

There is an appreciable risk of war between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, into which the US would be drawn, according to a new publication from the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). Conflict is genuinely possible, despite the potential costs to both nations far outweighing the economic value of the disputed territory.

In his new Adelphi publication, *The Ties That Divide: History, Honour and Territory* in Sino-Japanese Relations, William Choong, Shangri-La Dialogue Fellow for Asia-Pacific Security, examines the rapidly deteriorating relationship between the two Asian nations. He claims that the dispute between Japan and China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which is entangled with a disagreement over Japan's wartime record, has directly affected military postures in and around the disputed islands, and raised the possibility of open conflict. According to Choong, relations between the two countries have descended down a dangerous spiral. He asserts that the more Japan refuses to come clean on historical issues and admit that there is a dispute over the islands, the more China feels compelled to act in the form of incursions into the waters surrounding the chain. In January 2013, Japan alleged that Chinese naval vessels operating in the vicinity of the islands had twice locked their fire-control radars on Japanese counterparts. In response to what it deemed to be increased Chinese incursions into Japanese territorial waters around the islands, Tokyo issued a Defense White Paper exhibiting strong antipathy towards Beijing. Choong states that top-level dialogue and interactions between political leaders from both sides have now largely ceased, with both nations indulging in increasingly nationalistic behaviour and rhetoric. The impact of this dispute, he claims, has been further compounded by factors such as the enduring strength of the US-Japan alliance, Tokyo's post-2001 efforts towards remilitarisation, its shift to the right during Shinzo Abe's second term as prime minister and Beijing's perception that the US seeks to contain its 'peaceful rise' through a network of alliances and partnerships across the Asia-Pacific. Choong said: 'Existing trends entail an appreciable risk of armed conflict. The US rebalance to the Asia-Pacific is stoking Chinese fears about containment and Japan casting off its post-war restrictions in order to become a "normal power".' In the absence of any move by Japan to recognise that a territorial dispute exists, China will continue or increase its maritime incursions into the territorial waters of the Senkakus/Diaoyus. The Japan Coast Guard will respond by intercepting Chinese vessels. At some point, another 'radar lock-on' incident could occur, leading to military exchanges. This would draw in the US, because the disputed islands are covered by the US security guarantee to Japan. That in turn would imperil regional stability. A fight over the islands, states Choong, would eradicate decades of goodwill built up after 1972. It would cut off people-to-people exchanges between China and Japan and endanger sea-lanes so crucial for global commerce and supply-chain networks. Three factors, he says, should be noted when considering the risks of conflict. Firstly, the cool-headed decision of national leaders in the 1970s to shelve contentious issues such as Japan's wartime record and the question of sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has been overturned. In its place, both sides are indulging in nationalism and an inclination toward irrational or risky behaviour. Secondly, China and Japan have invested much more in their claims to the islands than is justified by their value or the costs of an open conflict over them. Thirdly, neither the cultural and linguistic affinities between the two countries nor their economic interdependence preclude the possibility of such a conflict. Scholars on both sides of the East China Sea are concerned

that hostilities could escalate and even lead to war.

According to the Asia expert, immediate measures need to be taken to reduce tensions and limit the diplomatic and strategic impact of the disputes over history and the islands. This could include the creation of crisis-management mechanisms, a code of conduct in the East China Sea and political understandings to lower the tensions over the islands and historical issues through shelving or a similar arrangement.

William Choong is the Shangri-La Dialogue Senior Fellow for Asia-Pacific Security at the IISS.

For more information on *The Ties That Divide: History, Honour and Territory in Sino-Japanese Relations*, visit the IISS website [here](https://www.iiss.org/en/publications/adelphi/by%20year/2014-de9e/the-ties-that-divide-a777).