

U.S. Reactions to the 1978 Chinese Armed Fishing Vessels Incursion near the Senkaku Islands

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Abstract

In April 1978, numerous armed Chinese fishing vessels amassed near the Senkaku Islands, resulting in several hundred violations of Japan's territorial waters. The reason for this unprecedented large-scale incursion remains unclear but it occurred as Japan was about to restart negotiations with China on a Peace and Friendship Treaty. As a country preparing to normalize relations with the People's Republic of China, the United States monitored the incident with great interest. In addition to reporting on the incident, it also double downed on its neutrality policy with regard to the question of ownership of the Senkaku Islands, and adopted some new policies based on the desire to not get drawn into the Sino-Japanese dispute. One of those self-defeating ones was the imposition of a moratorium on the use of U.S. target ranges in the Senkaku Islands, which continues today. The purpose of this article is to examine for the first time ever the U.S. reactions to this incident and highlight the problems with the responses it adopted. It is based on declassified U.S. documents, memoirs of U.S. and Japanese officials, and interviews the author has conducted over the years with some of the key players.

Introduction

Beginning on April 12, 1978, dozens and then hundreds of Chinese fishing vessels, many of them armed, gathered near Japan's Senkaku Islands from various ports along the coast of China. Due to the lack of transparency in the one-party state known as the People's Republic of China, we may never know the actual reason for this incursion, but it was clearly planned at some level due to the large number of ships involved and the geographical distances of the ports from which they sailed. The slogans used and resistance shown when Japanese authorities demanded the ships leave Japan's territorial waters also suggest a certain level of political backing in Peking or Shanghai.¹

We are, fortunately, able to know precisely how Japan responded, thanks to its having a free press, an orderly declassification process for its official documents and the existence of a number of memoirs from that time.² The same is true for the United States, a formal ally of Japan that was in the process of officially recognizing the PRC at the time. As the records show, both Japan and the United States were at a loss to explain China's behavior, other than educated guesses based in part on information relayed to them by their Chinese and foreign sources.

¹ In this study, Peking, the former name for Beijing, will be used as was common at the time.

² As this study shows, the Japanese side, too, was greatly confused about the actions of the People's Republic of China. For example, Tajima Takashi, Chief of the China Division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, wrote "we were greatly surprised at what happened." See Tajima Takashi, *Gaikō Shōgenroku: Nicchū Heiwa Yūkō Jōyaku Kōshō to Tōshōhei Rainichi* (Diplomatic Testimony: Sino-Japanese Peace Treaty Negotiations and Deng Xiaoping's Visit to Japan), (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2018, p. 40). His boss, Nakae Yōsuke, suggested, "It was probably ordered from above." See Nakae Yōsuke, *Nicchū Gaikō no Shōgen* (Testimony on Japan-China Diplomacy), (Tokyo: Sotensha, 2008), pp. 163-164.

The purpose of this article is to examine the reaction of the U.S. government to the incursion by Chinese ships into the area near the Senkakus. This uninhabited island group (that President Richard M. Nixon called “those damned islands” as the Okinawa reversion talks were being finalized) falls under Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. Two of the islands—Taishō Jima and Kuba Jima—also possess air-to-ground target ranges dedicated for U.S. military use as per the bilateral Status of Forces Agreement.³

Interestingly, while there is some scholarship on the incident itself, there is nothing on the American reaction to it in English or Japanese despite the importance of the islands geostrategically and as a litmus test of the U.S. commitment “to defend Japan.” This article was written to fill the large gap in the academic literature.

The article is divided into eight parts and utilizes declassified U.S. diplomatic documents, memoirs, and interviews. Following this Introduction, the article briefly introduces the incident itself, U.S. diplomatic reporting of the incident from Tokyo and Peking, as well as Taipei, U.S. interactions with Chinese and Japanese counterparts, and then looks at U.S. policy resulting from the incident, before ending with a conclusion.

Unfortunately, U.S. policy that began as a result of the incident continues today—the moratorium on the use of the training ranges by the U.S. military in Japan—and the continuance of the incoherent U.S. stance to not get involved in the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Senkakus. This stance has placed both Japan and the United States at a huge disadvantage vis-à-vis the PRC and has also weakened the U.S.-Japan alliance in the process at political and operational levels.

The Incident and Background

On the morning of April 12, 1978, the Japanese Coast Guard detected a large number of foreign vessels near Uotsuri Island and approached them to instruct them to depart the area but was ignored. Subsequently, the 11th Regional Coast Guard Headquarters dispatched two other patrol vessels and a patrol plane to the scene. Nevertheless, the number of Chinese fishing vessels increased leading to a tense standoff in which some of Chinese vessels displayed machine guns and took aim at the Japanese Coast Guard. In just the first week alone, a record 357 Chinese fishing boats trespassed into Japan’s territorial waters. This tension continued for a couple of weeks, and it was not until June 24 before the Coast Guard’s special incident response headquarters could be disbanded.

During that time, the Fukuda Takeo administration (1976-1978), about to restart talks with China on the bilateral Peace and Friendship Treaty, was at a loss what to do. As readers know, Japan had normalized relations with China in September 1972 and established an Embassy there in January 1973. (The PRC subsequently opened its Embassy in Tokyo in February that year.) In doing so, it severed its official ties with the Republic of China (Taiwan) despite its long connection to the island, having administered it from 1895-1945 and signing a peace treaty with the Republic of China—set up on Taiwan in 1949—in April 1952. Following the normalization of relations between Japan and the People’s Republic of China, the two countries had sought for several years to negotiate a Peace and Friendship Treaty but were unsuccessful when the Senkaku incident happened.

This was the first incident of this kind. Since the reversion of Okinawa, including the Senkaku Islands, to Japan on May 15, 1972, there had been a number of small cases of Taiwanese fishing boats and government vessels near the Senkaku Islands as the Republic of China was also a

³ The two islands are called Sekibi Sho and Kōbi Sho in the SOFA. For more on them, see Robert D. Eldridge, “(Un)targeting the Senkaku Islands: Bombing Ranges in the Senkakus, the Decision by the United States to Suspend Their Use, and the Current Implications of that Moratorium, 1948-1978,” *Japan Review*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2024), pp. 37-53 (https://www.jiia.or.jp/eng/upload/eng/04JapanReview_Vol7_No2_Robert%20D%20Eldridge.pdf).

claimant to the area, but nothing of this scale and duration. Indeed, those boats would leave after a Japanese Coast Guard vessel appeared on the scene. Otherwise, they simply fished peacefully. This time was vastly different. It was done by China, in large numbers, and for different, political purposes.

Early U.S. Diplomatic Reporting about the Incident and Japan's Initial Response (April 12-April 14)

U.S. officials in Tokyo likely first heard about the incident from news stories that day and may have also been informed via the U.S. Consul General in Okinawa, John F. Knowles.⁴ By the morning of April 13, they were reporting the issue to Washington and other locations, such as the U.S. military at Yokota Air Base (Headquarters of U.S. Forces Japan and the Air Force), Camp Butler in Okinawa (Okinawa Area Field Office and commanding general of III Marine Expeditionary Forces), and Honolulu (Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command), as well as the U.S. Embassy in Taipei, U.S. Liaison Office in Peking, and U.S. Consulate in Hong Kong.

A telegram sent by U.S. Ambassador to Japan Michael J. Mansfield said the incursion by the Chinese fishing fleet into waters off the Senkaku Islands “has provoked consternation as well as confusion as to PRC motives” and that “one likely effect will be further to complicate prospects” for a peace treaty between China and Japan.⁵ The ambassador explained that the presence of the Chinese boats caught the Japanese government “by surprise” and that Fukuda thought “it strange that they should be there.”⁶ Foreign Minister Sonoda Sunao, who had been enthusiastic about a peace treaty with China, stated in the Diet earlier that day (April 13) that he had instructed the Japanese Embassy in Peking to make an official inquiry and that the government was watching the situation “with grave concern.”⁷ Mansfield reported as well that the Japanese government had sent additional patrol boats to the area, including one with an interpreter aboard, as well as maintaining aerial reconnaissance.

Mansfield's telegram also included reports from the American Consul General in Naha, who said (correctly) that the incident had received “major attention” in the Okinawa press and political circles, but that there had not been any editorial comment “probably because [the] leftist Okinawa press cannot decide what to make of this assertive action on part of country thought to be friendly to Japan.”⁸ Knowles, who had previously served in Okinawa as the political advisor to the High Commissioner from December 1968 until Okinawa's reversion in 1972, also reported (correctly) the “rumor that at least half of [the] Chinese vessels were armed with machine guns” and shared that “observers reportedly believe the Chinese boats were not configured for serious fishing, reinforcing suspicion that [the] fleet's purpose was to make [a] political point.”⁹

According to Mansfield, the China Division of MOFA was also unsure what to make of the incident. Its deputy director, Sugiyama Yōji, had told Embassy officials that the incident “provided ammunition for pro-Taipei members” in the Diet who have asked why the Japanese government

⁴ Author's interview with John F. Knowles, March 26, 2001, Alexandria, Virginia.

