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Japan-Korea Relations and the Tokdo/Takeshima Dispute: The Interplay of Nationalism and Natural Resources

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ABSTRACT

The Tokdo/Takeshima dispute has remained a major irritant in Japan-Korea relations, preventing a deepening of diplomatic ties. This paper claims that the dynamics of the dispute have been informed by nationalism and access to natural resources. It argues that it is precisely the interplay of these considerations that can lead to the rapid escalation of a maritime territorial dispute or conversely to a diffusion of tensions in bilateral relations. Nationalism and the quest for natural resources have, in the context of the Tokdo/Takeshima issue, been locked in a convergent and escalating relationship. Nationalistic sentiments and the imperative to guarantee access to natural resources have reinforced each other in fuelling the dispute. The purpose of this paper is therefore to offer a better understanding of how nationalism and resources influence and interplay in the Tokdo/Takeshima dispute and to identify pathways to cooperation.

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Japan-Korea Relations and the Tokdo/Takeshima Dispute: The Interplay of Nationalism and Natural Resources

Introduction

Despite decades of relatively peaceful relations and growing economic interdependence between Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK), the two countries have failed to establish strong diplomatic ties. Even shared interests in maintaining the U.S. presence in the region, managing the rise of China and uniting against North Korea's nuclear threat have not fully eradicated the memories of their turbulent past. The poor relationship is the result of the historical animosity stemming from the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1910 until 1945. While Koreans often carry a strong sense of resentment for the past actions of the Japanese, the latter have arguably demonstrated "a superiority complex towards Korea inherent in the collective mindsets of former colonizers" (Cha, 2000: 313). Such emotional tension periodically takes on physical manifestation in the form of the countries' territorial dispute over the Tokdo or Takeshima Islands, as they are respectively known to the Koreans and the Japanese.¹ Both Korea and Japan consider the islands to be part of their own territory, making the dispute seemingly intractable and concession next to impossible.

The Tokdo or Takeshima Islands are a group of small islets in the Sea of Japan or the East Sea as it is called in Korea. The disputed islands are respectively 217 km and 250 km from mainland Korea and Japan and located approximately 87 km from Korea's Ullung Island and 157 km from Japan's Ori Island (Figure 1). The islets would appear to be of little initial value to either country, as the contested territory consists of two volcanic rock formations and 30-odd reefs, with total land mass amounting to one-fourteenth of a square mile. Widely considered uninhabitable, a Korean fisherman and his wife are, apart from stationed ROK Coast Guard patrols, the sole residents of the islands. The ROK Coast Guard is patrolling the waters around the islets to reinforce

¹ The Korean name of the islands is romanized either as Tokdo, Tokto or Dokdo. The "Tokdo" spelling is used in this paper. The Islands are also referred to as Liancourt Rocks, after the French whaling ship—the Liancourt—which charted the islets in 1849. The name "Liancourt Rocks" is often used by neutral observers of the dispute.

Korea's control of the disputed islands, in effect since the 1950s, and to dissuade Japanese vessels from approaching.

Figure 1: Map of the Tokdo/Takeshima Islands



Source: Author

Conflict over Tokdo/Takeshima Islands has primarily remained at the diplomatic level, with physical engagement being rare. Skirmishes at sea have, at their most serious, seen the exchange of gunfire between the two sides. The 1950s were the most physically conflictual period of the dispute. With Korea's later establishment of effective control, however, violence between Japan and Korea has been relatively minimal in the decades since. It is important to note here that the Korean physical control over the Tokdo/Takeshima Islands is not meant in a legal sense, as the islands and surrounding maritime areas have continued to be contested. The marginal strategic importance of the islands and the fact that Japan and Korea are military allies of the United States have acted as mitigating factors on the dispute. The Tokdo/Takeshima issue has nonetheless remained an irritant in bilateral relations preventing a deepening of diplomatic ties despite a high level of economic interdependence. Bateman (2000: 22) explains that such irritants "can be quite disproportionate in terms of both their impact on regional relations, the boost to nationalistic fervour and the incentive they provide for acquisition of naval capabilities". After having been in the background for some time, the dispute has re-emerged since the mid-2000s as a spoiler in Japan-Korea relations. The paper seeks to explain why this has been the case by focusing on two primary factors—nationalism and resources—and how they interact with each other.

