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ORIGINS OF A “RAGGED EDGE”

U.S. Ambiguity on the Senkakus’ Sovereignty

Robert C. Watts IV

On May 15, 1972, the United States returned Okinawa and the other islands in the Ryukyu chain to Japan, culminating years of negotiations that some have hailed as “an example of diplomacy at its very best.”¹ As a result, Japan regained territories it had lost at the end of World War II, while the United States both retained access to bases on Okinawa and reaffirmed strategic ties with Japan. One detail, however, complicates this win-win assessment. At the same time, Japan also regained administrative control over the Senkaku, or Diaoyu, Islands, a group of uninhabited—and uninhabitable—rocky outcroppings in the East China Sea.² By 1972, both the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan also had claimed these islands.³ Despite passing control of the Senkakus to Japan, the United States expressed no position on any of the competing claims to the islands, including Japan’s. This choice—not to weigh

in on the Senkakus’ sovereignty—perpetuated the underlying dispute and fostered tensions that recently have found new expression.

To this day, Japan administers the Senkakus, China and Taiwan claim them, and the United States ostensibly maintains its neutral position with regard to their sovereignty.⁴ U.S. leaders across recent administrations have stated publicly, however, that treaty obligations to defend Japan include the Senkakus.⁵ So, although the United States takes no explicit position on the Senkakus’ sovereignty, it has committed to defending them. Washington’s seemingly contradictory stance on

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the Senkakus contributes to the risk of misunderstanding and conflict over these islands, which some analysts describe as the “most likely flash point” in Sino-Japanese relations.⁶

Beijing’s military, political, and economic efforts to uphold its claim and challenge Tokyo’s are of particular concern. Militarily, China operates naval and paramilitary forces near the Senkakus to challenge and erode Japan’s control over the islands.⁷ Politically, in November 2013 China attempted to regulate air traffic in the East China Sea by declaring an air-defense identification zone (ADIZ) that encompassed the Senkakus.⁸ Economically, China reprimands companies that do not acknowledge Beijing’s claim; in one recent example, the Chinese government ordered Muji, a Japanese housewares company, to “seal and scrap” catalogs that featured “faulty maps” of China that did not include the Senkakus.⁹ China’s apparent desire to challenge the status quo in the East China Sea may increase the risk of a conflict that likely would involve the United States.

This risk could increase if Beijing and Tokyo doubt Washington’s commitment to defend the islands on Japan’s behalf. Political scientist Thomas C. Schelling once described the Taiwanese island of Quemoy, just off the coast of China, as “a ragged edge about which [U.S.] intentions were ambiguous.” Schelling argued that because the United States appeared unwilling to defend Quemoy on behalf of its ally Taiwan, China may have felt emboldened to attack it.¹⁰ During the 1950s, Beijing and Taipei fought over the island in two wars, both of which involved the United States. Despite public assurances of U.S. resolve, the Senkakus could become a similar, modern “ragged edge” if Beijing doubts the credibility of Washington’s commitment to these isolated islands. This risk may increase further if, as Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels suggest, “some Japanese question the extent of the U.S. commitment to the defense of the Senkaku Islands.”¹¹

Why did the United States sidestep questions raised during the Okinawa reversion negotiations about the sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands? Washington’s preference for successfully reverting Okinawa, including the Senkakus, while walking a fine line regarding the sovereignty question—neither placating nor aggravating other claimants—most likely shaped U.S. policy choices. To understand the factors that influenced the transactional U.S. approach to returning administrative control over the Senkakus to Japan, this article first will review existing theories about U.S. decision-making. These explanations discount the context of the decision and the complex interactions within the U.S. government and among Washington and the three claimants. Second, the article will review the historical roots of each claim to the Senkakus and describe how the United States gained control of the islands at the end of World War II. Third, the article will analyze post-World War II U.S. decision-making toward Okinawa, culminating

in the decision to return it to Japan, and the choices subsequently made—or avoided—about the Senkakus. On the basis of this analysis, the article finds that U.S. decision-making on the Senkakus’ sovereignty may have emerged from a complex policy-making process focused on achieving the proximate policy objectives of returning Okinawa and reaffirming the U.S.-Japan alliance, while accepting future strategic risk. Fourth, the article will conclude with a review of the contemporary policy implications of this understanding of the origins of U.S. policy toward the Senkakus.

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS: STRATEGIC GAMBIT OR BUREAUCRATS RUN AMOK?

Analysts have proposed several different explanations for why the United States returned the Senkaku Islands to Japan in the way it did. Some argue that the United States saw the ambiguous status of the islands as a means to a strategic end in East Asia, while others argue that bureaucratic behavior or existing precedent constrained U.S. options. These explanations take a too-narrow perspective on this complicated issue and provide an incomplete analysis, which could have misleading policy implications.

Several scholars argue that the United States made decisions about the Senkakus with a strategic eye toward shaping the future western Pacific security environment. Kimie Hara, a historian at the University of Waterloo, Canada, argues that Washington deliberately left this territorial dispute unresolved to sustain Sino-Japanese tensions and act as a mechanism to ensure that Tokyo would continue to permit U.S. access to military bases in Japan.¹² Jean-Marc F. Blanchard, a political scientist at East China Normal University, makes a nearly opposite argument. Writing before many U.S. archival sources were available, he speculates that the United States “betrayed” Japan by not endorsing its sovereignty claim, in an effort to “curry favor with the Chinese whom [the United States] was seeking as allies against the Soviet Union.”¹³ Hara and Blanchard make realpolitik cases and suggest that giving Japan administrative control, rather than full sovereignty, over the Senkakus was a ploy either to maintain Sino-Japanese tensions or to promote Sino-U.S. rapprochement.

China similarly ascribes strategic motives to U.S. policy. A December 1971 statement by the Chinese foreign ministry argues that “U.S. and Japanese reactionaries . . . barter[ed] China’s Diaoyu [Senkaku] Islands and use[d] Chinese territory to sow dissension between the Chinese and Japanese people.”¹⁴ A 2012 white paper uses less-inflammatory language to assert that the U.S. government both administered the Senkakus and transferred them to Japan in an “illegal and invalid” fashion, constituting “acts of grave violation of China’s territorial

sovereignty.” Chief among these acts were “arbitrarily” including the Senkakus in U.S. postwar jurisdiction, and conducting “backroom deals” with Japan to include the Senkakus in the reversion of Okinawa.¹⁵

Some U.S. government leaders and analysts who participated in the decision-making pertaining to the Senkakus contemporaneously emphasized the impact of bureaucratic actors and precedent. In June 1971, Henry A. Kissinger, the assistant to the president for national security affairs (i.e., national security advisor) for President Richard M. Nixon, expressed to Nixon his frustration with the U.S. State Department and how its actions during the Okinawa reversion negotiations constrained the president’s options. He said, “Mr. President, this is one of those examples where the bureaucracy, ’til they got into trouble, no one even told us there was an issue.” He then lamented that by the time he looked into the issue “it was already down the drain,” implying that negotiations were too far along—it was an issue to which U.S. and Japanese diplomats already had agreed.¹⁶

A State Department briefing paper on the Senkakus written in 1972 took a fatalistic approach, stating that “we had little choice other than to return these islands to Japan along with the rest of the Ryukyus” because of how the United States had gained control of them.¹⁷ The memo describes how the United States took over administration of the Senkakus—and the rest of the Ryukyus—from Japan at the end of the war, and suggests that this circumstance limited the United States to returning them to Japan as a collective whole. Both Kissinger and the anonymous State Department analyst provide compelling descriptions of what they experienced or observed, but they neglect to examine fully how and why U.S. participants developed this policy.

To provide a more thorough understanding of U.S. decision-making, this article will broaden the inquiry’s scope beyond just the Senkakus to consider other interests that influenced U.S. government policy makers. This analysis incorporates declassified U.S. government correspondence, Nixon and Kissinger’s recorded conversations, and (where English-language sources permit) the three claimants’ perspectives and their impact on U.S. policy. Other analysts have evaluated much of this documentary evidence, but the Nixon tapes provide new and valuable insight into decision-making at the highest level.¹⁸ There are inherent limits to the conclusions that one can draw from reading primary sources and evaluating their impact on decisions; nonetheless, this analytical approach usefully tests existing theories and advances a plausible alternative hypothesis.¹⁹ Opening the analytical aperture beyond just the question of sovereignty over the Senkakus makes it appear more likely that questions of whether, when, and how to return Okinawa to Japan played an outsize and underappreciated role in decisions that U.S. policy makers made or deferred on the Senkakus.

In the years leading up to the Okinawa Reversion Agreement, the United States had a significant foreign policy goal: to strengthen relations with Japan. Across several administrations, U.S. leaders evaluated and debated the trade-off between holding on to Okinawa for its strategic value and returning it to Japan. By the time of Nixon’s presidency, U.S. policy makers considered reversion to be an opportunity to reinforce the U.S.-Japan alliance and encourage Tokyo to take on more leadership in Asia. Once President Nixon decided to revert Okinawa to Japan, the U.S. government, led by the State Department, worked within existing processes to resolve many pertinent issues, including the sovereign status of the Senkakus. Defining the Senkakus’ status became increasingly complicated, however, as other U.S. political objectives came into play and interacted with Taiwan’s and China’s competing claims. As reversion negotiations drew to a close, several conflicting political goals came to a head in key decisions by President Nixon, because these negotiations occurred simultaneously with domestically significant textile trade discussions with Japan and Taiwan and in parallel with President Nixon’s secret diplomacy with China.