⁵ “Telegram 06393, Sino-Japanese Relations—Fishing in Troubled Waters, from Mansfield to Secretary of State, April 13, 1978,” RG 59 Department of State.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. For more on Knowles, see Robert D. Eldridge, *The Origins of U.S. Policy in the East China Sea Islands Dispute: Okinawa's Reversion and the Senkaku Islands* (London: Routledge, 2014).

has not seized the vessels.¹⁰

Mansfield informed the State Department that his staff “shared GOJ puzzlement as to Chinese motive” but that it may have been an attempt by the PRC to clarify where Japan stood on the peace treaty being that opinion was divided in the ruling party: “while Sonoda and [ruling Liberal Democratic Party, or LDP, Secretary General] Ōhira [Masayoshi] reportedly have argued that [the] incident underscores [the] need for [a peace treaty], Chinese action is likely to strengthen [the] hand of [treaty] opponents, further dimming prospects for [an] early resumption of talks.”¹¹

These views were reported the next day in newspaper stories that the Embassy shared with Washington, after confirming their veracity. Specifically, a “top-ranking LDP official” was quoted in Japanese newspapers as saying that the presence of the Chinese vessels off the Senkakus “had raised [the] territorial issue between China and Japan, thus making it difficult for Japan even to begin negotiations with China on [a] Peace and Friendship Treaty. [The] official [also] said his statement reflected unanimous view of LDP leadership.”¹²

The Embassy checked with a Japanese source close to Ōhira who confirmed that the official quoted in the story was indeed Ōhira, someone who planned to challenge Fukuda again for the party presidency in the future.¹³ The fishing fleet was “rapidly becoming [a] major political/diplomatic issue” for the government.¹⁴ Ōhira went so far as to say, understandably, that the continued presence of the vessels off the Senkakus had made the “conclusion of [the treaty] impossible, not just for [the] present Fukuda cabinet but for an Ōhira cabinet as well.”¹⁵

This comment was significant as Ōhira was a treaty “advocate,” having been foreign minister when Japan normalized relations in 1972.¹⁶ He was particularly upset by the response of the Chinese Embassy in Tokyo to Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ request on April 13 to withdraw the ships. The Chinese Embassy representative instead said that the Senkaku Islands belonged to China and referenced the December 30, 1971 statement by China to that effect. To Ōhira, this reference to the 1971 statement was a “deliberate abrogation [by China] of [the] tacit agreement, made during normalization talks of 1972, to put aside [the] question of the Senkakus.”¹⁷ Ōhira,

¹⁰ “Telegram 06393.” Sugiyama had an expansive diplomatic career, later serving as Japan’s Ambassador to Panama and Sri Lanka. A member of the Church of Latter-day Saints, he became a pastor after retiring in 1990. Sugihara later told the author that he did not feel that Chinese officials actually believed what they were saying about the Senkakus. They did not, in other words, fully believe the islands were theirs. See Eldridge interview with Sugiyama Yōji, February 18, 2026, Yokohama, Japan.

¹¹ “Telegram 06393.” In another message earlier that day, the U.S. Embassy reported that “it now appears unlikely that [the foreign minister] will travel to Peking for [treaty] talks in [the] near future” and that the prime minister “in turn has not personally participated in current debate within LDP, leading treaty supporters to question again his resolve.” See “Telegram 06361, Sino-Japanese PFT—Momentum Slackens, from Mansfield to Secretary of State, April 13, 1978,” RG 59 Department of State.

¹² “Telegram 06516, Chinese Fishing Boats Still Off Senkakus, from Mansfield to Secretary of State, April 14, 1978,” RG 59 Department of State.

¹³ Fukuda and Ōhira had been rivals in the past, most recently leading up to the 1976 contest to replace Miki Takeo. At that time, they reportedly agreed that Fukuda would serve first and then turn it over to Ōhira. When Fukuda didn’t, Ōhira challenged him. For details on the rivalry, see Masumi Junnosuke (translated by Lonny E. Carlile), *Contemporary Politics in Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), Chapter 5, Seizaburō Satō, Kenichi Kōyama, and Shunpei Kumon, *Postwar Politician: The Life of Former Prime Minister Masayoshi Ōhira* (New York: Kōdansha, 1990), Part 6, and Ryūji Hattori, *Japan and the Origins of the Asia-Pacific Order: Masayoshi Ōhira’s Diplomacy and Philosophy* (Singapore: Springer, 2022), pp. 104-109.

¹⁴ “Telegram 06516.”

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

therefore, was doubtful that treaty talks “could be resumed without directly addressing [the] sticky territorial issue.”¹⁸

Mansfield’s Embassy felt that the “dilemma” for the Japanese government would “become increasingly acute as time passes...and will become a major political headache for Fukuda” particularly as actions against the fleet by the GOJ have been seen as ineffective although two Taiwanese boats had been chased away.¹⁹ The Embassy was also concerned that Chinese actions, which had “aroused considerable nationalist sentiment” in Japan were also helping to deflect public attention, “at least for [the] moment” from the Northern Territories issue and criticism of the Soviet Union.²⁰ Indeed the latter was “indignantly accus[ing] Chinese of pursuing [a] ‘Maoist policy which supports territorial claims against neighboring countries’.”²¹ Moscow was secretly “pleased” to see talks over a peace treaty between Japan and China ruptured.²²

The same day that the above information was being reported and confirmed, Mansfield dined with Prime Minister Fukuda Takeo at a luncheon the latter gave for Charles L. Schultze, the Chairman of President James E. Carter’s Council of Economic Advisors, who was visiting Japan at that time. In addition to Mansfield, a former Marine and soldier as well as a Senate Majority Leader, he was joined by his Deputy Chief of Mission and Japan hand William C. Sherman, among others. Both Mansfield and Sherman had been in Japan since the previous year.²³ In nominating Mansfield for the post, President Carter saw the elder statesman as America’s “Ambassador to Asia.”²⁴ He would stay in Japan until 1988, the longest serving U.S. Ambassador to Japan in history.

After the luncheon, Fukuda asked the two men to stay behind to discuss the Senkakus and the “long-stalled” Treaty of Peace and Friendship with China.²⁵ They were joined by Fukuda’s private secretary, Owada Hisashi, of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Miyazawa Kiichi, who was then serving as the Director General of the Economic Planning Agency, having recently been foreign minister and a well known expert on relations with the United States.²⁶

Fukuda told his guests about the recent history of the Senkaku Islands and “the gathering there of a large number of PRC fishing boats” two days before “and the stalemate which has

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Sherman spoke of his selection as DCM in an oral history he conducted approximately 15 years later. “I was of course hoping that I would be selected by Mansfield to be his DCM and I was very glad that he did so. Before he made his selection, I escorted him around in all of his meetings around Washington. I arranged all the meetings and went with him. So I got to know Mansfield relatively well during his indoctrination period.” See “Interview with Ambassador William C. Sherman, October 27, 1993,” Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project (<https://adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Sherman,%20William%20C.toc.pdf>), p. 99.

²⁴ Don Oberdorfer, *Senator Mansfield: The Extraordinary Life of a Great American Statesman and Diplomat* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2003), p. 459. See author’s interview with Michael J. Mansfield, March 27, 2000, Washington, D.C.

²⁵ “Telegram 06507, Conversation with Prime Minister Fukuda, from Mansfield to Secretary of State, April 14, 1978,” RG 59 Department of State.

²⁶ For more on Miyazawa’s life and career, see Robert D. Eldridge, *Secret Talks between Tokyo and Washington: The Memoirs of Miyazawa Kiichi, 1949-1954* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), and Robert D. Eldridge, “Miyazawa Kiichi: His Life and Times,” *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, Fourth Series, Vol. 21 (2007), pp. 127-147.

been in effect since.”²⁷ According to Mansfield’s secret telegram of the conversation, Japanese “Self-Defense (sic) boats” were “patrolling the area but the Chinese fishing boats are refusing to leave.”²⁸ He was informed that Japan’s ambassador to China, Satō Shōji, a career diplomat with expertise in treaties and who had served as Japan’s ambassador to France and Spain, had been instructed to make representations against the intrusion of the fishing vessels into Japan’s territorial waters and was scheduled to meet that day at noon.

The brief history that Fukuda explained about the Senkakus was that the islands had been administrated as part of Okinawa Prefecture since 1895 when they were first incorporated into Japan. “At the time,” Fukuda stated, “no voices were raised against their incorporation, nor were any other claims made until after the war. As part of the Nansei Shotō they were administered by the United States during the occupation and after the peace treaty went into effect. They were finally returned to Japanese control at the time of [Okinawa’s] reversion in 1972.”²⁹

He continued by explaining that a 1969 report by the United Nations had indicated the possibility of oil deposits in the vicinity of the Senkakus and at that point, in 1971, the PRC made its claim to sovereignty over the islands.³⁰

Fukuda was serving as foreign minister at this time and had been responsible for explaining the Okinawa reversion agreement in the parliament. As the author explains in his 2014 book about the Senkaku Islands, he had been very upset with the United States at the time, stating in the Upper House in March 1972 that he was very “dissatisfied” with America’s “evasive attitude” on the Senkakus.³¹ In his conversation with Mansfield, Fukuda noted that during the negotiations for the reversion of Okinawa, the sovereignty question had been discussed with the United States. Although the U.S. government did not commit to recognizing Japan’s sovereignty over the Senkakus, Fukuda said that the United States had “indicated that if a problem arose in the future the United States would be willing to ‘show understanding’ Japan’s position.”³² He added that he had not originally intended to raise the matter with Mansfield and “was making no request as yet, but he felt it important to bring [the ambassador] fully up to date.”³³

Fukuda further told Mansfield that “no representations were made [by the PRC] at the signing of the Japan-PRC joint communique in 1972” and that “Japanese vessels have continued to patrol the area regularly. The Chinese fishing fleet incident is the first of this sort and has come as a surprise.”³⁴ He added that he did not know what his next step would be, and that it would depend on the success of Ambassador’s Satō’s protest in China.