A large majority of works focusing on the Tokdo/Takeshima dispute tends to be empirical, historical and/or legalistic in their approach. In contrast, this paper seeks to combine a conceptual and factual understanding of the issue by applying a framework structured around a two-dimensional typology. It claims that the dynamics of the conflict are informed by nationalism and access to natural resources. Nationalism, tied to identity and memory politics, is especially critical to the Korean reaction, constituting the main exacerbating force behind its position towards the dispute. The Tokdo/Takeshima issue also resonates with nationalist groups in Japan and evokes domestic nationalistic sentiments. That said, in comparison to the Korean official position, the reactions of the Japanese Government have traditionally been less nationalistic. However, in light of the fact that Korea controls the disputed islands and that its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) overlaps with Japan's in the surrounding semi-enclosed sea, Tokyo's position has also been directly influenced by resource considerations. Besides abundant fishery, the seabed surrounding the Tokdo/Takeshima Islands may have gas potential. In particular, the Tsushima Basin and the Yamato Rise and Trough are expected to have gas and mineral wealth. Ownership over the disputed rocks would enable Japan to claim jurisdiction over these maritime areas.

The paper further argues that nationalism and resource considerations have at times operated in tandem in escalating the Tokdo/Takeshima territorial dispute. The importance of these two attributes and how they might influence and interplay in the dispute is at the core of the paper. It is contended that rather than adopting a single explanation, the Tokdo/Takeshima issue can best be understood by linking these two inter-connected variables. In other words, nationalism and the quest for resources cannot be addressed in isolation as they are mutually reinforcing. Indeed, the fundamental argument developed in the paper is that it is precisely the operation and interplay of the nationalism and resource dimensions that can lead to the rapid and dangerous escalation of the territorial dispute. Conversely, the reduced virulence of the two attributes may lead to the de-escalation and diffusion of tensions. Consequently, cooperative solutions to the Tokdo/Takeshima dispute need to address nationalism and resources simultaneously as the root causes of the conflict and be cognizant of the fact that they intersect each other.

The paper consists of three sections. The first introduces a conceptual framework that ties nationalism and identity politics to economic prosperity and energy security in an attempt at understanding territorial disputes. Nationalism and economic interests are, therefore, regarded as essential features to comprehend the dynamics of such a dispute. The discussion offers an interpretation of nationalism and resource considerations and examines how they might operate and interact with each other in the context of a territorial dispute. The second section reviews the nature of the Tokdo/Takeshima dispute. The final section discusses specifically the role played by nationalism and resource calculations in the Tokdo/Takeshima dispute before applying a two-dimensional typology to offer a better comprehension of its ongoing dynamics.

Drivers of territorial disputes

Nationalism and natural resources

Territory is associated with statehood, national boundaries and nationalism. Borders and physical demarcations remain of vital importance in conception of what it means to have a state. Dodds (2000: 32) notes that “boundaries are central to the discourse of sovereignty as they provide, among other things, the means for a physical and cultural separation of one sovereign state from another”. Boundaries are thus inseparable from political arguments that seek to gain or protect sovereignty (Dodds, 2000). Beyond its physical nature, territory takes on significance for the nationalist meaning ascribed to it. Territoriality is “the social construction of space by political processes that act as platforms for the expression of power” (Flint, 2005: 5–6). Accordingly, for territorial disputes, nationalism becomes critically important as an explanatory factor. Nationalism can be defined and studied in terms of an ideology and doctrine, ethnicity, statehood and/or with reference to popular movements. Nationalism personalizes the nation and increases its resonance to the individual (Dijkink, 2005: 128). Dijkink (2005: 120) argues that for “the complete nation-state, loss of territory is inevitably something comparable to bodily mutilation”. Reconciling the members of a nation with the borders of the state is consequently dependent on the attainment and control of territory. Territory, therefore, remains important not for its material wealth alone, but also for the various social values that may be at stake as well (Forsberg, 1996: 438).

