and Jon Williamsson, "'Remilitarization', Really? Assessing Change in Japanese Foreign Security Policy', *Asian Security*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2009), pp. 242–72.

¹⁴⁰ A more thorough analysis of the alleged power shift between Japan and China can be found in Jian Yang, 'Japan's Decline', pp. 148–54.

¹⁴⁶ Robert S. Ross, 'China's Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the U.S. Response', *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2009), pp. 46–81.

the waters around the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, and in the passage of Chinese patrol and investigation vessels through the area.

A widely shared notion of power in international relations scholarship and the widespread analysis of East Asian politics in such terms is thus one discursive context in which the emergence of the 'power shift' narrative can be understood. Of course, building on this notion of power Japan has been understood as curiously 'weak' in its security policy for almost half a century already, and this image has only been further strengthened by its economic misfortunes in more recent decades.¹⁴⁷ A corollary of this way of analysing power, where rising capability is typically construed as increasing threat, is the so-called 'China threat theory'.¹⁴⁸ Several observers agree that this understanding of China received a boost around the time of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands incident, as 'Western' discourses started to depict China as ever more 'aggressive' and 'assertive'.¹⁴⁹ Although Tokyo's role in promoting such an understanding is as yet unclear, this is undoubtedly another related discursive context in which the development of the dominant narrative, and, hence, the interpretation of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands incident in 2010, can be understood.

Yet another discursive context, which is arguably relevant to the notion of an 'aggressive China', is Japanese discourse on China, wherein the juxtaposition of a 'civilised' Japan and an 'uncivilised' China has recurred from the *kokugaku* (literally 'the study of [our] country') of the late Tokugawa period (1603–1868) onwards.¹⁵⁰ Not least, the interpretation that Beijing suspended rare earth exports and arrested Japanese nationals in China as a way of retaliating and putting pressure on Japan constructed China as an

¹⁴⁷ See for example Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The Emerging Structure of International Politics', *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1993), pp. 44–79, and Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Structural Realism After the Cold War', *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2000), pp. 5–41. But note the counternarrative in the last decade on Japan's normalisation and remilitarisation, as discussed in footnote 144 above.

¹⁴⁸ For a comprehensive and critical overview of this literature, see Khalid R. Al-Rodhan, 'A Critique of the China Threat Theory: A Systematic Analysis', *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2007), pp. 41–66.

¹⁴⁹ Minxin Pei, 'Why the West Should Not Demonise China', *Financial Times*, November 25, 2010, <http://cache.ft.com/cms/s/0/15a347f8-f8d2-11df-b550-00144feab49a.html#axzz1ezVB0x4A>; Michael D. Swaine, 'Perceptions of an Assertive China', *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 32 (2010) pp. 1–19; <http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/CLM32MS.pdf>. For examples, see David Shambaugh, 'Coping with a Conflicted China', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2011), pp. 7–27; Tokyo Foundation, 'Japan's Security Strategy Toward China', pp. 14–15.

¹⁵⁰ Harumi Befu, *Hegemony of Homogeneity: An Anthropological Analysis of Nihonjinron* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2001), pp. 123–4; Kazuki Sato, "'Same Language, Same Race": The Dilemma of *Kanbun* in Modern Japan', in Frank Dikötter, ed., *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (London: Hurst & Company, 1998), pp. 118–35; Rumi Sakamoto, "'Will You Go to War? Or Will You Stop Being Japanese?'" Nationalism and History in Kobayashi Yoshinori's *Sensoron*', in Michael Heazle and Nick Knight, eds., *China–Japan Relations in the Twenty-First Century: Creating a Future Past* (Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Elgar, 2007), p. 84.

‘international bully’ and Japan as the more ‘reasonable’ party.¹⁵¹ The influence of this discourse can be seen, inter alia, in the report by the Policy Council of the Japan Forum on International Relations on the ‘Expansion of China and Japan’s Response’, which was signed by 68 influential Japanese academics and opinion leaders before being handed to Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko in January 2012. The Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands incident was contextualised in the report by juxtaposing China’s ‘modern’ pursuit of ‘narrowly defined egoistic national interests’ with Japan’s adherence to ‘human rights, freedom and democracy’ and a concept of national interests which ‘realizes the need to respect international public interests more keenly’, framing the isolated incident as part of a system-wide conflict between more developed ‘post-modern’ states (such as Japan and the United States) and less developed ‘modern’ ones (such as China and Russia).¹⁵²

