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# THE “CONSEQUENT INTEREST” OF JAPAN’S SOUTHWESTERN ISLANDS

## A Mahanian Appraisal of the Ryukyu Archipelago

*Eric Sayers*

In his classic collection of essays on maritime geography *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future*, Alfred Thayer Mahan opined that the importance of “portions of the earth’s surface, and their consequent interest to mankind, differ from time to time.”<sup>1</sup> Just as the Mediterranean Sea once transfixed the minds of European strategists and policy makers, Mahan believed, at the turn of the twentieth century, the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea would obtain similar prominence in American strategic thinking. A century later, as we observe the relative balance of economic and military powers shifting to Asia and the Pacific and Indian Oceans, Mahan’s teachings on geography are again instructive, as once seemingly insignificant bodies of water and island chains take on a new importance in regional security matters.

Recent research has drawn attention to the interaction of commercial and martial activity in the Indian Ocean, Malacca Strait, and South China Sea.<sup>2</sup> To this group of portentous maritime zones should be added Japan’s southwestern island chain—and specifically the Ryukyu Islands in the East China Sea.<sup>3</sup> The ongoing territorial dispute between the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Japan,

and Taiwan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu island group near the southern end of the Ryukyu chain; the southwestern islands’ geographic proximity to the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan; and the former’s expanding naval capabilities and ambitions promise to ensure, as Mahan’s adage contends, the Ryukyus’ “consequent interest” to Japan and its neighboring states.<sup>4</sup>

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After hugging its own shores for decades, since 2004 the PRC's People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy has increased its activity around Japan's southwestern islands. In what appeared as a response to this more assertive posture of the PLA Navy (or PLAN) the Japanese Ministry of Defense in its 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) identified the southwestern islands as a priority for defense spending and advocated a shift in the nation's strategic focus to them. Why has China taken an interest in these islands and their surrounding waters? What explains Japan's new strategic emphasis on its southwestern islands? What form will Japan's strategy take in response to China's increased focus on them and activity there?

This article seeks to explain the growing strategic importance of Japan's southwestern island chain and to understand how Japan is responding to China's increased maritime activity in this zone. The article has five sections. The first two review the geography of the southwestern islands and evaluate the strategic importance of these islands by adopting a topology that Alfred Thayer Mahan developed to assess a geographic location's strategic value. The third section evaluates China's maritime interests in the Ryukyus and reviews the PLA's capabilities and war-fighting missions that affect the islands. The fourth describes the Japanese government's strategic focus on the southwestern islands as articulated in the 2010 NDPG. The final section draws conclusions on Tokyo's likely course of action in this area.

### JAPAN'S SOUTHWEST, OR "RYUKYU," ISLANDS

The history of Japan's southwestern islands stretches back to the establishment of the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1429. From the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries the kingdom embraced all of the island chain, from the Amami Islands below Kyushu in the north to the Sakishima Islands near Taiwan in the south. During this period, the kingdom paid tribute to both the Japanese shogun and the Chinese emperor. In 1609 the Japanese feudal domain of Satsuma invaded the Ryukyu Kingdom and took control of it after a swift victory. In 1853, on his way to open trade relations with Tokyo, Commodore Matthew Perry transited the Ryukyus, stopping over at Naha. Less than two decades later, in 1872, the Japanese Meiji government abolished the kingdom, declaring it the Prefecture of Okinawa in 1879. Following World War II, the U.S. government maintained administrative rights over the islands, while recognizing Japan's residual sovereignty. Full sovereignty over the islands was ultimately returned to Japan in 1972.

Japan's southwestern islands form a seven-hundred-mile-long chain that flanks the coast of China, from the Japanese home island of Kyushu to near the northeast coast of Taiwan. In Japanese, the overall chain is known as the Nansei-shotō (Nansei Islands). The Satsunan Islands make up the northern half of the

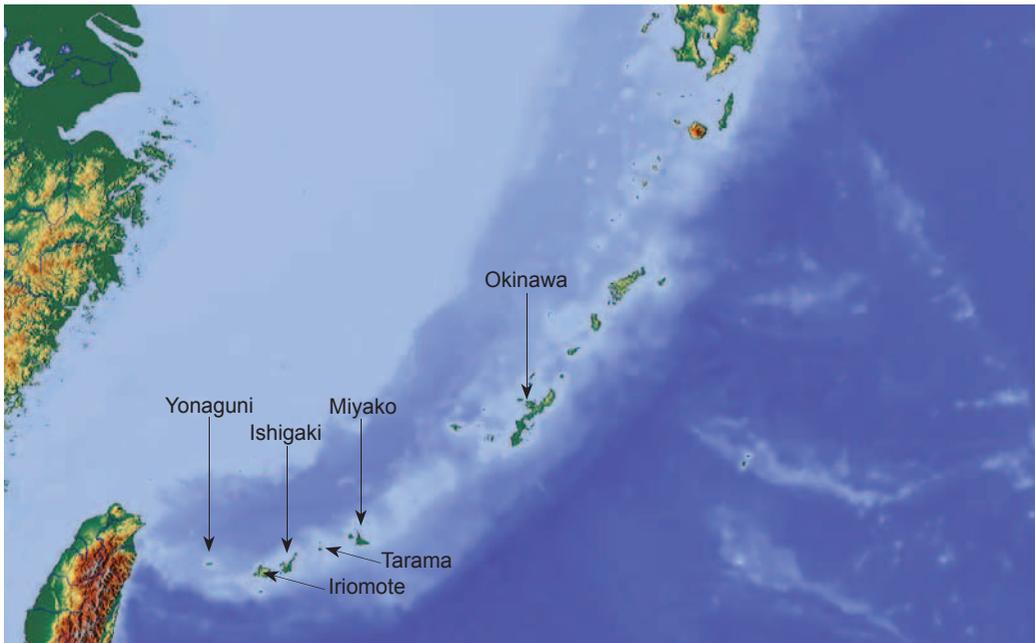
Nansei Islands and the Ryukyu Islands, including the Okinawa Islands and the Sakishima Islands, the southern half. This article will focus on the Ryukyus, including Okinawa and the larger islands of Miyako, Ishigaki, Iriomote, and Yonaguni.