By encompassing both cultural and political beliefs, claims of territorial ownership frequently accompany nationalist ideology as groups seek to claim or defend their “homeland”. Alternatively, established states may themselves invoke state-sponsored nationalistic sentiments in order to arouse public support for territorial claims, or defend themselves from perceived threats to their governmental legitimacy. State elites may thus take advantage of nationalistic sentiments to legitimize their authority. “Pragmatic nationalism” is said to involve protests and demonstrations tolerated, condoned or organized by national governments. In this context, nationalistic sentiments and movements can be used as a diversion, as a legitimizing tool or even as a replacement for a dying ideology.

Natural resources and energy needs have traditionally influenced the foreign policy objectives of states. The question of natural resources has shifted from the low politics of domestic production and consumption to the high politics of national security. A secure energy supply is seen as crucial to meeting a population’s energy demands, guaranteeing a standard of living for certain countries and aiding in the development of others. Natural resources, as an economic and strategic issue, have also been a contributing factor in alliance-building, expansionist policies and the origins of conflict. When considering the finite nature of such resources, the implications for conflict are obvious. Competition over a “variety of resources and historically legitimated claims to national homelands has inspired war throughout history” (Flint, 2005: 6). An abundance of resources can contribute to the economic vitality and political leverage of a state over others. Conversely, a scarcity of resources may leave states in a vulnerable position and dependent on securing their energy supplies from others. The increased demand coupled with a decreased availability of resources has the potential to aggravate existing tensions and instigate violent conflict (Le Billon, 2005: 219).

Nevertheless, natural resources in themselves cannot explain the sources of all conflict. Territorial disputes and ethnic conflict also occur over land that would appear to be limited in their supplies of natural resources. In other words, the most valued territories are not always among the most contested (Forsberg, 1996). Newman (2005: 331) argues that where “boundaries cross both the identity and the resource

divide at one and the same time, the potential for boundary conflict is greatest”. This paper argues that this is the case in the Tokdo/Takeshima dispute. In short, while natural resources are important in understanding the origins of many conflicts, they must be examined concurrently with notions of nationalism and territoriality when studying why conflicts occur. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to offer a better understanding of how nationalism and the quest for resources influence and interplay in a particular dispute and to identify pathways to cooperation or settlement.

Driving factors at work

Beyond the interpretation of nationalism and natural resources as driving factors in a border dispute, it is crucial to analyse their operation and interaction within the dispute under study. In order to do so, this section makes a set of suppositions and introduces a two-dimensional typology.

Let us first turn to the individual operation of nationalism and the quest for resources. It is asserted that the two attributes can operate individually as, and be divided into, escalating or de-escalating factors in a territorial dispute depending on circumstances and trends. Escalating and de-escalating factors refer to conditions that respectively worsen or improve the climate of relations over the respective disputes. Under the escalating factors, one should include disputed territories that evoke strong nationalistic sentiments, especially if they are further incorporated by governments into a wider nationalist strategy, and proven oil and gas reserves for commercial usage in the disputed area. De-escalating factors are expected to include a lessening of nationalistic rhetoric deriving, for example, from an improvement of relations between the claimant states as well as the reaching of an agreement on joint energy exploration and development schemes in parts of the disputed area.

It is important to discuss how the two driving factors may interact with each other. It is assumed that nationalism and resource considerations do not simply co-exist in the Tokdo/Takeshima dispute but rather impact on each other. Hence, beyond the likely co-existence of these variables, this paper seeks to analyse the type of dynamics that may emerge between them. A two-dimensional typology is used when seeking to understand the interplay of these considerations (Table 1). First, the attributes could be in a convergent relationship, where nationalistic sentiments and natural resources

are operating along similar trends, mutually reinforcing each other and generally becoming inseparable from each other. Second, the attributes may be in a divergent relationship, where the operating trends of the respective considerations are reversed. While the empirical assessments of the interplay will not necessarily fall exclusively into one specific category, this typology still provides a conceptual framework to examine the interactive relationships existing between nationalism and natural resources and to investigate the extent to which they influence the territorial dispute under study.

