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## Navigating Tensions in the East China Sea

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China's response to Japan's move last year to nationalize the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands could well lead to a predicament familiar to other great powers: getting stuck in a conflict it doesn't really want.

Last month, Beijing brought its maritime law enforcement capacity, previously scattered among five agencies, under a unified command. The move, according to one Chinese analyst, will turn "an open palm" into a "clenched fist." The head of the revamped agency has affirmed that regular Chinese patrols of the disputed islands will continue. Beijing's goal is to wear down Japan -- and the rest of the world -- into accepting that Japan no longer solely administers the islands. Instead, in the course of the past six months, China has established the notion of "overlapping control."

This tactic can be termed "reactive assertiveness": respond heavy-handedly to perceived provocations by rival claimants in order to alter the status quo.

Last spring, responding to the Philippines' dispatch of a warship to arrest Chinese fishermen operating near the disputed Scarborough Shoal, China roped off the mouth of the main lagoon and began regular patrols. The result is that, in waters where neither country had a permanent presence, China has established control. Similarly, in June, after Vietnam passed new navigation regulations covering the disputed Spratly and Paracel Islands, China established a new administrative area, complete with a military garrison, Sansha City, to encompass the islands.

As for the Senkaku/Diaoyu, China took advantage of a move in September by the Japanese government to purchase three of the disputed islands from their private owner and began regularly sending law enforcement vessels into waters that previously had been administered by Japan's Coast Guard.

Such measures are designed to be irreversible. Scarborough Shoal remains inaccessible to Filipino fishermen and the development of Sansha City continues apace. On the Diaoyu/Senkakus, Chinese analysts say that the core message to Japan is: Face reality. The situation has fundamentally changed. Now we also exert our authority over the islands.

China has accomplished this without firing a single shot, instead relying on its various Coast Guard-like agencies to act as roving sovereignty defenders.

The danger is that one of these vessels -- or one of the Chinese naval and air force patrols increasingly active in the East China Sea -- will collide with a Japanese ship or plane, or even engage one. According to Japan, Chinese naval vessels locked their weapons-guiding radar on Japanese military assets, claims that China has denied.

The actors that populate the two countries' frontline of contact -- maritime agencies and militaries -- have little understanding of each other's intentions and protocols, and recent tensions have made this worse. Their missions are to vigorously defend sovereignty claims -- with corresponding incentive structures built into their bureaucracies. In the event of an accident, they would have a vested interest in blaming the other side. Their monopoly over information would shape perceptions back home among both leaders and the public. The news of a clash with Japan would pour oil on the nationalist fires in China. Beijing would have to choose between continuing to escalate or face the political peril of appearing weak against Japan.

The two countries' traditional crisis-management structures have been unraveling for several years. Top leaders mistrust each other; back-channel diplomacy between high-level politicians has waned; foreign ministries have been incapable of dialogue beyond reciting official statements. The foreign ministry in China generally learns about international incidents from foreign diplomats or the press, as its position in the Chinese decision-making bureaucracy continues to be weak. A super committee is being established to coordinate China's first grand maritime strategy. The foreign ministry will be represented, but will be only one among more than a dozen agencies involved in maritime affairs.

Aware of the absence of effective crisis mitigation mechanisms, the two countries have tried -- but failed -- to establish new and more stable communication channels. A prime minister's hotline was established but is not used in crises. A possible military-to-military hotline has been negotiated for years, but talks stop whenever tensions start. Negotiations for a maritime communication channel had barely begun when the island dispute reignited and shut talks down.

While both sides have stated that they do not want to take up arms against each other, a conflict does not have to result from a deliberate decision. Avoiding one, however, requires careful and methodical planning. Unfortunately, this is just the kind of diplomacy that both China and Japan are both neglecting, or even unlearning. The world's second- and third-largest economies

need to find ways to manage their differences, especially in this period of chronic crises -- or the crises will begin making their foreign policies for them.

*This piece is based on International Crisis Group's recent report, "Dangerous Waters: China-Japan Relations on the Rocks."*

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