Mansfield, who had played a key role in the passing of the Okinawa Reversion Agreement in the Senate in 1971 as well as being an advocate for the unconditional and immediate recognition of the PRC by the United States, expressed his appreciation and promised to report the conversation to Washington.³⁵ He did, which saw some comments come in from officials familiar with the Okinawa reversion agreement.

²⁷ “Telegram 06507.”

²⁸ Ibid. Here, Mansfield likely meant Coast Guard vessels.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ This history is covered in detail in the author’s *The Origins of U.S. Policy in the East China Sea Islands Dispute*.

³¹ Eldridge, *The Origins of U.S. Policy in the East China Sea Islands Dispute*, p. 278.

³² “Telegram 06507.”

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Oberdorfer, *Senator Mansfield*, pp. 458-461. Also see Eldridge interview with Michael J. Mansfield, March 27, 2000, Washington, D.C.

The first was from Deputy Secretary of State Warren M. Christopher, who sent a telegram to the Tokyo Embassy to provide guidance on the position of the United States government on the Senkakus. The telegram was drafted by Edward M. Featherstone, who had served in pre-reversion Okinawa and later as the Consul General there, and approved by Nicholas Platt, who would shortly afterwards join the National Security Council.³⁶

The guidance was written primarily to address the issue of the training ranges, which had come up in a separate telegram regarding them as a potential reason for the presence of the Chinese boats. The same day as Mansfield's discussion with Fukuda after the luncheon, an unidentified Embassy officer spoke with a Japanese reporter close to LDP Secretary General Ōhira. The latter, according to the reporter, allegedly believed that one reason for the presence of the Chinese fishing vessels near the Senkakus had to do with the fact that the Japanese government allowed two of the islands to be used by the U.S. military for target practice.³⁷

The Embassy officer had confirmed with an official from the China Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the head of the division (Tajima) had sent a personal memorandum to the LDP's General Affairs Division explaining GOJ policy regarding the Senkakus.³⁸ The Embassy officer then spoke with Tamba Minoru, the chief of the Security Division, who "agreed...that, puzzling as the PRC motives were, it was hard to believe U.S. facilities had much to do with the dispatch of [the] fishing fleet—after all, why did they wait almost six years after reversion [?]".³⁹

The immediate concern for the Embassy was that the local correspondent from the *Washington Post*, Bill Chapman, had become aware of the story about the perception that U.S. facilities in the Senkakus were "a" or "the" reason for the Chinese fishing fleet being in the area and had asked the Embassy for confirmation. Embassy officials requested to Washington that they be authorized to comment along the lines that the "longstanding U.S. forces' utilization of [the] range[s] in question has grown out of fact of Japan's exercise of facto (sic) sovereignty over islands and that United States has not taken formal position as to sovereignty."⁴⁰ It was this pressing need for guidance that most likely triggered a response from the State Department.

It was the aforementioned draft prepared by Featherstone that became the response from Washington. First, it authorized to use the following guidance on the role of U.S. military facilities in the Senkakus on an "if asked basis only": "the longstanding U.S. forces' utilization of two bombing ranges in the Senkaku Islands has grown out of the period of U.S. administration of these islands and from the fact of Japan's exercise of de facto authority over them. The [United States] uses these facilities in accordance with the Mutual Security Treaty and its related

³⁶ See Eldridge interview with Edward M. Featherstone, October 18, 2000, Washington, D.C., and "Interview with Edward M. Featherstone, September 20, 1999," The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Foreign Affairs Oral History Project (<https://adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Featherstone,%20Edward.toc.pdf>). Also see Eldridge interview with Nicholas Platt, November 4, 2024, New York City, and "Interview with Nicholas Platt, March 7, 2005," The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Foreign Affairs Oral History Project (<https://adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Platt-Nick.pdf>)

³⁷ As explained in detail in the aforementioned article (Eldridge, "(Un)Targeting the Senkaku Islands"), the use of both ranges began in the 1940s and 1950s respectively and continued through the application of the Status of Forces Agreement to U.S. facilities in Okinawa after reversion in 1972.

³⁸ The fact that the memorandum was sent from the China Division of MOFA is odd and inconsistent with the official stance of the Japanese government that "a territorial dispute over the Senkakus does not exist."

³⁹ "Telegram 06519, Senkaku Islands: U.S. Forces Facilities, from Mansfield to Secretary of State, April 14, 1978," RG 59 Department of State.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

arrangements.”⁴¹

The telegram, signed by Christopher, continued, stating, “if pressed as to [U.S. government] position on Senkaku territorial disputes,” the Embassy should use the following statement:

As you may know, under Article 3 of the Treaty of Peace with Japan, the United States acquired administrative rights over “Nansei Shotō” including the Ryukyu Islands south of 29 degrees north latitude. The term “Nansei Shotō” was understood to include the Senkaku Islands, which were under Japanese administration at the end of the Second World War and which were not otherwise specifically referred to in the treaty. On May 15, 1972, the United States relinquished to Japan, all of the rights and interest over the territories, including the Senkaku Islands, which we had been administering under Article 3 of the Treaty of Peace. The [United States] has consistently maintained that by returning administrative of authority over these islands to Japan, the United States has not added to or subtracted from legal rights to the Senkakus, which, of course, predate the United States’ connection with the Ryukyus.⁴²

Richard L. Sneider, who was serving as U.S. Ambassador to South Korea and had previously served as Deputy Chief of Mission in Japan from 1969 to 1972 was another official who chimed in having seen the exchanges between the Embassy in Tokyo and Washington. Sneider explained that he did not have the full files available to him at the moment, but “my recollection confirms [the] Depart[ment]’s views.”⁴³ Writing to William H. Gleysteen, Jr., Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, a position he had previously held, Sneider challenged Fukuda’s interpretation of events. “I can recall no specific commitment,” Sneider wrote from Seoul, “made with respect to showing understanding of Japan’s position in the future. On the other hand, this could very well be [a] semantic problem, since we made clear that we did not wish to prejudice specifically Japan’s claim to the Senkakus.”⁴⁴

U.S. Diplomatic Reporting about Sino-Japanese Interactions during the Incident (April 14-April 20)

In the meantime, the Chinese side was unwilling to listen to Japan’s demands for the PRC to withdraw the fishing boats. According to the top-secret National Intelligence Daily briefing of April 14, President Carter was informed under a subject heading of “China-Japan: Conflicting Claims” that “Japan has officially protested the continuing presence of Chinese fishing vessels in Japanese-claimed waters around the Senkaku Islands. The Chinese have rejected the protest and reiterated their own claim to the Senkakus.”⁴⁵

This was confirmed by newspaper reporting from Tokyo and Peking, with additional information that Japan had sent more patrol boats to the area. Fukuda, according to one of the stories, had called on his cabinet ministers to “remain cool” at a Cabinet meeting on the 14th.⁴⁶

⁴¹ “Telegram 096877, Senkaku Islands, from Secretary of State to Embassy Tokyo, April 15, 1978,” RG 59 Department of State.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ “Telegram 03902, Senkakus, from Sneider to Gleysteen, April 17, 1978,” RG 59 Department of State. Sneider referenced two State Department communications in his telegram, but only one of the two has been declassified.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ “National Intelligence Daily Cable, Friday, April 14, 1978, CG NIDC 78/087C.” This document was approved for release in 2005.

⁴⁶ “Telegram 096447, April 14 EA Press Summary, from State to all East Asian and Pacific Diplomatic Posts, April 14, 1978,” RG 59 Department of State.

On the 17th, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the U.S. Embassy that all Chinese boats had departed the territorial waters claimed by Japan. “Chinese action,” the Embassy wrote to Washington afterwards, “ends [the] immediate crisis for [the] Japanese government and, presumably, saturation media coverage, which has upstaged all other news over past few days.”⁴⁷ However, the Embassy noted, more than 140 boats still remained in the area as of 4 p.m. that day.

The Embassy observed in a telegram that day that the departure of the Chinese vessels came after denials by PRC officials that the incident was deliberate. The telegram noted comments by three different Chinese officials which sought to downplay the incident. The first one was by the Deputy Director of the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s Asian Affairs Bureau, Wang Hsiao-yun, who told Japanese Minister Dōnowaki Mitsurō in Peking on April 14 that China did not want the development of friendly relations between the two countries to be impeded by the Senkaku Islands issue. The second one was a statement on April 15 by Vice Premier Keng Piao who told a group of visiting Social Democratic Federation (*Shakai Minshu Rengō*) members from Japan, led by Den Hideo, that the Senkakus incident was “totally accidental” and that it would be “wiser to let the matter drop for the time being rather than renew discussion of the issue.”⁴⁸ The third interaction was when Hsiao Hsiang-t sien, Counselor of the Chinese Embassy in Tokyo, reiterated on April 16 to Director General Nakae Yōsuke of the Japanese Foreign Ministry’s Asian Affairs Bureau that the vessels’ entry had been accidental and suggested that the two countries should try to prevent the Senkakus issue from obstructing efforts to conclude a peace treaty.