Table 1: Two-dimensional typology

Nationalism	Natural resources	
	Escalating	De-escalating
	Escalating De-escalating	Convergent Divergent Divergent Convergent

Source: Author

Some suppositions can be made regarding each dimension of the typology and how they may impact on the dispute. A convergent relationship can either act as a driving source of escalation or de-escalation depending on whether the attributes operate jointly as escalating or de-escalating factors. Deep nationalistic sentiments combined with resource competition have the potential of creating the type of “perfect storm” conditions most likely to lead to an escalation problem. Conversely, the two attributes operating jointly as de-escalating forces would constitute a convergent relationship creating the right set of conditions to manage tensions peacefully and perhaps even resolve the dispute in the longer term.

A divergent relationship between nationalism and the quest for resources may be expected to act as a neutralizing force in a specific dispute. Key here is expected to be the operation of the energy consideration and the possibility for the joint exploration and development of resources. It is assumed that such collaborative energy schemes might act as a de-escalating force capable to some extent of neutralizing ongoing

tensions over overlapping sovereignty claims. By enabling the parties to benefit economically from joint oil and gas development schemes, the de-escalation of the resource consideration may indeed be expected to soften the escalating impact of nationalism.

The nature of the Tokdo/Takeshima dispute

Complicated legal and historical documentation are presented by Korea and Japan to argue that the Tokdo/Takeshima Islands are rightfully their own. Assertions of Korean claims to the islands rest mainly on the basis of discovery and usage, which date back to the sixth century. According to Korean scholars, Tokdo/Takeshima Islands was first conquered in 512 AD by Chi Jung Wang of the Silla Kingdom, as inferred by the *Samguk-Sagi* (Chronicles of Three Kingdoms), Korea's oldest history text published in 1145 (Ue, 2005). Additionally, Korea asserts that various maps confirm its claims to the islands. It further argues that disputes over fisheries in the surrounding waters were resolved in 1696 when Korean control was recognized by Japan and the Tokugawa Shogunate banned Japanese fishing in the area (Weinstein, 2006). Japan, however, counters that the ban only prohibited Japanese passage to Utsuryo Island, and not Tokdo/Takeshima Islands, further asserting that Seoul has yet to demonstrate a clear basis for its claim that Korea controlled the disputed islands prior to Japanese rule (MFA Japan, not dated).

On its part, Japan argues that its sovereignty over the islands was established at the latest by the seventeenth century, noting that several trade families made use of Tokdo/Takeshima Islands for fishing. The earliest records providing evidence for Japan's ownership of the islets are dated later than those of Korea, however, first appearing around 1650 (Sibbett, 1998). The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) writes that formal incorporation of Tokdo/Takeshima Islands into Japanese territory was established by a 22 February 1905 Cabinet decision of the Shimane Prefecture in the effort to curb the amount of sea lion hunting taking place (MFA Japan, not dated). Japan considered the territory as *terra nullius* (unclaimed territory) and Korea did not protest the Cabinet decision at the time. Viewing the current Korean occupation of the islets to be "illegal", the Japanese MFA maintains that the country has consistently held the same position on the issue. The 1905 doctrine is,

therefore, said to have simply reaffirmed its already existent claim to the territory. In contrast, Korea dismisses this claim, instead viewing the move as the first by an aggressive and expansionist Japan that would, by 1910, have claimed sovereignty over the entire Korean Peninsula. Korea was colonized by Japan until its wartime defeat at the end of the Second World War in 1945. Prior to its full annexation by Japan in August 1910, Korea had already been transformed into a Japanese protectorate through the Protectorate Treaty of November 1905.