That a ‘power shift’ narrative underlies the dominant interpretation of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands incident, and that it is in turn wedged in several discourses (the above overview does not aim to be exhaustive) can be understood from the point of view of a concept of power that is very different from that upon which the ‘power shift’ narrative is based. It is a reconfirmation of the links between knowledge and power, where power is viewed as productive of knowledge and subjectivity.¹⁵³ This kind of power operates here in that dominant narratives steer the construction of Japanese identity through China as an ‘Other’, and its workings are allegedly ‘intimately bound up with’ ‘the production of interstate crises’.¹⁵⁴ As Bahar Rumelili points out, ‘discourses on the promotion of democracy and human rights are inevitably productive of two identity categories, a morally superior identity of democratic juxtaposed to the inferior identity of non- (or less) democratic’.¹⁵⁵ This kind of differentiation vis-à-vis China is arguably not just part of the Japanese discursive context, but also of that of the United States.¹⁵⁶

Furthermore, since the fourth section reviewed the dominant interpretation of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands incident by highlighting Beijing’s and Tokyo’s attempts to exert influence and actual exercises of power over one another, the analysis could be framed in terms of yet another concept of

¹⁵¹ Mark Schreiber, ‘Weeklies, Tabloids Hawkish over China’.

¹⁵² Policy Council of The Japan Forum on International Relations, ‘Expansion of China and Japan’s Response’, p. 2. A few more examples are provided in Joel Rathus, ‘Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands’.

¹⁵³ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972–1977*, Colin Gordon, ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

¹⁵⁴ Jutta Weldes, et al. ‘Introduction: Constructing Insecurity’, in Jutta Weldes, et al., eds., *Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities, and the Production of Danger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 27.

¹⁵⁵ Bahar Rumelili, ‘Constructing Identity and Relating to Difference: Understanding the EU’s Mode of Differentiation’, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2004), p. 31.

¹⁵⁶ Oliver Turner, ‘Sino-US Relations Then and Now: Discourse, Images, Policy’, *Political Perspectives*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2011), pp. 27–45.

power—a relational one.¹⁵⁷ Although dominant narratives establish a framework whereby some action is deemed appropriate and other inappropriate, a relational concept of power can arguably also be applied to analyse the way in which actors *strategically* draw on narratives in attempts to exercise political power. It can for example be employed to understand how the aforementioned report by the Policy Council of the Japan Forum on International Relations mobilised the dominant narrative on the Diaoyu/Senkaku incident in 2010 in order to prescribe policy. The report basically used this narrative to argue that Japan should take measures to 'review Japan's system of survival and self-defence in a national emergency in terms of both hardware and software'; in particular the 'present strict interpretation of the constitution on the operation of the JSDF [Japan Self-Defence Forces] should not be left unaddressed, but be reconsidered in a prompt manner, including the possibility of constitutional amendment, taking the realities on the ground into consideration'.¹⁵⁸ Succeeding an analysis reflective of the dominant narrative, Kitaoka Shin'ichi of Tokyo University has also recommended that Japan take 'a resolute and strong posture' (*kizentaru tsuyoi shisei*) in its security and defence policies—above all, that it should strengthen its national defence through (i) introducing a National Security Council; (ii) abolishing or relaxing its principles on the non-export of military goods; and (iii) reinterpreting collective self-defence.¹⁵⁹ Nakanishi Terumasa of Kyoto University, moreover, has asserted that Japan lost its 'effective control' through the incident, and that it should try to stave off future Chinese invasions attempts by stationing SDF units on the islands.¹⁶⁰ Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro provides a final, and most extreme example of the effortless move from description to prescription on the part of many analysts and actors. Referring to the threat from 'fast-rising China' and Japan's 'weakness' in the context of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands incident, in early 2011 he suggested that Japan should arm itself with nuclear weapons: 'China wouldn't have dared lay a hand on the Senkakus [if Japan had had nuclear weapons]'.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); for an adaption to foreign policy analysis, see Linus Hagström, 'Relational Power for Foreign Policy Analysis'.

¹⁵⁸ The Policy Council of The Japan Forum on International Relations, 'Expansion of China', pp. 7–8.

¹⁵⁹ Kitaoka Shin'ichi, *Japan as a Global Player*, pp. 324–5.

¹⁶⁰ Nakanishi Terumasa, *The Road towards a Strong Japan*, pp. 50–80.

¹⁶¹ David McNeill, 'Japan Must Develop Nuclear Weapons, Warns Tokyo Governor', *The Independent*, March 8, 2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/japan-must-develop-nuclear-weapons-warns-tokyo-governor-2235186.html>. Ishihara made similar comments in a speech at the Heritage Foundation in Washington DC on April 17, 2012. The speech became best known for Ishihara's statement that Tokyo would buy the disputed islands, most of which are currently—according to the Japanese narrative—privately owned.

