

DOI: [10.71317/jgst.2.10.2026.880](https://doi.org/10.71317/jgst.2.10.2026.880)**Journal of Global Social Transformation**Journal homepage: <https://rjsaonline.org/index.php/JGST>

China, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and the US-Japan Security Alliance: A Strategic Triangle in the Indo-Pacific region

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September 04, 2026

Revised:

September 29, 2026

Accepted:

October 11, 2026

Available Online:

October 20, 2026

Keywords:

Senkaku/Diaoyu, US-Japan alliance, China, Deterrence, Indo-Pacific, claims.

ABSTRACT

The Senkaku/Diaoyu disputes has been bone of contention between China and Japan. This conflict aggravated particularly with the start of the 21st century. Japan being a treaty ally of the US is ambitious to counter Chinese claims and its incursions into the maritime waters of the islands. There seems a strategic competition between China and the US-Japan alliance in the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands region. Adopting interpretivist qualitative research approach with descriptive analysis method this study endeavours to investigate how Chinese claims over these islands challenge the US-Japan alliance and assesses the alliance credibility in deterring Chinese maritime activities around the Senkaku islands. Findings of this study are interpreted through neorealism demonstrating the role of balance of power, anarchy and self-help in the Indo-Pacific region. Drawing secondary sources this study concludes that the expansionist Chinese incursions are exacerbating with the passage of time testing the credibility of the alliance and the alliance has effective role but with limited deterrence against China.

Corresponding author:**Riaz Ali****Email:**riazali.edu@gmail.com**Introduction**

The importance of the Indo-Pacific region cannot be overlooked in diverse contexts. In recent years it has become a magnet hub seizing the attention of major powers of the world. Massive population, high level of GDP, Large armies, abundance of minerals, busy trade routes, rising economies and particularly the rise of China have become omnipotent peculiarities of the region. With all these specifications, it has also become home to several regional conflicts among the regional states with potential to global escalation. One of these eminent issues is the strategic conflict of Senkaku/Diaoyu islands between Japan and China. According to Sato and Chada, the Senkaku Islands are uninhabited chain of islands comprise of five small islet-Kuba Island, Uotsuri Island, Kitakojima Island, Minamikojima and Taisho Island. These Islands are located at distance of 190 nautical miles away from Southwest coast of Okinawa Japan, 200 nautical miles away from Eastern coast of China and 120 nautical miles away from Northwest coast of Taiwan (Y. Sato & Chadha, 2022). For decades, the possession over Senkaku/ Diaoyu islands controlled by Japan has been a bone of contention among Japan, China and Taiwan (Kim, 2021). With the passage of time, the dispute over the islands between China and Japan is leading to make the situation more complicated. The escalating posture of this issue is exacerbating tensions in the region. Both the countries have taken firm stances over their territorial claims. The conflict between the two has profound effects on regional political dynamics. The escalation of this conflict often provide space to military exercises and military skirmishes in the region. Both states try to demonstrate their relative strength against each other. This situation becomes horrible when fishing vessels from both sides enter each other's territorial regions causing intense security threats (Tuan, 2024). Under the article 5 of the 1960 Japan-US treaty, both the states would cooperate to counter common threat to their security and stability. Tackling an arm attack against one of the two with mutual resilience is applicable to the security milieu in the territorial waters of Japan against

any aggression. In this regard, the US is committed to stand by Japan in the flashing regional conflict of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands against China. Japan is part of the US Indo-Pacific strategy aimed at free and open regional order in the Indo-Pacific region. It has also joined Australia, India and the US in QUAD, a security configuration against Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region (Kim, 2021). In recent years great-power competition has been escalated between the US and China. This is leading towards a cold war like rivalry but in different respects of the US-USSR confrontation. The US president Trump published national security strategies to focus on the long term strategic run with China. In 2021, the new US president Joe Biden portrayed China as an extreme competitor. In this context, differences between the US and China have exacerbated in diverse range like trade, human rights, technology, international order and regional conflicts (Carlson, 2023). This complex situation in regional strategic milieu of the Indo-Pacific region creates a triangular configuration of relative regional strategic interests. In broader sense, the US wants to contain Chinese expansion. While Japan being an ally to the US wants to counter Chinese claims over the Senkaku islands. The regional conflicts involving US allies provide pretext to United States to intervene into regional strategic politics. On the other side, China is expanding militarily, politically and economically. It is committed to fulfil its dream of rejuvenation and not ready to compromise on its claimed territories in the region. In this scenario, it is note-worthy to explore how Chinese efforts to capture the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands challenge the US-Japan security Alliance in the Indo-Pacific region and to what extent the US-Japan alliance is able to deter Chinese assertiveness in the context of this regional conflict.

Problem Statement

The territorial dispute over Senkaku/Diaoyu islands between China and Japan has become a flashpoint in East Asian strategic politics. Both the claimants have firm stances over the islands. There exist a bilateral security pact between the US and Japan. The expanding Chinese assertiveness towards the islands render potential security threats to Japanese hold over the islands. The three concerned states formulate a strategic triangle in the region. This study is directed to examine the challenge created by Chinese assertiveness to the US-Japan alliance in the region and the potential of the alliance to deter Chinese standpoint.

Research Questions

1. How does China's claim over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands challenge the US-Japan Security Alliance in the Indo-Pacific region?
2. Does the US-Japan Security alliance influentially deter Chinese stance over the Senkaku Islands/Diaoyu islands?

Research Objectives

1. To explore how does Chinese claim over Senkaku Islands Challenge the US-Japan Security Alliance in the Indo-Pacific region.
2. To explore whether the US-Japan alliance effectively deter Chinese stance over the Senkaku Islands or not.