Historical ambiguity over Tokdo/Takeshima Islands is matched by the U.S. hesitancy in effectively deciding the issue following Japan's defeat in the Second World War. The Cairo Declaration of 1943 called for the forfeit of Japanese territory taken "by violence or greed" (cited in Hara, 2007: 17). The 1945 Potsdam Declaration additionally stated that "Japanese sovereignty shall be limited to the islands of Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku and other minor islands as we determine" (cited in Hara, 2007: 17). Under the Instrument of Surrender, signed by Japan in September 1945, the terms of both were agreed to. However, the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951, in which Japan recognized the independence of Korea, did not directly address the question of the Tokdo/Takeshima islets. The consequent confusion over the offshore territory either specified or implied as belonging to Japan and Korea by these treaties has since left the issue open to debate. While the Koreans argue that the Cairo Declaration returns the disputed rocks to its ownership, the Japanese Government contends that, as Tokdo/Takeshima Islands is viewed as an "integral" part of its own territory, the Declaration is inapplicable (MFA Japan, 2004). Moreover, the deletion of Tokdo/Takeshima Islands from the final version of the San Francisco Peace Treaty was taken by Japan as an international recognition of its sovereignty over the islands (Ue, 2005).

Early versions of the San Francisco draft had concluded that the islets were a part of Korean territory. Until November 1949, circulated proposals by the United States planned for the return of the islands to Korean control. However, within the span of a few years, the United States had switched positions, arguing that there were legitimate historical reasons for believing the islets to be considered Japanese territory (Hara, 2007). By the time the actual Treaty was signed in 1951, the issue was left off the agenda altogether. Reasons for the shift in the U.S. position are uncertain and open to

speculation. As Hara (2007) argues, the context of the Cold War environment at the time contributed substantially to the stance taken by the United States when formulating the final San Francisco Peace Treaty. When Japan surrendered in September 1945, the Korean Peninsula had already been divided into North and South. Fearing that the spread of communism might lead South Korea to fall to its Northern counterpart, it was suggested that many offshore islands, including Tokdo/Takeshima Islands, would best be left in the control of non-communist countries (Hara, 2007). As Japan, at the advent of the Cold War, was viewed as more strategically valuable in the region to the United States, the historical claims of South Korea arguably came to be outweighed by America's focus on its own political and security interests.

Consequently, the San Francisco peace settlement left the issue unresolved by avoiding its discussion entirely. Ironically, while the United States had left the dispute open to contention in order to give itself more strategic manoeuvring room, the Peace Treaty has largely boxed Washington into sustaining its initial position today, despite the end of the Cold War era. As Weinstein (2006) notes, should the United States side with Japan in the current dispute, South Korea, to the U.S. detriment, may become more closely aligned with China or North Korea. Alternatively, however, should South Korea be favoured, Japan may act more independently (Weinstein, 2006). Washington consequently rests its hope on the notion that the two countries will resolve the dispute peacefully between themselves.

Prior to the San Francisco Treaty of 1951, the "MacArthur Line" had demarcated the contested area. It benefited the Korean fishing industry by keeping Japanese boats out of the zone. The San Francisco Treaty terminated the "MacArthur Line" in spite of a Korean request to preserve it. In response, the Korean Government of President Syngman Rhee (Yi Seungman) unilaterally declared the "Peace Line" (known as the "Rhee Line" to the Japanese) in January 1952, circumscribing Tokdo/Takeshima Islands within its territory. Japan responded to the proclamation of the Peace/Rhee Line by refusing to recognize the Korean claim to the islets. In July of that year, Japan declared the ABC line, which included the Tokdo/Takeshima and Jeju Islands. The UN Supreme Commander, Mark Clark, reacted to the bilateral dispute in September 1952 by declaring the "Clark Line", which worked favourably for Korea by including

the islands on its side and which was therefore disregarded by Japan. Korea later established effective control of the islets through its continued presence of the Coast Guard. Normalization of ties between Japan and Korea occurred in June 1965 only when the issue was set aside in favour of advancing relations. The Tokdo/Takeshima Islands were not mentioned in the Treaty on Basic Relations, which normalized bilateral ties.