The Okinawa Islands form the northern portion of the Ryukyus, almost four hundred miles south of Kyushu. Okinawa itself is the largest in the Ryukyu chain, stretching sixty miles from the northeast to the southwest and ranging from two to sixteen miles wide. The northern portion of the island, known as Kunigami, contains a dense mountain ridge with streams and valleys where water is abundant. The midsection, known as Nakagami, is marked by limestone ridges and rolling hills; below that is a hilly southern area called Shimajiri. The majority of Okinawa's population of almost 1.4 million people lives in the urban areas of the south. The major islets of the Okinawa group are scattered to the north and west, including Yoron, Iheya, Izena, Zamami, and Tokashiki. Naha's harbor and airport are located in the southwestern portion of the island and serve as major transit points to the rest of the Ryukyus.

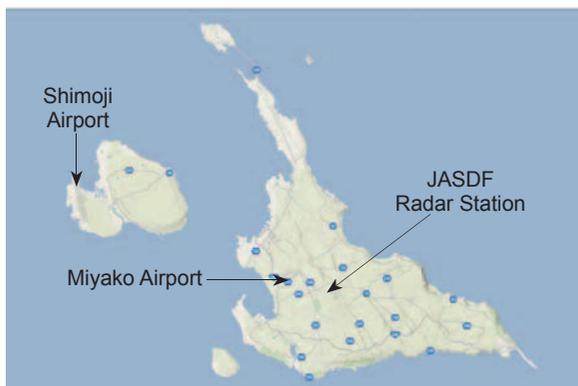
While one's typical mental map of Japan is challenged to visualize the archipelago as stretching southward beyond Okinawa, in fact the twenty islands that make up the Sakishima portion of the Ryukyus pepper the waters of the East China Sea for roughly three hundred nautical miles, from Okinawa all the way to within a hundred miles of the coast of Taiwan. Governed as part of Okinawa Prefecture, the Sakishimas include the contested Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and the main islands of Miyako, Ishigaki, Iriomote, and Yonaguni.

The Miyako chain, with its main island of Miyako, is the first group of the Sakishimas south of Okinawa. The Miyako Strait separates Miyako Island from Okinawa by roughly 145 nautical miles and runs 500–1,500 meters deep. The triangle-shaped island is composed largely of limestone formed by the raised coral, with a maximum height of 378 feet. Because it is relatively flat, it is densely settled (a population of roughly fifty thousand) and intensely cultivated. Large limestone ridges run north and south along the island's coast. Miyako is flanked by a number of even tinier islands, including Kurima, Shimoji, Irabu, and Ikema. Both Kurima and Ikema are accessible from Miyako by bridge. Miyako's Hirara civilian port is on the northwest portion of the island facing Irabu. Farther south lies the Yaeyama Island chain, including the major islands of Ishigaki and Iriomote and the westernmost island of the Ryukyus, Yonaguni. The Ishigaki Strait, separating Ishigaki from Miyako, is twenty-five nautical miles wide and from seventy to five hundred meters deep. It is sliced in half by the islands of Tarama and Minna. Ishigaki Island is eleven miles long and consists of a southern plain and a northern mountainous spur. A low beach extends along the southern coast, where the Ishigaki port is located. The island's total population is roughly forty

## RYUKYU ISLANDS



## MIYAKO (TOP) AND YONAGUNI (BOTTOM) ISLANDS



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thousand. Five smaller islets separate Ishigaki from Iriomote: Taketomi, Kuroshima, Kohama, Aragusuku, and Hateruma. All are sparsely inhabited, largely dependent on tourism, and accessible only by ferry from Ishigaki. Iriomote, fifteen miles wide from east to west and about ten miles from north to south, is the largest of the Sakishimas. Its coasts are very irregular, and the topography is rough and mountainous. Visitors to the island arrive by ferry from Ishigaki. To the west—and the most southwestern of Japan’s southwest islands—is Yonaguni. Eighty nautical miles from the east coast of Taiwan, Yonaguni is just seven miles from east to west and 2.5 north to south. Most of the island is composed of Tertiary rocks, with places capped by limestone. Known largely as a tourist destination, it has a population of just 1,600.

Finally, to the north of the Yaeyamas are the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. The Senkakus/Diaoyus comprise five islands—Uotsuri, Taisho, Kuba, Kita, and Minami—and three exposed rocks, covering a total area of seven square kilometers. Since the U.S. Civil Administration returned the Ryukyus to Japan in 1972, the mayor of Ishigaki has had civic control over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Around this time both the PRC and Taiwan began to claim ownership of the group, whose waters are ideal for fishing and contain potentially large oil and gas fields, in addition to seabed minerals.