Rather than a calculated international gambit, the result of diplomats keeping political leaders in the dark, or just an inevitable outcome, U.S. decision-making toward the Senkakus may be understood better as an outcome of complex U.S. foreign policy processes in which policy makers encountered the thorny question of the sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands but deferred a lasting settlement to achieve the immediate and transactional goal of returning Okinawa to Japan.

CLAIMS ON THE SENKAKUS AND U.S. ADMINISTRATIVE CONTROL

Japan, China, and Taiwan all claim the Senkaku Islands. The historical context is that Japan first claimed islands in the East China Sea in 1879 when it annexed the Ryukyus, including Okinawa. Previously the islands had been relatively autonomous, but they paid tribute to both Japan and China. China opposed Japan’s annexation. Even then, the United States played a role in addressing competing claims in the East China Sea; during an 1879 visit to Asia, former president Ulysses S. Grant encouraged the two parties to negotiate about the Ryukyus, but the talks quickly broke down.²⁰

Japan asserts that it then (in 1884) determined the Senkakus to be *terra nullius*, meaning they were unclaimed and uninhabited, and therefore international law allowed any state to acquire them by exercising effective and continuing control.²¹ Japan claimed them in January 1895, in the midst of the 1894–95 Sino-Japanese War.²² Proponents of Japan’s claim note that it preceded and is separate from the Treaty of Shimonoseki, which ended the war several months later, in April 1895.²³

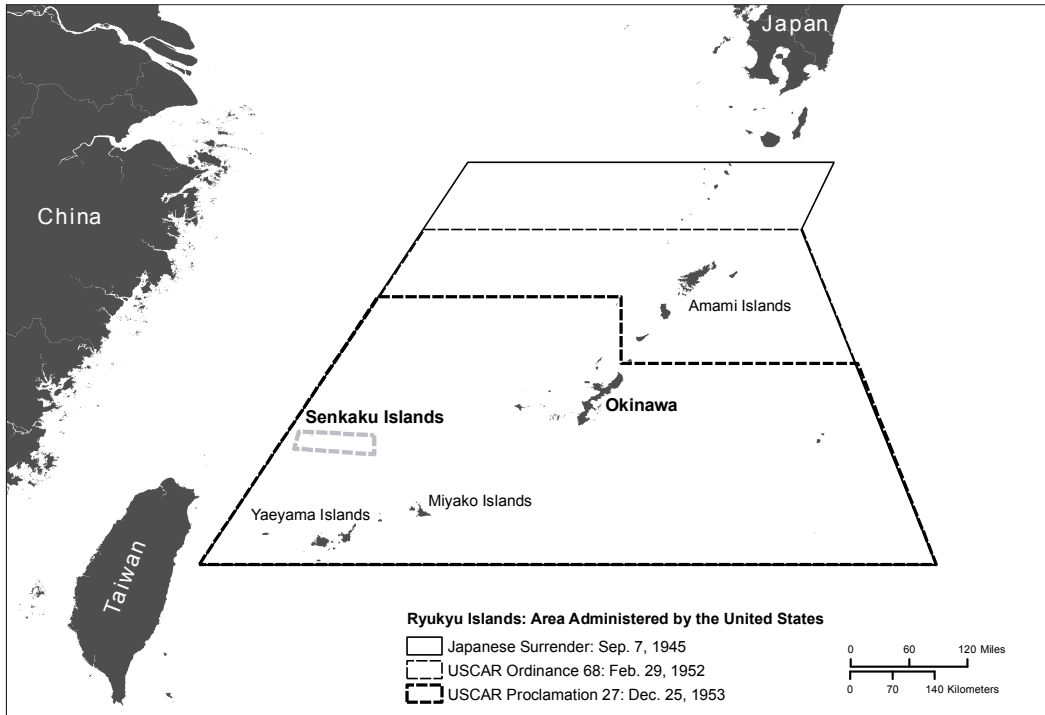
In that treaty China ceded Taiwan to Japan, ended its political dominance in Korea, and opened up new ports to Japanese trade. The pact has been described as the most “galling” of China’s nineteenth-century humiliations.²⁴

China, on the other hand, asserts that the islands were not *terra nullius* because China discovered them in 1403 and that “Chinese fishermen have exploited the islands and their adjacent waters for generations.” Furthermore, Beijing argues that, despite the several months’ difference between Tokyo’s claim to the Senkakus and the Treaty of Shimonoseki, the claim still should be considered part of Japan’s pattern of territorial aggrandizement and aggressive behavior toward China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁵ China also asserts that the United States should not have held the Senkaku Islands at the end of the war, that instead China should have recovered them “in accordance with the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Declaration” as one of the “territories invaded and occupied by Japan.”²⁶ Taiwan highlights similar historical evidence in its claim.²⁷

The Cairo Declaration, a joint communiqué that followed a U.S.-U.K.-ROC summit in November 1943, declared in part: “Japan shall be stripped of all the islands in the Pacific which she has seized or occupied since the beginning of the First World War in 1914, and that all territories stolen from the Chinese . . . shall be restored to the Republic of China. Japan will also be expelled from all other territories which she has taken by violence and greed.”²⁸ The United States, Great Britain, and China reaffirmed this approach in the July 1945 Potsdam Declaration, which stated in part that “the terms of the Cairo Declaration shall be carried out and Japanese sovereignty shall be limited to the islands of Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku, and such minor islands as we determine.”²⁹ Modern Chinese sources (both in Beijing and in Taipei) consider the Senkakus to be part of Taiwan Province (of the PRC and the ROC, respectively) and argue that the Senkakus were among the territories “taken by violence and greed” during the period of the Sino-Japanese War and should have been returned to China at the end of World War II.³⁰

The United States occupied Japan at the end of World War II. It desired to retain strategically located Okinawa even after ending the occupation of Japan’s home islands.³¹ U.S. and Japanese commanders on Okinawa signed a surrender document on September 7, 1945, that “formally [rendered] unconditional surrender of the islands in the Ryukyus” and geographically defined them. As shown on the map, this area included the Senkakus.³² The United States changed its definition of the Ryukyus twice over the next eight years as it returned some islands to Japan, but each time the Senkakus remained within the boundaries of U.S. administration.

The United States planned to maintain control over the Ryukyus indefinitely. A 1948 U.S. National Security Council (NSC) report about U.S. goals for a peace



treaty with Japan noted that “the United States intends to retain on a long-term basis the facilities at Okinawa and such other facilities as are deemed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to be necessary in the Ryukyu Islands south of 29° N,” which is roughly the northern end of the Ryukyu Islands. The report also indicated that Washington would seek international support for “United States long-term strategic control” of those islands.³³ The United States pursued this goal in part through the peace settlement.

The 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty ended the war in the Pacific, but also granted control of the Ryukyus to the United States. Article III named the United States as the “sole administering authority” over “*Nansei Shoto* south of 29 degrees north latitude (including the Ryukyu Islands and the Daito Islands).”³⁴ The term *Nansei Shoto* refers to southwestern (*nansei*) islands and included all islands not explicitly returned to the Republic of China between 29 degrees north latitude and Formosa.³⁵ Before the San Francisco Peace Treaty took effect in April 1952, the U.S. Civil Administration of the Ryukyus (USCAR) issued Ordinance Number 68 on February 29, 1952, to outline the structure of the government of the Ryukyu Islands. The ordinance began by defining “the area of political and geographical jurisdiction of the Government of the Ryukyu Islands.”³⁶ This area roughly matched the 1945 definition of the Ryukyus, but the northern boundary shifted to the south by one degree of latitude, as shown on the map.

The terminology in the San Francisco treaty was ambiguous about both Japan's sovereign rights over the Ryukyu Islands and the inclusion of the Senkakus. The treaty neither prohibited Japan from repossessing the Ryukyus in the future nor closed off alternative territorial settlements with other countries. At the San Francisco conference and again during Senate ratification of the treaty, however, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles said that Japan would hold "residual sovereignty" of these territories, which suggested that U.S. administrative control was granted by Japan and only would be returned to Japan, not transferred to another country.³⁷ The San Francisco treaty did not name the Senkakus explicitly as being among the islands over which control was ceded to the United States, but they lay within the bounds of the treaty's vague territorial delineation.

USCAR Proclamation 27 of December 25, 1953, again updated the geographic definition of the islands under U.S. control.³⁸ USCAR delineated new boundaries because the United States returned the Amami Islands to Japan on that day. The map shows how this change again diminished the area under U.S. control but did not affect the boundaries encompassing the Senkaku Islands. USCAR Proclamation 27 is a particularly significant document because it provided the definition of the Ryukyus that would be current during the Okinawa reversion negotiations. The Chinese government argues that in 1953 the United States arbitrarily expanded its definition of the Ryukyus to include the Senkakus.³⁹ The historical record indicates, however, that the Senkakus had been within the U.S. definition of the Ryukyus since 1945.

After this examination of the details of how Japan and then the United States gained control of the Senkakus, it is important next to consider the broader context of U.S. policy toward Okinawa and U.S.-Japan relations.

OKINAWA AND EVOLVING U.S. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES IN EAST ASIA

To place the reversion of Okinawa and the disposition of the Senkaku Islands within the appropriate historical framework, it is useful first to understand how U.S. policy makers perceived the relative significance to the United States of possessing Okinawa versus strengthening the alliance relationship with Japan, and how this perception changed over time.

