

The meaning of the Diaoyu/Senkaku¹ Islands conflict in Sino-Japanese relations by the example of 2012 incidents

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Abstract:

The Sino-Japanese relations have been difficult for years due to various reasons. The common history of China and Japan brings about further problems. There are many of them in mutual relations and one of them is the conflict concerning the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands discussed in the article. These are crucial lands for Sino-Japanese relations because they have their specific advantages. Therefore, among others, they divide the two nations. This raises a number of historical, legal and other issues. Moreover, in the dispute there are all kinds of incidents. It has an impact on the societies of China and Japan. It is also important for the policy of both countries, among others, for country defence issues. It is manifested by many examples, and some of them can be certainly observed in the text based on the events that took place in 2012. The objective of this article is to show the importance of the conflict concerning Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the relations of China and Japan. The dispute about the small islands in the East China Sea, which for some reason divides China and Japan, which are the key countries in the Far East. The year 2012 perfectly showed the character of the discussed conflict and its importance.

Keywords:

China, Japan, Diaoyu, Senkaku, Sino-Japanese relations

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Introduction

The conflict over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea has divided China and Japan for years. Although Taiwan is also interested in these areas, it is unable to compete with its opponents for a variety of reasons. Therefore, two, much larger and stronger states count in this dispute. This also affects the specifics and nature of the antagonism presented. It may seem strange that Japan

1 The archipelago also has different names in Taiwan, but for this article the most important are the two names in the title: Diaoyu - Chinese and Senkaku - Japanese.

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and especially China are competing for such a small area. After all, the archipelago in question consists of only five small islands and three reefs (Kubiak 2005: 186). The largest of these, named Diaoyu/Uotsuri, is only 4,3 km², which is still a considerable part of the whole (Pan 2007: 71). Their area is therefore negligible, and in addition these areas are largely barren. They are therefore not particularly attractive but there are other factors that make them unique.

The aim of this article is to show the importance of the conflict over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in Sino-Japanese relations and, as a consequence, its importance and role in bilateral relations. Moreover, the aim is to show how the presented dispute influences other domains. The discussion will focus mainly on the events of 2012 mentioned in the title due to their particular significance. Therefore, they constitute an essential part of the text, as they perfectly illustrate the nature of the present antagonism. The following parts of the paper will also examine the thesis that the archipelago in question has a major impact on the image of relations between China and Japan. The role of the archipelago refers not only to the impact on actions of these countries, but also on the specific strategies chosen by these countries.

The aforementioned relevance of 2012 in the dispute means that analyzing the phenomenon from the perspective of the described period also requires at least some focus on other events. For example, those leading up to the fateful September in relations between the two states. They are scrutinized in detail in the first part of the article. However, the analyses will focus mainly on the consequences of the events presented, which are particularly telling and valuable given the subject of consideration. The subject of research has also led to a specific selection of sources, which focus largely on the incidents related to September 2012. It should be noted that the presented issues will be analyzed considering important facets.

In order to understand the background to the whole dispute, it is important to bear several things in mind. Firstly, the island area must always be associated with Chinese-Japanese relations, which have not been simple. This also makes the presented conflict difficult to resolve. In addition, there is a certain interdependence between the relations of the two countries and the islands, as they also contributed to the deterioration of the situation in the Far East.

Secondly, the whole matter is compounded by the complex and painful history of both nations. This often has a negative impact on attempts to rebuild common relations. It is worth bearing in mind the issues related, for example, to history textbooks, which divide the two societies recurrently. Within this context, one of the problems raised is that of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, which then became almost a symbol of sovereignty. It is therefore impossible to escape here

from the difficult Sino-Japanese relations, in which some problems have remained unresolved for years, as in the case of the islands.

It must be stressed at this point that the conflict over the archipelago is only one element of the difficult relationship between China and Japan. Just as often, public opinion is preoccupied with other important topics - especially those related to history. School textbooks have been mentioned above, but the Yasukuni shrine, which is a memorial to fallen Japanese soldiers, can also be cited. It also causes great tension between the arguing states. One example is the visit of the then Prime Minister of Japan Junichiro Koizumi, which reverberated in the Middle Kingdom (Warchoł 2013: 78-79). It is therefore confirmed that the presented relations are burdened with many different problems. Often one of them influences the ongoing talks on another subject and the way certain issues are perceived.