### SITUATION, STRENGTH, AND RESOURCES

Mahan often found that applying continental characteristics to features of the nautical domain aided clarity. He famously referred to the ocean as “a great highway . . . a wide common,” and as a “level desert of land” where geographical features are prized for their geostrategic value.<sup>5</sup> To assess the value of islands, specifically for use as bases, Mahan developed a three-pronged formula—first examine the island’s “situation,” or geographic proximity to important sea lines of communication; second, its strength, both its inherent and acquired ability to defend itself; and finally, its resources, either natural or stored military capabilities.<sup>6</sup> “When all three conditions . . . are found [to be favorable] in the same place, it becomes of great consequence strategically and may be of the very first importance,” Mahan believed.<sup>7</sup> In short, the blend of situation, strength, and resources defines the Mahanian consequence of a strategic position. By this measure, we turn to assessing the significance of the Ryukyus in maritime East Asia.

#### *The Situation of the Ryukyus*

Of Mahan’s triad, he believed a position’s situation to be the “most indispensable,” because it is beyond “the power of man to change the situation of a port which lies outside the limits of strategic effect.”<sup>8</sup> The situational value of a position depends on its nearness to sea-lanes and the potential effect it can have over communications. Unsurprisingly, a location that straddles two or more routes simultaneously

has greater value and narrows the choice of available routes. Finally, if these routes are “highways” through which ships pass, not simply ports where their routes terminate, the island’s strategic value is even greater, because the number of passing ships is larger. As for the Ryukyus, their situation gives them command over a number of positions along key sea-lanes.

***Okinawa.*** The largest and most populous island of the southwestern chain, Okinawa flanks the Chinese coast, serving as a natural barrier against PLA ambitions to break out of what is commonly referred to as the “first island chain”—the islands of Japan, the Ryukyu Archipelago, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Borneo, embracing the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and the South China Sea.<sup>9</sup> It is also situated strategically alongside the Miyako Strait and near the Luzon Strait. If Chinese surface patrols over the last decade are an indication, the PLA Navy’s prefers the Miyako Strait, only enhancing Okinawa’s importance. Finally, as a key military base for U.S. forces in the Pacific, Okinawa is a bulwark of military power and a point of transit for U.S. forces between Guam, the Korean Peninsula, and the South China Sea.

***The Ryukyu Archipelago.*** Like Okinawa individually, the Ryukyu chain as a whole presents itself as an archipelagic screen for commercial and naval ships transiting the East China Sea to the Pacific Ocean. This is especially true for China. Three Chinese naval engineers claim that of the sixteen major straits critical to their country’s maritime access, no less than eleven are located along the Ryukyu Archipelago.<sup>10</sup> Whether in the form of a Chinese containership passing north of Okinawa or a PLA Navy surface-action group steaming through the Miyako or Ishigaki Strait, a good portion of Chinese maritime communications fall under the watchful eye of Japan’s southern flank.

***Taiwan.*** A brief look at a map reveals that the southern Sakishimas lie just to the east of the island and its capital, Taipei. The cities of Yilan and Keelung in Taiwan’s northeast face the Sakishimas, most directly the tiny island of Yonaguni. Add to the mix the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, only 120 nautical miles to the northeast, and it is hard to imagine a conflict over Taiwan that would not threaten to spill over into Japan’s territory. The strategic advantages the Ryukyus would offer during a Taiwan crisis are compelling. For China, they are a valuable feature to seize and from which to envelop Taiwan or contest the approach of U.S. forces. From the U.S. perspective, they represent, if properly protected, a primary position from which either to launch strikes or to exercise local sea control.

### ***Strength and Resources***

Mahan advised that a position should also be judged by its strength, or defensive qualities—be they natural coastal embankments that pose dilemmas for amphibious forces or ideal sites for antiship missile batteries. Mahan understood that

“advantages of position would more than counterbalance a small disadvantage in force,” though deficits of both attributes could rarely be made up for.<sup>11</sup> He also believed that the resources, natural or manufactured, that a position can supply to its port and a fleet must be considered. However, since Mahan’s day, technology—notably, enabling ships to produce their own freshwater, refrigerate their own stores, and feed forces with preserved food, and allowing submarines and aircraft carriers to operate independently of conventional-fuel sources—has all but negated the importance in this context of a position’s resource capacity.

The Ryukyus as a whole enjoy strategic effect on nearby sea-lanes, but what sets individual islands apart are their individual situations combined with their military strength. Closer examination of the Ryukyus reveals the inherent and potential military strength these islands possess.