The relationship between the conflicting U.S. policy objectives of controlling Okinawa and deepening ties with Japan evolved over three distinct periods. First, during Dwight D. Eisenhower's and John F. Kennedy's presidencies, U.S. leadership prioritized control of bases on Okinawa over the relationship with Japan. Second, during Lyndon B. Johnson's administration, U.S. policy makers began to accept the idea of eventually returning Okinawa to Japan but would not commit to a time frame. Third, Richard M. Nixon valued more highly the broader

U.S.-Japan strategic alliance and sought to return Okinawa while still maintaining access to its bases. This shift in U.S. policy priorities can be observed in the evolving positions taken by these presidents and their key advisers, along with U.S. perceptions of Japanese domestic political demands for reversion and commitment to the alliance.

Eisenhower and Kennedy: Reluctant to Revert

Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy both believed that it was strategically and militarily important to retain control of Okinawa indefinitely. As early as 1953, however, it was evident to senior U.S. policy makers that the U.S. occupation of Okinawa and the other Ryukyus could impede the improvement of relations with Japan. During a December 23, 1953, NSC meeting, Secretary of State Dulles warned Eisenhower that the United States should “expect a very unpleasant reaction” from Japan to the U.S. intention to control the Ryukyus indefinitely. Furthermore, he warned that “the effect of such bad relations might go far to offset the military advantages we would gain from the military rights we retained in Okinawa.” Vice President Nixon, who had just returned from a trip to Asia, agreed with Secretary Dulles, believing that the continued U.S. hold on Okinawa could expose Washington to accusations of colonialism. These arguments did not sway President Eisenhower, however; he dismissed them by pointing out that “the Russians are in the Kuriles and lots of other places where they don’t belong.”⁴⁰ A 1954 NSC report on U.S.-Japan relations acknowledged that Japan desired the return of the Ryukyus, but “because of the critical strategic importance of these islands, the United States must continue to impress upon the Japanese its intention to retain control over them pending the establishment of enduring conditions of peace and stability in the Far East,” implying an open-ended time frame.⁴¹

President Kennedy continued Eisenhower’s policy toward Okinawa. He bluntly told the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff in February 1963 that he “had no intention of giving up the island.”⁴² Okinawa was critically important to U.S. security policy in East Asia. Unlike at other bases in Japan, nuclear weapons were stationed there officially. Conventional forces operating from the island were critical components in contingency planning for defending South Korea and Taiwan, and became important to executing the Vietnam War. Equally significant, because of U.S. administrative control, the United States could operate these forces as it wished, unfettered by any other nation.⁴³ During a conversation with Japanese prime minister Hayato Ikeda on June 21, 1961, President Kennedy described the importance of Okinawa to U.S. security, stating that the “only interest of the U.S. in the Ryukyus is to support our security position in Southeast Asia and Korea” and that without base access “we might have to deploy all the way back

to Hawaii.” He then noted that “our interest in the area is not colonial, but flows purely from security considerations.” Kennedy concluded that the United States and Japan shared an interest in “avoiding pressures for reversion.”⁴⁴

During the Kennedy administration, Japanese leaders did not apply meaningful pressure on the U.S. government to revert Okinawa. Prime Minister Ikeda focused on developing the Japanese economy and strengthening ties with the United States, which would reduce the need for and expense of rearmament.⁴⁵ He did not seek Okinawa’s return and instead advised President Kennedy to take steps that would lessen the emerging domestic political pressure to reincorporate Okinawa into Japan, such as by helping to improve the local economy.⁴⁶ Kennedy took this advice to heart and commissioned a Ryukyus Task Force to understand better how to reduce local dissatisfaction.⁴⁷ The task force’s report noted that “[w]hile the [Japanese] government continues to speak formally in favor of the return to Japanese administration, it recognizes that we in fact have no intention of making any such transfer for the indefinite future, and that its position on this matter is for the public record only.”⁴⁸ The U.S. State Department shared this impression that the Japanese government spoke about reversion only to satisfy its domestic audience.⁴⁹ It was not until the Johnson administration that Japan more forcefully sought Okinawa’s return.

Johnson: Okinawa Bases or U.S.-Japan Alliance?

U.S. interests in Okinawa and the American relationship with Japan began to change during the Johnson administration. Lyndon B. Johnson at first continued Kennedy’s policies. When Deputy Under Secretary of State U. Alexis Johnson briefed the newly appointed U.S. high commissioner of the Ryukyus in June 1964, he explained that the United States intended to “stay in the Ryukyus for as long as there is a military requirement for our bases there.”⁵⁰ By that August, however, some government officials recognized that “Okinawa remains a simmering and potentially dangerous issue in terms of U.S. relations with Japan” and that the United States faced a “hard choice between our military bases on Okinawa and our strategic alliance with Japan.”⁵¹

President Johnson publicly expressed his Okinawa policy in a joint communiqué with Japanese prime minister Eisaku Satō in January 1965. The statement describes Japan’s interest in eventual reversion but concludes that such a change would happen at an indefinite time in the future when the United States no longer needed Okinawan bases. The communiqué notes that Japan sought reversion “as soon as feasible,” while the United States “look[ed] forward to the day when the security interests of the free world in the Far East [would] permit the realization of this desire.”⁵² However, with bases on Okinawa supporting military operations in Vietnam, it was impossible to predict when security interests would permit reversion under this formula.

Over the next several years, Japan's leaders focused their political and diplomatic efforts on the Okinawa issue. In August 1965, Satō visited Okinawa and declared that World War II would not be over until the United States returned the Ryukyus to Japan.⁵³ By 1967, Japanese officials increasingly expressed their desire for Okinawa's reversion and their frustration with the U.S. pledge to return the islands only after tensions relaxed in East Asia. During one week in July 1967, Japanese officials in both Washington and Tokyo approached their U.S. counterparts in a seemingly coordinated effort to discuss Okinawa's status ahead of the next Satō-Johnson meeting that November. In Washington, the Japanese ambassador warned Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs William P. Bundy that "the present trend of developments appears to be leading toward the creation of new problems which might damage fundamental U.S.-Japan relations." The ambassador also expressed frustration that the "military importance" of Okinawa "will never decrease," postponing reversion indefinitely.⁵⁴ In Tokyo, Foreign Minister Takeo Miki met clandestinely with U.S. ambassador U. Alexis Johnson and discussed "how to reconcile Japanese desire for reversion with military requirements."⁵⁵ The pressure Japan applied in these meetings may have spurred the U.S. government to reexamine reversion.

Several weeks later, State Department officials argued that there would not be a better opportunity to resolve "the only major problem between Japan and the United States." In a memo to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, William Bundy explained that "we are prepared to negotiate on reversion provided they give us advance commitments to assure broad freedom of action for the use of U.S. bases, particularly to support the Vietnam War, and to enlarge [Japan's] political and economic role in Asia." He then pointed out that "our prospects for reaching an agreement with Japan on this basis will never be better than at the present time" and that "the longer we delay negotiations the greater the danger that an explosive situation could develop." If a deal was not reached, domestic political pressure on Japan's leaders eventually could force the United States out of Okinawa on less favorable terms, perhaps as soon as 1970, when "the Security Treaty debate could bring irresistible pressures for reversion."⁵⁶ The Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan (known as the Security Treaty), which established the U.S.-Japan alliance, was up for renewal in 1970. The original treaty, signed in 1954 and amended in 1960, had sparked political controversy in Japan, and State Department officials expected the renewal to roil Japanese domestic politics if Okinawa remained unresolved.⁵⁷ Despite dissent from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara agreed that smoothly renewing the Security Treaty was more important than retaining Okinawa.⁵⁸

In several memos to the president ahead of a November 1967 meeting between President Johnson and Prime Minister Satō, Secretary of State Rusk and the national security advisor, Walt W. Rostow, outlined U.S. interests regarding Okinawa reversion. Secretary Rusk argued that Japan should play a more active and equitable role in the U.S.-Japan alliance. He wrote, “[W]e want Japan as a partner—not as a rival—in Asia, but as [a] partner sharing the political and economic burdens of regional responsibility.”⁵⁹ Rostow outlined the U.S. government’s position on reversion and its relationship to U.S.-Japan relations, writing, “The fact is that the old, immediately pre-war relationship is changing and must change. Our objective can only now be a gradual and judicious transition into a new relationship in which the Japanese take increased responsibility as a partner as we alter the essentially occupation status on the islands.”⁶⁰ Thus U.S. policy began to prioritize the alliance with Japan over the unrestricted use of Okinawan bases.

Diplomatic and intelligence reports prior to the November summit also emphasized the importance of Okinawa to Japanese domestic politics. The U.S. ambassador in Tokyo reported that Satō would seek “a commitment on Okinawa which would represent a step forward beyond [the] 1965 communiqué.”⁶¹ The State Department’s director of intelligence and research described Okinawa reversion as “the leading political issue in Japan today” and noted that, “wittingly or unwittingly, Prime Minister Sato has staked a large amount of his political prestige on his handling of the reversion issue.” The analysis concluded that “popular sentiment demands something more concrete than a U.S. promise to return Okinawa when security conditions permit.”⁶² A Central Intelligence Agency report noted that Satō faced increasing domestic political pressures to recover Okinawa and that “he reportedly considers it vital that his [November 1967] Washington trip result in some positive progress toward meeting Japanese desires.”⁶³

Thus, it was in both U.S. and Japanese interests to make progress toward reversion. During their November 1967 summit, President Johnson and Prime Minister Satō acted on this shared interest and moved closer to reversion. Their joint communiqué provided more-tangible conditions for Okinawa’s return to Japan. Satō urged that “within a few years” the two governments should agree on a “date satisfactory to them for reversion of these Islands.”⁶⁴

During Johnson’s presidency, U.S. policy shifted from prioritizing base access toward a willingness to discuss reversion, owing to the greater importance of maintaining and strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance. Japan’s increased assertiveness about recovering Okinawa occurred simultaneously with, and may have spurred, this policy shift.