Significance of the Study

This study will assist us to understand the dynamics of the strategic triangular composed of China, Japan and the US in the context of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the region. Investigating these dynamics will disclose the potential of challenge developed by Chinese assertiveness to the US-Japan alliance. It will also facilitate us to examine the US-Japan alliance deterrence against China pertaining to the dispute over the islands.

Methodology

This study is grounded in the interpretivist philosophical approach which focus on the subjective meanings and illustrations underlying political actions, diplomatic norms and strategic approach. The interpretivist approach enable the researcher to explore the perspectives of Japan, China and the US in the context of the dispute over the Senkaku islands between Japan and China in the Indo-Pacific region. The nature of the study is qualitative. This method assist the researcher to have a profound and comprehensive understandings of the strategic dimensions of the dispute. It prefer interpretation rather than measurement that allows the researcher to catch the nuances in the strategic approach of the concern states in the region. This study adopts descriptive analytical design. The descriptive perspective is directed to outline the background, standpoint and strategic approach of the concern states in the context of the dispute over the islands. It gives detailed understanding of the relative strategic narratives of the three engaged states. The analytical perspective provides a critical examination of the motives, strategic and interconnectedness of the three states viewpoints. The analytical approach analyse the prevailed competitive strategic milieu among the three states under the lens of the

neorealism approach. The combination of description and critical analysis assists the researcher to have a comprehensive conception of different dimensions of the dispute. For this research study data is collected from secondary sources. Data is obtained from journal articles, policy papers, newspapers papers and other online sources. These sources are employed because of their relevance, profoundness and trustworthiness which assist in the presentation of concrete perspectives of the study.

Literature Review

Historical background of the dispute

The territorial dispute over Senkaku/Diaoyu islands is one of the most significant issue of the 20th century. This is a group of five islands and three reefs administer by Japan. These islands are located in the west of Japanese island Okinawa, east of China and northeast of Taiwan. On account of contiguity and entangled historical context, the proprietorship of these islands among the three countries Japan, China and Taiwan is a bone of contention (Vidi & Octafiyani, 2023). Japan asserts that these islands were “terra nullius” (no nation claimed authority over these islands) before 1895. It further urges, there were found no territorial control from China over these islands. Even a Japanese fisherman from Okinawa wrote an application to Japanese authorities for the lease of the islands in 1884. According to Japan the country got sovereignty over the islands when its government through a cabinet decision ceded the islands into its territory. This was decided just before the end of the Sino-Japanese war and the incorporation of Shimonoseki treaty between the two countries. While China rejects Japanese notion of terra nullius and asserts according to Chinese documents originating from Meiji period that Japan captured the islands as the war booty rather than through surveys or grant rights to fishermen (Osti, 2013). According to Japan, it has controlled the islands since 1895. The Japanese people have been in several activities in these islands like raising cattle and fishing. When Japan was defeated in 1945, these islands were part of Nansei islands those were kept under tentative US administration. Later in 1972, the territorial administrative rights were given back to Japan and it started exercising sovereign authority over these islands. Therefore, Japan argues that these islands are fundamental part of its territory on behalf of historical evidences and global law (Soons & Schrijver, 2012). China claims the islands territory as its geographical, historical and legal part. It argues on behalf of historical background it had discovered and named the islands by the 14th and 15th century. It further asserts that these islands were part of Chinese historical Qing and Ming dynasties. After the China-Japan war in 1895, China was compelled to handover the islands to Japan by the virtue of the Shimonoseki treaty. After WW2, the Japanese occupied territories were returned to China but Diaoyu islands were wrongfully included to trusteeship of Nansei islands. Later on in 1972, the administrative authority over these islands was returned to Japan despite the intense protest from China as well as from Taiwan (Soons & Schrijver, 2012). According to China the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands were set under the authority of Chinese naval defence as associated islands of Taiwan. In fact, the Chinese emperor sent official delegates on missions of appointment to subordinate states in the region with the inclusion of Ryukyu Kingdom but there is no evidence of Chinese permanent occupation over these islands. Furthermore, experts while investigating Chinese historical maps depict the islands belong to Japan (Grieger, 2021). The dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands among Japan, China and Taiwan re-emerged and escalated in 1960s when the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) reported the excessive existence of hydrocarbons reserves in the surroundings of these islands. Ever since, the dispute has escalated repeatedly among the claimants in a series of years like in 1970, 1972, 1978 and in 1997. However the concerned governments have prioritized to limit the deterioration of the political relations. Consequently, the dispute still exist (Shaw, 1999). According to China Senkaku/Diaoyu islands were not “terra nullius”. The Chinese name of the islands came from a book named “Voyage with a Tail wind” published in the year 1403. This book reveals the discovery and naming of the islands by China. It further argues that it was decided in Postdam Proclamation and Cairo Declaration that the Japanese occupied territories should be returned to China. It claims the San Fransisco Treaty between Japan and the US as illegitimate. China further refer Japanese history scholar Kiyoshi’s approach in this context. According to Kiyoshi the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands are named Tiaoyu /Diaoyu islands in Chinese recorded documents in the mid of 16th century. He asserts the “Senkaku Islands” is a so-called name while original name of the islands is Diaoyu islands (Robot, 2013).