*Okinawa.* Mahan prized Cuba for its size and declared it had few strategic rivals among the islands of the world. Similarly, Okinawa benefits from its vast coastline and numerous harbors, which offer advantages to mobile forces and make the island difficult to blockade. Its main harbor at Naha gazes west toward Shanghai and is protected, as is the island as a whole, by a natural barrier of smaller islands and islets to the north and west. The military force on these islets includes air-defense radar sites on Kume in the west and Okinoerabu in the north. The island of Ie has an airstrip where U.S. Marines maintain a drop zone for parachute training. During the battle of Okinawa in 1945, the Allies seized many of these tiny islands and set up artillery on them in preparation for their assault on the main island; by the same token, Tokyo could, if it saw fit, use the islands as a defensive barrier. In terms of strength, the island of Okinawa is home to a large contingent of Japanese and U.S. forces. Japan has surface-to-air missile units in southern Okinawa, and the United States operates an air-defense artillery regiment at Kadena Air Base. The island also houses the U.S. Air Force’s 18th Air Wing and the Japan Air Self-Defense Force’s 83rd Squadron. Finally, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) operates the 5th Air Wing, with two P-3C squadrons (twenty aircraft in all) out of Okinawa and the 1st Air Wing (roughly twenty P-3Cs) at Kanoya on southern Kyushu. The JMSDF also bases three mine-countermeasure ships on Okinawa. Destroyers from both the U.S. Seventh Fleet and JMSDF operate out of Sasebo, Kure, and Yokosuka to the north.

*Miyako.* The first major island south of Okinawa hosts a Japanese Air Self-Defense Force radar station and a new, state-of-the-art signals intelligence facility.<sup>12</sup> Miyako has a large civilian runway (two thousand meters long and forty-five wide, without a parallel taxiway) on its west coast and another airfield (with a runway three thousand meters long by sixty meters wide and a parallel taxiway), normally used for civilian airline practice, nearby on the tiny island

of Shimoji. In the future, the latter airfield could be used for military training and even for basing military assets.<sup>13</sup> The northern face of Miyako is guarded by ridged cliffs running from west to east along the Miyako Strait. Like Naha on Okinawa, the port of Hirara faces west toward China. In September 2010 it hosted the U.S. Navy mine-countermeasures ship USS *Defender* (MCM 2), only the third visit by U.S. naval units to the island since 1972.<sup>14</sup> In response to both the March and December 2012 ballistic-missile launches by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the Japanese Ministry of Defense deployed Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) interceptor batteries to Miyako and Ishigaki.<sup>15</sup> In the future, the basing of JMSDF troops or Japan Coast Guard (JCG) vessels on the island is a possibility.<sup>16</sup> As well, the southwest portion of the island and the sparsely inhabited Irabu Island to the west would be ideal locations for surface-to-air missile batteries or shore-based antiship cruise missiles.

**Ishigaki.** Japan's only permanent naval or air presence south of Okinawa is a small JCG air facility on Ishigaki, with a runway 1,500 meters long and forty-five meters wide (no parallel taxiway). The JCG, which is part of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism, operates B-737 aircraft from here to patrol Japan's exclusive economic zone, including the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. At the time of this writing, a new airport with a runway two thousand meters long and forty-five wide and a parallel taxiway is under construction. Another commercial airstrip is located on the small island of Hateruma to the southwest, but it is no longer in service. As on Miyako, the rugged northwestern coast of Ishigaki faces westward like a shield toward the East China Sea, while the hulking Iriomote Island, with its mountains and rough coasts, stands guard between Ishigaki and Taiwan. The Ishigaki port is on the Philippine Sea side of the island and its approaches are protected by five islets. In February 2011 two JMSDF minesweepers visited the island, followed in March by an *Atago*-class guided-missile destroyer. Most of the population is concentrated in the area around the port. The plains just to the north and east of the port are well suited as defensive positions. As on Miyako, PAC-3 interceptors were deployed to the island in March 2012 in anticipation of the DPRK missile launch.

**Tarama.** In the middle of the Ishigaki Strait, thirty miles southwest of Miyako, rests the circle-shaped island of Tarama. It has a population of only 1,200 but is home to two ports and a small runway (single, 1,500 meters by forty-five, no parallel taxiway). Tarama's small size and lack of defenses make it susceptible to blockade and difficult to defend. For this reason, Tarama can be compared to the islands of Mujeres off the Yucatán Peninsula or Saint Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands, to which Mahan concluded "defensive strength could be imparted only by an expense quite disproportionate to the result obtained."

*Yonaguni.* The tiny island of Yonaguni is remarkable for its proximity to Taiwan. The southeast coast of the island is marked by large cliffs, while the westernmost portion, facing Taiwan, consists of gently rolling hills. Yonaguni currently has no military presence, but its western plains would be ideal for defense emplacements. Japan plans to deploy a small contingent of Ground Self-Defense Force soldiers to the island by 2015. It has three ports, the largest on the west coast opposite Taiwan, another on the south side of the island, and the third to the north. A sizable airfield (single runway running east and west, two thousand meters by forty-five, no parallel taxiway) sits near the northern port. Controlling the island, with its airfields and ports, would help the PRC concentrate forces on Taiwan’s eastern coast. Yonaguni also offers China a new axis from which to press its interests in the Senkakus/Diaoyus or the rest of the Sakishima archipelago.

In his 1897 review of the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea, Mahan opined that “the advantages of situation, strength, and resources are greatly and decisively in favor of Cuba.”<sup>17</sup> It is clear that the same could be said today for Okinawa, with its great size, access to key straits both to the north (near Japan’s home islands) and south (toward Taiwan), its multiple airfields, and finally the resident defensive and offensive military capabilities of the United States and Japan. An effort to enhance the island’s capacity to watch over the southwestern islands in the future would demand further defensive capabilities, distributed airfields, greater intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets, and perhaps a base for fast attack craft.