Nixon: Ready to Revert

Returning Okinawa to Japan while retaining U.S. military freedom of action was one of Richard Nixon’s foreign policy goals. From his service as Eisenhower’s

vice president, Nixon was familiar with the debate within the U.S. government about Okinawa. As early as 1968, then-presidential candidate Nixon privately expressed a willingness to return Okinawa to Japan, provided that Tokyo would play more of a leadership role in Asia.⁶⁵ As president, he publicly agreed with Prime Minister Satō in a 1969 joint communiqué to revert Okinawa, leading to the June 1971 Okinawa Reversion Agreement and Okinawa’s return to Japan in May 1972. The Senkakus played little apparent role in the negotiations ahead of the 1969 communiqué but were among many factors affecting the more detailed negotiations leading to the 1971 Okinawa Reversion Agreement.

For Nixon, reverting Okinawa to Japan was not just a goal but a priority. He viewed Okinawa as a “constant irritant” in U.S.-Japan relations and believed that resolving the issue could encourage Japan to take a larger role in ensuring Asian security.⁶⁶ Upon entering office, Nixon told his NSC that he wanted to return control of the Ryukyus to Japan, so long as basing rights could be retained.⁶⁷ After only a few months in office, his administration issued National Security Decision Memorandum (NSDM) 13, articulating its Japan policy. The classified document described Japan as “our major partner in Asia,” argued that the mutual-defense treaty should remain in effect after 1970, and recommended that the United States encourage Japan to “seek an increasingly larger . . . role in Asia.”⁶⁸

NSDM 13 also set three objectives for reverting Okinawa to Japan. First, an initial agreement should be reached in 1969, allowing time to negotiate the details and complete reversion by 1972. While unstated, this timeline would allow Nixon to return Okinawa before his term ended. Second, the United States desired “maximum free conventional use of the military bases, particularly with respect to Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam.” Third, although the United States desired to keep nuclear weapons on Okinawa, it would agree to withdraw them if it could retain “emergency storage and transit rights.”⁶⁹ Achieving these goals would enable the United States to retain most of the military benefits it already enjoyed on Okinawa while ending a major irritant in bilateral relations and shoring up the U.S. alliance with Japan. Negotiations with the Japanese began in earnest in June 1969 and continued through the Nixon-Satō summit that November.⁷⁰

Prime Minister Satō remained a staunch advocate of Okinawa reversion, yet proved willing to negotiate. Recovering Okinawa—with no U.S. nuclear weapons remaining—was his political priority. Furthermore, he wanted Okinawa to be treated on a “homeland basis,” meaning that the United States would be prohibited from deploying nuclear weapons there in the future, just as it was with regard to mainland Japan.⁷¹ Yet despite this public antinuclear stance, Satō was more interested in regaining Okinawa than in restricting nuclear weapons fully. Through high-level back-channel negotiations, Satō agreed to a more flexible, secret arrangement: if the United States removed all nuclear weapons from

Okinawa before reversion, the United States could return nuclear weapons to the island in an emergency. This met Nixon's policy goal.⁷²

These negotiations culminated in a joint communiqué issued on November 21, 1969. In it, President Nixon and Prime Minister Satō announced their intention to transfer control of Okinawa and the Ryukyu Islands from the United States to Japan by 1972. The United States agreed to remove nuclear weapons from Okinawa but retained access to "such military facilities and areas in Okinawa as required in the mutual security of both countries." The communiqué noted that by settling "the last of the major issues between the two countries arising from the Second World War" the agreement "would further strengthen United States–Japan relations . . . and would make a major contribution to the peace and security of the Far East."⁷³

By agreeing to revert Okinawa to Japan while achieving all the goals set out in NSDM 13, the communiqué was a diplomatic achievement for the Nixon administration. There is no evidence that the status of the uninhabited Senkaku Islands played any role in these initial negotiations.

OKINAWA REVERSION AGREEMENT NEGOTIATIONS

After this public declaration of a high-level consensus between the United States and Japan that Okinawa and other islands under U.S. control should revert to Japan, the hard work of negotiating the details began. The status of the Senkaku Islands was among those details.

The State Department led the U.S. government effort to negotiate the Okinawa Reversion Agreement. U.S. negotiators operated within the bounds of their established procedures to address the Senkakus' status, and they believed that adjudicating this issue was within their remit. Contrary to Kissinger's depiction of them as rogue bureaucrats boxing in the president, they appear to have negotiated within their perceived limits.

Delegated Responsibility and Negotiating Instructions

The U.S. State Department delegated the negotiations to the U.S. embassy in Tokyo, and provided explicit instructions to establish goals, constraints, and procedures. The instructions granted the embassy "overall responsibility for conduct of the negotiations," while laying out five "general objectives":

1. "To retain maximum military flexibility for our Okinawa bases"
2. "To arrange an orderly transfer of administrative rights over Okinawa"
3. "To assure maximum economic and financial benefit to [the] U.S."
4. "To assure best arrangements for the future of U.S. business and other private U.S. interests on Okinawa"

5. “To assure public support of [the] continued U.S. military presence”

A number of additional political, military, and economic aims supplemented the general objectives. The instructions also directed negotiators to “refer new or unresolved issues not adequately covered by instructions to Washington together with your recommendations as appropriate.”⁷⁴ The Senkaku Islands later fell into this category.

The reversion negotiations were inherently complex but were within the capacity of the participating U.S. organizations. A State Department negotiator, Charles A. Schmitz, later recalling the negotiations, said that “there were thousands of details that needed to be addressed and somehow resolved before reversion could take place, and several hundred of them had to be negotiated and put into the treaty itself.”⁷⁵ For example, a status report in September 1970—nine months into the process—listed over thirty significant issues still being worked out, including currency conversion, disposition of U.S.-owned assets, civil aviation agreements, defense responsibilities, trade arrangements, radio frequencies, telecommunications, and postal procedures.⁷⁶ Notably, the status of the Senkakus did not appear on this list. Many of these issues were technical in nature, but some had meaningful policy implications and received attention at higher levels of government, including from the president.

The State Department oversaw the U.S. negotiators for this high-visibility process. The U.S. embassy in Tokyo provided routine updates on progress to Foggy Bottom and, per instructions, referred a number of issues to higher headquarters in Washington for resolution.⁷⁷ For example, an October 1970 summit between Nixon and Prime Minister Satō provided an opportunity for the State Department to brief the president about the negotiations. Several days before the summit, U. Alexis Johnson, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs and prior ambassador to Japan, informed the president that “reversion negotiations are progressing reasonably well, but potentially serious problems are emerging.” These problems included “the future of American business on Okinawa, including civil aviation, and the continuation of a VOA [Voice of America] relay broadcasting from Okinawa.”⁷⁸ He did not include the status of the Senkaku Islands in this list of problems.

Remarks by President Nixon and Henry Kissinger at the October 24, 1970, summit suggest that both were comfortable with the progress made in the ongoing negotiations and the latitude given to the negotiators. According to notes summarizing the discussions, Nixon told Satō that “he [Nixon] had told our people to cooperate in working out little problems in the same way that he and the Prime Minister had cooperated in solving the big problem,” meaning the national commitment to return Okinawa. Kissinger followed up on the president’s

comments by noting the specific disagreements on civil aviation and VOA broadcasting but “explained to the President that VOA and civil aviation had not been raised to his level because it was hoped that a solution would be worked out at lower levels.”⁷⁹ The president understood that organizational processes were necessary to achieve reversion and were functioning as intended. The negotiators elevated some issues to him, even if they did not require his action. It appears, however, that they did not raise the question of the Senkaku Islands until near the end of the negotiations.

Status of the Senkakus: Decision Deferred

As part of the Okinawa reversion negotiations, the United States and Japan needed to determine which territories were included in the reversion, and their sovereignty. The State Department already had wrestled with questions about the Senkakus’ sovereignty before the November 1969 Nixon-Satō communiqué and so may have been predisposed to handle it without seeking a presidential-level decision, but instead in a manner consistent with precedent and conforming with the negotiating instructions.

