

# **Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands: The Impact of the Democratization Process on the Management of Territorial Claims to the Present**

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## **Abstract**

Since the 1970s, both the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China have officially laid claim to the Senkaku Islands (Diaoyutai). However, their positions have evolved differently in relation to Japan. After reviewing Taiwan's position on the Senkaku (Diaoyutai) Islands and its evolution, the paper analyzes how strategic factors, as well as ideological and domestic considerations, play a crucial role in the way Taiwan's position has evolved over time, diverging from the nationalist discourse of the PRC. The paper focuses on external factors, including the evolution of relations between Taipei and Tokyo, the role of the United States during the Cold War, and the positioning of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in this complex game involving multiple players in Asia. The paper analyzes the growing indifference of the Taiwanese people to the issue and the lack of anti-Japanese nationalism in the handling of the issue by both the Taiwanese authorities and the media. In addition, this paper analyzes the ideological dimension, especially since the return of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to power and the election of President Tsai Ing-wen in 2016.

**B**oth the Republic of China (ROC/Taiwan) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) lay claim to the Senkaku Islands (Diaoyutai), which have been administered by Japan since 1895. The purpose of this article is not to discuss the validity or other aspects of Taiwan's claims, nor to present Japan's position on the issue, as Tokyo does not recognize the existence of a "dispute" over the islands, but to analyze how strategic factors, as well as ideological and domestic considerations, play a crucial role in the way Taiwan's position has evolved over time, diverging from the extremes of the hyper-nationalist discourse of the PRC, especially since the early 2010s and Xi Jinping's rise to power. After reviewing Taiwan's position on the Senkaku Islands (Diaoyutai) and its evolution, we will analyze external factors, including the evolution of relations between Taipei and Tokyo, the role of the United States, and the positioning of the PRC in this complex game involving four major players in Asia. Finally, we will analyze the ideological dimension, especially since the return of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to power and the election of President Tsai Ing-wen in 2016.

## **Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands (Diaoyutai): A reminder of the official position**

Like the PRC, the ROC has maintained since the early 1970s that the Senkaku Islands (Diaoyutai) are an "inherent" part of its territory for reasons related to history, international law, the geographical location of the islands, and their geological structure. According to their version, the Chinese Empire "discovered" the archipelago in the 14th century, regularly used it as a navigational marker on voyages to the Ryukyu (Okinawa) Kingdom, which paid tribute to the

Ming dynasty, and incorporated the Senkakus into its plans for coastal defense against pirates.<sup>1</sup> Taiwan, like the PRC, does not recognize the position of Japan, which claims to have conducted surveys from 1885 to 1895 before declaring the islets *terra nullius* and incorporating them into the Empire of Japan. The imperial decree of January 14, 1895, which was signed a few months before the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki that ended the first Sino-Japanese War, was not made public.<sup>2</sup> According to Article 2 of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, “the island of Formosa together with the islands belonging to or dependent on the said island of Formosa” were to be ceded to Japan. The Treaty of Shimonoseki, however, was signed on April 17, 1895, three months after the incorporation of the Senkakus into the Japanese Empire during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895.

The Taiwanese position, which links the issue of the Senkaku Islands (Diaoyutai) to the Treaty of Shimonoseki, refers to the Cairo Declaration (December 1, 1943), reaffirmed by the Potsdam Declaration (July 26, 1945), to demand their return. According to the Cairo Declaration: “All territories Japan has stolen from the Chinese such as Manchuria, Formosa and the Pescadores shall be restored to the Republic of China. Japan shall also be expelled from all other territories which she has taken by violence and greed.”<sup>3</sup> According to the Potsdam Declaration: “Japanese sovereignty shall be limited to the islands of Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku and such minor islands as we determine.”<sup>4</sup>

After 1945, neither the ROC nor the PRC proclaimed on October 1, 1949 participated in the San Francisco Peace Treaty (1951), but the separate peace treaty signed between Japan and the Republic of China in 1952 nullifies the Treaty of Shimonoseki and declares: “It is recognized that, under Article 2 of the Treaty of Peace which Japan signed at the city of San Francisco on 8 September 1951 (hereinafter referred to as the San Francisco Treaty), Japan has renounced all right, title, and claim to Taiwan (Formosa) and Penghu (the Pescadores) as well as the Spratly Islands and the Paracel Islands.”<sup>5</sup> However, the Senkaku Islands (Diaoyutai) are not specifically mentioned. According to Taiwanese experts, this omission is explained by the fact that only the territories administratively attached to Taiwan in 1945 were covered by the restitution, as the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands had been administratively attached to the village of Ishigaki (Okinawa) by imperial decree on April 1, 1896.<sup>6</sup>