Thirdly, in order to understand what the struggle for the territories is about, it is necessary to look at the issue in a multidimensional way, because that is what the conflict is like. The small area of the territory is very misleading because the antagonism presented is characterized by considerable relevance, although this was not always the case. The multidimensionality of the conflict is due to various factors that play a greater or lesser role in it. The conflict is taking place not only at sea, but also in the air, which, by the way, only happened after the aforementioned events of 2012. This, in turn, determined the increasing financial outlay by China and Japan in relation to the islands.

Another notable feature of the dispute over the archipelago is its dynamics. Even for a few years there may not be much going on, and then the situation changes. The intensity has varied, but it has intensified in the 21st century. Going further, the strategic location is particularly important, as the islets are located within a very important route for both countries, which is why neither side wants to give up the area. They lie roughly 240 nautical miles from Japan's Okinawa and 200 nautical miles from eastern mainland China (Ramos-Mrosovsky 2008: 903). Besides, the multidimensionality presented here manifests itself in factors that play a role in the dispute. In addition to history or geography, factors such as law, politics, nationalism or the ambition of the authorities are also relevant. This confirms that the antagonism presented is driven by a really large number of variables.

Because of the topic, 2012 will be the most important year, but it is also worth mentioning what has been written before, that the area has not always had such high relevance. Despite the fact that the archipelago has fascinated its inhabitants for decades, the actual conflict in the full sense of the word only gained

momentum in the early 1970s. The report of the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East presented in 1969 had a great influence on this state of affairs. It was there that studies of crude oil in these areas appeared (Osti 2013: 7). This also meant that this small territory took on a whole new significance, especially for the People's Republic of China (PRC), which had not been particularly interested in the matter until then. This report thus contributed to the escalation of the conflict. From that moment on, the struggle for these territories and the struggle to assert rights to the Diaoyu/Senkaku began for good.

The period of 1970s was also the genesis of various incidents that have affected relations between the two countries to a certain extent ever since. Initially, however, it was other actors who played a significant role here as the islands were mainly of interest to nationalists who wanted to manifest their rights in this way (Wani 2012: 3-4). With time, the authorities became more and more actively involved in Diaoyu/Senkaku issues and, in fact, in the 21st century they completely dominated this conflict. It has therefore also become, among other things, a political game. As mentioned, there have been multiple incidents, including serious ones, over the decades, but none as significant as the events of 2012.

April 2012, the genesis of all the commotion

The previous few months had not heralded such a turn of events, as the situation was relatively stable. Relatively little has happened, however, the nature of Chinese-Japanese relations has once again become apparent. It takes very little in this relationship to reignite mutual animosity, and it happened this time as well, with the exception that April 2012 was only the beginning of a difficult period for all concerned.

This was due to the then governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, who announced that he intended to use public money to buy the islands from the private Japanese owners to whom they belonged (reuters.com, 2012). It was also significant that he was known in the community as a nationalist, and his views were also in line with this fraction in connection with the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands conflict. His plans were primarily intended to demonstrate the control of the Cherry Blossom Land over the disputed areas. He also wanted to do this by, among other things, building facilities on certain islets. His words resulted from dissatisfaction with China's actions, which was palpable, while Tokyo and Washington, according to the governor, were not sufficiently responsive to Beijing's undertakings in this matter (Kotani 2013: 4).

Shintaro Ishihara's words resonated and caused an almost immediate reaction. The Japanese government, in the context of the above statements, confirmed that it knew nothing about the governor's intentions. Most interestingly, however, it also admitted that there had already been contacts with private owners about the purchase of certain areas. The intention of the authorities was to have better and therefore more effective control over the islands. Two days after Ishihara's announcement, on 18 April 2012, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda admitted that the acquisition of the islands was one of the options discussed. Ishihara's character severely thwarted the plans as he had, among other things, good contacts with one of the private owners who also shared his nationalist nature. It was in this way that the Tokyo governor instantly became the leader in the race for the islands.

The situation did not go well with the authorities of the Cherry Blossom Land, as such actions could cause serious complications in bilateral relations with China. A little later, in May of this year, Prime Minister Noda and his advisors decided to buy the land. Such steps were taken out of the pressure created by Ishihara's actions. In addition, he had a very high level of public support, which also characterized the feelings regarding the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. The success of the governor was evidenced by the voluntary donations he collected for his cause, reaching at one point an unimaginable amount of over one billion yen (Drifte 2013: 35-36).

