

The Japan-China Squabble over Rocks
Asia Sentinel
August 20, 2012
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The Ryukyu island chain gets into the act over the Diaoyu/Senkaku

The row between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands has implications which go far beyond this little group of essentially useless rocks.

While the rocks have seen the arrival of nationalist activities from Hong Kong (as proxy for China) and Japan, the underlying story is another Chinese move to upset the status quo in the region by reviving and reasserting dormant earlier claims. In the case of these rocks, they have, apart from the period of American occupation, been controlled by Japan for approximately the past 150 years.

The rocks are not capable of sustaining human habitation and they are unoccupied. They did once host a fish processing plant owned by a Japanese family that reportedly employed more than 100 workers. But that proved a commercial failure and closed back in 1940. So under the Law of the Sea convention they do not form a basis for a 200-nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone.

In terms of proximity, the closest inhabited territory is the southern Ryukyu island of Ishigaki, 170 kilometers away, which has a population of about 100,000. The nearest Chinese territory is Keelung, a city on the northeastern tip of Taiwan. China's claim rests in the first place on this proximity and the fact that there is a continuous continental shelf linking it to mainland China as well as Taiwan.

The Chinese claim that there is no such link to the Ryukyus, which stretch southwest in an arc from Kyushu to Taiwan, with Yonaguni the southernmost. The largest of the islands is Okinawa. The Chinese assert that there is a seabed depression between the rocks and the Japanese islands. Japan says this is an undulation, not a break in the continental shelf, which extends southeast of the Ryukyus to where the deep waters of the Pacific begin.

But behind the Chinese claim based on the seabed configuration lies another which has yet to be raised by Beijing. However, it could well be as China seeks to use ancient claims that it exercised at least nominal sovereignty over tributary states in its current effort to pursue modern claims.

The Ryukyus are themselves an interesting case of an island group which lies not only between Japan and China but Korea to the north and the greater Malay world to the south. The origins of the Ryukyu peoples themselves vary depending on where each island sits in the chain. Its southernmost island is 1,000 km from Kyushu. The primary source, at least judging from their language, was Japan but there is evidence of strong Malay cultural influence from an early age – not surprising given that nearby Taiwan was a Malay majority island until about 200 years ago. Later, ikat weaving, another Malay influence in which a dyeing technique used to pattern textiles similar to tie-dyeing, was introduced on the island.

Many Chinese and some Koreans came to trade and settled and left their own marks on these far-flung little societies. Islanders went to China to study. With little land to cultivate the

people of the islands thrived as seamen, their ships trading with China, northeast and Southeast Asia, primarily bringing tropical products from the Malay Peninsula, Siam and Java to China and Japan. From the 15th century, trade relations with China were especially close and tribute missions sent to Beijing.

Rival states vied for Chinese recognition at least till the dominance over the islands of one Okinawa-based dynasty. Similar tribute missions also went to Japan's shoguns. Japan had long regarded the Ryukus as semi-barbarian although they have been within Japan's orbit since around the year 600. But for a long time trade opportunities with China were greater, especially once Chinese traders began to settle in Taiwan and Southeast Asia and until European traders with more modern ships came to dominate the region's seas.

The Ryukus' quasi independence, which enabled it to send missions to courts around Asia, was gradually snuffed out by Japan more because of fears of western than Chinese designs. Most notable were the Americans, with Commander Perry arriving in 1853 with a warship demanding cooperation. The US signed a treaty with the "Kingdom of Lewchew" (using the Chinese version of the name) in 1854. Perry wanted the US to take the islands under US "protection" but President Pierce declined.

Instead, soon after the Meiji restoration Japan, decided to take action itself to prevent other countries from occupying it. It sent a force to Naha, Okinawa, and deposed the king. Integration into Japan began and an Okinawa prefecture was established in 1879.

China continued its own sovereign claims based on the earlier tribute missions and only renounced them in the treaty of Shimonoseki, which gave Japan sovereignty over Taiwan. This "unequal treaty" was subsequently denounced by China. During World War II the US and Britain promised China that Japan would be forced to surrender "all territories stolen from China such as Manchuria, Formosa..." There was no specific mention of the Ryukyus but in the immediate aftermath of the war they were treated separately from the rest of Japan and only returned in 1972.

Okinawa suffered dreadful casualties during the war itself, and since then has had to endure the massive US military presence which remains today, an essential part of Japan's defense but very unpopular among Okinawans.

China has an established ability to resurrect claims based on old tributary relationships and travels of its merchants. In practice most so-called "tributes" were not acknowledgement of sovereignty but gifts necessary to being allowed to trade with China. But at one time or another they were paid by almost every state between Japan and Sumatra, Korea and Brunei.

A revived claim to the Ryukyus, or at least attempts to foster Okinawa's sense of grievance and identity and this undermine the whole US-Japan strategic situation is not beyond the bounds of possibility and may explain quite why the Senkaku/Diaoyu rocks have assumed such importance. This is not just about possible oil and gas under the sea. It is about history.

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