Chinese claims over Senkaku/Diaoyu islands challenge US-Japan alliance

In 2012 when Xi Jinping came into power China was faced with a serious foreign policy challenge regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Japan had nationalized three of the contested islands. The then Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko made the move to prevent the Tokyo’s municipal government from acquiring the islands and constructing infrastructure there. The Chinese authority knew Japanese intentions not to escalate tensions between the two countries. But China sent maritime law enforcement ships to the Japanese controlled maritime region in the surroundings of the islands. These advancements escalated conflictual maritime tensions between the two countries in the region (Chubb, 2024). China condemned the Japanese nationalization of the islands viewing it a unilateral effort of changing the status quo in the region. China dispatched six government vessels into Japanese

maritime territory (Emeritus, 2023). China started adopting an assertive posture in bilateral, regional and global concerns specifically in 2009. Since then it started applying advance tactics to escalate its maritime claims challenging others plyers adjacent to its coastline and airspace. China is advancing with asymmetric, ambiguous and incremental manner avoiding provoking US to fulfil its security commitments in the region. These Chinese endeavours are renewing the status quo by bolstering Chinese asymmetric capabilities against the US, its allies and partners in the region (Green, 2017). During the past decade, the Chinese incursions into Japanese waters has been doubled and Chinese vessels have started entering the contiguous zone on daily basis (Emeritus, 2023). The Chinese acquisition of control over Senkaku/Diaoyu islands would not only provide access to abundance of natural resources but would also strengthen its power projection ability and surveillance capabilities in the region. Moreover, it would change the balance of power in the region opening doors to the Indo-Pacific region for the PRC Navy (Hurtado, 2025). China has built up oil and gas extraction in the northern waters of the region. These Chinese formulations exacerbate the intensity of the dispute between the two countries. Japan blames China of extracting minerals in the Japanese territorial maritime region. According to a United States Geological Survey the concern region contain an estimated oil reserves of about 0.3 to 1.7 billion barrels while gas reserves of about 1.3 to 7.3 trillion cubic feet (Chubb, 2024). In 2012, the nationalization of the Diaoyu/ Senkaku islands created chaos in Chinese masses composing a staunch message to Chinese authorities aiming at a hard response to Japan (Green, 2017). Fifty percent of Chinese claimed maritime regions have caused contestation with its neighbouring countries. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has titled People's Republic of China (PRC) as a naval power in 2012. This has become a challenge to Japan, the US and ASEAN countries. In East China Sea China has adopted offensive policy against Japan. The word offensive not only encompass military but also economic, legal, psychological and political approach to supress the opponent. This exacerbate the Chinese offensive policies towards the demand of natural resources in the disputed region and anti-Japan protestations inside and outside China (K. Sato, 2019). China executed Coast Guard Law in 2021. According to article 22 of this law if the national sovereignty is being breached by any foreign force, the coast guard agency shall have the authority to counter any threat even using weapons to eradicate the danger. Furthermore, it allows the coast guard personnel to enter forcibly to vessels illegally entered the Chinese claimed maritime zones (Xiaolin, 2022). Over the last few years, China has taken assertive steps to execute its claims. It captured the Scarborough Reef from Philippines in the year 2012. Starting circa 2014, China suddenly started construction of artificial islands in the waters of the South China Sea. It has also made periodic intrusions into Indian border (Burke et al., 2018). There is popular narrative regarding China that it has adopted aggressive posture in the context of maritime disputes and trying to dominate other claimants. The rise of its conflict with India in Galwan valley inclined the world to worry about the Chinese economic and military strength. A strengthened China will ambitious and capable of controlling the claimed territories. In some cases the Chinese aggressiveness is the results of provocative moves of the claimants and the US (Xiaolin, 2022). On 23 November 2013 China announced its Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) on its own in the East China Sea. According to China all the commercial and non-commercial aircrafts passing through this region should fulfil the requirements of the Chinese authorities. It has warned for the consequences if the rules are avoided by any country. This Chinese ADIZ is composed of the region where Japan, Taiwan and Korea are located. It also encompass the disputed islands of Senkaku/Diaoyu. But the US, Japan and South Korea deny these Chinese advancements. Even Japan and South Korea directed their commercial airlines not to obey the Chinese formulated single handed rules for the region. This has heightened tensions in the region (Choo, 2014). The acquisition of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands by China will assist it in fulfilling the security gaps. China can turn these islands to an impactful base to secure from the US and Japan. According to Japanese experts these islands can be used for the formation of missile base, submarine base and radar system increasing Chinese security (Antczak, 2020). China has started stationing numerous number of coast guard and naval vessels around the waters of the East Asia. This is a record maritime deployment comprising of about one hundred vessels. This deployment stretches from the southern part of the Yellow sea through the East China Sea and downing into the disputed South China Sea as well as to the Pacific. China is also exercising mock attacks on foreign ships in the region and access-denial manoeuvres to block backing up outside forces in case of any military conflict (Lee & Blanchard, 2025). The recent massive Chinese maritime forces deployment in the East China waters is the largest of all. Such kind of Chinese activities are stretching from Alaska to the Red Sea to gauge how the US allies respond. According to Jennifer Parker the Chinese deployment of maritime forces is increasing year by year. The Chinese coast guard and navy have more impactful formations than ever in history. China is busy in operating in circumstances where the US has been engaged in conflictive concerns with Venezuela, Russia and Ukraine (Sler, 2025). On September 27, 2012, Chinese foreign minister Mr. Yang Jiechi claimed that the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands are occupied by Japan. Nationalizing the islands by Japan single-handedly is the violation of Chinese sovereignty and the charter of the United Nations. In 2013, China announced its Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) which overlaps the airspace surrounding Senkaku/Diaoyu islands caused severe protests from Japan. In 2025, the Chinese unilateral exploitation of resources exacerbated tensions between China and Japan. Japan mentioned it violation of the 2008 joint gas exploration agreement. In 2016, Chinese fighter jets flew very close to Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. According to Japanese ministry of Defence, Japan had to intervene 99 times to stop Chinese aircrafts from April to June this year (Tuan, 2024). Today the number of days China's Coast Guard vessels (CCG) intruded into the