These measures made it clear that the Japanese were fed up with waiting and demanded, in a sense, decisive action (Ishihara's plans were part of this). Such a situation caused a lot of problems for Tokyo, as the governor's position triggered a discussion in Taiwan, but much more importantly in the following months also in China. However, the first signals that appeared regarding Ishihara's comment were quite moderate, but they were also combined with an emphasis on the Middle Kingdom's right to the Diaoyu Islands.

In April 2012, a spokesman for the PRC Foreign Ministry also spoke out and said that the disputed archipelago was part of China. This therefore indicates Chinese sovereignty over these territories. He added that no action by Japan would change this fact. The then Vice President Xi Jinping also joined the discussion, maintaining that Tokyo should not aggravate relations between the two countries, and that such issues should be resolved by the parties concerned in an appropriate manner (Drifte 2013: 37).

As early as mid-May there was a chance to discuss the problems that had arisen, as the then PRC Prime Minister Wen Jiabao met with Noda, who held the same position in Japan. The talks took place in Beijing, but no major breakthrough

was achieved. The Chinese premier remained adamant that the islands belonged to his country's territory, while Noda echoed that activity of the Middle Kingdom, especially near the Senkaku, offended the feelings of the Japanese people (Swaine 2013: 13).

So it can be seen from this and previous examples that the words of the Governor of Tokyo exacerbated the situation. The worst period was yet to come, but before that it was possible to resolve some of the problems. This could not be done because after the calm comments came the following weeks in which there was, for example, the already mentioned information about the desire of the government of the Land of the Cherry Blossom to acquire the disputed areas.

The following weeks leading up to September 2012

In this way, tensions constantly grew around the Diaoyu/Senkaku issue. There were many factors contributing to this state of affairs, but the most important by far was the issue of the purchase of the land dividing the two nations, which was causing concern in China. In addition, there was a lack of sensitivity among politicians and representatives of the conflicting parties. For example, there was a famous interview for the Financial Times with the Japanese ambassador to the PRC, Uichiro Niwa. In it, he expressed, among other things, great concern about how the fate of both countries would turn out once Ishihara fulfilled his intentions. He also added that such actions would adversely affect the interests of Beijing and Tokyo (ft.com, 2012).

Criticism quickly arose from various quarters regarding the irresponsibility of the ambassador and the fact that he should not have made such statements, mainly on account of his position. The fact that he was later dismissed from his position speaks a lot about how serious his offence was. In addition, the Prime Minister of Japan Yoshihiko Noda announced on 7 July 2012 that the government was working on the purchase of interesting land.

It has been some time since the words of the Governor of Tokyo, but it is well apparent that the subject of the islands would sooner or later divide China and Japan again (it only needed the right stimulus). The failure to resolve this issue in earlier decades has resurfaced in various ways from time to time. The crisis that was initiated by Ishihara was visible in many fields. One of them was Chinese society which did not hide its growing bitterness. It was to such an extent that in surveys carried out at the time, for example, there were calls for the use of armed forces. It also became popular to believe that a clash, using troops, with Japan over the archipelago issue was possible (Drifte 2013: 38-39). This also shows how far

things have come and in what position the authorities of the quarrelling states found themselves.

Once again, the key thing seems to have been missing, namely better communication between Tokyo and Beijing. Previously, however, other problems related to the conflict in question had been dealt with in a similar way. The difference in this particular case was that none of them had such a strong impact on bilateral interests. Dialogue and addressing the historical opponent in the entire dispute were not easy, however, as in the summer of 2012, problems arose at almost every turn. It was therefore difficult to expect both countries to resolve the impasse quickly and, most importantly, amicably.

Apart from the increased patrols at sea or other incidents in this field, which, however, had already occurred before April 2012³, it was significant that the conflict had renewed public interest. This was also evidenced by, among other things, two actions in August of the year in question. They were popular especially in the 20th century, so it was a clear signal that animosities in the dispute still exist.

The first of the actions in question took place on 15 August 2012. The commotion was caused by activists from Hong Kong, who landed on one of the islands at that time. The reaction was immediate, and the action of the volunteers ended with their deportation (Iida 2017: 148). The second incident, on the other hand, was the work of activists from Japan, who four days later also went to the islands to raise their country's flags there (scmp.com, 2012).

