

Maritime territorial disputes and the G7 - the limits of agenda setting

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Something is amiss in the seas East of Asia. If one includes Taiwan in the count, ten nations are struggling for territorial control and sovereignty in the waters of the East and South China Seas. Japan is one of the states who claims disputed territory in the East China Sea (ECS), and it has previously utilised the G7 summits to gain international support for these claims. Hosting the 2016 summit provided a special opportunity for Japan to place its concerns centrally on the agenda of the two-day meeting. Yet, Japan's failure to extract any tangible commitments from the other group members showcases the limitations of agenda-setting in decisively influencing international action.

Maritime territorial disputes in the Asia Pacific are rooted in incompatible interpretations of the United Nations

Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), as illustrated by the continuing disagreement of Japan and China over the proper extent of their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in the ECS. Resources, strategy and history also play into the ECS dispute between China and Japan. According to the [UNCLOS](#) from 1982, states are entitled to an EEZ stretching up to 200 nautical miles (nm) (370 kilometres) from their coastlines. The ECS's narrow width of 360nm does not allow both countries to claim the full extent of their EEZs. In accordance with Article 15 of UNCLOS on resolving territorial water disputes, Japan has proposed to divide the sea along a [median line](#), but so far China has rejected this idea. Within an EEZ, maritime traffic can travel freely, but the sovereign state can claim and develop natural resources such as fish, oil, and gas. These development rights are essential to

maritime territorial disputes in Asia, due to the rich resources the basins hold. [Estimated](#) to contain 25% of the world's fishing resources, as well as 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, the South China Sea (SCS) is the bigger prize to claim, but the ECS also holds substantial energy reserves. In addition, control of the maritime territory has military and symbolical value for each of the claimants. In a neighbourhood as volatile and riddled with mutual suspicions as East Asia, extending their area of control is beneficial to all of the states. Different historiographies across the region further entrench contradictory claims, and historical enmities complicate resolution and compromise. Both countries (and Taiwan) have made their claims increasingly forcefully since the discovery of natural resources in 1968, and all three lay competing historical claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands just off Taiwan's coast. These islands provide territorial outliers for each of the claimants, and promise greater military and strategic control for whoever succeeds in holding them. In sum, the ECS is a legal,

geographical and political conundrum, further complicated by the multitude of interests involved.

The stakes for the G7 to take a stand on maritime disputes have risen in recent years. Many claimants are becoming more assertive in their demands and some – China and Japan at the fore – have taken concrete steps to advance their claims. In 2012, Japan bought three of the Senkaku islands from a private owner, a unilateral affirmation of its sovereignty which was met by great public outrage in both Taiwan and China. More recently, China has engaged in well-publicised construction activities in the SCS, building islands on rocks and half-submerged reefs. Other claimant states are understandably worried that this aggressive expansion will overtake legal arbitration and reinforce China's case on the ground before the international community has time to find a multilateral solution to the problem. If China succeeds in this approach, it might set an uncomfortable precedent for similar territorial disputes in other parts of the world. International institutions were built to prevent the logic of 'those who move

most quickly and ruthlessly will conquer' becoming the guiding principle of international relations. An unhindered expansionism on behalf of any country is a failure for these institutions, including the G7.

Although maritime security has been on the G7 agenda quite frequently in recent years, hosting the summit has enabled Japan to make the issue a greater priority in 2016. As part of the G7's expanding foreign policy agenda, maritime security was first mentioned in the [2009](#) and [2010](#) communiqués, albeit in the context of piracy, not territory. The first statements to make the explicit connection between maritime security and the ECS emerged from the [2014](#) and [2015](#) summits. A similar tone characterised both statements, in which leaders professed to be '(deeply) concerned by tensions in the East and South China Seas'. The 2015 statement barely hid its criticism of China, strongly opposing 'the use of intimidation, coercion or force, as well as any unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo, such as large scale land reclamation'. Abe took a number of steps to build on the