Of Cuba, Mahan wrote that its lengthy coastline and numerous harbors gave it an “advantageous” possibility of “shifting operations from side to side, and finding refuge and supplies in either direction.”<sup>18</sup> Today, the same might be said, in maritime terms, of a large archipelagic defense array with Okinawa, Miyako, Ishigaki, and perhaps Yonaguni as the hubs. Indeed, in the future, given the right mix of mobility, command and control, and defensive assets, a networked Ryukyu Archipelago could enjoy the same advantages as continental Cuba, with distributed capabilities and the ability to shift operations “from side to side” along the chain.<sup>19</sup>

#### CHINESE MILITARY OPERATIONS IN ITS “NEAR SEAS”

China’s growing interest in the Ryukyu island chain, in particular the southern Sakishimas, has paralleled its own growing capabilities and ambitions. Prior to 2004, there was almost no PLA Navy activity in the Ryukyu region. However, since 2004, and especially since 2008, it has become a regular occurrence.<sup>20</sup>

- November 2004: A Chinese Han-class nuclear attack submarine traveled submerged through the Ishigaki Strait.

- October 2008: A *Sovremennyy*-class destroyer and four other vessels passed through the Miyako Strait from the Pacific Ocean.
- November 2008: Six surface vessels, including a *Luzhou*-class destroyer, passed through the Miyako Strait on the way to the Pacific Ocean.
- June 2009: A *Luzhou*-class destroyer and four other vessels traversed the Miyako Strait.
- March 2010: Six warships, including a *Luzhou*-class destroyer, passed through the Miyako Strait to the Pacific Ocean.
- April 2010: Eight warships and two submarines passed through the Miyako Strait, during which time a Chinese helicopter buzzed a JMSDF escort ship.
- July 2010: Two vessels, including a *Luzhou*-class destroyer, passed through the Miyako Strait.
- March 2011: A PLA Y-8 patrol aircraft and a Y-8 intelligence-gathering aircraft crossed the Japan–China median line and approached within approximately fifty kilometers of Japan’s airspace near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.
- June 2011: Eleven vessels, including three *Sovremennyy*-class destroyers, transited the Miyako Strait.<sup>21</sup>
- 4 October 2012: Seven PLA Navy vessels transited the Miyako Strait to the Pacific Ocean.<sup>22</sup> On 17 October the same seven vessels—destroyers, frigates, a refueling vessel, and a submarine rescue vessel—transited back to the East China Sea through the Taiwan-Yonaguni Strait.<sup>23</sup>
- 28 November 2012: Five vessels—two guided-missile destroyers, two missile frigates, and a supply ship—passed through the Miyako Strait on their way to the Pacific Ocean to conduct training exercises.<sup>24</sup>

What explains the PRC’s increased maritime activity near the Ryukyus? China’s 2010 defense white paper discusses the nation’s “vast territories and territorial seas” and pledges to “defend the security of China’s lands, inland waters, territorial waters and airspace,” “safeguard its maritime rights and interests,” and “oppose and contain the separatist forces for ‘Taiwan independence.’”<sup>25</sup> China’s ability to achieve these objectives is connected to the Ryukyus in various ways. First, Beijing’s pledge to defend its lands and territorial waters includes the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, inevitably generating friction with Japan. Second, the maritime rights it desires to protect involve access to sea-lanes, including the vital straits that transit the Ryukyus to the Pacific Ocean. Finally, the proximity of the Ryukyus to Taiwan means that should China resort to force to prevent Taiwanese independence, the Ryukyus would likely play a critical operational role.

To accomplish the goals set forth in the white paper, the PLA Navy aims to pursue what it calls an "offshore defense strategy."<sup>26</sup> However, the missions and capabilities needed for a strategy in the Ryukyu Islands are left undefined. One Western specialist has analyzed China's military developments and the roles and missions with which the PLA Navy would be tasked in terms of China's "near seas," which he describes as running along the PRC's first island chain. This near-seas strategy "aims to reunify Taiwan with the mainland, restore lost and disputed maritime territories, protect China's maritime resources, secure major sea lines of communications in times of war, deter and defend against foreign aggression from the sea, and conduct strategic nuclear deterrence."<sup>27</sup> These objectives, save nuclear deterrence, all can pertain to China's interests in the Ryukyus.

The same scholar attempts to categorize the war-fighting missions for which the PLA is preparing as a part of this strategy: "blockade and isolation," "joint strike," "suppression of outlying islands," "search and annihilation," and "comprehensive barrier removal." These missions are relevant to the Ryukyus in two ways. First, they focus on reducing the ability of strategic positions like islands to be used for countering PLA sea-control and amphibious-landing operations: the "suppression of outlying islands" calls for "coastal firepower, ground-attack aircraft and light surface combatants to strike the defense systems of these islands."<sup>28</sup> Second, "joint strike" aims to attack the opponent's "reconnaissance and early warning systems, command and control, naval and air bases and logistics infrastructure, for the purpose of crippling the opponent's capabilities to counter the PLAN's sea-control operations."<sup>29</sup> Japan's radar and signals-intelligence facilities on islands like Miyako would be primary targets, and ISR systems or mobile forces deployed to the Sakishimas in the future would also be at risk. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, to help achieve these missions the PLA is deploying large numbers of land-attack cruise missiles and short- and medium-range conventional ballistic missiles.<sup>30</sup>