Moreover, at the end of August 2012, the car of the aforementioned Japanese ambassador Uichiro Niwa was attacked in Beijing (bbc.com, 2012). These events and an unfortunate coincidence contributed to the escalation of the dispute over the islands, which took place in September 2012. That month, Sino-Japanese relations deteriorated considerably, as the issue of the purchase of the islets then came to its conclusion. The race between Shintaro Ishihara and the Japanese government was in fact fought until the last days. Although the governor of Tokyo was in a strong position, this proved to be insufficient in the end. Due to financial problems, the private owner Kurihara Kunioki agreed to the government offer.

3 It should be added that the maritime incidents over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands have varied greatly in intensity. They ranged from those which did not affect bilateral relations to those which gave rise to disputes within China and Japan. Moreover, it should be added that they took place both before and after September 2012. Obviously, they are closely linked to the current issues and their intensity increased at times and decreased at others. The first trend will aptly appear a little later after September 2012, when incidents of all kinds, and not only at sea, will be the order of the day. In time, there will also be incidents in the air, which will put the authorities of both entities on alert once again.

This was quite a disappointment for Ishihara, who after all had a lot of capital for this purpose (Drifte 2013: 36).

Such actions by Japanese politicians were primarily intended to prevent the islands from falling into the hands of nationalists, including Shintaro Ishihara. However, the matter was very delicate because the position of the PRC had to be taken into account. Prime Minister Noda in those days assured Beijing that buying back some of the disputed areas was to ensure stability and not to create even more chaos that might have arisen. As expected, such rationale did not reach Chinese representatives, who did not accept the Japanese Prime Minister's arguments (Kotani 2013: 4).

Nevertheless, the matter was already settled. The date of 11 September 2012 became symbolic for further Chinese-Japanese relations and the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute. On that day Japan officially signed a contract for the purchase of the three islands (Swaine 2013: 14). It is worth mentioning that the whole operation cost the government 26 million dollars (polityka.pl, 2012). Thus, the governor of Tokyo was no longer a major problem for the central government, but 11 September 2012 brought a new challenge. Such was certainly the case of facing Beijing's reaction to the above steps, which the PRC disapproved of. This had consequences that nearly immediately affected Sino-Japanese relations.

The effects of 11 September 2012 in Sino-Japanese relations

Almost instantaneously, large-scale anti-Japanese demonstrations broke out in China. They occurred not only in the capital, where the embassy of the Land of the Cherry Blossom was located, but also in other regions of the Middle Kingdom. It even got to the point where on one day there were protests in more than 50 cities, which perfectly illustrates the scale of the whole problem that had arisen. Thus, the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands conflict was once again on everyone's lips. The anti-Japanese demonstrations were also accompanied by the aggression of disgruntled crowds, which led to various incidents. The arson attack on the Panasonic factory was just one example of such behavior. In China, the call to boycott Japanese products was becoming louder and louder.

The reactions of the Chinese people could not go unnoticed by the country's authorities. Interestingly, excessive aggression and similar behavior were not praised, but at the same time, it was emphasized that the protests of the Chinese people were a symbol of their patriotism. It should be added that some media tried to calm the mood a little by maintaining that the speeches against Japan should be kept within certain limits (nytimes.com, 2012). Only on the basis

of this brief outline of what happened immediately after the purchase of the islets by the Japanese government, one can realize how important this small area was and still is in the relations between the two countries.

These, in turn, for many different reasons have never been the easiest of matters. The dispute over the archipelago was only one of the problems. Going back for a moment to the first days after 11 September 2012, it should be added that there were also articles in the Chinese press which clearly spoke about the issue of rights to the Diaoyu Islands. Such arguments and conclusions, however, recurred with every major incident in the conflict presented.

What particularly marked September 2012 were its far-reaching consequences. There were many incidents which translated into increasingly difficult contacts and prevailing moods (Japanese shops, restaurants and cars were destroyed). The animosity among the inhabitants was so great that tourism also suffered as the Chinese did not want to visit Japan (polityka.pl, 2012). The economic and business consequences, however, were much more serious. On the political scene, too, there were nervous and determined moves by the Japanese. Many of these were combined with a degree of Chinese frustration that was inevitable. Beijing's position was made clear by successive cancellations of both official and unofficial visits. The work these days focused primarily on legal acts that could ultimately legitimize larger claims on the archipelago in the future (Drifte 2013: 44). It follows that virtually all of the authorities' undertakings at that time concerned the conflict over the islands.