Taiwanese historians emphasize the inability of the weakened Qing Manchu Empire at the end of the 19th century, unlike Meiji Japan in the midst of “Western-style” modernization, to understand and use the rules of international law to define and ensure the integrity of its territory

<sup>1</sup> Vincent Wei-Cheng Wang, “Taiwan’s Policy toward the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Disputes and the Implications for the United States,” *Education About Asia*, Association for Asian Studies, vol.19, Number 2, 2014. From 1609, the Ryukyu Kingdom also paid tribute to the shogunate in Japan after being subdued by the Satsuma clan. There is no demonstration in the Chinese argument that there was actual “utilization” of the islands beyond naming a navigation point on the map.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the International Court of Justice, in a previous arbitration dating from 1931, recognized the sovereignty of France over the islet of Clipperton, although neighboring states were not informed of the French decision; see Kazuhiro Nakatani, “The Senkaku Islands, Takeshima and International Adjudication,” [https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/ryodo\\_eg/kenkyu/assets/pdf/takeshima/column/nakatani01-eg.pdf](https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/ryodo_eg/kenkyu/assets/pdf/takeshima/column/nakatani01-eg.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943CairoTehran/pg\\_448](https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943CairoTehran/pg_448)

<sup>4</sup> <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945Berlin02/d1382>

<sup>5</sup> <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/docs/19520428.T1E.html>

<sup>6</sup> [25](https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/senkaku/qa_1010.html#:~:text=Following%20the%20Cabinet%20Decision%20in,the%20jurisdiction%20of%20the%20Governor%2D; Han-yi Shaw, “The Diaoyutai /Senkaku Islands Dispute: Its History and an Analysis of the Ownership Claims of the PRC, ROC, and Japan,” <i>Occasional Papers Reprints Series in Contemporary Asian Studies</i>, November 3, 1999.</a></p>
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“traditionally recognized in the east Asian world order.”<sup>7</sup> This reference to an ancient east Asian order to justify Chinese claims to the Diaoyutai/Senkaku raises a fundamental problem in the contemporary world.

The legitimacy of this ancient world order, organized around the supposed centrality of the Chinese Empire, was characterized by inherently unequal hierarchical relations, symbolically manifested in the payment of tribute, between the Chinese Empire and the neighboring states over which its supposedly benevolent suzerainty was to be imposed. There is a school of thought in Beijing that seeks to revive this concept of Tianxia (天下), which is supposedly more “harmonious” than the “Westphalian” Western order (1648 Peace of Westphalia) based on international law and assuming the principle of equality among sovereign states.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands, the issue is all the more complex because, unlike the situation that may have prevailed in Vietnam or Korea, the Chinese Empire never exercised effective control over the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands. Actually, the reference to tributary relations implies that the entire Ryukyu archipelago (Okinawa) should be “returned” to China as it is the Ryukyu Kingdom that paid tribute to the Chinese Empire from 1372.<sup>9</sup> The ROC has never articulated this claim and, while the PRC may be tempted to question Okinawa’s affiliation with Japan, especially with a view to destabilizing Japan and its defense alliance with the United States, this is not the official position of the Chinese authorities in Beijing.<sup>10</sup>

The Republic of China issued a statement on December 24, 1953, disagreeing with the US interpretation that Japan had “residual” sovereignty over the Amami Islands and the entire Ryukyu archipelago, under direct administration of Washington at that time. Taipei said this contradicted the terms of the Potsdam Declaration, and therefore Japan should not regain possession of the Amami Islands. Despite this opposition, the Amami Islands were handed over to Japanese administration in 1954.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, Taiwanese fishermen continued to exploit the waters around the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands throughout the period of US administration of Okinawa. According to the ROC, this continued presence of Taiwanese fishermen is the basis of the special geographical and economic relationship between Taiwan and the islands.<sup>12</sup>

However, despite these claims, the ROC’s position on the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands between 1945 and the early 1970s, like that of the PRC, was one of indifference.<sup>13</sup> Prior to the signing of the peace treaty with Japan in 1952, Taipei did not protest the fact that only the territories under Taiwanese administration, i.e., not the Senkaku Islands, had been returned to the ROC. Moreover, as was the case on the mainland, many official publications, maps, atlases and geography books referred to the Senkaku Islands, under that name, as part of Japanese territory until 1972.<sup>14</sup>

It was only after the publication of a report by the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) in 1968, which mentioned the possibility of significant hydrocarbon reserves in the East China Sea, that the ROC asserted its claim to the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands and gradually developed the above-mentioned arguments. In September 1970,

<sup>7</sup> Han-yi Shaw, op.cit.