Initial questions about the Senkakus’ sovereignty came not from Japan but from U.S. oil companies seeking to explore surrounding waters. The prospect of oil reserves near the islands appears to have provided the first prompt to the U.S. State Department to consider its position on the islands’ sovereignty. In May 1969, the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) reported that oil and gas could be found under the seabed near the Senkakus, and in fact the area “might contain one of the most prolific oil and gas reservoirs in the world”—which attracted the attention of the international oil industry.⁸⁰

Within a month of the ECAFE report, a U.S. oil company, Gulf Pittsburgh, asked the State Department about maritime boundary lines near the Senkakus to determine which country—perhaps even the United States—could grant permission to survey the adjacent seabed. Robert W. Barnett, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, replied that “international law is murky.” He then described the dilemma facing the United States. “Settlement of the Ryukyu-Taiwan boundary question would require that the U.S. act for Japan in negotiations with the Republic of China, since the U.S. administers the Ryukyus but recognizes that residual sovereignty rests with Japan.” Furthermore, “the U.S. is reluctant to get involved on this matter at this time with return of the Ryukyus under active discussion with the Japanese.” The lines of sovereign authority were just as murky as international law, and U.S. officials were not willing to upset reversion negotiations, which were still at an early stage, to assist Gulf Pittsburgh.⁸¹

Beyond the Senkakus, broader U.S. policy toward competing maritime claims across East Asia sought to reduce the risk of conflict and maintain positive U.S.

relations with all claimants. Specifically, a January 1971 memorandum within the State Department’s Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs outlined policy goals in this and other regional territorial disputes. These goals included avoiding U.S.-PRC conflict and avoiding “exacerbation of U.S.-PRC and U.S.-[government of the Republic of China] relations in general over this matter,” which might mean “avoiding taking a position either way.” It further advocated avoiding damage to U.S. relations with other countries in East Asia, peacefully resolving the conflicting claims, and avoiding fostering “permanent animosities that would preclude a peaceful general settlement of existing differences in the East Asia area.” The memo’s author lamented that these goals “seem mutually exclusive, but this merely reflects the complexity of the situation.”⁸² In support of this policy of not taking a position, the U.S. government asked U.S. oil companies “to stay out of disputed areas until claims are settled” and warned companies “operating American vessels anywhere in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea and the Taiwan Strait that [the United States] will not provide military protection in the event their operations are challenged.”⁸³

During reversion negotiations, U.S. officials believed that the territorial descriptions in the Okinawa Reversion Agreement should be consistent with the ambiguous phrasing used in the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty. Their Japanese counterparts, however, argued that the agreement should state explicitly the boundaries of the territories transferred to Japan, and that those boundaries should encompass the Senkakus. On October 8, 1970, Japanese negotiators submitted a proposed draft agreement that included the coordinates USCAR had used to define its boundaries in 1953, to “add precision” but also to address the “Senkakus issue.” Officials from the U.S. embassy countered this proposal, telling their Japanese counterparts that “(1) the [U.S. government] prefers to stay out of the middle of the Senkakus issue, [and] (2) that [the] reversion agreement is probably not [the] proper place to refer even indirectly to [the] Senkakus dispute.” U.S. officials further emphasized that the reversion agreement’s description of the boundaries should match the San Francisco treaty’s wording.⁸⁴

The State Department’s strong organizational preference not to intervene in territorial disputes may have influenced its position on the Senkakus’ status. Furthermore, decision makers within the State Department may have considered their stance on the Senkakus to be consistent with specific precedent regarding the Ryukyus, such as Secretary of State Dulles’s “residual sovereignty” interpretation of the 1951 San Francisco treaty and existing policy toward territorial disputes more generally. It therefore would be unsurprising that, unlike other issues such as civil aviation and the VOA, the State Department did not bring this issue to President Nixon’s attention during the negotiations. Instead, negotiators in Tokyo and State Department officials in Washington appear to have believed

that their solution to this issue was within their instructions and consistent with U.S. policy.

How to address the Senkaku Islands in the reversion agreement remained unresolved through at least the final months of U.S.-Japanese negotiations. A cable that the U.S. embassy in Tokyo sent in March 1971, three months before the treaty was signed, identified the status of the Senkakus as one of nearly twenty “outstanding problems which must be resolved before final arrangements can be worked out for signing reversion agreement.” The cable indicates that negotiators still were “awaiting Washington guidance for appropriate method of referring to Senkakus.”⁸⁵ It is unclear from whom in Washington the negotiators were awaiting a response, but there is no indication the issue was raised outside State Department headquarters. President Nixon and Kissinger both later said that they were not aware of this issue until April 1971, when Taiwan’s ambassador brought it up with them.⁸⁶ By that point, however, U.S. and Japanese negotiators already had agreed on how to handle these islands.

Ultimately, by May 1971, U.S. and Japanese negotiators referenced the broad language of the 1951 peace treaty in the draft reversion agreement, and added an “agreed minute” that explicitly delineated the boundaries of the administered area. Providing instructions to U.S. negotiators in May 1971, Under Secretary of State John N. Irwin II wrote that it was “essential to limit metes and bounds to context of area U.S. now administering.” Anything more expansive could result in the U.S. government’s “involvement in sovereignty issue,” which the United States was trying to avoid.⁸⁷ As a result, the treaty defined “the Ryukyu Islands and the Daito Islands” as “all the territories and their territorial waters with respect to which the right to exercise all and any powers of administration, legislation, and jurisdiction was accorded to the United States of America under Article III of the Treaty of Peace with Japan.” The agreed minute provided points of latitude and longitude that matched those used in USCAR’s Proclamation 27 of 1953 (see map) to describe “the territories under the administration of the United States of America.”⁸⁸ Thus did U.S. negotiators dodge a definitive decision on the status of the Senkakus.

The U.S. position of not recognizing any claims to the Senkakus was unsatisfying to some in Japan, but did not halt reversion. During the negotiations, Japan’s foreign minister expressed his unhappiness with the “uncertain attitude” of the United States toward the Senkakus and the Japanese ambassador to Washington similarly criticized the U.S. “public position of neutrality.”⁸⁹ Days before the Okinawa Reversion Agreement was signed, two members of Prime Minister Satō’s cabinet—the director of Japan’s Defense Agency and the minister for administrative affairs—informed Satō that they did not concur with the agreement, because the United States would not address the Senkakus’ sovereignty. Their

nonconcurrence could have blocked Japan’s execution of the agreement. Responding to Minister for Administrative Affairs Sadanori Yamanaka’s objection, Satō said, “[Yamanaka] is passionate about Okinawa, and I see that he cannot be budged from his position. However, if this is the case, there is no telling when Okinawa will get returned.”⁹⁰ Although the U.S. position may not have been ideal for Japan, Prime Minister Satō placed such a high priority on recovering Okinawa that he accepted the ambiguous U.S. Senkaku position so as to complete the Okinawa Reversion Agreement.

U.S. negotiators received clear objectives and constraints, then operated within them to execute the policy of reverting Okinawa, and ultimately felt that they had performed successfully. In a cable sent several weeks before the agreement was signed, the U.S. embassy in Tokyo summarized the negotiations and highlighted officials’ belief that “we have substantially carried out negotiating instructions with changes made only with Washington concurrence to accommodate firm GOJ [government of Japan] positions.” The embassy listed over a dozen approved deviations from their instructions, including the status of the Senkaku Islands. The cable indicated that the agreement avoids “making specific reference to [the] disputed Senkaku Islands (although covered in agreed minute) and clearly relates territories to be relinquished to those now administered by USG [U.S. government].” The negotiators did not consider this to be a controversial outcome. They concluded this summary of their work on the reversion agreement with the perhaps self-serving commentary that “while there has been a hard and protracted negotiation with give and take from both sides, the fundamental objective of preserving an effective military base structure in Okinawa has been achieved.”⁹¹ In other words, mission accomplished.

BARGAINING GAMES AND COMPETING CLAIMS

This article next evaluates whether and how the interests of other domestic entities, foreign countries, and Nixon’s own policy initiatives may have affected U.S. policy toward the Senkakus during the Okinawa reversion negotiations. Relevant actors included governments of the other claimants (Taiwan and China); U.S. textile manufacturers; and Nixon, with regard to his own secret effort to improve relations with Beijing. This section will describe how these external factors interacted with the reversion negotiations and affected U.S. decisions on the Senkakus. In each case, Nixon decided to favor returning control over the Senkakus to Japan, rather than accommodating other claimants or interests.

As rival claimants for the Senkakus emerged in late 1970 and early 1971, these competing interests complicated U.S. efforts to avoid making a decision on the Senkakus’ sovereignty. Taiwan and China did not challenge Japan’s claim and assert their own until Okinawa reversion negotiations were well under way.

Japanese and Taiwan diplomats discussed the sovereign status of the Senkakus in the summer of 1970, and by September the Japanese formally asserted that the Senkakus belonged to their country.⁹² Taipei quickly contested this claim, and later announced its own on February 23, 1971.⁹³ China staked its claim in a December 4, 1970, radio broadcast, and reiterated it over a year later in a December 30, 1971, statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁹⁴

Different actors within the U.S. government also had a range of interests related to these competing territorial claims. Trade negotiators saw the Senkakus as a carrot to spur Taiwan's cooperation in textile trade negotiations. Nixon intervened, however, to affirm the U.S. position on the Senkakus and preserve the Okinawa Reversion Agreement. Ongoing but secretive efforts to open relations with China could have influenced policy toward the Senkaku Islands if more participants had been aware of Nixon's overtures to Beijing. This secrecy likely inhibited some of the normal bureaucratic conflict and compromise across the U.S. government that might have brought more scrutiny to U.S. policy toward the Senkakus and how it would affect future relations with China. Under the pressure of the deadline for signing the reversion agreement, U.S. policy makers, including President Nixon, weighed these issues against the goal of reverting Okinawa. In both cases, U.S. leaders concluded that this territorial dispute should not obstruct reverting Okinawa.