23 September 2012 turned out to be both telling and symbolic for Sino-Japanese relations. This day also confirms the thesis of the great importance of islands in bilateral relations. On the 23rd of September, the Chinese side informed Tokyo about the cancellation of the celebrations of the 40th anniversary of the normalization of mutual contacts, which were to be held at the end of the month in the Chinese capital (Swaine 2013: 14). This fact clearly paints a picture of September 2012 in Sino-Japanese relations, which were once again in crisis. The matter was therefore very serious, because it affected other levels. It should not be forgotten on this occasion that the cause of such turmoil were the small islands in the East China Sea presented here.

The issue of the cancellation of joint meetings or similar opportunities for talks by the Chinese was linked to several factors, among which the dislike of the Japanese after the events presented earlier was certainly of great importance. Besides, it seems that any contacts in those days were simply out of the question, e.g. as a result of the threat combined with the demonstrations that took over the whole of China in the second half of September 2012. This kind of anti-Japanese

policy also involved other actions. For example, on 20 September a government agency issued a map of the areas around the Diaoyu Islands. To further illustrate the fever that prevailed at the time, it is also interesting to note that it was on these days that weather forecasts for the disputed areas began to be broadcast on the state television station. The activities concerning the archipelago had a changing and evolving nature. From these it is possible to discern the trend and direction of Beijing's policy in relation to Tokyo's decision.

Japanese politicians, in addition to the implications from the PRC, also had to bear in mind the potential feelings of their public on the whole issue. It must be said that these were essentially divided over the actions of their own authorities and lacked general consensus. Several variables contributed to this mood of the Japanese people. In addition to the protests in China, the destruction of Japanese property, etc., the people of the Cherry Blossom Land were also victims of cyber-attacks that affected selected institutions of their state. There were also reports during this period that some demonstrations were instigated by Chinese government agencies. With time, the protests stopped, because, according to the accepted thesis, there was a risk that they could even turn into anti-government protests.

What was also interesting in the whole problem was that some Chinese scholars argued that some of the arrested demonstrators did not even know where the disputed islets, which were the basis of all the antagonism here, were located. What is also symbolic in comparison with the situation in the PRC is that in Japan there were in fact no protests or other organised demonstrations. There were only isolated incidents or actions e.g. in Kobe, but they did not compare to what was happening in the Middle Kingdom (so the difference in approach was significant) (Drifte 2013: 44-45). However, various factors and the position in which the Chinese people found themselves must be considered here.

This was also evident in other areas. To complete the economic and business theme, it should be added that in these areas the effects of 11 September 2012 were much more severe than initially anticipated. All of this resulted from the PRC's actions towards Japan and the relative boycott that affected Japanese products. Although the government denied intervening in these matters, certain steps were evident that affected economic issues. Japanese business in the Middle Kingdom was not easy at the time, e.g. because of successive inspections. The decision to buy out the islets also affected Japanese car companies, which had to face significantly lower sales in China.

What is important in economic terms, however, is mainly that trade between the two countries recorded its first decline in three years in 2012. The

last such trend was due to the global crisis. This time the genesis of the problem had its root in the antagonism in question, which proves once again its relevance. Besides, it must be said that back in 2011 Chinese imports accounted for about 23% of Japanese exports. Thus, for Tokyo, it was important to have good relations with Beijing in the presented fields because the Chinese market was important for many companies. To confirm such a thesis, the fact can be quoted that already in November 2012, i.e. basically a month after the key events, some Japanese companies in China claimed that the dispute really affected their interests. However, one should not go to extremes here, as it should be remembered that there were also sectors that were not affected (Drifte 2013: 45-48).

To conclude the economic theme, it may be added that China also suffered loss from the then prevailing resentment, which was transferred to specific industries, because the two countries had cooperated for years in specific areas (Tersa 2014: 144). The two sides therefore suffered losses, however, to different degrees. The conclusion that emerges here is that the issues described above were determined by many factors. Most importantly, they are a good reflection of the impact on bilateral relations of events originating in the conflict over the archipelago.