Nevertheless, the U.S. Embassy felt that the “impact on [treaty] prospects has been immediate and adverse” and “Peking’s action as viewed from Tokyo seems both inexplicable and ill-advised” because the Japanese government will be more “wary of PRC in future.”⁴⁹ Indeed, Fukuda expressed “surprise and dismay” at the incident, at both the Cabinet meeting on the 14th and during a political rally in Kyoto on the 15th. He stated that the incident had occurred after more than five years of sensitive discussions on the peace treaty, but that his intention to conclude the treaty had not changed and therefore care would be taken not to damage Sino-Japanese relations.⁵⁰

Objectively speaking, the Embassy saw the incident causing the treaty to be shelved for the “foreseeable future” as the Japanese government “could not now proceed with treaty discussions without addressing [the] territorial issue on which mutual agreement seems most unlikely. Whether it will be possible—or even considered desirable—to try to pick up [the] pieces will depend on PRC attitude, how quickly Japanese emotions calm down, and extent of [Prime Minister] Fukuda’s determination, always less than wholehearted.”⁵¹

According to an intelligence source, Fukuda in fact “could not conceal his delight at the incursion by the fishing fleet.”⁵² Fukuda had long been concerned about the status of the

⁴⁷ “Telegram 06687, Impact of Senkaku Incident, from Mansfield to Secretary of State, April 17, 1978,” RG 59 Department of State.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Another report said Chinese officials told the visiting Japanese delegation and Foreign Ministry counterparts that they would investigate the incident. See “National Intelligence Daily Cable, Monday, April 17, 1978, CG NIDC 78/089C.” This document was approved for release in 2005. The SDF, which existed from 1978-1994, included members of the Japan Socialist Party and was the predecessor to the *Nihon Shintō* (Japan New Party) and *Shintō Sakigake* (New Party Sakigake or Harbinger) that was involved in the non-LDP coalition governments in the early 1990s.

⁴⁹ “Telegram 06687.”

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

Senkakus, as mentioned earlier, and led a faction that was strongly pro-Taiwan and very unhappy about the idea of Peace and Friendship Treaty with China. For these reasons, he may have been reluctant to move forward.

Another more generous interpretation is that he was taking his time to build a consensus within the ruling party. “The Prime Minister may very well have been slowly, carefully but determinedly trying to bring about an LDP consensus in favor of the treaty,” one scholar wrote about this time, “before actually moving to negotiate, let alone sign. He was probably stalling and wooing supporters, activities which are not mutually exclusive.”⁵³

Overall, according to Mansfield’s staff, Japanese “reaction to [the] incident has been relatively restrained” but “it has been firm and insistent that the [government] retain Japanese control over the islands.”⁵⁴ The Embassy noted that within the LDP and Cabinet, there were discussions on April 14 about building a lighthouse, heliport, and other facilities in the Senkakus as well as expediting construction of large high-speed patrol boats to monitor the situation.⁵⁵ On the 15th, the National Defense Division of the LDP Research Council criticized the government for its “weak attitude” on the Senkakus and called on it to do everything necessary to protect Japanese sovereignty. Executive Council Chairman Nakasone Yasuhiro even stated that the incident showed Japan needed to revise its postwar constitution to eliminate restrictions on its defense forces, something for which he had long been a proponent.

In the final analysis, the Embassy felt it was still too early to “gauge [the] nature and full extent” of the Senkaku incident on the political scene in Japan, it “clearly came as something of [a] shock...rais[ing] serious questions about PRC intentions which continue to mystify [the Japanese and]...forcefully reminded [them] of vulnerability of Senkakus.”⁵⁶ (This vulnerability was particularly felt from both military pressure from China as well as diplomatic pressure—i.e., lack of support—from the United States.)

No sooner had this report gone out, however, when new information came in that the number of Chinese vessels had actually increased, although they were generally outside of Japan’s territorial waters. In light of this, MOFA told the U.S. Embassy on April 18 that Minister Dōnowaki in Peking had been instructed to lodge a protest with the Chinese government and to find out the results of the investigation Deputy Director Wang had promised Japanese officials on the 14th.⁵⁷ (Privately, Japanese Embassy officials in Peking told representatives of the U.S. Liaison Office there that they “doubted whether PRC would ever pass on results of an investigation (if

⁵³ Daniel Tretiak, “The Sino-Japanese Treaty of 1978: The Senkaku Incident Prelude,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 18, No. 12 (December 1978), p. 1240.

⁵⁴ “Telegram 06687.”

⁵⁵ For more on this, see Robert D. Eldridge, “Developing the Islands or Demonstrating Effective Control? The Japanese Government and the Construction of a Heliport in the Senkaku Islands in the Late 1970s,” *Japan Review*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2025), pp. 20-38.

⁵⁶ “Telegram 06687.”

⁵⁷ “Telegram 06868, Chinese Boats Remain in Senkakus Area—PRC First Secretary Comments, from Mansfield to Secretary of State, April 18, 1978,” RG 59 Department of State. In what was the main purpose of this telegram, the Embassy reported that a Western diplomat had spoken with 1st Secretary Sung Wen on the afternoon of April 18, who said that the incident was accidental and a “minor problem to be solved by diplomatic means.” He stated the Chinese aim was to put the problem “aside temporarily,” and blamed the Japanese side for “making it [a] major issue in order to delay signing [the] PFT.” Sung also tried to make the case why under international law the islands belonged to China.

there was one).⁵⁸⁾

Further insights into the incursion of the Chinese fishing vessels were provided by the U.S. Liaison Office in Peking, which had been established in May 1973 to facilitate interactions between the United States and PRC prior to normalization and the re-opening of the Embassy in March 1979 (which had closed in February 1950, after the Chinese Communist Party had come to power). Headed at the time by Leonard F. Woodcock, the recently retired president of the United Auto Workers union which had helped get Carter elected in 1976, the USLO was monitoring the situation as things were going on in China as well as getting ready to host Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the National Security Advisor to President Carter.

Woodcock informed Washington that the Japanese Embassy officials in Peking “believed that [the] definitive PRC line on [the] Senkakus incident” was provided by Vice Premier Keng Piao in the latter’s meeting with Den from Japan and that they “do not expect the PRC to keep the issue alive and remain perplexed as to the Chinese motivation in precipitating this minor crisis.”⁵⁹

Importantly, the Japanese official told the (unidentified) USLO representative that he found it “interesting” that the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs adopted the position that “in principle recognized Japanese sovereignty over the islands.”⁶⁰ He explained that he had delivered notification to the Chinese foreign ministry of the 12-mile extension of fishing limits around the Senkakus. According to him, the Chinese side had assured him that the “authorities concerned ‘would be notified’” in response to a Chinese explanation that the fishing boats in question were small ones “without sophisticated distance measuring equipment aboard...[and] perhaps they did not realize they were inside Japanese limits [or] ...had never received word about the extension of Japanese fishing limits.”⁶¹

Woodcock relayed that the Japanese officials his team spoke with were “generally puzzled” as to what the Chinese motivation was in creating or permitting the incident, doubting “because of the close timing” the PRC “reacted simply to the raising of the Senkakus question by right wing LDP members.”⁶² Two other theories offered by the Japanese side, including one by the agricultural and fisheries officer, were that the recent reorganization of the Chinese fisheries administration may have led to the incident, and the other was that the Chinese government had simply miscalculated the Japanese reaction, thinking that “a little pressure might actually hasten the conclusion of the PFT and underline PRC constancy on the basic territorial issue” of the Senkaku Islands.⁶³

Whether the USLO officers accepted these two explanations is unclear, but in their eyes it was

⁵⁸ “Telegram 01063, Chinese Fishing Boats Off Senkakus, from Woodcock to Secretary of State, April 18, 1978,” RG 59 Department of State. Dōnowaki went to meet with Deputy Director Wang on the afternoon of April 21 to obtain the results of the investigation. See “Telegram 07081, Senkaku Incident—April 21, from Mansfield to Secretary of State, April 21, 1978,” RG 59 Department of State.

⁵⁹ “Telegram 01063.”

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid. The Japanese press reported on April 21 the comments of a Japanese fisherman from Nagasaki, who claimed to have recently fished alongside Chinese ships in waters near the Senkakus. He stated that the Chinese entry into the Senkaku territorial waters were indeed “accidental” and that they had fished there for filefish the year before as well. The U.S. Embassy noted in its report to Washington that the “latter assertion contradicts all official GOJ statements to date, which have maintained this was first appearance of PRC fishermen in Senkaku waters,” and that the political officer of the China Division of MOFA actually “hoped [the] assertion was true” probably because it would help diffuse the situation. See “Telegram 07081.”

⁶² “Telegram 01063.”