surroundings of the disputed islands is at the record number for the fourth consecutive year in the East China Sea. According to the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) last year the Chinese vessels intruded into contiguous zone on 357 of 365 days. As compare to the past today the CCG vessels are more sophisticated. They are larger and can sail regardless of the weather conditions. In fact, China is striving to take control of the islands stationing its vessels for continuous presence. China is inclined towards “new normalization” where it seeks to abolish the prevailed status quo utilizing its, “salami-slicing strategy”. This would prepare an atmosphere where the slow changes would not attract public attention and policy oversight (Kosuke, 2026). China’s Coast Guard (CCG) conducted 134 patrol operations and stationed 55000 vessels and 6000 aircrafts across the contested Senkaku islands in the last 5 years (The Asahi Shimbun, 2026). Today, the most sophisticated implementer of the “grey zone tactics” is China in the East China Sea. Utilizing the coast guard ships and maritime militias, China has managed to create obscure lines between the military and civilian operations avoiding direct confrontation. Such strategies are effective in the maritime region where the equivocal nature of jurisdiction and unstable territorial hold leads to incremental occupation (Charles, 2026). China imposes yearly fishing ban on Japanese fishing boats in the surrounding waters of the Senkaku islands. It claims Japanese fishing boats activities are illegal in this region. China has formulated a ban in 1999 over fishing in waters under Chinese jurisdiction. It starts from 1 May and ends in mid of September every year. It encompass the north of the 12th parallel region and is initiated to preserve the marine ecosystem and biodiversity (Kim, 2021). China has advanced its aircraft capability to the extent that Japanese endeavours in this competition seems lower and ineffective. The recent facts and figures of Japanese air defence do not match the Chinese capabilities. So Japan and the United States should work together to tackle the emerging Chinese threat (Burke et al., 2018). The Chinese warfare in shape of grey-zone tactics is tireless. It would not be wrong to say that Japan is attacked almost every month. Such Chinese incursions are flagrant breaches of Japan’s territorial integrity and sovereignty. It seems neither a cold war nor a hot war (Tokuchi, 2021). During a session of the Japanese parliament, the Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi expressed, Chinese assertive posture towards Taiwan can lead to threats against Japan’s national survival. Chinese authorities took these remarks as provocative considering them a signal that Japan would become part of collective self-defence and assess its allies if a limitary action takes place in the contingency of Taiwan (Bonny et al., 2026). China officially consider the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands as integral part of its territory like Taiwan. Its military activities in the region are legitimize as a measure to secure its territorial integrity. This argument leads to the principle of territorial integrity which is acknowledged in international law (Hurtado, 2025). Chinese claims over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands is challenging the Japanese determination and the consolidation of the US-Japan alliance. In contrast to popular version of the opinion the dispute is not only tied to the possession of the islands nor to the natural resources or the factor of nationalism. Instead, China is opposing Japan over these islands to destabilize the liberal international order developed after second World War anchored to US-Japan security alliance (Kotani, 2013).

The US-Japan Alliance deterrence against Chinese claims over Senkaku/Diaoyu islands

Although, the US does not support sovereignty of any one over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, it recognizes the Japan’s administrative control over these islands. It further asserts the application of the US-Japan security treaty to this issue. This dual approach is considered “strategic ambiguity” contributing the US to discourage China’s hostile actions and providing space to diplomacy (Hussain, 2025). China as well as other regional countries have claims over different territories in the surrounding regions of these countries. Chinese officials and scholars often contend that the US has motivated other claimants to be more aggressive and firm (Green, 2017). For the US the significance of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands does not match their inherent value but these are crucial for alliance credibility and regional framework. US portray the Japanese controlled zones are inevitable to their expanded deterrence mechanism. Avoiding countering aggression in East China Sea would lead to diminish the US alliance configuration not only in Japan but across the Indo-Pacific including Australia, Philippines and South Korea (Hussain, 2025). Between Japan and the US, Treaty of Mutual cooperation was signed in 1960. According to this treaty Japan provided its land to the US troops in exchange of provision of security against any external threat (Maior, 2022). The importance of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands not only attracts China, Japan and Taiwan but also other international players because of their heavy investments in the region. The claims over these islands by the three have implications over the triangle of relations, the sea lines of communications (SLOC) and the enforcement of the conventional maritime law in the region (Ahmed, 2026). In East Asia the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute is the most critical dispute formulating the debate around regional security, alliances and global maritime order. Chinese aggressive stance and efforts to change the maritime order in the East China Sea is linked to Japan’s alliance signalling. In addition, the US naval activities through joint maritime exercises and Freedom of Navigations Operations (FONOPs) render threats to China. During 2021 alone, the US Navy and Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) conducted 23 joint exercises in the surrounding of the Senkaku islands. Furthermore, in January 2024 the US, South Korea and Japan executed trilateral exercises in the East China Sea seeking consolidating alliance deterrence in the context of tensions around the Senkaku islands (Ahmed, 2026). Japan is committed to bolster security alliance with the United States. The United States having hard policy against China has reaffirmed to act upon the