These war-fighting missions also aim to deny mobile naval forces the ability to conduct sea-control missions through "search and annihilation" and "comprehensive barrier removal" methods. If China aimed to seize the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands or other islands in the Sakishima chain during a Taiwan crisis, it would be forced to vie for sea control with Japanese and U.S. forces. China's focus on search and annihilation "involves the use of submarines, major surface combatants and sea-attack aircraft to search and destroy the opponent's major naval combatants outside the blocked areas, for the purpose of capturing and maintaining sea-control." Consistent with this effort, the PLA Navy has commissioned *Luyang*- and *Luzhou*-class destroyers, acquired *Sovremennyy*-class destroyers from Russia, and sent Song-class and Yuan-class diesel attack submarines to sea and is now

developing an antiship ballistic missile based on a variant of the CSS-5 medium-range ballistic missile.<sup>31</sup> Should Japan develop an offensive mine-warfare capability, “comprehensive barrier removal,” mine countermeasures “to ensure the security and freedom of sea-crossing and amphibious landing operations,” would also become critical for Chinese forces.<sup>32</sup>

Another Chinese mission that affects security in the Ryukyu Islands is the PLA Navy’s amphibious capabilities. China seeks to be able to project power ashore in Taiwan or various islands of the East China Sea. To date, its capabilities have been concentrated opposite Taiwan. The U.S. Department of Defense reported in 2012, however, that “the PLA is capable of accomplishing various amphibious operations short of a full-scale invasion of Taiwan. With few overt military preparations beyond routine training, China could launch an invasion of small Taiwan-held islands such as the Pratas or Itu Aba. A PLA invasion of a medium-sized, defended offshore island such as Mazu or Jinmen is within China’s capabilities.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, while China’s amphibious assets remain focused on the Taiwan Strait, they appear capable of assaults against small, lightly defended islands, potentially including Miyako, Ishigaki, or Yonaguni.

#### THE RYUKYUS IN JAPANESE DEFENSE PLANNING

In December 2010, the Japanese Ministry of Defense released the anticipated National Defense Program Guidelines 2010. NDPG 2010 identifies Japan’s offshore islands as a new priority for defense planning and advocates shifting the nation’s strategic focus to the East China Sea and the southern Ryukyu island chain.<sup>34</sup> Specifically, it directs the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to “permanently station the minimum necessary units on offshore islands where the SDF is not currently stationed. Also, the SDF will enhance its capability to respond to attacks on those islands and ensure the security of the surrounding sea and air space by securing bases, mobility, transport capacity and effective countermeasures necessary for conducting operations against such attacks.”<sup>35</sup>

To support this strategy, the corresponding Mid-Term Defense Program budget calls for the procurement of thirteen new JMSDF ships for sea control in local waters, including helicopter-equipped destroyers, destroyers, diesel attack submarines, and fixed-wing aircraft, and life extensions for existing platforms. It also gives priority to expansion of continuous, steady-state ISR capabilities (including deployment of ground-based surveillance radars to the Ryukyus), development of a maintenance infrastructure to support E-2C early-warning aircraft in southwestern Japan, and procurement and service-life extension for maritime patrol aircraft.

Finally, the NDPG aims to establish a new coastal-surveillance unit in the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF) and to stand up a first-response unit in

the island chains "to gather intelligence, monitor situations, and respond swiftly when incidents occur."<sup>36</sup> This unit will also train for rapid deployment operations. While official deployments have not been announced, reports indicate that the JGSDF plans to increase its total presence in the Nansei Islands, including Okinawa, by two thousand soldiers.<sup>37</sup> Alongside these forces, the deployment of eighteen surface-to-ship guided-missile launchers in fiscal year 2011 and potentially a hundred more over the following four years represents at least a moderate defense against hostile mobile forces operating from the littoral.<sup>38</sup>

### THE FUTURE SHAPE OF JAPAN'S DEFENSE POSTURE

The 2010 NDPG put the nation's offshore islands, specifically the Ryukyus, at the center of Japan's strategic focus. How Japan approaches the Ryukyus and adapts its forces to China's growing defense capabilities will be central questions. The Mid-Term Defense Program budget has initiated this process, but the specific posture to be adopted remains unresolved. That decision will be influenced by a number of variables.

*The 1 Percent Limit and National Expenditures.* Since 1976, Japan has chosen, with few exceptions, to invest no more than 1 percent of its gross domestic product in defense. Efforts to break free from this commitment in the last two decades and grow the defense budget have fallen short. Today, Japan's economic troubles continue to place pressure on the federal budget, and defense spending over the past decade has dipped slightly below the 1 percent ceiling. The cost of the March 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, with material damage estimated at over U.S.\$300 billion, could add incentive to retain the spending cap.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, any defense buildup or new capabilities associated with the Ryukyus would be likely to have to fit within the 1 percent framework, requiring difficult trade-offs, if possible at all.