<sup>8</sup> Zhang Feng, “The Tianxia System, World Order in Chinese Utopia,” *China Heritage Quarterly*, n° 21, March 2010, [http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/tien-hsia.php?searchterm=021\\_utopia.inc&issue=021](http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/tien-hsia.php?searchterm=021_utopia.inc&issue=021)

<sup>9</sup> Paying tribute was a way to establish very lucrative trade relations with the Ming Empire.

<sup>10</sup> Valérie Niquet, “History and Information Warfare: The Importance of Okinawa in Chinese Strategy,” *Policy Brief*, April 14, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Zhang Feng, op.cit.

<sup>12</sup> Idem

<sup>13</sup> Han-yi Shaw, op.cit.

<sup>14</sup> [https://www2.jiia.or.jp/en/pdf/digital\\_library/Okuhara\\_Senkaku.pdf](https://www2.jiia.or.jp/en/pdf/digital_library/Okuhara_Senkaku.pdf)

C. K. Yen, Vice President of the Republic of China, stated: “The ROC is determined to preserve the interests it should have in Diaoyutai,” and the Taiwan Provincial Assembly passed a motion calling for the preservation of Chinese sovereignty over Diaoyutai.<sup>15</sup> In an initial statement issued on June 11, 1971, when the return of Okinawa, including the Senkaku, was the subject of negotiations between Washington and Tokyo, the ROC foreign minister mentioned Taiwan’s claim to the Senkakus based on geological, geographical and historical grounds, but also stated his opposition to the return of the Ryukyu islands to Japan without consulting the ROC.<sup>16</sup> The most comprehensive declaration of sovereignty was issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China on April 3, 2012.<sup>17</sup>

### **The strategic weakening of Taiwan’s position on the international scene**

The first and most important crisis between the ROC and Japan took place in the early 1970s and was motivated by two factors: the possible existence of hydrocarbon reserves near the Senkaku Islands and the decision by the United States to return the archipelago to Japan, along with Okinawa, on which it was administratively dependent, without first consulting the Chinese authorities in Taiwan. In February 1971, President Nixon announced his intention to return the Okinawa and Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands to Japan. The Okinawa reversion agreement was signed in June of that year.<sup>18</sup>

At the strategic level, with the Cold War, the Korean War, and then the Vietnam War, Japan’s strategic importance to the United States far outweighed that of Taiwan, particularly after the signing of the Japan-US Security Treaty in 1960.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, the PRC, at that time too weak to pose a threat, appeared to American strategists as a possible asset vis-à-vis Moscow and Hanoi. This weakened the ROC’s international position and left it a complex strategic situation to manage. The evolution of the US’s China policy was the main factor. By lifting its opposition, the US made possible the October 1971 passage of UN Resolution 2758 granting permanent Security Council membership to the PRC, and this was followed by Richard Nixon’s trip to Beijing in February 1972 and Japan’s recognition of the PRC the same year.<sup>20</sup>

Until they were returned to Japan, the Senkaku Islands, like Okinawa, were under American administration, with Japan retaining only residual sovereignty over the entire territory. As President Chiang Kai-shek’s diaries show, Taiwan’s priority at that time was to manage unfavorable developments as best it could, avoiding provoking tensions with Washington and Tokyo in the vain hope of gaining their support for maintaining the ROC’s seat on the UN Security Council. On December 7, 1970, Chiang Kai-shek wrote in his diary: “Regarding the Diaoyutai issue, I should not discuss the sovereignty issue now.” On April 7, 1971, he also wrote: “This cannot be settled by military means. The primary policy of our country is to regain the Chinese