Article 5 of the 1960 US-Japan Security treaty. This treaty specifies that both the parties would mutually respond to common threat if there is made any armed attack against the US or Japan in the Japanese territories. This covers the conflictual milieu surrounding the Senkaku islands. The US support Japan's stance on the Senkaku islands. Japan has participated in the US initiated free and open Indo-Pacific strategy which aims free and open regional order in the region. Japan has also committed to work in collaboration with the US, India and Australia under the security configuration of QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) to against the Chinese assertive expansion in the Indo-Pacific region (Kim, 2021). The significance of the geo-strategic location of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands has a crucial rule in the US-Japan defence strategy in the East China Sea as both states render a security alliance under Mutual Security Treaty 1960 (Hurtado, 2025). The US has consolidated its security and diplomatic coordination with Japan countering Chinese assertiveness in the East and South China Seas. Along with firm commitment to support Japanese stance over Senkaku islands, the US collaborated closely with Japan to enhance its maritime and defence capabilities. Following 2012, the US has provided Japan with sophisticated naval and air defence armaments. Since 2015, both the states have revised the defence guidelines to bolster alliance joint efforts to tackle the potential security challenges in the East China Sea. The Military coordination between the two countries has enhanced intelligence sharing and surveillance assisting Japan to monitor Chinese assertiveness around the Senkaku islands more efficiently. The Japanese Coast Guard has bolstered its coordination with the US Coast Guard via regular mutual exercises and exchanges. While the US military conducts naval training with Japan self-Defence Forces including the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade developed in 2018 to reinforce Japanese island defence capabilities (Manyin, 2021). In reaction to Chinese escalated assertiveness, the US has redirected its strategic focus to the Indo-Pacific region. In the US President Obama tenure in 2011 "Pivot to Asia" was designed to reinforce ties with partners including Japan in the region. Trump administration consolidated the security arrangement QUAD among the US, Australia, India and Japan due to Chinese behaviour in the region. President Biden did the same in his tenure. The Japanese updated national security policy 2022 convey that the US-Japan alliance has central position amid Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific policy. This policy is an accumulation of principles like peace, prosperity and security. Taiwan has got Japanese increasing attention laying in 68 miles westernmost point of Japan. In 2021, Japanese Prime Minister pointed that "A Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency and it is also an emergency for the US-Japan alliance" (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). Over the decades, the US maritime forces have been stationed in Japanese province Okinawa. This province host about Fifty five thousand US military personnel. Thirty one among eighty five military stations are on Okinawa (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). The Japanese national Security Strategy 2022 highlighted China as the greatest strategic challenge to peace and security of Japan. Japan is ambitious to strengthen its defence increasing it to 2 percent of GDP. It has reinforced the US-Japan Alliance deterrence against their enemies in the region. Moreover the US is committed to Japan's defence under its nuclear umbrella. Although experts also convey the US commitment to the defence of their allies in the Indo-Pacific region can be effected by the US military involvement in the Middle East. This presents concerns about the sustainability and effectiveness of the US expanded deterrence in the region. Due to the escalating posture of Chinese and North Korea's nuclear expanding capabilities, US extended deterrence requires lasting and revived reassurance of allies including Japan. Reinforced measures are needed to strengthen the confidence between the US and its allies. Till now Japan has maintained its non-nuclear stance but recent developments like discussing NATO-style nuclear sharing and debating the Japanese three non-nuclear principles after comments of a Japanese official reflect revival of nuclear policy (Govella & Szechenyi, 2026). China being potential aggressor is prompting states towards escalating deterrence. The US-Japan Marines are contributing to deter Chinese aggression in the East China Sea (ECS), predominantly from occupying the Senkaku/ Diaoyu islands. Chinese use of force is exacerbated with the passage of time (O'shea, 2024). The importance of the US access to the Indo-Pacific cannot be denied and without a strong commitment of the US-Japan alliance it seems challenging. Japan accommodates about 60000 US military personnel and contractors while 35000 civilians. This is the largest US military deployment out of the country. Japan bears 75 percent of the cost under the recent agreement. At Yokosuka Naval Base in Japan the US has deployed carrier strike group which is the only permanent US deployment outside the US. This establish reinforced and regular deterrence around the Taiwan Strait (Snyder, 2026). The US inclination towards the Northeast Asia can be explained based on three propositions. Firstly, the US believes the sustaining of conflicts among China, South Korea and Japan would support the need and vital US position in the region. Secondly, working for collaboration among Northeast Asian nations would benefit the US and thirdly engaging with Japan via formulating potential policies would assist the US to monitor China in the region (JaHyun, 2018). The Chinese emergence, relative US decline, Russia's assertiveness and the European Union economic and political confusion have ramifications over inter-state relations all over the world (Koga, 2018). Both the US and Japan are taking advantages of engaging in the vibrant Indo-Pacific region. Both the countries are ambitious for a regional order which base on the rule of law, accountable governance, protected sea lanes and free and open regulations for trade. These stances assess the trajectories of the two countries and forward actionable recommendations for future advancements (Koga et al., 2019). The Japanese alliance is essential for the US, it has manifold structural realities like geography. The world's busiest water routes and geopolitical conflict zones related to China, Korea, Russia, Taiwan Strait and East and West China Sea are located some hundred miles from Japan's shores (Liff, 2026). Specifically, in the Indo-Pacific region Japan has to maintain successful

credible deterrence but the US-Japan alliance should come forward than mere pro forma gestures and adopt practical measures to reinforce integration where it extremely lacks (Early & Rehberg, 2026). To deter China is US national interest. The US is striving to deter China in two ways. First to deter by denial and second to deter by punishment. In the first way it focus to convince China that it cannot succeed to achieve its objectives like conquering Taiwan. In the second way the US threatens China of severe repercussions if it strive to achieve its objectives. It can face intense consequences like nuclear attack, overwhelming military response and economic sanctions. This would lead to a world war against China and catastrophe of Chinese people and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Long, 2026).