Taiwan and Textiles: "High Politics at Home and Abroad"

Taiwan sought U.S. support for its claim on the Senkakus and linked this issue with a textiles trade dispute, forcing President Nixon to decide whether the United States should weigh in on the Senkakus' sovereignty question more explicitly. Following its February 1971 claim, Taipei elicited U.S. support, both by detailing its sovereignty claim in a diplomatic *note verbale* and by dispatching its ambassador to lobby the White House. The March 15, 1971, diplomatic note provided historical, geological, and economic justifications for Taiwan's claim, but also explained why Taipei had not asserted its sovereignty any earlier. "For regional security considerations the government of the ROC has hitherto not challenged the U.S. military occupation of the Senkakus under Article 3 of the San Francisco Treaty." Taiwan essentially argued that it had not voiced its claim previously to avoid antagonizing the United States, the guarantor of its security. The note went on to ask Washington to restore Taipei's sovereignty over the Senkakus rather than revert the islands to Tokyo along with Okinawa.⁹⁵

Taiwan's ambassador, Chow Shu-kai, raised the question of the Senkakus' sovereignty with President Nixon and Henry Kissinger on April 12, 1971. He emphasized the political importance of these islands to Taiwan, stating that "the issue of nationalism was deeply involved." Henry Kissinger was not familiar

with the issue and told the ambassador that he was “looking into the Senkakus matter.”⁹⁶ The next day, an NSC staffer sent a memo to Kissinger that detailed Taiwan’s claim, noted that Japan “has a comparable list of apparently offsetting arguments,” and explained that “State’s position is that in occupying the Ryukyus and the Senkakus in 1945, and in proposing to return them to Japan in 1972, the U.S. passes no judgement as to conflicting claims over any portion of them, which should be settled directly by the parties concerned.” In a handwritten marginal note, Kissinger remarked, “But that is nonsense since it gives islands to Japan. How can we get a more neutral position?”⁹⁷ Despite Kissinger’s frustration with this apparent contradiction, U.S. policy did not change.

Taiwan’s claim and U.S. policy dramatically came to a head in June 1971, only weeks before the United States and Japan planned to sign the Okinawa Reversion Agreement. In parallel with the Okinawa negotiations, President Nixon also discussed textile trade issues with Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. Responding to political pressure from southern states affected by competition with Asian textile manufacturers, Nixon sought voluntary export restrictions from those countries.⁹⁸ He designated former Treasury Secretary David M. Kennedy to lead these negotiations.

Kennedy reported from Taipei that the Taiwan government proposed linking the Senkakus’ sovereignty with textile trade concessions. Nixon’s international economic adviser, Peter G. Peterson, informed the president on June 7 that “Ambassador Kennedy is convinced that the ‘only’ way to resolve the [textile] issue is to withhold turning the Senkaku Islands over to Japanese control.”⁹⁹ That same day, Henry Kissinger and Peterson urgently requested to meet with Nixon about “the issue of the Senkaku Islands,” which Kissinger described as “a delicate issue of the greatest importance to the Republic of China.”¹⁰⁰ The meeting was scheduled for the same afternoon.

Hours before the meeting, Kissinger spoke with Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs U. Alexis Johnson in two telephone calls to understand how changing the status of the Senkakus in response to Taipei’s demands could affect the Okinawa negotiation. Johnson had unique experience on this issue because he had served as U.S. ambassador to Tokyo from 1966 to 1969 and had been involved with the Okinawa reversion negotiations from the beginning.¹⁰¹ In the first call, Kissinger started in by asking, “About those God damn islands, where do we stand?” Johnson explained that “[i]t’s frozen in the text of the agreement with Japan” and had been since before Taiwan’s ambassador Chow first brought up the issue at the White House that April.¹⁰² In the second call, Johnson explained that if the United States changed its position on the Senkakus to favor Taiwan, “there is not the slightest question about this blowing up the Okinawa

negotiations with the Japanese.” He also explained that “it [the Senkakus] is not our territory. We have no sovereignty. It is a territorial dispute under our present administration of Okinawa. We just administer it—it is a Japanese-Chinese [meaning Japanese-ROC] question.”¹⁰³ Johnson did not elaborate on why he felt the deal would collapse if the United States reneged on the existing draft agreement about the islands. Perhaps his extensive professional experience in Japan and personal involvement with the Okinawa negotiations caused him to present a worst-case assessment of Japan’s reaction. Alternatively, he was acutely aware that the Senate needed time to review and ratify the Okinawa Reversion Agreement, so he also may have been wary of reopening the negotiations because doing so might weaken support on Capitol Hill and delay or derail ratification.¹⁰⁴

A short time before meeting with Kissinger and Peterson, Nixon called Kissinger to prepare for the discussion ahead. According to the transcript of that brief conversation, Kissinger, echoing Johnson, said that changing the U.S. position on the Senkakus would “blow up negotiations with Japan.” Nixon reiterated the importance of reaching a deal on textiles, to which Kissinger countered, “This would be a hell of a price to pay with the Japanese. The treaty is to be signed in about a week.” Appearing to agree with his national security advisor, Nixon wrapped up the call by asking whether Kissinger had “gotten him [Peterson] around” to agreeing with his view, to which Kissinger replied, “He’s all right.”¹⁰⁵ The president seemed to have made up his mind about the Senkakus prior to meeting with his two senior national security and economic advisers.

Kissinger and Peterson met with the president on the afternoon of June 7, 1971; Nixon’s taping system recorded their conversation.¹⁰⁶ Nixon began by indicating the importance of the decision before him, remarking that “what’s involved here is some high politics at home and abroad.” He told them both that “a lot of the things here have to be done in the context of our relations with Japan. . . . You understand that?” Kissinger then described his understanding of the history behind the decision: “In 1951 when the peace treaty was signed the Senkaku Islands were made part of the Okinawa administrative arrangement in which we handled the administration and the Japanese received sovereignty. . . . As a result of that we treated the islands as part of the Okinawa complex, since we had already granted the Japanese residual sovereignty in ’51 and it’s never been really disputed during the negotiations.” He concluded that “if we now suddenly, in the last week of the negotiations, surface this . . . it would blow up the Okinawa negotiations.” Kissinger later added, “[M]y major concern is that this would be seen in Japan now as deliberate sabotage of the treaty and would profoundly jeopardize our relations there.”

Nixon abruptly shifted the conversation to Taiwan, but rather than discussing Taipei’s arguments in detail he instead asked, “Is there something else we can do

with Taiwan?” In other words, what could we offer Taiwan other than changing our position on the Senkakus? Options included selling weapons to Taiwan or sending the Secretary of Defense to visit Taipei. Nixon, frustrated with the poor choices in front of him, then acknowledged, “I don’t think we can go back on Okinawa, I think our long range relationship is symbolic.” He wanted to find another opportunity to “screw them [Japan] on trade,” but it was not worth risking Okinawa reversion to trade the Senkaku Islands for a textiles deal with Taiwan. He added, “I hope to God that we can think of some other things where we can stand up and kick the Japanese in the butt,” but he was unwilling to sacrifice Okinawa reversion to that end.

Following Nixon’s decision, Kissinger criticized how the Okinawa reversion negotiators appeared to have put Nixon in a bind, and analyzed the impact of the U.S. position on the Senkakus. He asserted that “this is one of those examples where the bureaucracy, ’til they got into trouble, no one even told us there was an issue, and I frankly had never even heard of these islands until—” Nixon interrupted, “I never heard of ’em.” Kissinger resumed by saying, “[U]ntil Chow [Taiwan’s ambassador] came in here to see you [in April].” To which Nixon added, “[O]h yeah, he hit those items.” After recounting the post–World War II history of the Senkakus, Kissinger lamented that by the time he first learned of the islands “they had already been given away because they had automatically been included by the Japanese in the reversion of Okinawa.” Peterson then asked, “[H]ow crucial are these islands to the Japanese?” and “[A]re you sure they are urgently important?” Kissinger responded, “I think it’s the sort of issue which, if it had been raised six months ago, we could have found, could have found out, but I suspect if it’s done now, it will look like a deliberate attempt to sabotage the treaty.” Kissinger then noted—perhaps presciently—that the U.S. position “in fact means they [the Senkakus] are going to Japan because nothing short of war is ever going to get them off these islands.”

Afterward Peterson relayed the outcome to Kennedy in Taipei. “After lengthy discussion, the President’s decision on the islands is that the [Okinawa reversion] deal has gone too far and too many commitments made to back off now. . . . The President was deeply regretful that he could not help on this, but he felt that the decision was simply not possible.”¹⁰⁷ With so little time remaining before signing the Okinawa Reversion Agreement, Nixon was unwilling to withhold the Senkakus from Japan and upend the progress made over many years toward returning Okinawa.

Several days later, Robert I. Starr, the legal adviser to the State Department’s Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, assessed the legal aspects of Taiwan’s claim and concluded that the government of Taiwan “is not without legal argument under its 1952 Treaty of Peace with Japan . . . to call upon the [government

of Japan] to settle the Senkakus dispute by negotiation or by other pacific means including third party adjudication.” He went on, however, to outline legal and political obstacles to U.S. involvement. “It is open to serious doubt whether . . . the [U.S. government] may properly raise the Senkakus issue with Japan” through mechanisms provided by the San Francisco Peace Treaty, because Taiwan was not a signatory to that treaty. Furthermore, “it is the firm policy of the [U.S. government] to take no position on the merits of the dispute.” He added that “there are other considerations which may also bear upon the question of the appropriate [U.S. government] posture on this matter,” specifically the importance of U.S.-Japan relations and that “Japan obviously attaches great significance to the impending return of Okinawa, including the Senkakus.” His memo records that in response to pressure from Taiwan, the United States had only “asked the [government of Japan] to agree to discuss the matter with the [government of Taiwan].”¹⁰⁸ Thus, legal considerations apparently were not compelling enough to outweigh the political impetus to revert Okinawa.