<sup>15</sup> Hsue Hua-yuan 薛化元, 保釣運動的回顧與反思 (Review and Reflection on the Diaoyu Protection Movement), [https://www.twcenter.org.tw/thematic\\_series/history\\_class/tw\\_window/e02\\_20010423](https://www.twcenter.org.tw/thematic_series/history_class/tw_window/e02_20010423), April 23, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> 中華民國外交部關於琉球群島與釣魚台列山與問題的聲明 (Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China on the Ryukyu Islands and Diaoyutai Issues), [https://www.mofa.gov.tw/News\\_Content.aspx?n=214&sms=57&s=62396](https://www.mofa.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=214&sms=57&s=62396), June 11, 1971

<sup>17</sup> 釣魚台列嶼是中華民國的固有領土 (Diaoyutai Islands are the Inherent Territory of the Republic of China), [https://www.mofa.gov.tw/News\\_Content.aspx?n=214&s=62395](https://www.mofa.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=214&s=62395), April 3, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Vincent Wei-Cheng Wang, op.cit.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/1.html>

<sup>20</sup> Full diplomatic relations between the United States and the PRC were not established until 1979.

mainland.”<sup>21</sup>

In 1970, ROC foreign minister Wei Tao-ming also declared that US administration of the Diaoyutai Islands was indispensable to the defense of Taiwan and Asia against communism.<sup>22</sup> The absence of a clear formal objection by the Taiwanese authorities came against the backdrop of the Cold War and the head-on confrontation between the two Chinas, where the priority was to preserve the United States’ commitment to Taiwan, to avoid creating a rift with Japan—Washington’s ally in the region—and to indulge in the vain hope of preserving the ROC’s diplomatic position at the UN and on the international stage.<sup>23</sup> While Taiwan had not yet begun its democratization process that would eventually increase its soft power and ideological legitimacy among likeminded democracies, the early 1970s were a particularly fragile period for the ROC.

This fragility was also increased with the 保釣 (Baodiao) movement, supported by the PRC to weaken the Taipei regime.

### The Baodiao movement and Beijing’s strategy of destabilization

While the ROC was weakened by the strategic decisions of Washington and Tokyo, the PRC was in a position of strength in both the US and Japan. It did not pose a military threat as it was focused on its border with the Soviet Union, and it already appeared to be a potentially huge market. Thus, the priority for Japan was to establish diplomatic relations with the Beijing regime and potentially profitable economic exchanges with the PRC. For the Chinese leadership, obtaining massive loans and aid from Japan, which would contribute greatly to its economic development in the late 1970s, far outweighed the issue of the Senkaku Islands, which Beijing had unofficially agreed in 1978 would be set aside for future generations.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, the PRC’s claims to the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands were expressed only after the ROC had taken a position on the archipelago. On the other hand, in its rivalry with Taipei, the Chinese regime was quick to see the advantages of supporting a nationalist cause that had the potential to unite all Chinese people against a regime—that of the Republic of China in Taiwan—denounced as incapable of defending their interests.

In 1970, at a particularly tense time for the Republic of China, the Baodiao (Protect the Diaoyu) movement began in the United States in communities of Chinese students from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and elsewhere overseas. The objective was to oppose the position of the Taiwanese authorities, who claimed the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands but at the same time declared their willingness to develop resources jointly with Japan and South Korea, seemingly recognizing the legitimacy of the Japanese positions. The first student demonstration was held in New York in January 1971 with 1,500 participants, followed by a second demonstration in April of the same year.<sup>25</sup> A demonstration was also organized at the National University of Taiwan in June 1971, although it was more cautious due to the martial law that had been in effect on the island since

<sup>21</sup> In Chiba Akira, “The Reversion of Okinawa as the Origin of the Senkaku Islands Issue, Chiang Kai-shek and his Turbulent Seeds in East Asia,” The OPRI Center of Island Studies, Tokyo, <https://www.spf.org/islandstudies/readings/b00016r.html>, September 27, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Han-yi Shaw, op.cit.

<sup>23</sup> Wu Renbo 吴任博 “再探一九七〇年代初期知保釣运动：中华民国政府之视角”(Reexamining the Diaoyutai Movement in the Early 70s: Perspectives from the Government of the Republic of China), <https://www.airitilibrary.com/Article/Detail/10277641-201106-201201110017-201201110017-134-175>, June 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Japan-China Summit Meeting, Deng Xiaoping: “As I expressed this to Minister for Foreign Affairs Sonoda in Beijing, there’s probably insufficient wisdom to resolve the issue in our generation but, with the next generation likely to be savvier than us, they will probably be able to find some resolution to the issue.” [https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/senkaku/qa\\_1010.html#q15](https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/senkaku/qa_1010.html#q15)

<sup>25</sup> Han Cheung, “Taiwan in Time: A Tale of Two Protests over Specks of Land,” *Taipei Times*, April 7, 2019.

