

Gist of RSTV “The Big Picture”: Senkaku-Diaoyu Islands Dispute

Anchor: Frank Rausan Pereira

Guests:

1. Gurjit Singh, Former Ambassador.
2. Commander Abhijit Singh (Retd.), Head, Maritime Policy Initiative, ORF
3. Srikanth Kondapalli, Professor, Center for East Asian Studies, JNU

What's in the news?

- Both Japan and China claim the uninhabited islands, known as the Senkaku in Japan and Tiaoyu in China, as their own, but Japan has administered them since 1972.
- The Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands were formally claimed by Japan in 1895. After Japan’s defeat in World War II, the island chain was controlled by the US until 1971, when it was returned. Since then, Japan has administered the island chains.
- China began to reassert claims over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the 1970s, citing historic rights to the area. However, Japan does not recognize Chinese claims.
- Recently, there has been a flare up in the region. The Japanese government said that it had protested to China regarding a set of names recently assigned by Beijing to seabed zones in the East China Sea.

Background:

- Senkaku Islands or Diaoyu Islands are a part of the Ryukyu Island chain for all practical and political purposes.
- Before World War II, the main Island was owned by a private Japanese family who used it for fisheries business. Subsequently, in 2012 these islands were acquired by Japanese Government and made a part of the Okinawa prefecture.
- Within the Okinawa prefecture the small town of Ishigaki has the administrative control.
- Japan recently decided to change the name of the southern Japan area containing the Senkaku Islands from "Tonoshiro" to "Tonoshiro Senkaku", as another locale in downtown Ishigaki, also has the same name. The change of name was to avoid the confusion, as stated by Japan.
- Earlier Senkaku islands were a largely neglected and peaceful region. Only Kuril Islands were an area of contention between Japan and the erstwhile USSR.
- Geographically closest places to these islands are: Taiwan, Okinawa (Japan) and China.

What is China’s intention?

- The areas around these islands are possible bearers of oil and gas. This got China and Taiwan interested in these islands.
- Japan got the ownership of Formosa (Taiwan) under the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895. When Japan returned Formosa, the details of apportionment to Formosa were not clearly described. Chinese and Taiwanese believe that Senkaku islands are a part of Formosa, while the US and Japan believe otherwise.
- China’s maritime ambitions have increased considerably. It has become powerful and assertive in the South China Sea belt and East China Sea region and wants to threaten Japanese establishment there.
- China wants to completely change the power game and achieve regional and eventually global

maritime hegemony. This is in line with China's Two Ocean Strategy.

- In the South Taiwan channel and Miaku Bay, China has been flying H-6K missile bombers.
- Recently, there have been 621 transgressions by China on the Senkaku Islands.
- Schools of thought in China consider Japan as a historic enemy, as it had defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War.
- China has been using the salami slicing strategy by gradually nibbling away foreign territories in the regions where it has a dominating presence. This is done through reclamation or building islands in sea. Example: South China Sea, Ladakh.
- China follows incremental expansion strategy by deploying its military, intelligence, mining and survey ships. China maintains its presence in foreign territorial waters including Senkaku, Andaman seas and East China Sea, Natuna islands.

What has led to the recent flare up between Japan & China Over Senkaku Islands?

- Near the Senkaku islands are the Chunxiao islands where Chinese are drilling for oil and gas. However Japanese have accused Chinese of stealing oil from Japanese Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) through underwater pipes.
- Chinese's increased interest in lucrative fishery platforms in these islands to meet the rising consumption demands in China.
 - While Japan had agreed to let China use its traditional fishing grounds under a fishing agreement at Senkaku, China refused any fishing activity by Japan in its Special Economic Zones (SEZ).
- Recently, there was a standoff between Chinese and Japanese coast guard vessels, when the former entered Japanese territorial waters near Senkaku.
 - Despite retaliation the Chinese boats refused to back off, causing consternation and protest in Japan.
- The US acknowledged the incident but refused to take action saying that it will not consider mediation unless a high intensity conflict takes place.
 - Given China's aggressive foreign policy globally, if there is no constructive dialogue in the impending Chinese President's visit to Tokyo, the US may consider naval deployments near the Senkaku island region.
- In the South China Sea and East Asia Sea the US is not a potent force. Neither is the US politically willing to come and restore stability in this region for Vietnam, Philippines and Japan. The US is just apprehensive about any intrusion of China into the Pacific ocean, which would be a direct threat to the US.
- Japan perceives a major threat from China and has increased its defence budget since 2019.
- It has also invested in maritime patrol aircraft and air-to-air refueling capacity, to have a stronger strategic position in Senakau.

Way forward for Japan :

- Japan has to step up its tactical measures if it needs to maintain its control over Senkaku, as China has been maintaining its presence in that region for the last 2- 3 months.
- China has already taken away Scarborough Shoal, Paracel islands and Spratly islands and the future target is Senkaku. Merely going by foreign policy changes may not help Japan at present.
- Right after diplomatic ties were established between Japan and China in 1972, while Japan agreed to Taiwan being part of China, no reciprocal response came from China.
 - Chou En Lai- "China has no time to solve and discuss these issues with Japanese premier "
- Similar indifference came from China towards border issues with India in 1960. Japan and India need to come together on sovereignty related issues.
- Japan is presently playing the waiting game to see how far China pushes its conflicting political intentions. As per Japanese analysts on Senkaku dispute, President Xi is under huge pressure

domestically due to COVID-19 and faltering economic situation and therefore China's aggression on the maritime front is increasing. This does not mean that China wants to go for a war.

- Cooperation with India, on the East China Sea and Indian Ocean seems like the only tactically viable solution for both Japan, which would prove to be mutually beneficial for both the countries.