⁶³ Ibid.

only “remotely possible” that the fleet’s commander “acted mistakenly.”⁶⁴ Moreover, regarding the “miscalculation” theory, Woodcock wrote that the incident would not have been the “only recent Chinese miscalculation in their handling of relations with Japan,” explaining, “[China’s] approach to the PFT negotiations in recent months, which has included some rather insulting references to PM Fukuda, has been heavy-handed and generally counterproductive. If one assumes that [the Chinese] actually want rapid conclusion of a treaty.”⁶⁵

Immediately after that telegram went out, the Chinese compounded the situation by insulting the Japanese prime minister the next day, in Tokyo and Peking. At a banquet in Peking for Vice Premier Li Hsien-nien, Foreign Minister Huang told the then-deputy chief of mission from the Philippines that the incident had been “blown out of all proportion by right wing elements in Tokyo opposed to the [treaty]” and made “derogatory comment about PM Fukuda’s indecisiveness.”⁶⁶

This comment was repeated the same day in Tokyo, which suggests it was orchestrated. PRC Ambassador to Japan Hao Fu, at a dinner on April 19 for former Upper House president Kōno Kenzō, who was seen as a proponent of the treaty, said that the Senkakus incident was accidental, implying that the Japanese side was deliberately highlighting the issue. Furthermore, Hao reportedly asserted that Prime Minister Fukuda had “no intention of promoting the conclusion” of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship.⁶⁷ The following day, after the remarks were reported in the press, Fukuda criticized them saying that it was “inconceivable for an ambassador to make such an imprudent remark” with other government officials saying Fu’s remarks were “unpardonable and constituted interference in Japan’s internal affairs.”⁶⁸ Both the Chinese side and Kōno, the younger brother of a former faction leader and deputy prime minister, later denied the ambassador made such a comment.⁶⁹

Before we look further at Sino-Japanese interactions over the incident and U.S. reporting of those outcomes, it is necessary to introduce briefly how the U.S. government interpreted what was going on inside the Chinese leadership.

An American Interpretation of Chinese Actions: The Oksenberg Memo to Brzezinski

Approximately a week after the start of the incident, Dr. Michel C. Oksenberg, a senior member of the National Security Council responsible for China affairs, prepared a confidential memo for National Security Advisor Brzezinski on the incident. Entitled “Chinese Activities Around the Senkaku Islands,” the two-page memo sought to answer what exactly China was thinking when it launched, or at least allowed, its fishing vessels to gather in large numbers near the Senkakus.

Oksenberg, like Brzezinski, was born in Europe and later naturalized as a U.S. citizen. Also, like his boss “Zbig,” he studied and taught at Columbia, among other institutions. Oksenberg specialized in China, while Brzezinski, ten years his senior, in Soviet and International Affairs.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ “Telegram 01089, PRC Fishing Boats in Senkakus, from Woodcock to Secretary of State, April 20, 1978,” RG 59 Department of State. The USLO noted at the end of the telegram that “Philippine interest in cases of disputed sovereignty over uninhabited islands is obvious. Neither Philippine or (sic) Chinese side, however, has mentioned Spratley (sic) group since Senkaku flap began.”

⁶⁷ “Telegram 06996, Senkaku Incident and PFT: Prime Minister Takes Umbrage at PRC Ambassador’s Remarks, from Mansfield to Secretary of State, April 20, 1978,” RG 59 Department of State.

⁶⁸ Ibid. This wasn’t the only comment of this kind. Several more had been made prior to that by Teng Hsiao-p’ing (Deng Xiaoping). See Tretiak, “The Sino-Japanese Treaty of 1978,” pp. 1240-1241.

⁶⁹ “Telegram 07081.”

Oksenberg had particularly good access to Chinese officials, such as Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping, whom he had met on previous occasions. In one biography of Brzezinski, Oksenberg was described as “not only a brilliant analyst but also a superb bureaucratic infighter, having honed his skills in the academy.”⁷⁰

Oksenberg began the memo by explaining that the presence of the boats could not be attributed to a “local decision by lower level military or party officials” because the boats came from six different Chinese ports, which presumably would have required much coordination, fuel, and supplies.⁷¹ The Chinese action, therefore, was “perplexing, particularly because it departs from moderate and unprovocative Chinese policies toward Japan over the past year and more.”⁷²

Oksenberg first attempted to explain it as China’s way to “express its displeasure over Japan’s footdragging” on the Treaty of Peace and Friendship, but he said that “hypothesis seems implausible.”⁷³ The reason was, he wrote, that the Chinese “probably would not link” progress on the treaty with a settlement of the Senkaku issue as the Chinese had agreed in 1972 to “set aside the Senkakus as they worked to improve Sino-Japanese relations” and because according to Japanese reports, “all Chinese statements about the current incident have attempted to decouple the Senkaku[s] and the [treaty].”⁷⁴

Instead, Oksenberg argued the Chinese might be reacting to other developments including the following three:

[1] Nakasone [the aforementioned Chair of the LDP Executive Council and conservative faction leader] has been attempting to link the [treaty] to the settlement of the Senkaku issue. Rather than attempting to link the issues, the Chinese effort may be a miscalculated effort to deter the Japanese from linking the two issues.⁷⁵

[2] The Japanese Self-Defense Forces, according to Japanese press reports [dates unidentified in the memo] early this month, have talked about sending patrol boats and helicopters to improve the Japanese position in the Senkakus. The Chinese may be attempting to deter such moves. They may fear an erosion of the Japanese commitment to the earlier agreement to sustain a status quo in the region.

[3] The Lower House of the Diet early this month passed the enabling legislation for the Japanese-ROK agreement on sharing the resources of the Continental Shelf. This agreement has implications for use of the resources around the Senkakus. The Chinese may well be willing to risk immediate Japanese displeasure in order to underscore the seriousness of their

⁷⁰ Warren I. Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, “Beijing’s Friend, Moscow’s Foe,” in Charles Gati, *Zbig: The Strategy and Statecraft of Zbigniew Brzezinski* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), p. 89. A colleague of Oksenberg wrote with a slightly different appraisal, “Mike had never worked in a big bureaucracy and had little time for the consultative process. A marvelous lecturer and lucid writer, his interpersonal skills were less developed.” See Nicholas Platt, *China Boys: How U.S. Relations with the PRC Began and Grew* (Washington, D.C.: New Academia Publishing/Vellum, 2009), p. 249.

⁷¹ “Memorandum from Michel Oksenberg to Zbigniew Brzezinski on Chinese Activities Around the Senkaku Islands, April 18, 1978,” Carter Presidential Library, Atlanta, Georgia.

⁷² “Memorandum from Oksenberg to Brzezinski on Chinese Activities.” This view was shared by Tretiak in his aforementioned article, “The Sino-Japanese Treaty of 1978,” pp. 1245-1246: “The Senkaku incident didn’t ‘fit’ the recent pattern of Chinese foreign policy, yet it occurred and caused concern.”

⁷³ “Memorandum from Oksenberg to Brzezinski on Chinese Activities.”

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Brzezinski was well aware of who Nakasone was, having devoted many pages to him in his book earlier that decade, *The Fragile Blossom: Crisis and Change in Japan* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972). In fact, Nakasone interestingly received more coverage than the prime minister at the time, Satō Eisaku, or the latter’s successor, Tanaka Kakuei.

claims to these potentially oil-rich waters.⁷⁶

Oksenberg, a protégé of A. Doak Barnett, a former journalist and Columbia scholar of contemporary Chinese affairs who had been born in Shanghai in 1921, continued by writing that the “unknown aspect of this intriguing situation” concerned who made the decision.⁷⁷ He provided two possible explanations, “neither of them particularly attractive.”⁷⁸

The first is that it was a decision by Deng Xiaoping, who was serving as Chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and Vice Chairman of Chinese Communist Party, with the evidence being that the

maneuver has all the angularity, bluntness, and ill-considered decisiveness of a [Deng] decision. [He] frequently moves rapidly and assertively before carefully calculating the likely reaction to his move—a fault which helps explain his frequent trouble within China. The conventional wisdom around town today in the Intelligence Community is that it is a [Deng] decision, although there may be some differences among the Chinese leadership which helps explain some of the waivering (sic) and mixed signals the Chinese have been emitting. If it is a [Deng] decision, then we are reminded of his tough and acerbic qualities which do not speak well for our possible prospects in dealing with [him] in the months ahead.⁷⁹

The second explanation, according to Oksenberg, was that it was a decision by Foreign Minister Huang Hua, who had been serving as China’s permanent representative to the United Nations and had submitted in that capacity a letter on May 20, 1972 to the Security Council critical of the inclusion of the Senkaku Islands in the area to be reverted to Japan at the time of the reversion of Okinawa. Oksenberg suggests that the use of the Chinese fishing vessels was “more Hua’s decision and has been undertaken with the knowledge that it would undercut [Deng]’s recent move toward Japan. This interpretation would suggest that [Deng] is not totally in control and his policies are subject to the same kind of blockage which the ‘Gang of Four’ were earlier able to erect. If this is the case; then the Chinese leadership may not be sufficiently unified to deal with some very tough foreign policy issues, including their relations with us.”⁸⁰

Regardless of the explanation, Oksenberg felt that the Chinese “may have miscalculated.”⁸¹ This is because, he says, the Chinese have

eroded the good will that they have generated in Japan in comparison to Moscow’s heavy-handed treatment of Tokyo. They have delayed the [treaty]. They probably have altered what Fukuda will say to the President [Carter] about China. They may have even provided some stimulus for rethinking about Japan’s defense requirements in the years ahead, for this Chinese pressure joins current Soviet and American pressure on Japan and causes many Japanese to feel somewhat isolated in world affairs...It is too early to draw definite conclusions about this incident nor to hazard a guess as to how long the affair is likely to last. But Mike Armacost [the Japan specialist on the NSC and future ambassador to Japan] agrees with

⁷⁶ “Memorandum from Oksenberg to Brzezinski on Chinese Activities.” For details on this issue, see Kameda Akihisa, *Senkaku Shotō no Sekiyū Shigen to Nicchū Kankei* (Oil Reserves in the Senkaku Islands and Japan-China Relations), (Tokyo: Sanwa Shoseki, 2021), particularly Chapters 3-5.