1949 and was still in force.<sup>26</sup> Despite the “patriotic” nature of the demonstrations, these first demonstrations organized on the island since the imposition of martial law were not supported by the Taipei authorities. The Baodiao movement was also a means of demonstrating opposition to the Kuomintang dictatorship under Chiang Kai-shek. The demonstrations at Taipei University were the first organized on the island since the repression of 1948. At the National University of Taiwan, a banner echoed a Nationalist student slogan from May 4, 1919, declaring, “You can conquer Chinese territory, but you cannot give it away.”<sup>27</sup>

In this alleged reference to the May 4 Movement, the demonstrators denounced the weakness of the Nationalist government, which was incapable of protecting Chinese territory. They also denounced “US and Japanese imperialism.”<sup>28</sup> The “Declaration on the Defense of Diaoyutai Chinese Territory” issued at the January 1971 rally in New York directly condemned the revival of “Japanese militarism” and the “US conspiracy” in support of the Japanese prime minister, and rejected any plans for joint development with Japan and the Republic of Korea.<sup>29</sup>

Beyond the issue of the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands and their reversion to Japan, the dimension of Taiwan’s relations with the PRC was of course predominant. Against the backdrop of the debate over whether the PRC should be admitted to the UN in place of the ROC, the demonstrators, encouraged by Beijing, denounced the inability of Taiwan’s authorities to defend China’s territorial integrity and thus questioned their legitimacy.<sup>30</sup> Then, as now, the PRC used “united front” tactics to mobilize all components of the Chinese communities in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas Chinese to try to undermine the Taiwanese authorities’ legitimacy.<sup>31</sup> This targeting of American imperialism and Japanese “militarism” also took place against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. In his diary on April 17, 1971, Chiang Kai-shek denounced this: “The Communist forces are provoking young students to rise up against the US and Japan. Bandit spies are manipulating these developments under the pretext of Diaoyutai.”<sup>32</sup> The last demonstration of the Baodiao movement took place on May 17, 1972, after which the movement lost momentum, not least because the PRC’s priority at the time was instead to strengthen its ties with Japan, which established diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1972, and receive valuable economic assistance from Tokyo after years of chaos under Mao Zedong’s leadership, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.

For their part, the Taiwanese authorities, who no longer had official diplomatic relations with Tokyo, did not give up their claims to the Diaoyutai. Several “crises” occurred in 1990, 1996, and especially in 2012, under the presidency of Ma Ying-jeou (KMT), a former activist of the Baodiao movement, who joined Beijing in denouncing the Japanese government’s purchase of three islets in the archipelago from their private owner on September 11, 2012.

On September 24, 2012, a large flotilla of Taiwanese fishing boats attempted to land on the islands, backed by eight Taiwanese Coast Guard patrol boats that used their water cannons against Japan Coast Guard vessels, while Chinese vessels were positioned at the outer limit

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<sup>26</sup> Martial law in Taiwan was not lifted until 1987.

<sup>27</sup> Both intellectual and political in nature, the May 4 Movement in 1919 saw demonstrations by Chinese students against the attribution by the Treaty of Versailles of the German possessions of Shandong to Japan. China and Japan were among the Allied Powers.

<sup>28</sup> Han Cheung, *op.cit.*

<sup>29</sup> Wu Renbo, *op.cit.*

<sup>30</sup> Duan Xiaolin, “China’s Strategic Thinking on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Island Dispute,” <https://www.e-ir.info/2022/06/26/chinas-strategic-thinking-on-the-diaoyu-senkaku-island-dispute/>, June 26, 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Hsue Hua-yuan, *op.cit.*