Theoretical Framework

Neorealism is a renowned theory in the discipline of International Relations. This theory was formulated by Kenneth Waltz in 1979 in his book "Theory of international politics". According to this theory the international system is anarchic in nature. There is no central authority to supervise the states actions in the world. This minimize the tendency of cooperation among states. Getting advantage of this factor states strive to advance in seeking its national interests by any means. In such a global milieu states worried to assure its security and survival maximizing its potential power. States in the world focus on the power maximization notion that create chaos in the global competitive world. This result in the initiation of balancing power mechanism. A state is ambitious to balance its opponents even formulating partnerships and alliances with other states. They also keep eye over the gains of opponent states.

The Neorealist approach can precisely describe the China-Japan controversy over Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the light of the US-Japan alliance deterrence against China and Chinese Deterrence against the US-Japan alliance. According to Neorealism there is no absolute power in the world. States engage in political, military, economic and antagonistic ways with other states under their own authority, norms and interests. The absence of an absolute authority in the Indo-Pacific region has enabled China and the US-Japan alliance to continue their relative strategic policies in the region. Chinese aggressive and assertive posture is exacerbating around Senkaku/Diaoyu islands with the passage of time. On the other side the US-Japan alliance activities are the consolidation of power in this region. These developments in the absence of an absolute power can lead to mass catastrophe in the region.

States are the primary actors making decision regarding their relative interests in the anarchic world. In the context of the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute China, Japan and the US are the key actors. China is ambitious to bolster its position around the islands while Japan seeks to uphold its administrative control and make sure its territorial integrity.

To strengthen security and survival both China and Japan are seeking their national interests around the region where the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands are situated. China is inclined on behalf of its strategic efforts to strengthen its position and protect its territorial interests. While the competitive Japan is ambitious to consolidate its administrative hold over these islands and reinforce its security with the US cooperation. These actions can be understood through the neorealist features of security and survival those are basic aims of states.

According to Neorealist approach security dilemma develops when one state take actions to increase its security is perceived threat by another state. Thus the other states also start to reinforce its security which cause the first state to consider itself more insecure. In the context of the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute Chinese extending maritime activities around these islands are to preserve its maritime interests and sovereignty but Japan consider these activities as a challenge to its administrative control and security. This lead to a security dilemma where Chinese concerns escalated because of reinforcing US-Japan alliance collaboration in security.

As the international system is anarchic where every state bolster its power for more influence and authority. This create a chaotic global environment where some states start to consider themselves vulnerable to other powerful states. According to the balance of power notion presented by neorealism, these states starts to balance the powerful states. China is becoming more powerful with the passage of time. Its expansion has effected whole of the Indo-Pacific region. Its increasing, continuous and bolstered incursions into the maritime zone of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands is inclined Japan to balance its power through the US-Japan alliance.

One of an important postulates of the neorealist theory is the relative gains which refers to how much a state gains as compare to another state rather than focussing on how much it gains in absolute terms. Because whatever and how much a state gains would strengthen its relative power and strategic position. In this context around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands if Chinese influence increase as compare to Japanese relative control over the islands would provide China a strengthen position against Japanese claims of the islands. Thus Japan would not simply consider this a Chinese gains but a change in the balance of power between the two. Similarly if the consolidation and strengthening activities of the US-Japan alliance minimize Chinses influence would be considered by China as change in balance of power and will strive to fill the gap.

Discussion

China –Japan Contending Claims over Senkaku/Diaoyu islands

According to Vidi and Octafiyani, the proximity of Senkaku/Diaoyu islands to three claimant states China, Japan and Taiwan is the bone of contention among them (Vidi & Octafiyani, 2023). He argues that the location of the islands in the middle of the three states is causing such claims. This is logical as mostly such claims have been observed in different parts of the world. India and Pakistan claims sovereignty over Kashmir while China and India over Aksai Chin region. China and Japan have firm claims over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands keeping in view their relevant historical arguments. China rejects Japanese vision of “Terra Nullius” while Japan deny Chinese assertions tied with the ancient dynasties. Their relevant contradicting claims never results any conclusion that decide the belonging of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands to any one of them. Also one of the two claimants has never referred the dispute to an international body. According to Soons and Schrijver, if states refer their dispute to international court of Justice, the international law become the base for adjudicating who has the potential legal claim. But international court is competent only when the claimants states have consented to its jurisdiction plus it cannot force a state to go before the court unless there is a legitimate groundings that the state obey the jurisdiction of the court (Soons & Schrijver, 2012). In the case of the dispute over Senkaku/Diaoyu islands Japan has recognized the compulsory jurisdiction (subject to conditions) of the International Court of Justice but China has not. Hence Japan cannot take the dispute to ICJ without setting up another ground for the court jurisdiction. According to Shaw the dispute over the Senkaku islands among the three states escalated when the United Commission for Asia and Far East (ECAFE) revealed the existence of excessive hydrocarbons reservoirs in the environs of the islands in 1960s (Shaw, 1999). The economic gains have been the foremost national interest of states. The abundance of natural resources in the surroundings of these islands has inclined the claimants to consolidate their claims. Specifically China is an emerging economic giant and is in need of enormous raw materials. According to Kalantzakos, to be a global power China and BRI needs Critical minerals (Kalantzakos, 2020). The progressive economic speed of China is directly related to the availability and extraction of raw materials. China is in search of such destination in the Indo-Pacific region. According to Hurtado, China officially regards Senkaku/Diaoyu islands as its territory like Taiwan and consider occupation over these islands by Japan a breach of its integrity (Hurtado, 2025). China has firm belief and is committed to get hold over Taiwan. So if Senkaku/Diaoyu are taken in the same context, one can imagine Chinese seriousness about Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