⁷⁷ “Memorandum from Oksenberg to Brzezinski on Chinese Activities.”

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

me that this is a significant development in East Asia and certainly one well worth closely monitoring.⁸²

As the PRC does not generally make documents available to the public or researchers (especially in endeavors it has little leg to stand on), we may never know the real reason for the use of the hundreds of armed fishing vessels in the vicinity of the Senkakus in the spring of 1978, but unfortunately, the United States adopted some policies (introducing a moratorium on the use of training ranges in the Senkaku Islands) and doubled down on others (U.S. neutrality in the territorial dispute) as a result of it that have yet to change in the near five decades since.

U.S. Reporting on the Resolution of the Incident (April 20-)

On April 21, Political Counselor Dōnowaki met with Wang Hsiao-yun to obtain the results of the investigation Chinese officials promised a week earlier. Deputy Director Wang first stated for the record the Chinese position that the Senkakus belonged to the PRC and then reiterated that the incident was due to fishermen who followed the migration of fish which went near the Senkakus, as was usual practice.⁸³ Wang then went on to say that the Chinese felt, in any case, that the Senkakus issue “should not be allowed to interfere with the development of friendship between the PRC and Japan.”⁸⁴

It is unclear how Dōnowaki responded, but he shared with his counterpart at the U.S. Liaison Office the view that the Chinese foreign ministry was making “a sincere effort to play down [the] issue...[as] Wang made no effort to argue case for Chinese sovereignty other than [the] initial pro forma statement...and [instead] concentrated on trying to provide a plausible explanation for [the] presence of Chinese boats independent of the sovereignty question.”⁸⁵ As such, the Japanese Embassy was planning to recommend to Tokyo that the Japanese government accept the Chinese explanation and “not pursue the matter further.”⁸⁶

Dōnowaki said that while they did not intend to ask the Chinese side for further explanations or assurances, and Japanese officials hoped the issue would die down over the next few weeks, he admitted that Wang’s statement did not adequately explain the incident since the Japanese side had no evidence of Chinese fishing in the waters off the Senkakus in recent years. Dōnowaki sensed, rather, officials from the Chinese foreign ministry had been unaware of the dispatch of the fishing vessels as there was much confusion among lower-level officials after the incident came to light. In any case, he felt that the damage to treaty talks was significant and did not think

⁸² Ibid. The last sentence was underlined, presumably by Brzezinski.

⁸³ “Telegram 01114, Chinese Response on Senkakus Incident, from Woodcock to Secretary of State, April 22, 1978,” RG 59 Department of State.

⁸⁴ Ibid. A similar explanation was provided a few days later in Moscow by a Chinese diplomat speaking with an American official. The former “generally followed PRC line” reported in previous telegrams describing Chinese incursions into the Senkakus waters as “accidental.” The diplomat, identified as “Li,” indicated that these incursions were made by “local” fishermen “without the knowledge of the Chinese central authorities” and that “no political significance should be attached to them.” He stressed that the incident would “not impede the positive trend in Sino-Japanese relations” despite what one reads, he “joked, in the Soviet press.” The Chinese diplomat lamented, however, that the incident “gave ammunition” to the critics in Japan of the treaty even though the treaty would be eventually signed as “both sides had agreed” at the time of the establishment of diplomatic relations [in September 1972] that a solution to the Senkaku problem should be postponed. Finally, he said, Sino-Japanese goodwill has been reflected in the lack of activity by either side to exploit the oil resources in the Senkaku area. “Telegram 08967, Sino-Soviet Relations, Toon to Secretary of State, April 25, 1978,” RG 59 Department of State.

⁸⁵ “Telegram 01114.”

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Foreign Minister Sonoda would be able to visit China until the end of the year. When the U.S. Embassy official asked Dōnowaki if he thought the Chinese would accept this delay in treaty negotiations, he said he believed they would as they “must be aware of the effect the Senkakus affair has had on Japanese opinion.”⁸⁷

As it turned out, Sonoda would end up visiting much earlier, as talks on the Sino-Japanese peace treaty began that summer and the treaty itself was signed in August. The incident did not, in the end, greatly delay the treaty, thanks in large part to Japan’s willingness to accept Chinese explanations no matter how banal and nonsensical they were. There are some arguments (to which the author does not subscribe) that the incident actually helped “clear the air” and moved things forward.⁸⁸

In the meantime, Fukuda invited Mansfield to the official residence on the morning of April 25, knowing that the ambassador was leaving for the United States the next day ahead of the prime minister’s planned visit to Washington. The purpose of the meeting was for an informal exchange of views concerning the trip and was attended by Sonoda as well. Sino-Japanese relations in general, and the Senkakus in particular, were some of the topics that came up early on.

Fukuda recalled their last meeting ten days earlier at which he had noted how unfortunate it was that the Chinese incursions into the Senkaku waters occurred just as Japan was about to move into a more active phase of negotiating the PFT with China. He then asked his foreign minister to provide an update on the situation.

Sonoda, with whom Mansfield had developed an especially close relationship, began by saying that the Senkaku incident had “caused confusion in China as well as in Japan” and that it had taken some time before the Chinese were ready to deal with the issue officially.⁸⁹ When the Chinese side “finally responded to Japanese protests and inquiries,” their reply was that the incursions had not been planned and were essentially “an accident,” implying that the recent extension by Japan of territorial waters from the three- to twelve- mile limit may have been part of the problem.⁹⁰ In any case, Sonoda continued, Japan would proceed with the negotiations on the treaty “only after the Senkaku issue had been settled in one way or another.”⁹¹

It is unclear if the “Senkaku issue” here meant the blame for the incident or the question of sovereignty question itself. Imprecision—in part caused by language barriers—in meetings plus incomplete record keeping—in part caused by ignorance of the issues—regularly haunts bilateral meetings, especially between Japan and the United States. This is an example of one of those times.

Fukuda followed Mansfield, traveling to the United States on April 30. He and Carter were scheduled to meet on the morning of May 3. In preparation for that meeting, Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance, whom President Carter had said was “philosophically closest to me” out of all his cabinet officers, prepared the schedule and talking points for the president.⁹² Fukuda, whom Carter had met previously, was described as “wily and resilient” but a “firm friend of the United

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Tretiak, “The Sino-Japanese Treaty of 1978,” pp. 1248-1249.

⁸⁹ “Message from Ambassador Mansfield to the President on Prime Minister’s Views Re Meeting with President, April 25, 1978,” RG 59 Department of State. Regarding Mansfield’s close relationship with Sonoda, see Oberdorfer, *Senator Mansfield*, p. 472.

⁹⁰ “Message from Ambassador Mansfield to the President.”

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), p. 302b.

States” who was concerned about the “state of our relationship.”⁹³

Symbolic of the importance of the issue, the State Department prepared a two-page, four-part briefing paper on the Senkakus.⁹⁴ It is reproduced in full here.

Senkaku Islands Territorial Dispute

US Objectives: To avoid becoming involved in a territorial dispute between Japan and China (PRC and ROC) over ownership of the Senkaku Islands.

Japanese Objectives: Ultimately, to obtain US support for the Japanese claim to the Senkakus, but in the meantime to avoid raising the issue and prompting the United States to reiterate its position.

Essential Factors:

The long-dormant dispute between Japan and the People’s Republic of China over ownership of the Senkaku Islands, nine uninhabited islets between Taiwan and Okinawa, flared up in mid-April. Upwards of 140 PRC fishing vessels (some armed) entered the 12-mile territorial waters claimed by the Japanese around the islands and displayed signs asserting the PRC claim. The Japanese quickly demanded an explanation from Peking and the PRC equally quickly termed the incursion an “accident.” The Chinese fleet withdrew four days later, largely defusing the crisis, although vessels remained in the vicinity for some time, occasionally straying into the Japanese-claimed waters again. Motives for Peking’s action are not clear. The Chinese may have been dissatisfied with what they view as Fukuda’s foot-dragging on negotiations for a Sino-Japanese Peace and Friendship Treaty or with Japanese Upper House consideration of the Japan-ROK continental shelf agreement in the face of PRC protests. In any case, the incident has set back prospects for a peace treaty while demonstrating Chinese and Japanese sensitivities about their respective territorial claims. (Both sides had agreed to shelve their conflicting claims in 1972 when Sino-Japanese relations were normalized.) The tiny, barren Senkakus, claimed by the ROC in addition to Japan and the PRC, are significant chiefly for their relation to regional fisheries and possible submarine oil deposits.