<sup>32</sup> Chiba Akira, *op.cit.*

of Japanese territorial waters in what appeared to be a concerted operation.<sup>33</sup> In 1990, the mayor of Kaohsiung, Wu Tun-yi, attempted to disembark on the Senkaku Islands to protest the Japanese Maritime Safety Agency's decision to use a lighthouse erected by a Japanese nationalist movement on the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands as an official navigation marker. Similarly, in 1996, groups from Taiwan and Hong Kong attempted to disembark on the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands, primarily to protest Japan's ratification of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which established an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) that included the Senkakus, effectively excluding Taiwanese fishermen from their traditional fishing grounds.<sup>34</sup> In reality, though, despite the crises in 2012 and earlier, the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands issue had been losing importance for the Taiwanese people and their political representatives since the mid-1990s and the successful conclusion of Taiwan's democratization process with the first direct election of the President of the Republic in 1996.<sup>35</sup> In 2012, the Apple Daily newspaper noted that the population of a democratic Taiwan is not willing to display "fanatical anti-Japanese" sentiments, in contrast to the very violent demonstrations organized in Beijing against Japanese interests following Tokyo's "nationalization" of the islands.<sup>36</sup> Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, pro-PRC opinion in Taiwan has plummeted, while at the same time Japan—a former colonial power that played an important role in shaping Taiwanese identity—enjoys a more favorable image. Tokyo and Taipei face the same aggressive gray-zone strategy and constant pressure from the PRC, and their analyses of the Chinese threat are converging. For Japan, stability in the Taiwan Strait and the non-use of force to change the status quo are at the core of its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy.

In August 2022, during military exercises organized by Beijing around Taiwan to prevent a visit to the island by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, five missiles were fired into Japan's exclusive economic zone off Okinawa as a direct warning to Tokyo, on the front line in the event of military action against Taiwan. Yonaguni lies 108 km off the coast of Taiwan, and Okinawa is home to the largest American bases in the archipelago and in Asia.

Beijing's strategy of pressure and destabilization also includes the Senkaku Islands, as China maintains a quasi-permanent presence in the waters around the archipelago, with occasionally prolonged incursions into its territorial waters. Moreover, the Senkaku Islands are covered by Article 5 of the Japan-US Security Treaty, which covers all territories "administered by Japan," as publicly reaffirmed by all US presidents since Barack Obama in 2014.

As a testimony to this strategic proximity between Taipei and Tokyo, the 2024 edition of the Taiwanese Foreign Minister's annual report, as in previous editions and in contrast with the PRC's posture regarding Japan, underscores the "stability and cordiality of relations between Japan and Taiwan" and the intensity of exchanges involving former prime ministers, vice-ministers and

<sup>33</sup> Dennis V. Hickey, "Taiwan and the Rising Tensions in the East China Sea: A Mouse that Roared," *Asian Survey*, 2014(3), <https://online.ucpress.edu/as/article-abstract/54/3/492/24732/Taiwan-and-the-Rising-Tensions-in-the-East-China?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

<sup>34</sup> Han-yi Shaw, op.cit.

<sup>35</sup> Duan Xiaolin, op.cit. and Dennis V. Hickey, op.cit.

<sup>36</sup> Boyu Chen, San-Yih Hwang, "Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute and Taiwan's netizens' sentiments toward China and Japan," *East Asia*, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12140-015-9245-3>, August 13, 2015.

parliamentarians.”<sup>37</sup>

### **Conclusion: The Diaoyutai/Senkaku issue and Taiwan’s identity**

The ROC’s claims to the Diaoyutai/Senkaku archipelago date back to 1970, as do those of the PRC, which followed the Taiwanese initiative and the Baodiao student movement to challenge Taiwan’s legitimacy and strategic ties with Japan and the United States. While the Chinese and Taiwanese claims are based on the same arguments, the Taiwanese authorities have always been more moderate in their demands. Before his death in 1975, Chiang Kai-shek’s priority was to regain the mainland and fight communism. In the context of the Sino-American rapprochement, it was also a matter of trying to save the ROC’s representation at the UN and then to maintain relations with Washington. For its part, Japan, whose business community wanted closer ties with the PRC for economic reasons and which was surprised by Richard Nixon’s visit to Beijing in February 1972, established diplomatic relations with Beijing on September 29, 1972, effectively severing all diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