*Defending Japan's Vital "Areas."* Investment in a Ryukyus buildup would compete with the demands of other capabilities for Japan's defense, including the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, a maritime patrol aircraft, and ballistic-missile defenses against the DPRK. In addition to competing systems, Japan will have to wrestle with choices at a more strategic level. In particular, as a maritime nation Japan will have to protect the sea-lanes that make up what have long been called the "lifelines" of its existence. All of 99.7 percent of Japan's trade travels by sea; the nation must import 99 percent of its petroleum and 60 percent of its caloric intake.<sup>40</sup> If Japan chooses to rely less on nuclear power for its energy, as is currently being debated in the aftermath of the 11 March 2011 disaster, its reliance on the seas for energy will grow even greater. At the 2010 Shangri-La Dialogue, former Japanese defense minister Toshimi Kitazawa identified Northeast Asia as

one of four “areas” (maritime regions) that Japan must defend in order to secure its sea-lanes.<sup>41</sup> While this speech was billed as an indication that Tokyo planned to take on a more international role, the operational impact for the JMSDF is to bifurcate its core missions between directly protecting sea-lanes in Japan’s home waters and relying on the United States and on Japanese diplomacy to secure those interests in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia.<sup>42</sup> For the JMSDF to uphold its long-standing commitments to secure sea-lanes within a thousand miles of Tokyo, it will mean continued investment in many of the same kinds of platforms that would enhance its Ryukyu defenses, including destroyers, attack submarines, maritime patrol aircraft, and, increasingly, amphibious capabilities.

*The U.S.-Japan Alliance.* During the Cold War, when the Soviet Union’s defense buildup pushed Japan to respond with its own defense modernization, the parameters of this response were in many ways shaped by the U.S.-Japan alliance. Feeling that it could rely on the United States for sea-lane defense in the Indian Ocean, Japan focused its efforts within one thousand nautical miles, a policy advocated by Admiral Nakamura Teiji, chief of the Maritime Staff from 1976 to 1977. Today Japan continues to look to the U.S. Navy to provide sea-lane defense through the Indian Ocean, the Strait of Malacca, and much of the South China Sea.<sup>43</sup> This has two implications for the Ryukyus. First, although the size of the U.S. fleet is declining and could face even further pressure under the defense “sequestration” cuts at this writing scheduled to take effect on 1 March 2013, in the medium term Japan can continue to rely on the United States for sea-lane security beyond a thousand nautical miles. This should give Tokyo confidence to concentrate on the maritime “area” of Northeast Asia as part of a Ryukyu defense strategy. Second, consistent with the Barack Obama administration’s plan to “re-balance” its international focus to the Asia-Pacific region, the continued strength of U.S. forces in the Pacific, particularly those forward-deployed forces in Japan, will enhance conventional deterrence. Japanese decision makers are likely to conclude that the United States would continue to shoulder some of the burden for deterrence and defense in the Ryukyus. This could help spur new areas of defense cooperation. For instance, just as the alliance has benefited from a focus on ballistic-missile defense capabilities over the last decade, the decade ahead could bring new developments in joint U.S.-Japan amphibious capabilities.

*Pacifism or Nationalism?* How Japan chooses to respond to China’s growing power will determine the nature of its Ryukyu defense strategy. A number of scholars have sought to explain Japan’s more restrained (relative to its economic strength) defense investments by the pacifist tendencies of the Japanese polity. However, when national security interests have been at stake, Tokyo has not hesitated to act in its defense.<sup>44</sup> During the 1970s, the Japanese maritime community

found itself embroiled in a debate over sea-lane defense. Sekino Hideo, once a commander in the Imperial Japanese Navy, argued that Japan should give the protection of Japan’s sea-lanes first priority and obtain the necessary capabilities to accomplish this mission. Alternatively, Kaihara Osamu, the former director of the Defense Policy Bureau and Secretariat of the National Defense Council, held that securing Japan’s sea-lanes was an “unrealistic goal” because they were too long and the necessary capabilities were unaffordable.<sup>45</sup> Threatened by the growing naval power of the Soviet Union, Japan adopted a sea-lane-defense strategy in the 1980s, modeled on Sekino’s thinking, inside the thousand-nautical-mile limit. China presents a similar dilemma today, and it could prompt Tokyo to respond with the same conviction it demonstrated in the 1980s.

Mahan taught us that “from time to time” certain geographic locations could be transformed into the “centre round which gathered all the influences and developments” of importance. Japan’s Ryukyu Archipelago, a chain of islands that have received little attention in print and are in fact barely visible on most modern maps, appears poised to take on a new significance in Asia-Pacific security affairs. While the modern strategic value of these islands may be overshadowed by that of the Strait of Hormuz or South China Sea, the geographic situation of the Ryukyus combined with their military capacity all but guarantees their “consequent interest” for Japanese and regional security. Indeed, how Japan (along with the United States) chooses to address its Ryukyu issues in the face of the PRC’s growing defense capabilities and activity in this maritime arena will be a critical security question for policy makers in Tokyo and Washington in the decade ahead.

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#### NOTES

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1. Alfred Thayer Mahan, “The Strategic Features of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea,” *Harper’s Monthly* (October 1897), pp. 680–91.
2. On the geostrategic relevance of the Indian Ocean see Robert Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (New York: Random House, 2010). On the relevance of the South China Sea see, for instance, James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
3. Government of Japan documents refer to these islands as “offshore islands” or, more specifically, the “southwestern islands.”
4. The government of Japan does not accept that the Senkakus/Diaoyus are in dispute and insists that the PRC and Taiwan are both unilaterally claiming ownership of them. The author is indebted to the previous work of Dr. James Holmes and Dr. Toshi Yoshihara on the general subject. See James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, “The Japanese Archipelago through Chinese Eyes,” Jamestown Foundation *China Brief* 10, no. 16 (5 August 2010), and Holmes and Yoshihara, “Ryukyu Chain in China’s Island Strategy,” Jamestown Foundation *China Brief* 10, no. 19 (10 September 2010).

5. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (1890; repr. New York: Dover, 1987), p. 20.
6. Mahan, “Strategic Features of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea.”
7. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Mahan on Naval Warfare*, ed. Allan Westcott (Boston: Little, Brown, 1918), chap. 6.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
9. Nan Li, “The Evolution of China’s Naval Strategy and Capabilities: From ‘Near Coast’ and ‘Near Seas’ to ‘Far Seas,’” *Asian Security* 5, no. 2 (2009), pp. 144–69.
10. Quoted in Holmes and Yoshihara, “Japanese Archipelago through Chinese Eyes.”
11. Mahan, “Strategic Features of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea.”
12. Yoichi Kato, “SDF Preparations All Have but Only One Target: China,” *Asahi Shimbun*, 1–2 January 2011. The author traveled to Miyako-jima in December 2010; see Eric Sayers, “A Day Trip to Miyako-jima,” *Information Dissemination* (blog), 18 January 2011, [www.informationdissemination.net](http://www.informationdissemination.net).
13. Shimoji has been discussed as one of the several offshore islands that could be an alternative to the Futenma Replacement Facility planned at Camp Schwab.
14. “Rare U.S. Warship Visit to Miyako Island Port Draws Protests,” *Japan Update*, 23 September 2010.
15. See “SDF, U.S. Ships Deployed for North’s Rocket,” *Japan Times*, 8 April 2012; and “PAC-3 Missile Interceptors Arrive at Miyako Island,” *House of Japan*, 7 December 2012.
16. Japanese Ministry of Defense officials, interviews with author, Tokyo, December 2010.
17. Mahan, “Strategic Features of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea.”
18. *Ibid.*
19. This is already occurring, consistent with the NDPG of 2010.
20. Japan Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2011* (Tokyo: [2011]), pp. 82–83, available at [www.mod.go.jp/](http://www.mod.go.jp/).
21. *Ibid.*
22. “Yin Zhuo: China Doesn’t Need to Inform Japan When Passing through Miyako Strait,” *People’s Daily Online*, 12 October 2012.
23. “Seven Chinese Navy Warships Skirt Okinawa,” *Japan Times*, 17 October 2012.
24. “Chinese Navy Fleet Enters West Pacific for Routine Training,” Xinhua, 28 November 2012.
25. *China’s National Defense in 2010* (n.p.: 31 March 2011), available at [www.china.org.cn/government/](http://www.china.org.cn/government/).
26. *Ibid.*
27. Li, “Evolution of China’s Naval Strategy and Capabilities,” p. 118.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*
30. U.S. Defense Dept., *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2012*, Annual Report to Congress (Washington, D.C.: May 2012), available at [www.defense.gov/](http://www.defense.gov/).
31. *Ibid.*
32. Li, “Evolution of China’s Naval Strategy and Capabilities,” p. 119.
33. U.S. Defense Dept., *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2012*.
34. See Eric Sayers, “Defending Japan’s Southern Flank,” *Defense News*, 7 February 2011.
35. Government of Japan, *National Defense Program Guidelines for FY2011 and Beyond* (Tokyo: Security Council and Cabinet, 17 December 2010), p. 14.
36. Government of Japan, *Mid-Term Defense Program (FY2011–FY2015)* (Tokyo: Security Council and Cabinet, 17 December 2010), p. 3.
37. “GSDF Coastal Unit to Monitor Islands,” *Kyodo News*, 18 December 2010.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Rie Ishiguro and Shinji Kitamura, “Japan Quake’s Economic Impact Worse than First Feared,” Reuters, 12 April 2011.
40. James Manicom, “Japan’s Role in Strengthening Maritime Security in Southeast Asia,” in *Maritime Security in Southeast Asia: US, Japanese, Regional, and Industry Strategies*,

ed. John Bradford et al., NBR Special Report 24 (Seattle, Wash.: National Bureau of Asian Research, November 2010), available at [www.nbr.org/](http://www.nbr.org/).

41. This maritime strategy based on separating missions into "areas" was discussed at length as a framework for JMSDF strategy during interviews conducted by the author at the JMSDF Staff College in December 2010.
42. "JMSDF Strategy and Sea Lanes Security," briefing at the JMSDF Staff College, Tokyo, 2 December 2010. Also see Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes, "Don't Expect Much from Japan in the Indian Ocean," *Journal of Military and Strategies Studies* 13, no. 2 (Winter 2011).
43. See, for instance, Tetsuo Kotani, "Lifeline at Sea: Japan's Policy towards the Indian Ocean Region," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 7, no. 2 (December 2011), and Yoshihara and Holmes, "Don't Expect Much from Japan in the Indian Ocean."
44. Also see Jennifer M. Lind, "Pacifism or Passing the Buck? Testing Theories of Japanese Security Policy," *International Security* 20, no. 1 (Summer 2004).
45. James E. Auer, *The Postwar Rearmament of Japanese Maritime Forces, 1945-1971* (New York: Praeger, 1973), pp. 133-47.