



News Release

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Sasakawa USA Reports on Mock Exercise Involving Crisis in East China Sea

Report released findings from a three-day tabletop exercise with teams from China, Japan and the U.S. represented by former senior Japanese and U.S. military, intel and national security officials

WASHINGTON, D.C. — With worldwide attention focused on the Korean Peninsula in recent weeks, Sasakawa USA conducted a tabletop exercise (TTX) last month that explored the possibilities of a crisis between Japan and China over disputed claims to sovereignty of the uninhabited Senkaku (Diaoyu in Chinese) Islands in the East China Sea. A group of experienced retired U.S. and Japanese defense, intelligence, and security officials gathered at the Lockheed Martin Center for Innovation in Suffolk, Virginia for an unclassified exploration of U.S.-Japan alliance coordination and possible responses to potential Sino-Japanese confrontations in the vicinity of the Senkaku Islands.

The American and Japanese retired officials played government roles in U.S. and Japan teams. The China team was played by four experienced China specialists from the U.S. The TTX itself consisted of a series of five different scenarios, each designed to explore ways in which a Senkaku crisis might be triggered and then evolve. The TTX provided insights on issues that will be important if an actual crisis occurs; in addition, it identified a number of important issues that require further consideration in Track II events, especially future TTXs, as well as detailed consultation and contingency planning by government officials in both countries.

[Click here to view the full report.](#)

Key insights from all participants included:

- None of the three teams involved—Japan, China, and the United States—wanted a war over the Senkaku Islands. Military moves sought a diplomatic way to resolve issues. Washington was anxious to facilitate a peaceful solution while maintaining its strong alliance with Japan.
- Tokyo and Beijing did not trust one another and were concerned about domestic political backlash if they failed to act strongly during a crisis. All three teams were primed to reinforce their military presence rapidly to deter any attempt to resolve sovereignty claims by physical seizure of the Senkaku Islands.
- De-escalation was difficult because each side tried to deter the other by ordering additional military deployments, raising suspicion in the other country about its ultimate intentions.
- The TTX reinforced the experience of many real-world events: in an emerging crisis it is very difficult to get all facts straight early on, and thus there is a reluctance to engage with other governments until there is certainty about what happened.
- The PLA leadership within the China team prepared plans for a military operation to seize the islands on the pretext of removing the Japanese nationalist group, and believed that their plan would succeed. However, the communist party leadership players on the China team did not authorize a landing. They were aware of the high risks of combat operations, and were prepared to launch an invasion only if Japan occupied the islands, or if the American guarantee to support Japan under Article 5 wavered.

- Beijing had the advantage when it came to innovative “deployments.” China’s maritime militia, which consists of hundreds of fishing boats, provided Beijing with the ability to organize a “maritime crowd” that could steam to the Senkaku Islands and numerically swamp the Japanese Coast Guard presence.

About Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA is an independent American non-profit, non-partisan institution devoted to research, analysis, and better understanding of the U.S.-Japan relationship. Through research and education programs, Sasakawa USA facilitates people-to-people exchange and dialogue between American and Japanese policymakers, influential citizens, and the broader public.