

Abstract

The world's second and third largest economies are engaged in a standoff over the sovereignty of five islets and three rocks in the East China Sea, known as the Diaoyu in Chinese and the Senkaku in Japanese. Tensions erupted in September 2012 when Japan purchased three disputed islands from their private owner to keep them from the nationalist governor of Tokyo. In response, Beijing implemented a series of measures including the establishment of overlapping administration in the disputed waters. Both sides' law enforcement agencies and militaries currently operate in close proximity in disputed naval and aerial space. Unlike foreign ministries, these actors have less institutional interest in containing crises and enjoy an information monopoly allowing them to shape domestic perceptions. The two countries lack the mutual trust and communication mechanisms to manage incidents, let alone to discuss intentions or operating protocols. In the event of a skirmish, heightened nationalism, especially in China, could constrict the room for diplomatic manoeuvres to de-escalate the situation.