Chinese Expansion in the Indo-Pacific region

With the start of the 21st century China has been proved an expanding country. It has started extending its economic, military and political power in the world. Expansion is inevitable when China think of its vision of rejuvenation and becoming a global power. It is expanding in all these three areas in the Indo-Pacific region. The Chinese BRI shows its influence around the region. According to Keary et al, in past China was contained to its neighbourhood in security perspective but since 2013, China has broadened its presence across the Indian and Pacific oceans expanding far from home water (Keary et al., 2026). It is in search of capturing adverse regions in the Indo-Pacific. It has seized the Scarborough islands Reef from Philippines in 2012. It has started construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea. It has also claims over the Galvan valley in Indian Side. This show the expanding Chinese commitment to strengthen its military, political and economic hold in different regions of the Indo-Pacific. These advancements exacerbates Chinese potential of presence in scattered regions to secure itself and be an influential power. This territorial expansion benefits China in two ways. Firstly, it is maximizing the opportunities of finding economic gains in shape of mineral extraction. Secondly, it has adopted massive stationing of its military power in these regions. As Lee & Blanchard pointed, China has aggravated standing of its Navy In East Asia with deployment of about 100 vessels from Yellow Sea through East China Sea towards South China Sea leading to Pacific Ocean (Lee & Blanchard, 2025). While the US is busy in Russia, Ukraine and Middle East, China has started deployment formation from Alaska to the Red Sea. It is the ever most deployment in history and is increasing day by day.

Assertive China and Senkaku/Diaoyu islands

Seeking its national interests, China adopts adverse methods. It has formulised salami-slicing and Grey zones tactics in the region where it has territorial claims. China does not escalate these advancements towards practical military conflict but pursue its national interests in an ambiguous manner. Several authors have highlighted the Chinese assertive and in some cases aggressive posture in the surroundings of the Senkaku islands. As according to Kosuke, the Chinses Coast Guard (GCC) have entered the Japanese maritime waters 357 days out of 365 days (Kosuke, 2026). China stations thousands of vessels and aircrafts in the surroundings of these islands from time to time. It also conducts hundreds of patrolling operations in these regions on regular basis. It is taken as an armed attack over Japan. According to Tokuchi, Japan is attacked by China about every month (Tokuchi, 2021). According to these assertions, this is breach of Japanese security and sovereignty. China is strengthening its presence and constant deployment

in the surroundings of the islands. These operations can be converted into permanent stationing of the Chinese forces. The Chinese salami-slicing and Grey zone tactics are well observed by Tokuch stating these represent neither a Cold war nor Hot war (Tokuchi, 2021). This show offensive posture of China while defensive posture of Japan in the nearby of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. China has also established an Air defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea covering the surrounding regions of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. This is an airspace where China asks aircraft to identify itself, disclose its position and obey instructions. Whereas Japan condemn Chinese ADIZ as leading towards Chinese sovereignty over the islands. Chinese fishing ban in this region is another Chinese act condemned by Japan as we earlier stated Japan deny Chinese territorial claims in the region. Along with this the returning and entrance of the fishing vessels by the end of the ban into this region with Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) pose security threats to Japan. This was claimed by Japanese authorities in 2016 (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2017). China claims Senakaku/Diaoyu as well as Taiwan as part of the country. Japanese Prime minister Sana e Takaichi expressed Chinese assertive actions against Taiwan can extend to Japan. This provoked China considering Taiwan and Japan on the same pitch collaborating for mutual defence against China. In fact the two territorial issues render the same ground. Mutual cooperation in defence and in strategic sphere by Taiwan and Japan along with the US can counter Chinese assertiveness and aggression in the region.

US-Japan alliance and Senkaku/Diaoyu islands

The US-Japan alliance has been crucial in the strategic milieu of the Indo-pacific region where Japan as well as other regional countries have security reservations against China. According to Hussain, the US does not endorse Chinese or Japanese sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. However, it upholds Japan's administrative authority over these islands (Hussain, 2025). The US does not want to indulge into the sovereignty tussle but support the existing situation where Japan has administrative hold over the islands. Recognizing Japanese sovereignty over the islands will provoke Chinese direct confrontation against the US which the US wants to avoid. While it is ambitious to counter China being in collaboration with Japan. This lead the US to a strategic ambiguity where the US is focussed on its national interests.

The US and Japan has kept on strengthening the alliance. As far as both the states observe Chinese expansion and assertiveness they reinforce their military and strategic cooperation. Both the states are committed and the US openly announce it will come to Japanese support in case of any aggression against it. Deploying around 60000 military personnel and contractors while 35000 civilians in Japan plus provision of sophisticated naval and air defence armaments consolidate the US-Japan military cooperation. Along with this the US has also focussed on intelligence sharing and surveillance support to Japan in the region. Collectively these measures strengthen the US-Japan alliance deterrence against China. Keeping in view the US commitment towards Japan in the context of security treaty between the two these collaboration can be applied against Chinese aggression. Japan has always supported the US security and strategic formations in the surrounding waters of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Till the last decade Japan has supported the policies of the three consecutive US regimes for the Indo-pacific region. It is part of the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific and QUAD. Quad is a security formation among the US, India, Japan and Australia. All these four countries have reservations and threat perceptions against Chinese expansion in the region. This extend the US-Japan deterrence against China around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Eruption of any military standoff between Japan and China the allied countries would come to support Japan.