The aftermath of 11 September 2012, however, is not only about political, economic, and other issues. That day also had a very strong impact on military activity in its broadest sense, which is another important element in the picture of described events in Sino-Japanese relations. The reality of the last months of 2012 resulted in incidents of varying intensity around the islands. The main intention of the Chinese in such actions was to show that the Diaoyu/Senkaku problem exists and the Japanese could no longer deny it. Tokyo at one time used similar tactics on the issue of the islets in order, interestingly enough, to avoid forced negotiations with Beijing. These in turn could have led to a weakening of the position of the Land of the Cherry Blossom on the disputed areas (Fatton 2013: 2).

Besides, the steps taken by the PRC were intended to put constant pressure on the other side. One point in this strategy was Chinese patrols around the archipelago. By the end of the year, moreover, such patrols were also done in the air. In response, Tokyo also had to deploy the air force. This happened in January 2013. In military terms, however, 11 September 2012 had far greater implications than could have been assumed, for example, from the perspective of the previous history of the conflict in question. Usually, tension was followed by specific movements in the waters around Diaoyu/Senkaku, but what has happened since September was something entirely new. As an indication of the scale of the

turmoil, Chinese vessels had violated the waters of the area dividing the two nations more than 40 times by May 2013 (Drifte 2013: 48-49).

Such a figure can act on the imagination, but there is something else to be mentioned at this point. There were, apparently, quite a few such incidents at sea, but they could be expected. However, the incident on 13 December 2012, which redefined the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute in Sino-Japanese relations, is worthy of special mention.

It was an incident involving a PRC patrol plane that flew over the archipelago. In response, the Japanese immediately sent their machines into the air. The Japanese authorities protested strongly, because it was an exceptional event, among other things because it was the first time in history that the airspace of their country had been violated by the Middle Kingdom (so it was a fact without precedent). These opinions were met with a laconic response from the Chinese side, which maintained that such a move was nothing special, as the Diaoyu Islands were simply part of their state (tvn24.pl, 2012).

The conclusion from this event was therefore clear that nothing had changed in principle, as both China and Japan continued to stick to their beliefs and arguments. Moreover, from that point on, the air force, which until then had stayed away from the islands, was also involved in the dispute. The conflict assumed a new character as the airborne units expanded their operations even further. The next face of the dispute entailed even greater expenditure on its activity. 13 December 2012 was therefore an incredibly significant date in the history of Diaoyu/Senkaku for many different reasons.

To conclude the extended thread of the major consequences of 11 September and the issues related to that event, it must be emphasized that both sides entered the 2013 new year focusing their work primarily on strengthening military resources. The following weeks brought no progress, and bilateral relations were disastrous. The turn of the year was characterized by intensification of activities that could bear fruit in the next few months. Thus, for example, the Japanese side concentrated mainly on matters concerning its own defense, which, by the way, seemed rational in view of current events, which after all were very frequent on various levels.

Japan's plans also reflected in other facts. At the beginning of 2013, the Liberal Democratic Party, which was in power at the time, announced that the national defense budget would increase by more than a billion dollars. All of this was due to the fact that many scenarios and therefore potential events were taken into account, of which the dispute with China over the islands in the East China

Sea was also a very important part (Métraux 2013: 223-224). The importance that the archipelago reached at the turn of 2012/2013 is therefore perfectly illustrated.

Japan remained strong even without these steps, e.g. in terms of its navy, but once again it was 11 September 2012 that forced the authorities to take even more action. Hence new programs for the country's defense were agreed on - because of, among other things, the growing threat from the Middle Kingdom. Furthermore, the intention was to strengthen the alliance with the United States and also, for example, to broaden the policy of surveillance over the islands (Behrendt 2013: 77). As it can be seen, the plans were extensive and long-term, but they had to be this way because of who stood on the other side. After all, we are talking about China, whose ambitions and resources reached much further than just the Diaoyu/Senkaku areas. Moreover, they had a very large potential at their disposal. This all stood behind the policy of the Cherry Blossom Land at the beginning of 2013. It also consisted of the subsequent incidents around the islands, which were still frequent.

The harsh reality of the islands dispute and Sino-Japanese relations after 2012

The first weeks of 2013 were not very different from the second half of the previous 12 months. Relations between the two countries were bad, and there was no shortage of incidents either. The biggest difference came from the fact that precisely since the recalled incident on 13 December 2012, incidents also took place in the air. This caused, among other things, a significant increase in the number of alerts in Japan, during which the country's own fighters were used in response. Mutual politics also suffered, and the consensus or resolution of the dispute over the islands was out of the question.