The United States exercised administrative control over the Senkakus from 1945 until 1972 when such control reverted to Japan along with Okinawa and the Ryukyus. The US still uses two of the islets as bombing ranges under the Mutual Security Treaty with Japan. We recognized in 1971 that, despite substantial historical evidence supporting Japan’s claim, we would not serve our long-term interests in the region by taking sides in the Senkakus dispute. Accordingly, we announced in June 1971 our view that by returning the islands to Japan, the US had not added to or subtracted from legal rights to the Senkakus. The development of US relations with the PRC in the meantime has strengthened the rationale against our involvement in the dispute.

Points to be Made:

- The US recognized Japanese authority over the islands until the end of World War II. The US exercise of administrative authority from 1945 to 1972 stemmed from Article 3 of the Peace Treaty.
- The US will not become involved in the Senkakus dispute. As we stated at the time of Okinawa reversion: “The US has consistently maintained that by returning administrative

⁹³ “Undated Memorandum to the President from Cyrus Vance on Your Meeting with Takeo Fukuda, Prime Minister of Japan, May 3, 1978—10:30 AM,” Carter Presidential Library.

⁹⁴ Department of State Briefing Paper, “Senkaku Islands Territorial Dispute,” in “Visit of Japanese Prime Minister Fukuda, April 30-May 6,” Carter Presidential Library.

authority over these islands to Japan, the United States has not added to or subtracted from legal rights to the Senkakus which, of course, predate the United States' connection with the Ryukyus." (end)

Carter hosted Fukuda for three back-to-back meetings on May 3, starting at 11:20 a.m. and finishing in the early afternoon.⁹⁵ The first meeting, called a tête-à-tête, was with just a few people. The second meeting, which began at 11:30, included fuller participation, such as Vance and Mansfield. It was at the second meeting that Fukuda broached the Senkakus issue in the context of China. Fukuda stated,

On China, five years ago, after the Shanghai Communique and after you began to normalize relations with China, we normalized our relations with Peking. We are now negotiating a Peace and Friendship Treaty with Peking, but our progress toward that Treaty has been marked by fits and starts, by convening meetings and moving forward and then having the momentum interrupted. The reason behind this is the Hegemony Clause. The wording is aimed at a third country. We were about to reconvene to make progress on the Treaty again when the Senkaku incident occurred. A reconvening of the negotiations has once again been interrupted, but we hope they can resume.⁹⁶

Although Carter had been briefed on the issue (as seen in the above memo as well as a presentation by the Central Intelligence Agency⁹⁷), he seems to have chosen not to respond here referencing the Senkakus. Neither the incident nor any reference to sovereignty matters appeared in any of the declassified U.S. documentation on the Fukuda visit itself.

However, reference to the Senkakus did appear again shortly after this on two occasions during Brzezinski's trip to China and Japan in late May. While not the subject of this article, his trip was controversial within the U.S. government—was it proper for the National Security Advisor to go abroad on his own and jump into diplomacy (the domain of the State Department) and was it an effort by Brzezinski at one-upmanship vis-à-vis his rival, Vance—but he received

⁹⁵ According to documents in the Carter Presidential Library, the Japanese side requested at least three meetings with the president to demonstrate the importance of the bilateral relationship and that which Fukuda had with Carter. Due to the president's schedule, namely an impending trip to Los Angeles during the mid-term election year, they arranged them back-to-back.

⁹⁶ "Memorandum of Conversation, Summary of the President's Meeting with Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda, Wednesday, May 3, 1978, 11:30-12:15 p.m., Cabinet Room, White House," in Memcons: President, 5/78, National Security Affairs—Brzezinski Material, Carter Presidential Papers—Staff Offices, Carter Presidential Library.

⁹⁷ The CIA prepared a memo whose contents were to be shared with Carter that included the section, "Chinese Leadership Differences—Possible Foreign Policy Implications." The relevant part read: "Implementation of foreign policy clearly remains a sensitive area in China. Media treatment of such key issues as the severity of the Soviet threat and the state of US-USSR relations has been inconsistent. Moves to improve relations with the US and to increase military contacts with the west have been cautious and circumscribed. Finally—as noted in our analysis of Sino-Japanese relations on April 25—Peking's handling of the Senkaku incident seemed confused and indicative of internal division." See "Memorandum on China for National Intelligence Officer, China, from Director of Central Intelligence, May 2, 1978," Carter Presidential Library.

Carter's permission to go ahead with it.⁹⁸

Prior to the trip and his meetings, Brzezinski received updates and talking points on the Senkakus from his staff, which included both China and Japan watchers.⁹⁹ Papers addressing Chinese matters were prepared ahead of time, and those for Japan were finalized after his earlier meetings with Chinese officials.

In one undated paper prior to departing for China, his staff informed Brzezinski that "negotiations for the Sino-Japanese Peace and Friendship Treaty are stalled, concrete negotiations to fulfill terms of the long-term trade agreement are proving arduous, and the recent Senkaku incident has marred the atmosphere of Sino-Japanese relations."¹⁰⁰

Brzezinski used a layover in Tokyo on May 19 to meet quietly with Mansfield and Woodcock, who had flown over from Peking to discuss trilateral issues (and then returned to Peking with Brzezinski). The National Security Advisor was thus presumably well rested and well briefed before he landed in China for what would be his first visit there.

In Brzezinski's three and a half-hour meeting with Foreign Minister Huang Hua on May 21, the latter sought to get the United States to take China's side in the dispute:

Prime Minister Fukuda does not seem to have made up his mind on this issue. So it depends on the Japanese side as to whether and when we can conclude this Treaty. Recently, some Japanese are making use of the incident in which Chinese fishing boats went fishing off the coast of the Tiao-yu-tai, the Senkaku Islands. They are making a big cry to the effect that the Chinese have infringed on the territorial sovereignty of Japan and raised the issue that the two sides should first settle the territorial disputes. Their purpose is to obstruct the conclusion of the Treaty of Friendship and Peace between the two countries. Behind them we can also see the maneuvers of the Soviet Union. I would like to brief you on the background of the issue of the Tiao-yu-tai. In 1972 Prime Minister Tanaka and Foreign Minister Ōhira visited China and normalized relations between the two sides and issued a joint statement. During the negotiations Prime Minister Tanaka raised the issue of the Islands. Chou En-lai told them that the two sides had a dispute and on this issue we may as well refrain from discussion and leave it for settlement in the future. This does not mean that the issue is not important. It means that discussion of this issue would not be of any good to the negotiations on the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. At that time the two sides agreed to put

⁹⁸ This controversy and the tense relationship between Secretary Vance and Brzezinski are covered in both men's memoirs, and a number of books about the administration. For their memoirs, see Cyrus R. Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983) and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1983). China skillfully used this rivalry to its advantage as well as that between Brzezinski and his academic and policy rival, Kissinger.

⁹⁹ Earlier in his career, when he was still in academia and had just returned from a six-month research trip to Japan when he worked on his book, *The Fragile Blossom*, Brzezinski had correctly sided more with Japan on the issue of the Senkakus. In April 1972, on the eve of Okinawa's reversion to Japan, Brzezinski wrote to then National Security Advisor Henry A. Kissinger about the latter's forthcoming trip to Japan, adding, "The Japanese will press you very hard on the Senkaku Islands, and you should not underestimate the potential here for an emotionally anti-U.S. reaction unless we somehow indicate that Japan has a legitimate claim. What if the Chinese (either ones) send their forces to plant the flag there after May 15!?" This quote, Brzezinski's views on the Senkakus, and the author's correspondence with him in 2012 (prior to his passing in 2017) are found in Eldridge, *The Origins of U.S. Policy in the East China Sea Islands Dispute*, pp. 300-301 fn171.

¹⁰⁰ "Paper Prepared by the National Security Council Staff, Scope Paper for May, 1978 Brzezinski China Trip, undated," Carter Presidential Library, National Security Affairs, Brzezinski Material, Trip File, Box 38, Brzezinski, Asia, 5/18-25/78, China, Volume I (II).

this issue aside. They also agreed that they would try to seek a settlement of this through negotiations in the future. As for Chinese fishing boats in the neighborhood of the Senkaku Islands, they have been doing so for many years. It is not just this year that they have begun to do so. It appears that certain people within Japan harbor hegemonistic desires, but the Chinese side sets store by the friendship between the Chinese and Japanese peoples while upholding its principles at the same time. So the Chinese side took appropriate measures to handle this problem. The friendship between China and Japan is strong and conforms to the trend of the time, and the troublemaking of a few pro-Soviet people and militarists in Japan would be of no avail.¹⁰¹

This appears to have been the only time the Senkakus were mentioned in Brzezinski's meetings with Chinese officials, although the need for a peace treaty between China and Japan were emphasized by his interlocutors in all three meetings, including Deng Xiaoping (on the 21st) and Chairman Hua Kuo-feng on the 22nd.