Driving factors in the Tokdo/Takeshima dispute

Nationalism, identity and memory politics

For Koreans, Japanese claims to the islets are a demonstration of the latter's tendency towards domination and evidence of their own lingering resentment over the war crimes committed by Japanese troops during their occupation of the peninsula. Combined with the repeated visits of former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to the Yasukuni war shrine (2001–2006)² as well as controversial Japanese textbooks that critics charge of glossing over the nation's violent history, the fact that the dispute over the islets remains an issue is an indication to many Koreans that Japan is not fully remorseful for its past. Thus, Cha (2000: 314) writes that “‘forgiving’ Japan or remaining even mildly neutral to Japanese actions is, in essence, to deny a critical part of one’s identity as a Korean”. The emotional significance of the islands to the Korean psyche is largely tied to that of anti-Japanese nationalism. Indeed, parts of the Korean identity “become constructed in linear opposition to Japan” (Cha, 2000: 314). Highly emotive, Korean nationalism over the islands has additionally been evident in the 1980s pop song, “Tokdo is Our Land”, as well as the “Save Dokdo” video game where contestants compete to successfully oust Japanese invaders from the islets. As a further illustration of nationalistic fervour, Korea named the first of its large amphibious ships *Dokdo* when it entered service into the ROK Navy in July 2007.

Japanese domestic politics have in recent years reflected the emergence of a different Japan. This has led to a stronger foreign policy posture and stronger reactions to foreign policy issues. Significantly, then-Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi passed

² The Yasukuni Shrine honours Japan's war dead, including 14 Class-A war criminals from the Second World War.

legislation to enable Japan to send a small naval contingent in support of the U.S. war in Afghanistan in 2001. This was an episode of major significance as it marked the first occasion that a Japanese force was sent to support combat operations since World War Two (Yahuda, 2004). Japan also sent a contingent to support the United States during its invasion of Iraq in 2003. Tokyo has also strengthened its naval ties with other powers. In April 2007, it conducted, together with India and the United States, joint naval exercises off its coast. Furthermore, domestic debates have focused on the possibility of revising the constitution and removing restrictions on the activities and capabilities of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF). Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution technically forbids the country from maintaining armed forces. A more nationalist Japan, especially until the electoral defeat of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in August 2009, has influenced its stand on the Tokdo/Takeshima dispute.

Nonetheless, while keeping a close eye on actions undertaken by the Korean Government as well as Japanese nationalist groups and wider popular domestic sentiments, the reactions of the Japanese Government have, in comparison to its Korean counterpart, been less driven by nationalism. Dismissing the war legacy dimension of the dispute, Tokyo has urged the Korean Government to move forward from the past and approach the issue strictly from a territorial and resource exploration point of view. Attempts by Japan to resolve the case at the level of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) have met with resistance from Korea when it was first proposed in 1954, however. A similar proposal was again rejected by Seoul in 1962. According to the Korean position, the Tokdo/Takeshima dispute does not exist, as the islands are indisputably Korean territory (Valencia, 2006). Moreover, as Korea is in actual control of the islands, the Japanese seemingly have nothing to lose by taking the issue before an international arbiter (Weinstein, 2006).

Even so, the Tokdo/Takeshima issue is seen as vitally important for Japan due to the other territorial disputes in which it is involved. Should Japan lose its claim to the islets, similar claims made to the North Territories/Kurils and the Senkaku/Diao yu Islands, contested respectively with Russia and China/Taiwan, may also be undermined. As all these disputes derive from a similar interpretation of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, Japan would, by renouncing its claims over the

Tokdo/Takeshima Islands, weaken its position with regards to the others (Savage, 2006).