Over time, the intensity of the conflict has somewhat diminished, although, importantly, this does not mean that further related events did not occur in Sino-Japanese relations. As it usually happened in these particularly difficult contacts, just when it seemed that there would be a chance for talks, something got in the way again. Such was the case when the PRC extended its own airspace control to include the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands (wprost.pl, 2013).

Such actions did not promote any attempts to exit the crisis that had been going on continuously since September 2012. It can therefore be said with conviction that the chaos depicted was already more than 12 months old, as we are talking about the incidents of November 2013. The following weeks had the typical characteristics of Tokyo-Beijing relations. There were frequent mutual disputes, provocations and, in addition, topics dividing the two nations emerged from time

to time. Despite such a difficult reality, the second half of 2014 saw a breakthrough in bilateral relations to which the leaders of China and Japan also contributed.

The culminating, and incredibly symbolic, moment for this development was the conversation between PRC President Xi Jinping and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. It took place during the summit of APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), the Economic Community of Asia and the Pacific, which was then taking place in Beijing. What is particularly meaningful is that it was also their first official meeting since taking up their political posts (so one can see well what kind of relations the conflicting parties had at that time). In addition, there was a handshake and the general feeling was most positive. Despite the fact that the issue of the islands still divided China and Japan, steps were decided upon to improve the dialogue between Tokyo and Beijing (tvn24.pl, 2014).

An important issue of this exchange of views was the talks held around the subject of the four-point agreement (Duchâtel 2016: 16). It originated directly from the desire to improve difficult relations and concerned the promotion of mutual understanding between the peoples and the development of economic relations between the two entities. The other two points related to cooperation in the East China Sea, as well as the issue of security in East Asia (mofa.go.jp, 2014).

It is therefore clear from the above outline that one area of discussion also concerned the disputed archipelago. It was decided to start work related to the establishment of a crisis mechanism that would help to avoid various incidents in the future. Finally, Xi Jinping's meeting with Shinzo Abe took place shortly after the official position of both countries, which spoke of the need to improve bilateral contacts. It also included the issue of the problematic Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, which again underlines their importance (japantimes.co.jp, 2014).

Conclusions

Indeed, the described conversation between the leaders in November 2014 contributed to a better situation. Despite this, Chinese-Japanese relations remained essentially unchanged. From time to time, various issues have surfaced that have divided and will probably continue to divide the societies of the two countries for many long years to come. This is not only true of the conflict over the archipelago, but also of other issues.

What is most important, however, from the brief information above is that it was only a little over two years after the events of September 2012 that there was a major breakthrough in China-Japan relations. This aptly demonstrates the role these events have played in the modern history of these nations. It seems that

they are also a symbol of the nature of the uneasy contacts between representatives of the Cherry Blossom Land and the Middle Kingdom.

The significance of the events depicted is therefore very clear, but it also supports the accepted thesis that the islands have a considerable influence on the nature of Sino-Japanese relations. In addition, they have an impact on many other levels, which together create a specific picture. On this occasion, however, it is worth remembering a few more things. One, that the intensity of the dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands is conditioned by a large number of variables, and two, that it varies from time to time. There are periods when very little really happens, but often it is simply the calm before the storm. This is also one of the main features of this antagonism between China and Japan. It must not be forgotten that the events that make up the conflict are not only a problem for the authorities, but also an important issue for societies. Issues related to the islands can have an impact on the economy or even tourism, for example.

The events of 2012 described, as intended, have clearly demonstrated the importance of this antagonism, which fits in its own way with the realities of the Far East. For years it has divided Tokyo and Beijing, which have had to deal with many difficult incidents not only in the Diaoyu/Senkaku issues. Sino-Japanese relations have the quality of being determined, among other things, also by an uneasy history. The conflict over the archipelago is therefore one of its components. The year 2012, but also worth mentioning, other events in this dispute have well reflected its importance. Despite the islands' small size, these areas of interest to China and Japan should not be underestimated, as they are linked to very important threads. The ambition and plans of the leaders of both countries are at stake here. Together, therefore, all these factors contribute to the importance and specific overtones of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in Chinese-Japanese relations.

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