The Chinese military strengthening and expansion has alarmed Japan. In its national security strategy 2022 Japan identified China as the greatest strategic threat. So it has started bolstering its defence budget. Is Japanese military strength along with US-Japan alliance is enough to deter China? According to Wu Xinbow the exacerbating trend of multi-polarization is diminishing the US significant advantages that have assisted it to its material strength and global influence. Some countries have started seizing economic and military cooperation with China as they now consider the US an unreliable partner. This minimised the endorsement of the US diplomatic agenda leading to a decrease in global resources adding to the US hard power and soft power (Xinbo, 2026). On the other side the US is busy in military expeditions in different parts of the world. As the Middle East and Ukraine military conflicts prolonged the US attention to other regions would decline. So the countries being in alliance with the US would tend to self-reliance. According to Govella & Szechenyi the Chinese and North Korea's escalating nuclear advancements can divert Japan towards the revival of nuclear capability (Govella & Szechenyi, 2026). To balance an assertive claimant China Japan would strive to be capable of relative strength specifically if the US failed to assist it in case of an arm conflict with China. So the recent developments reveal Japanese propensity towards the acquirement of nuclear arsenals. According to Johnson Japanese defence minister argument prove aggravating willingness among some Japanese policy experts to overtly discuss the contribution of nuclear weapons in Japanese defence (Johnson, 2026). It would also bolster the effectiveness of the US-Japan alliance against China.

Both the US and China are utilizing the Senkaku/Diaoyu conflict for their relative interests in the region. Kotani claims that the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute is not tied to nationalism nor to natural resources but China challenge the US-Japan alliance and ambitious

to destabilize the liberal global order (Kotani, 2013). Hussain used the same argument for the US. The US is not interested in the intrinsic value of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands (Hussain, 2025). This demonstrate the competition for dominance in the region between the US and China. For the US the region around the Senkaku is crucial to contain and compete China. Ignoring these regions would diminish the credibility of the US-Japan alliance while exacerbate Chinese influence. If the US hold is shattered in this region it probably would expand to other regions across the Indo-Pacific including South Korea, Philippines and Australia. Thus facilitating China to exacerbate and bolster its military, economic and political influence in the region.

The geostrategic significance of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands converge the strategic traction of the three as well as other big countries of the world. The region around Senkaku/Diaoyu islands contains vital maritime trade routes, busy Sea Lanes, fishing hubs and mineral rich areas. It render importance for maritime surveillance and combat operations. So the interests of some regional and extra regional states are also directed towards the consolidation of the US-Japan alliance. Specifically QUAD which has two members other than the US and Japan themselves would be useful to play a potential role in deterrence against China. In this context the US is also committed to provide Australia with nuclear submarines those strengthen its defence as well as the mutual military deterrence and expeditions against China.

No doubt both the US and Japan have strengthened ties in shape of their mutual alliance but they need much more consolidated collaboration if they are ambitious to counter China. According to Early and Rehberg the US and Japan commitments stand on rhetoric grounds. It extremely lacks practical adaptation to reinforce deterrence against China (Early & Rehberg, 2026). Both the states have strengthened military and strategic collaboration but lacks the practicality. The continuous Chinese incursions into the maritime zones around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands demonstrate the US-Japan weak deterrence against China. There is a sustained Chinese Coast Guard presence in the contiguous zone of the islands. So the effectiveness of the alliance is directed towards its practical steps those can deter Chinese assertiveness in the region.

Conclusion

The competing claims of China and Japan on historical basis have never been adjudicated by, or formally presented to an international judicial body. Thus there seems a continuous threat of military confrontation instead of peaceful solution to the issue.

The Chinese massive deployment around the region, its continuous military incursions and grey-zone tactics are testing the credibility of the US-Japan alliance in the surroundings of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Such Chinese impactful activities can convert into permanent stationing of its military in the region. These Chinese advancements test the US commitment whether it would response if China threatens Japanese administrative control over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. This is directly linked to the application of the US-Japan security treaty where the US is committed to support Japan in case of military clash between China and Japan. Chinese incursions into the maritime zone of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, proclamation of Air Defence Identification Zone and advantageous fishing ban seems offensive while Japan is defensive in its response but this provoke the US-Japan alliance towards serous counteractions. The Chinese operations in the region under its claims have inclined the US towards mass deployment with provision of sophisticated naval and air defence armaments in Japan. Also towards the extension of surveillance and intelligent cooperation between the two around the waters of Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

The US-Japan Alliance deter Chinese claims to some extent but need more security cooperation on practical grounds. The US-Japan alliance render strengthened deterrence against China on behalf of the US security formations QUAD and AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific region. In case of military clash between Japan and China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue India, Australia and the US would have mutual response to China. The recent Japanese tendency towards nuclear power capability would reinforce the US-Japan alliance deterrence against China. But the Chinese sustained reinforced expansion and constant incursions into the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands raise questions about the efficiency of the US-Japan alliance deterrence against China. Japan has identified China as a greatest security threat in his national security strategy and it is continuously increasing its defence budget. But the US has started military expeditions in different parts of the world. So in case of the US prolonged preoccupations in other regions Japan as well as other US allied powers in the Indo-Pacific region would tend to self-reliance. Also the US is not interested in the intrinsic value of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands but is inclined to contain and counter China. This signify potential shortcomings in the US-Japan alliance against China in the context of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

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