



The US-Japan Security Treaty and the East China Sea

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During a three day visit to Tokyo on 23-25 April 2014, US President Barack Obama confirmed that the islands known as Senkaku by Japan and Diaoyu by China are covered by 1960 US-Japan Security Treaty, under which the US has pledged to come to Japan's defence if its territory is attacked.

In an interview with the Japanese newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Obama [said](#):

The policy of the US is clear – the Senkaku islands are administered by Japan and therefore fall within the scope of Article 5 of the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security. And we oppose any unilateral attempt to undermine Japan's administration of these islands.

President Obama also stressed that this was “not a new position”, adding that “it would be a profound mistake to continue to see escalation around this issue instead of dialogue.”

Article 5 of the [US-Japan Security Treaty](#) says:

Each Party recognizes that an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional provisions and processes. Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall be immediately reported to the Security Council of the United Nations in accordance with the provisions of Article 51 of the Charter. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security.

In exchange for the US promise to defend Japan in the event of an attack, the US was given the right under the treaty to establish military bases in Japan. The largest is a US Marine base at Futenma in Okinawa prefecture.

Obama's remarks come at a time of growing Japanese nervousness about the state of its longstanding alliance with the US. There are concerns that the US '[pivot to Asia](#)', first announced in 2011, could in practice become a pivot to China. US commentators have noted that Japan has taken steps to improve relations with Russia recently.

Relations between the US and Japan have also been strained by the fact that Japanese government ministers continue to visit the controversial [Yasukuni shrine](#), at which Japanese war dead, including several convicted as 'war criminals' at the end of World War II, are honoured. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who many associate with a more assertive nationalist politics, visited the shrine in December 2013. This issue has also created renewed tension between Japan and South Korea.

There has been considerable local resentment over the years about the Futenma base in Okinawa, although in April 2013 the two governments [agreed](#) that it – and five other US bases – would be returned to Japan by the late 2020s. There have also been differences between the US and Japan over the prospective Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal – amongst other things, they have been finding it hard to agree on how to address key agricultural tariffs.

More positively, the US is supporting efforts by the Japanese Government to amend the country's Constitution so that its defence force can play a more active role in the world.

Some observers have [argued](#) that Obama's statements mark the first time a US president has clearly taken Japan's side over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. They do so on the grounds that no president has explicitly said until now that the islands are indeed covered by the 1960 treaty (although other senior officials have done so).

The degree to which the president's statements have reassured the Japanese Government remains to be seen. The US does not take a position on the sovereignty of the islands and Obama's willingness to accept that there is an 'issue' on which there should be 'dialogue', means that the American stance is still likely to be viewed by some as falling short of the unconditional support that Japan desires. The Japanese Government does not accept that there is a dispute to be discussed with China. The UK Government takes the [same position](#) on sovereignty as its US counterpart.

Meanwhile, China has responded negatively to Obama's remarks. A Chinese foreign ministry official [said](#): "The so-called US-Japan alliance is a bilateral arrangement from the Cold War and ought not to harm China's territorial sovereignty and reasonable rights."

Over recent months, China has been continuing to strongly press its claim to sovereignty over the islands. In November 2013 the Chinese Government announced the creation of an '[Air Defence Identification Zone](#)' in the East China Sea, under which all non-commercial air traffic is expected to submit flight plans before entering the zone. Both Japan and the US considered this a provocative move but responded relatively calmly. While refusing to acknowledge the zone, the US authorities have recommended that US airlines comply. Japanese airlines originally complied but ceased to do so under pressure from the government. The Chinese zone overlaps with similar Japanese and South Korean zones. Such zones are not binding under international law and no country has the right to shoot down airlines that enter without authorisation. The zones remain international airspace. The EU has expressed concern about the zone. No UK airlines schedule flights that cross the Chinese ADIZ, and the British authorities have taken [no actions](#) to ensure compliance with it.

Background

"[Fact Sheet: U.S.-Japan Bilateral Cooperation](#)", White House document, 25 April 2014; "[Japan-US relations](#)", Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 25 April 2014; "[Japan-US relations: issues for Congress](#)", Congressional Research Service report, 20 February 2014; [The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands: tension between Japan and China in the East China Sea](#), House of Commons Library briefing SN06475, 16 April 2013.

Note: The UK-Japan defence relationship was strengthened in 2012 by a [Defence Cooperation Agreement](#), as part of which Japan agreed to develop weapons with the UK. In 2013, the two governments [agreed](#) a [Defence Equipment Cooperation framework](#) and an [Information Security Agreement](#). In April 2014, the Japanese Government announced that it is abandoning its longstanding *de facto* [ban on exporting arms](#) to other countries.