On the 23rd, after arriving back in Japan, Brzezinski met with Prime Minister Fukuda. That day, the Japan specialist on his staff, Michael H. Armacost, who was traveling with him, provided the national security advisor with a three-page memo for his meeting with the Japanese leader. "With respect to the Senkakus," Armacost wrote, "you should tell Fukuda that the Chinese repeated their view that they had relinquished no claims at the time of Sino-Japanese normalization; they had merely agreed to set the issue aside in hopes of resolving it through future negotiation. Mention also the fact that Huang Hua played down the recent fishing boat incident."¹⁰²

Brzezinski took some of the advice, stating after a discussion of the need for a peace treaty, that "the Chinese mentioned in passing that they had not relinquished their claim to the Senkakus."¹⁰³ Fukuda appreciated the update and told Brzezinski that he was preparing to reach out to the Chinese side the following week to begin discussions again on the peace treaty. This was probably music to Brzezinski's ears, removing another uncertainty from the Carter administration's agenda for Asia.

U.S. Policy Resulting from the Incident

Despite Brzezinski the academic originally having sided with Japan, and despite Japan being an ally, the Carter administration incredulously adopted three policies that were self-defeating over the short-, mid-, and long-term on a number of levels.

The first one was that it cancelled a naval exercise that was being held around the time of the Senkaku Incident.¹⁰⁴ This created an unfortunate precedent that if there were an issue in the area,

¹⁰¹ "Memorandum of Conversation, Summary of Dr. Brzezinski's Meeting with Foreign Minister Huang Hua, May 21, 1978, Beijing, 9:52-1:20 p.m.," National Security Affairs, Staff Material, Far East, Oksenberg Subject File, Box 56, Policy Process: 5/16-31/78.

¹⁰² "Memorandum on Your Meeting with Fukuda from Mike Armacost for Zbigniew Brzezinski, May 23, 1978," Carter Presidential Library. Armacost succeeded Mansfield as Ambassador to Japan following the latter's unusually long 11 and a half-year tenure and published his memoirs in 1996. Unfortunately, the memoirs (*Friends or Rivals? The Insider's Account of U.S.-Japan Relations*), published by Columbia University Press, did not include a discussion of his work in the 1970s. See author's interviews with Michael H. Armacost, Washington, D.C., June 11, 2001 and Stanford, California (by e-mail), March 19, 2012.

¹⁰³ "Memorandum of Conversation [with Prime Minister Fukuda], May 23, 1978, Tokyo," in Memcons: Brzezinski, 10/77-8/78, National Security Affairs—Brzezinski Material, Carter Presidential Papers—Staff Offices, Carter Presidential Library.

¹⁰⁴ Training Cancellation Notice, Carter Presidential Library.

the United States would cancel a planned exercise or other activity rather than demonstrating a stabilizing presence or a warning to potential adversaries.

The second, unfortunate, policy adopted was placing a moratorium on the use of training ranges. This decision is covered in detail in the author's article "(Un)targeting the Senkaku Islands: Bombing Ranges in the Senkakus, the Decision by the United States to Suspend Their Use, and the Current Implications of that Moratorium, 1948-1978," previously published in this journal, *Japan Review*. While the decision is attributed to the State Department, it is unclear who made the actual decision. But it appears to have been a decision based on the next policy to be discussed—the desire to not get involved in the Senkakus issue.

The third result from the Chinese fishing boats incursion was affirmation of an existing policy to not get involved in the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Senkakus. This was particularly clear in a memo prepared by the State Department on the eve of Fukuda's visit to Washington in the spring. Cited in full earlier in this article, the operative phrase read: "US Objectives: To avoid becoming involved in a territorial dispute between Japan and China (PRC and ROC) over ownership of the Senkaku Islands."

This stance, however, was clear from years earlier. It was the subject of my 2014 book about the handling of the Senkakus at the time of Okinawa's reversion in 1972 and was also mentioned in a 1974 study by the CIA once marked "secret" but approved for release in 2004. It re-stated existing policy: "The United States' position is one of neutrality on the legal ownership of the Senkakus."¹⁰⁵

This inconsistent policy invites the unanswerable question that many Americans have—"why would our sons and daughters fight for a territory in which we do not even recognize our ally's sovereignty over?"¹⁰⁶ Because of this inherent contradiction, it is vital that the U.S. government change its policy on the Senkakus to one of re-recognizing Japan's sovereignty over the Senkakus (and not just acknowledging its administration over them).¹⁰⁷

The above were acts of commission. Unfortunately, there were things the United States did not do as a result of the armed Chinese fishing boats incursion. These were acts of omission, so to speak. The United States did not re-examine its incoherent policy on the Senkakus, despite the tensions and possible escalation that might have occurred then. This was an opportune time for the U.S. government to officially side with Japan (as Brzezinski had called for in his 1972 letter to Kissinger), not only publicly but through a change in its policy back to the original position of recognizing Japanese sovereignty as discussed in the author's book.

Another thing the United States did not do at this time was to seek to convince China to lay off its unfounded claims to the Senkaku Islands. U.S. officials hinted to their Chinese counterparts that the latter had made a mistake in their handling of the incursion, but the U.S. diplomats do not seem to have gone beyond that to pressure China to drop its claims.

Finally, the United States did not tell its ally Japan that it would be there for it if China escalated with military force, which would put its political leaders and thus public at ease (and also be a deterrent against the PRC). Of course, there are potential risks about getting too far out ahead of an ally, especially when the main burden for national defense should come from the

¹⁰⁵ Directorate of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, "East Asian Contested Islands, BGI RP 74-12, February 1974," p. 16.

¹⁰⁶ Robert D. Eldridge, *The Origins of U.S. Policy in the East China Sea Islands Dispute*, pp. 4-5, and Robert D. Eldridge, "U.S. Senkakus Policy and Its Contradictions," *The Japan Institute of International Affairs/Resource Library*, September 2023 (https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/resourcelibrary/pdf/ResourceLibrary_Territory_Eldridge_230906_r.pdf).

¹⁰⁷ Robert D. Eldridge, "It's Time for the U.S. to Re-Recognize Japan's Sovereignty Over the Senkaku Islands," *Japan Forward*, July 23, 2020 (<https://japan-forward.com/its-time-for-the-u-s-to-re-recognize-japans-sovereignty-over-the-senkaku-islands/>).

country affected. However, this incident did expose cracks in the alliance over the Senkakus that have not really been filled and in fact got wider at one point in the mid-1990s.

Conclusion

This article examined the U.S. reactions and response to the sudden—but previously planned—incursion by hundreds of armed Chinese fishing vessels into the waters near the Senkaku Islands in April 1978. Ironically, as this article was being prepared in early 2026, thousands of Chinese vessels have amassed in the vicinity of the Senkakus beginning in December of the year before.¹⁰⁸ As with the 1978 incursion, the reason for the amassing of these vessels is unknown.¹⁰⁹ However, it is clearly not only for fishing. Often it is for surveys and intelligence-gathering, as well as creating micro (and sometimes) macro *fait accompli* by normalizing the activities.

During the past 50+ years since Okinawa's reversion, China has sought to undermine Japan's administration and sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands with the fishing vessels' incursion in the 1970s and regular aerial and maritime violations today. It seeks to normalize its actions and create doubt in the minds of not only the international community but in Japan itself as to who actually owns the Senkakus, inviting comments like who would want these barren islands anyway and are they even worth fighting over? Japan is partly at fault due to its failure over the years to more strongly address the issue. However, the United States also a large share of the blame because of its inconsistent stance on the Senkakus at the time of Okinawa's reversion and its neutrality policy since then. Instead of laying down the law, the United States essentially allowed China to dictate the debate through its untruthful assertions and dangerously arrogant actions.

The failure of the United States to take a stance in favor of its ally Japan on the sovereignty question ends up strengthening China's claims by giving them the appearance of legitimacy. So much so that the United States now hesitates to use its own ranges in the Senkakus out of a misplaced fear of getting drawn into the so-called Senkakus dispute.¹¹⁰ This weakens U.S. military readiness in the region. And so, despite the United States having rights to use the ranges, we see China having won concessions from the United States to stop utilizing the ranges by using its fishing fleet illegally against the Senkakus.

It wasn't that China miscalculated but that the United States did. The United States was outmaneuvered, and the region is paying the price.

¹⁰⁸ Chūgoku Furontia Senryaku Kenkyūkai and Masuo Chisako, "Chūgoku ga Higashi Shina Kai ni Gyosen 2000 Seki o Dōin Shite 470 km no U-jisen o Keisei Shite Ita! Gijutsu to Dōin Taisei no Kakuritsu de Susumu Gunmin Yūgō, Haru Kara Kaijō Minpei no Katsudō ga Jōtaika ka (China Mobilized 2,000 Fishing Vessels in the East China Sea to Form a 470-Kilometer U-Shaped Line! With the Establishment of Technology and Mobilization Systems Advancing Military–Civil Fusion, Maritime Militia Activities May Become Routine from This Spring), *Tōyō Keizai*, January 20, 2026 (<https://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/930461?display=b>).

¹⁰⁹ *The Nikkei Asia* reported, February that the formation was possibly related, to nontime militia training. See "Formation of thousands of Chinese fishing boats stir worries in Japan," *Nikkei Asia*, February 20, 2026.

¹¹⁰ See Eldridge, (Un) Targeting the Senkaku Islands; and Robert D. Eldridge, "A Restart of Senkaku Firing Ranges is Long Overdue," *The Japan Times*, December 10, 2024.