Conclusions

This article has problematised the ‘power shift’ narrative with respect to Sino-Japanese interaction over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in 2010. In short, its context-specific prerequisites—Chinese ‘aggressiveness’ or ‘pressure’ and Japanese ‘weakness’ or ‘defeat’—can be challenged through the argument that no unambiguous evidence exists that the detention of four Japanese nationals in China and the two-month halt in exports of rare earth metals to Japan must be interpreted in terms of the former, and that the sudden release of the Chinese trawler captain in late September 2010 should be construed in terms of the latter.

Quite to the contrary, the fact that the Japanese authorities arrested and detained the captain in the first place could actually be interpreted as Japanese ‘escalation’.¹⁶² Furthermore, the widespread notion that Beijing retaliated by carrying out the aforementioned acts contributed to the construction of China as an ‘international bully’ and of Japan as the more ‘reasonable’ party, both in Japan and elsewhere—one that is clearly to Tokyo’s advantage and Beijing’s disadvantage.¹⁶³ Available data also lend themselves to the interpretation that the incident helped Tokyo to (i) secure US reassurances of a firmer commitment to the security of the Senkaku Islands; (ii) frame the disputed relocation of the Futenma base as a ‘China issue’, thus enhancing the Japanese people’s ‘realisation’ of ‘the necessity’ to maintain US bases on Okinawa; and (iii) sell a more active security policy to the Japanese people in the form of the new updated NDPG. Although the incident can thus be construed as having produced quite significant benefits for Japan, this is not to imply that Tokyo engineered the crisis or that the benefits came about as a direct result of Japanese strategy. It would nevertheless seem difficult to argue that Japan ‘lost’ as a result of the incident, that it was ‘defeated’, or, indeed, that the fallout from the incident has ‘weakened Japan’s claim’ to the islands.¹⁶⁴ This, however, is not to refute that the narrative construction of the incident created certain disadvantages for the Kan Cabinet, not least those of harsh domestic criticism and plummeting public support.¹⁶⁵ It could also be argued that the narration of ‘weak Japan’ was not necessarily beneficial to Tokyo, but it is important not to forget that ‘weakness’ was squared off with righteousness, and also provided a rationale to strengthen Japan’s defences in various ways.

¹⁶² Wenran Jiang, ‘New Twists over Old Disputes’, p. 12.

¹⁶³ Some articles acknowledge the latter, but never the former, see Masami Ito, ‘Senkaku Spat’; Wenran Jiang, ‘New Twists over Old Disputes’, p. 13; and Robert Dujarric ‘Enhancing Japan’s position in the Senkaku Dispute’.

¹⁶⁴ Yves Tiberghien, ‘Disputed Islands Crisis’.

¹⁶⁵ James J. Przystup ‘Japan–China relations: Troubled Waters Part II’, *Comparative Connections*, January 2011, http://csis.org/files/publication/1004qjapan_china.pdf.

An important premise of international relations theory is that power can be defined in terms of capability. This notion of power clearly underlies the understanding that China is rising, Japan is declining, and a power shift is occurring in East Asia and around the world. This article does not falsify this understanding. It does, however, unsettle the 'power shift' narrative of this incident, first by demonstrating the power of the narrative itself and challenging it through a sort of 'counter-narrative', and second by highlighting the actual exercises of power by various actors during the incident and its aftermath, thereby in a sense reinforcing Barnett and Duvall's point that the study of international politics benefits from application of many different concepts of power.¹⁶⁶ Moreover, to unsettle the 'power shift' narrative is potentially important, because the more dominant it becomes the more inevitable it is that other states will take recourse to potentially dangerous balancing behaviour vis-à-vis China. This tendency is apparent not least in the calls for a more robust Japanese security policy that have appeared in conjunction with analysis of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands incident in 2010.

Finally, the fact that the dominant narrative of this incident was to a certain extent constructed on the basis of ambiguous or even flawed data substantiates the point about narratives as conceptual lenses; those 'data' probably seemed so 'real' in the light of the dominant narrative that they have gone largely unquestioned. At the same time this article recognises that clear, accurate and sufficient data are difficult to find, and that available data are often indeterminate and depend on interpretation for their meaning. Still, great uncertainty is not only a predicament of this critical reappraisal, but, as the article has shown, one also of the dominant narrative.

¹⁶⁶ Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, 'Power in International Politics', *International Organization*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (2005), pp. 39–75.