In Taiwan, the Kuomintang did implement a more assertive strategy on the Diaoyutai/Senkaku issue in line with Beijing’s own. However, the democratization process that the island has undergone has fundamentally changed the ROC’s position on the Diaoyutai/Senkaku issue. The DPP, traditionally supporting a pro-Taiwanese independence stance, has historically emphasized Taiwan’s separate identity from the PRC, including on the issue of the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands. It advocates for a peaceful resolution to the Diaoyutai/Senkaku issue. Such an approach endeavors to balance not abandoning Taiwan’s claims while avoiding escalation into conflict. The party also seeks to leverage such issues to underscore Taiwan’s role and significance in regional security affairs and its specificity as a democratic regime in dealing with territorial issues. In 2016, President Tsai Ing-wen stated in her inaugural address that, as the elected president of the Republic of China, she must protect its territorial integrity and sovereignty in accordance with its constitution, but she also proposed setting aside disputes to allow for common development. As the ROC’s head of state, Tsai Ing-wen, like her predecessors, cannot give up her claims to the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands.<sup>38</sup> To do so would risk provoking a reaction from Beijing, which would see such a “renunciation” as a demonstration of Taiwan’s independence, just as it would see a decision by the Taipei authorities to abandon the name “Republic of China” in favor of “Taiwan.”<sup>39</sup> In his inaugural address on May 20, 2024, newly-elected President Lai Ching-te used the term “Republic of China/Taiwan,” but made no mention of the Diaoyutai/Senkaku archipelago. Internal politics and the different posture of the Kuomintang on the issue of Taiwan identity is another factor, particularly since the legislative elections in 2024 did not give a majority to the DPP.

As early as 1996, Lee Teng-hui, the first president to be elected by universal suffrage and a member of the nationalist Kuomintang party but a native of the island (本省人), laid the groundwork for a peaceful resolution of the Diaoyutai/Senkaku issue with Japan. It was on this basis that President Ma Ying-jeou, a supporter of the one-China principle, launched his East China Sea Peace Initiative 16 years later but with one difference: while Lee Teng-hui rejected any

<sup>37</sup> “Report by Jaushieh Joseph Wu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China at the Foreign and National Defense Committee of the Legislative Yuan,” <https://www.google.com/search?q=report+by+Jaushieh+Joseph+Wu%2C+minister+of+foreign+affairs+of+the+republic+of+China+at+the+foreign+national+committee+of+the+legislative+yuan&oq=report+by+Jaushieh+Joseph+Wu%2C+minister+of+foreign+affairs+of+the+republic+of+China+at+the+foreign+national+committee+of+the+legislative+yuan%C2%A0&q=chrome..69i57.4037j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>, March 20, 2024.

<sup>38</sup> <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/4893>

<sup>39</sup> Interviews, Taipei, April 2024.



agreement with the PRC on how to handle the Diaoyutai/Senkaku issue, Ma Ying-jeou's proposal made no mention of this dimension.

Beyond the strategic stakes and the desire to maintain good relations with Japan and the United States, the role of public opinion in a democracy such as Taiwan has become essential in the evolution of the authorities' position on the Diaoyutai/Senkaku issue.<sup>40</sup> While the anti-Japanese nationalist dimension has become increasingly important in the PRC and serves as a legitimizing factor for a regime that rejects any possibility of political evolution, this dimension is much less important in Taiwan, although it is sometimes taken up in the context of internal political games by the KMT or the political parties most favorable to China. Thus, the PRC systematically denounces any agreement between Tokyo and Taipei, such as the 2013 agreement on fishing zones. Taipei has been accused of selling out China's interests and using the Diaoyutai/Senkaku issue to establish itself as an autonomous actor. Japan, for its part, has been criticized by the Chinese authorities for fueling this ambition by signing an agreement directly with the Taiwanese authorities.<sup>41</sup>

Conversely, the dimension of Taiwanese identity based on the principle of shared democratic values and a growing hostility to the PRC and the threat of unification is also expressed in the Taiwanese people's indifference to the Diaoyutai/Senkaku issue and the absence of anti-Japanese nationalism in the handling of this issue by both the Taiwanese authorities and the media, including social networks. For some supporters of Taiwanese independence, the claim to the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands is tantamount to an objectionable recognition that Taiwan belongs to China, sharing the same positions—and the same historical arguments dating back to the Ming and Qing dynasties—and thus denying its identity and specific interests. In these respects, Taiwan has entered the camp of the major European liberal democracies, for whom territorial issues have become essentially residual, at least in public opinion.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Chang Yu-Che, *Influence of Domestic Politics on the Making of Foreign Policy: A Case Study on Taiwan Regarding the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands Dispute*, Master's Thesis, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, September 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Reuters, "China Angers as Taiwan Japan Sign Fishing Agreement," <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSBRE939097/>, April 10, 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Valérie Niquet, "Territorial Conflicts in Europe, Possible Lessons for Japan?," *Japan Review*, Vol 6, N° 1, 2023.