United States–China Rapprochement: Incalculable Consequences

The U.S. response to China’s claim on the Senkakus is more difficult to assess, largely because the United States neither recognized the PRC nor had normal diplomatic relations with it but secretly sought rapprochement with the regime. This goal in effect was hidden from the normal back-and-forth of the policy process. If participants across the government had been aware of President Nixon’s intent to open relations with China, then perhaps Senkakus policy could have been developed with that in mind. Instead, U.S. policy makers were cognizant of Beijing’s claim but were unsure about how to treat it, particularly since some perceived it as intertwined with Taipei’s claim.

China announced its claim on the Senkakus in December 1970, only six months before the signing of the Okinawa Reversion Agreement. Yet even within this short period, U.S. policy makers considered the implications of China’s claim. The previously mentioned June 1971 memo by State Department legal adviser Starr not only assessed the legality of Taiwan’s claim but pointed out that China had a stake in the outcome as well. “Then too, there is the position of [China] to consider. . . . If we press the [government of Japan] to negotiate with the [government of Taiwan], we run the risk of aggravating unnecessarily the state of both the [U.S. government’s] and [the government of Japan’s] relations with Peking. It is difficult to imagine any conceivable benefit in terms of our relations with the [government of Taiwan] that would justify such a risk, the full consequences of which may not even be calculable at this time.”¹⁰⁹

This memo was written a month before Kissinger’s secret July 1971 visit to China, so it was understandably difficult for State Department officials to better

envison the impact of a less ambiguous policy on the Senkakus. Nevertheless, the risks of antagonizing China further did not seem to outweigh the possible benefits of encouraging Tokyo and Taipei to negotiate about the Senkakus.

The uncertain future of Japan’s relations with China may have similarly influenced how Tokyo dealt with Beijing and Taipei on the Senkakus in this period. In a December 1970 cable, a U.S. diplomat in Taiwan described this interaction with a Japanese counterpart. “Japan would never, [the Japanese diplomat] repeated, never negotiate [the sovereignty of the Senkakus] seriously with [the government of Taiwan], because of the PRC.” According to the Japanese diplomat’s perspective, negotiations with Taiwan “would involve and thereby commit the [government of Japan] to and with the [government of Taiwan] in this area, and preclude involvement and commitment to the PRC in this area.”¹¹⁰ Similarly, the Central Intelligence Agency assessed in 1971 that “Japan finds itself caught in a painful dilemma” regarding whether and how to deal with Taipei and Beijing on the Senkakus. “To the extent that Tokyo solves its problems with Taipei, it damages its long-range hopes of improving relations with Peking.”¹¹¹

The United States appears to have been trapped in a similar dilemma between the two Chinese capitals, and arrived at a compromise solution that would have the least impact on both, while still completing the Okinawa Reversion Agreement with Japan. During Nixon’s June 7, 1971, meeting with Kissinger and Peterson, Kissinger briefly described how he thought China would react if the United States sided with Taiwan on the Senkakus. “The Senkaku Islands, strangely enough, as far as our relations with Communist China are concerned, wouldn’t bother them because they’d prefer them part of Taiwan because they could then grab them [the Senkakus] if they think they can grab Taiwan.”¹¹² There was no discussion, however, about how China might respond if the United States maintained its ostensibly hands-off approach. President Nixon was aware that the outcome of the Senkakus negotiations with Tokyo could have some bearing on the secret discussions with Beijing, but he did not direct any changes to the policy of noninvolvement in Senkakus sovereignty claims.¹¹³

If the United States in fact was trying to curry favor with China, a more concerted effort might have been made to withhold the Senkakus from Japan to benefit this budding, but closely held, relationship. No evidence suggests that U.S. leaders were any more interested in acceding to Beijing’s claim than they were to Taipei’s. In fact—likely because of the secrecy surrounding the pending rapprochement—most U.S. policy makers negotiating the return of Okinawa could only speculate about the impact of their Senkakus position on China. The clandestine nature of the effort to improve relations with China may have removed it from the normal policy process and simultaneously prevented U.S. policy makers

from analyzing more thoroughly the expected impact of U.S. decisions regarding the Senkakus.

OUTCOME: OKINAWA REVERSION AGREEMENT AND THE SENKAKUS

On June 18, 1971, the U.S. Secretary of State in Washington and the Japanese foreign minister in Tokyo signed the Okinawa Reversion Agreement in simultaneous ceremonies coordinated by a satellite television connection.¹¹⁴ Over the objections of both Chinas, the United States returned administrative control over the Senkakus to Japan and took no position on the competing sovereignty claims. U.S. Secretary of State William P. Rogers defended the policy in testimony to the U.S. Senate ahead of the treaty's ratification. "We have made it clear that this treaty does not affect the legal status of [the Senkaku Islands] at all. Whatever the legal situation was prior to the treaty is going to be the legal situation after the treaty comes into effect."¹¹⁵ Robert Starr, the State Department legal adviser, submitted to the Senate a letter more formally describing the U.S. government's position on the Senkakus.

The United States believes that a return of administrative rights over those islands to Japan, from which the rights were received, can in no way prejudice any underlying claims. The United States cannot add to the legal rights Japan possessed before it transferred administration of the islands to us, nor can the United States, by giving back what it received, diminish the rights of other claimants. The United States has made no claim to the Senkaku Islands and considers that any conflicting claims to the islands are a matter for resolution by the parties concerned.¹¹⁶

On May 15, 1972, Japan resumed its sovereignty over Okinawa and the Ryukyu Islands and received administrative control over the Senkakus. To this day, U.S. policy regarding the Senkakus' sovereign status remains consistent with Starr's letter.

The U.S. policy of noninvolvement was an imperfect compromise among conflicting interests, including Okinawa reversion, textile negotiations, and the secret rapprochement between the United States and China. Among these objectives, returning Okinawa to Japan and reinforcing the U.S.-Japan alliance appear to have been very consequential in the decisions about the status of the Senkaku Islands. Textile negotiations with Taipei and future U.S. relations with Beijing—the other claimants for attention—weighed on policy makers to some degree, but did not scuttle the first priority of reverting Okinawa and all other islands under U.S. administrative control to Japan. In the end, the U.S. policy was acceptable to the Japanese while providing enough ambiguity to avoid roiling relations with Taiwan and China. In retrospect, Charles Schmitz described how he and other U.S. negotiators working on the Okinawa Reversion Agreement "felt stuck

and vulnerable to attack from all sides.” He believed that the U.S. position was a “middle road” that “neatly extracted us from the middle of a Japanese-Chinese set-to” while still successfully reverting Okinawa to Japan.¹¹⁷

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY POLICY: REDUCING THE RISK OF CONFLICT

Why should we understand how the United States arrived at its Senkaku Islands policy over four decades ago? Why should we plumb the complexities of government behavior regarding these uninhabited islands? First, doing so demonstrates how existing explanations are incomplete. Second, doing so provides needed historical context for a particularly thorny contemporary policy issue in which the United States is more closely involved than many appreciate. Lastly, this historical background provides a foundation on which to build a better-informed strategy toward the Senkaku Islands and maintain peace and stability in East Asia.

First, several theories seek to explain why the United States chose an ostensibly neutral position on the Senkakus that was, according to Kissinger at the time, “nonsense since it gives [the] islands to Japan.”¹¹⁸ Some analysts and the government of China divine that Cold War power politics drove this decision. Kissinger believed that bureaucrats in the State Department forced a *fait accompli* on President Nixon. Both of these theories are incomplete and too narrow, because they do not consider the evidence that points to a more complex explanation within the broader context of returning Okinawa to Japan.

In many respects, *realpolitik* considerations drove U.S. decision-making, but American strategy centered on whether to retain Okinawa for its bases or revert it to Japan to improve relations. The question of the Senkaku Islands was only one among many challenging incidental issues negotiated prior to reversion. Decisions regarding the Senkakus appear to have been made while holding the goal of reverting Okinawa foremost in mind. U.S. negotiators crafted a policy that was within the bounds of their negotiating instructions, was consistent with existing policy, and achieved the goal of reverting Okinawa while retaining flexible basing rights. This policy output was subject to the normal policy processes within the U.S. government and among other claimants. Particularly in the example of the potential textiles deal with Taiwan, proponents of this policy squared off against advocates of other approaches and forced a presidential decision. Conversely, there was perhaps a missed opportunity for healthy intragovernmental bargaining regarding China’s claim on the Senkakus because many U.S. policy makers were in the dark about Nixon’s intentions toward Beijing.