momentum of the two previous summits for Ise-Shima 2016. First, he mentioned 'unilateral challenges to the status quo through the use of coercion' as early as January 2016 in his [welcome message](#), as one of the main issues facing the G7 members. Another step in steering G7 discussions toward maritime security was the Foreign Ministers' meeting in Hiroshima in April, which issued a separate [Statement on Maritime Security](#), condemning China for its unilateral expansionism. China will host the G20 in September, and Abe is interested in garnering as much support as possible for Japan's position before the attention is shifted to its larger neighbour. Lastly, Japan invited some of its Asian neighbours – most significantly the SCS claimant Vietnam, from which the US has just lifted a decades-old arms embargo – to the G7 Outreach Meeting, hoping to build coalitions and convey unity. Japan made its intentions clear enough for international media such as [Aljazeera](#) and the German [Spiegel](#) to pick up on the topic of maritime security in the lead-up to the summit. In sum, Japan used its host position to set

maritime security firmly on the agenda, and to make its case without having to exert effort on disproving contradictory points of view.

Despite Japan's unique agenda-setting powers, G7 statements on Asian maritime security are bound to be paper tigers – strong on words and weak on action – precisely because the summits bring disinterested parties to the table. Diplomats excel at affirming principles and values in ornate and lofty language. Yet where a nation's interests do not provide immediate incentives, action on these principles will fall short. At first glance, the G7's track record on maritime security looks promising. For example, the G7 Research Group at Toronto University attests the G7 a high compliance of [88% on their maritime security targets](#) for 2015. However, a closer look at the data shows that the member states achieved this high rating through such measures as rescuing refugees in the Mediterranean, and combatting pollution, smuggling and piracy. These are undoubtedly valuable pursuits, but without direct implications for Asian maritime security. Only France,

the US and Japan took concrete steps beyond diplomacy to address the SCS and ESC disputes that put maritime security on the agenda in the first place. France has residual post-colonial responsibilities to the region, and the US has been more invested in the area since its ['pivot to Asia'](#) in 2011.

However, the other G7 members have fewer ties to the region, and where they do, their allegiances are often ambiguous. For example, China outflanks Japan as a trading partner for [all of the G7 members](#), and these G7 members will be reluctant to jeopardise this relationship so as to uphold a principle in a region half a world away, unless they have more immediate interests at stake. Of course, the principles of peaceful dispute resolution and territorial integrity are globally important, but the European G7 members are more interested in upholding it in their immediate neighbourhood – Ukraine and the Middle East in particular. China has been [notoriously bristly](#) about outside interference on the territorial disputes. As long as G7 leaders do not agree on concrete measures to enhance their lip-

service to maritime security, their statements will have little effect beyond arousing Chinese indignation.

Considering the great amount of attention maritime security issues received in the lead-up to the talks, the summit's final statement's tame remarks on the subject show that Abe was not able to build on the momentum of previous meetings when faced by the other leaders' limited enthusiasm. Although the summit's final [Leaders' Declaration](#) contains a bigger section on maritime security than in previous years, its language is much weaker than in 2015 and includes a wider array of maritime issues such as environmental sustainability. The condemnatory language of the two previous declarations has been diluted and substituted with multiple entreaties to use international legal avenues for dispute resolution. The most interesting rhetorical novelty is the specific reference to arbitration, which is likely meant to encourage China to take the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration on its 9-dash line claim in the SCS seriously. The ruling is expected for later in 2016.

Altogether, the final statement contains more references to legal measures and fewer strong statements than Abe was likely aiming for. Similarly, leaders did not utilise the public attention after the summit to comment on maritime security. Neither French President Hollande nor British Prime Minister Cameron, who gave post-summit press conferences, mentioned the issue. Likewise, US President Barack Obama did not use his historic speech at Hiroshima to make any remarks on specific contemporary security issues, although he did affirm the Japanese-American friendship and alliance.

Despite Japan's ideal agenda-setting position and Abe's personal effort to bring maritime security to the forefront of this year's G7 discussions, it could not bring about significant new developments on the issue. This suggests that agenda-setting powers alone do not suffice in effecting international action. As every year, the summit has raised Japan's profile in the international community and its increased visibility may improve its position in regional discussions on



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maritime security. However, the Ise-Shima summit's disappointments show that interested parties need to be included in international conferences if their outcomes are to surpass symbolism.

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