Second, history is an ever-present factor in international affairs, but it is particularly relevant in East Asia, and especially with regard to the numerous maritime disputes along the region’s periphery. The legacy of Japanese aggression in

the early twentieth century, for instance, still colors Tokyo's relations with other capitals in East Asia.¹¹⁹ President Xi Jinping of China has wielded history in his relations with President Donald J. Trump, first lecturing him during a 2017 summit in Florida about China's historical role on the Korean Peninsula and then impressing him with China's long history during a state visit to Beijing later that year; both efforts may have been intended to shape Trump's perception of China and its role in Asia.¹²⁰ History's influence does not end at the water's edge. In the South China Sea, China claims "historical rights" to numerous islands and islets.¹²¹ Other Southeast Asian states dispute these claims and lodge their own historically informed counterclaims. In the East China Sea, China might not limit its claims to just the Senkaku Islands; some Chinese academics cite Okinawa's historical relationship with China to argue that Beijing could claim Okinawa and others among the Ryukyu Islands as well.¹²²

It is essential that contemporary U.S. policy makers understand and appreciate the U.S. role in the dispute over the Senkaku Islands. Unlike the case with any other modern East Asian territorial dispute, the United States not only once controlled these disputed islands; it also made decisions that perpetuated the dispute and—by pledging to include the islands in treaty obligations to Japan—arguably compounded it. Because of this intimate and unique historical relationship between the United States and the Senkakus, Washington should bear more of the burden for either encouraging the claimants to settle the dispute or ensuring that this political conflict does not lead to a war.

Furthermore, any of the three claimants to the Senkakus could misrepresent the historical record and the U.S. position on the Senkakus' sovereignty to advocate its position or debase a competing claim. China does just that, for example, in arguing that the United States arbitrarily expanded its definition of the Ryukyu Islands with the 1953 USCAR Proclamation 27. The historical record, as shown on the map, confirms that the United States considered the Senkaku Islands to fall under its administration of the Ryukyus after Japan's surrender in 1945. Each time the United States redefined its conception of the Ryukyu Islands, it included the Senkakus.

Third, the U.S. policy of not recognizing any of the claims to the Senkakus may have helped achieve U.S. foreign policy goals in East Asia in the 1970s, but U.S. ambiguity left an unresolved territorial dispute among China, Taiwan, and Japan. This territorial dispute—particularly between Japan and an increasingly assertive China—risks becoming a flash point of war. It seems increasingly likely that Kissinger was right when he told Nixon in 1971 that "nothing short of war is ever going to get [Japan] off these islands."¹²³ How should the United States—as an ally of Japan and the country that ceded administrative control to it—minimize the

risk of such a war? How can the United States mitigate the strategic risk caused by a decision deferred almost five decades ago?

Past and present experience with other disputed islands on China’s maritime flanks offers valuable guideposts. Analyzing the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, Ely Ratner, an NSC official under President Barack H. Obama, writes that “U.S. policymakers should recognize that China’s behavior in the [South China] sea is based on its perception of how the United States will respond. The lack of U.S. resistance has led Beijing to conclude that the United States will not compromise its relationship with China over the South China Sea.”¹²⁴ The United States should not let China draw a similar conclusion about the Senkaku Islands.

To paraphrase Schelling, the Senkakus could become a modern “ragged edge,” about which U.S. intentions risk being ambiguous. Although the United States publicly asserts that the Senkaku Islands fall within the U.S. treaty commitment to defend Japan, Washington’s ambiguity on their sovereignty could undermine, in the perceptions of all three claimants, the credibility of Washington’s commitment. Domestically, it also may be difficult to convince the U.S. public that the uninhabited and distant Senkaku Islands are worth fighting for, which could weaken further foreign perceptions of U.S. credibility.

To reduce these risks, the Trump administration should heed Schelling’s observation that “ritual and diplomacy can enhance or erode” U.S. security commitments.¹²⁵ Senior U.S. leaders, including the president, should continue to assert publicly and privately to all claimants that, while the United States is agnostic on Senkaku sovereignty questions, Japan administratively controls the Senkakus and, because of treaty obligations, the United States will defend the islands. Yet, while necessary, “ritual and diplomacy” alone may be insufficient. U.S. strategy should include continued and comprehensive bilateral (U.S.-Japan) military cooperation, multilateral (U.S.-Japan-China-Taiwan) diplomatic efforts, and perhaps a fundamental reevaluation of the U.S. political stance toward the Senkakus.

Militarily, visible but quietly executed demonstrations of the U.S. intention and capability to defend Japan’s administrative control of the Senkakus should continue. Able to project power in the region and operate with Japanese forces, the U.S. military plays a vital role in demonstrating U.S. commitment. B-52 bombers challenged China’s East China Sea ADIZ within days of its announcement in November 2013.¹²⁶ More recently, in March and August 2017, B-1B bombers have participated in bilateral exercises with Japan Air Self-Defense Force F-15 fighters near the Senkaku Islands “to demonstrate the solidarity and resolve we share with our allies to preserve peace and security in the Indo-Asia-Pacific.”¹²⁷ The U.S. Navy routinely operates at sea in the western Pacific and conducts exercises with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force.¹²⁸ The U.S.

Marine Corps and Japan Ground Self-Defense Force since 2006 have held annual exercises that have evolved from demonstrating humanitarian relief operations to practicing “recapturing invaded islands.”¹²⁹ These military operations and exercises should continue, both for the political signal they send and to improve U.S.-Japanese interoperability.

The United States also should support Tokyo’s ongoing efforts to strengthen Japan’s capability to defend the numerous isolated islands in its remote “south-western region,” which includes the Senkakus.¹³⁰ This approach could include encouraging Japan to invest in weapon systems and training that would enable it better to conduct routine operations around the distant Senkakus in peacetime, and in wartime to project defensive military power or to sustain its defenses until U.S. forces could intervene.¹³¹ This equipment could include high-endurance coast guard cutters, long-range fighter aircraft, maritime-patrol aircraft, submarines, aviation-capable ships, and upgrades to existing systems. Some changes, for example, could help Japan use its force more efficiently. Japan’s defense minister explained in January 2018 that the planned acquisition of two land-based Aegis Ashore ballistic-missile-defense (BMD) systems could free up Japan’s BMD-capable destroyers for use in the southwest rather than being tethered to BMD operating areas closer to Japan’s home islands. Japan has considered other force-structure changes that the United States should endorse, such as modifying its two largest helicopter carriers to operate the Joint Strike Fighter and purchasing standoff air-to-surface missiles that could be used to fend off amphibious assaults.¹³² Particularly if an evaluation of Japan’s strategy for defending against an increasingly capable Chinese threat informs weapons-procurement and -modernization decisions, these steps could improve Japan’s ability to deter conflict over the Senkakus and to operate effectively alongside the United States.¹³³

Diplomatically, the United States should encourage communication and cooperation among all three claimants to the Senkakus. Optimistically, President Trump could emulate U. S. Grant’s efforts during his 1879 visit to East Asia and encourage all claimants to meet and resolve their differences. However, the positions of the claimants may be too entrenched. Japan is unlikely to leave the islands voluntarily and neither China nor Taiwan appears ready to bargain away what Beijing calls “an inherent territory of China.” Furthermore, Beijing or Taipei or both may not view Washington as an honest broker. More practically, the United States should help the claimants maintain a stable political equilibrium regarding the Senkakus, which could include advocating bilateral discussions between Japan and China about managing the Chinese fishing fleets operating near the Senkakus or establishing communications protocols for Chinese and Japanese naval and coast guard vessels to use while operating near the islands.¹³⁴

The United States may find, however, that treaty commitments, military posturing, and diplomatic entreaties cannot curb China’s assertiveness toward the Senkakus. While Chinese fishing and other maritime activity near the Senkaku Islands generally has been nonconfrontational in recent years, the January 2018 patrol near the Senkakus by a Chinese warship and submarine and the February 2018 incursion by three Chinese patrol ships into Japan’s claimed territorial waters indicate that China easily could resume a more forceful approach.¹³⁵

If China increases political, military, and economic pressure on the Senkaku Islands, the United States should consider dropping the fig leaf of not taking a position on their sovereignty. Although the approach is politically convenient and consistent with U.S. policy for other maritime sovereignty disputes in East Asia, it may frustrate efforts to deter China and to assure Japan credibly of U.S. commitment.¹³⁶ At the very least, letting China know that this option is “on the table” may demonstrate to Beijing that destabilizing actions could elicit significant political responses short of war. It could be argued that taking a position on the Senkakus’ sovereignty might expose the United States to demands that it weigh in on other territorial disputes, particularly others involving Japan, such as Dokdo/Takeshima with South Korea and the Southern Kurils / Northern Territories with Russia. The Senkakus case is unique, however, because it involves the only disputed territory that the United States administered previously. Overwrought fear of setting a precedent should not preclude the United States from finally making a decision it deferred nearly fifty years ago.

U.S. decisions in returning the administration of the Senkaku Islands to Japan likely were not motivated by a desire to use the Senkakus to shape the western Pacific security environment, whether by driving a wedge between Japan and China or favoring one claimant over the other. Neither was it the result of a bureaucracy run amok. Instead, evidence suggests that it may have been an outcome of U.S. government decision-making that was oriented toward the goal of returning Okinawa to Japan and strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance. Nearly a half century later, these uninhabited islands remain a challenge for U.S. political leaders, who should reaffirm and strengthen expectations of U.S. intentions to deter challenges by Beijing and reassure Tokyo. These steps also may spur U.S. domestic interest and better inform the public about U.S. security obligations in Asia. Effective “ritual and diplomacy,” complemented by a more robust U.S.-Japan military posture and a political willingness to wrestle with a long-deferred decision, could make the Senkakus less of a “ragged edge” for the United States in Asia and increase the likelihood of continued calm in the East China Sea.

NOTES

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