Since the San Francisco Peace Treaty, the Tokdo/Takeshima dispute, driven by nationalism and memory politics, has periodically affected Japan-Korea relations, particularly when other overriding concerns for both countries have been absent. In 1982, Tokdo/Takeshima Islands was proclaimed “Natural Monument No. 336” by Korea and later opened to tourists. These developments caused the Japanese Government to complain. After having been in the background for some time, the dispute re-emerged in the mid-2000s. Diplomatic strife over the dispute most noticeably surfaced between the two governments in January 2004 when, despite objections from the Japanese Government, the South Korean Postal Service issued a set of stamps depicting the nature of Tokdo/Takeshima Islands. In response to what it viewed as an instigative move, Japan filed its grievances with the Universal Postal Union, citing violation of the latter’s Charter by Korea. Controversy surrounding the stamps did not deter Koreans from lining up to buy them, however. Even rationed at one per customer, the 2.2 million sheets that had been printed were sold out within three hours. In response, during the spring of that year, a group of right-wing nationalist students from Japan set sail to reclaim the islands. Faced with the threat of military action from Korea, they were, however, turned back by the Japanese Coast Guard. More nationalist rallies were organized throughout the summer of 2004.

In early 2005, Japan’s Shimane Prefectural Assembly further fuelled the dispute by issuing an ordinance proclaiming 22 February to be thereafter known as “Takeshima Day”. This was meant to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Japan’s assumption of control over the islands. This initiative was adopted without the backing of the national government in Tokyo, highlighting a noticeable difference in approach at the national and prefectural level.³ While actions undertaken by the Shimane Prefectural Assembly seem to be driven primarily by nationalism, it can be argued that the position of the Japanese Government is also influenced by energy considerations. The “Takeshima Day” initiative provoked an immediate reaction in Korea. A reformulation of Korea’s formal relations with Tokyo occurred within days of the

³ This point was made by Dr. James Manicom, 5 August 2010. Dr. Manicom is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Balsillie School of International Affairs.

declaration. Korean citizens also lodged their anger against the newly ordained holiday by burning Japanese flags in front of Korea's Japanese Embassy. A mother and son even cut off their fingers in protest, while other demonstrators set fire to themselves. Ironically, the incident took place during the "Japan-Korea Year of Friendship", meant to celebrate the 40th anniversary of normalized relations between the two countries. In response to the "Takeshima Day" controversy, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi emphasized the need for rationality. He argued that "overcoming emotional confrontation ... is important for both sides to promote friendship through a future-oriented way of thinking" (Japan Focus, not dated).

The invocation of nationalistic sentiments is deemed to be particularly critical in Korean domestic politics. Arguably opportunistic by playing up identity and memory politics, anti-Japanese nationalism is frequently used by Korean political elites to rally popular support from the nation when it is most needed by those in office, or those competing in elections (Koo, 2005). Thus, in March 2005, weeks before a by-election, the Korean Government issued an unusually strong statement condemning the Japanese "Takeshima Day" and stated:

Land was forcefully taken from us in the course of the colonial invasion and was restored to us with national liberation. This is not simply a territorial issue. It is nothing short of a denial of the history of our national liberation as well as a justification of aggression (Japan Focus, not dated).

NB – insert line

Likewise, the National Security Council (NSC) Chairman, Chung Dong-young, called the move by Japan, "a second dispossession of the Korean Peninsula that denies the history of Korea's liberation" (Japan Focus, not dated).

Likewise, Japanese domestic politics have contributed to discussions on the Tokdo/Takeshima issue in recent years. When the Japanese education ministry announced in July 2008 the inclusion of its claims to the disputed islands in curriculum guidelines for middle school teachers, the Korean Government of President Lee Myung-bak recalled its ambassador in Tokyo for three weeks and demonstrations were held in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. As an additional

nationalistic message, the Korean Prime Minister, Han Seung-soo, visited the islets and a large military exercise, involving new F-15K fighters, six warships, P-3C patrol aircraft and Lynx anti-submarine helicopters, was held in the disputed area in late July 2008. A revised curriculum guidebook for high school teachers was released in December 2009, which reiterated once again the Japanese territorial claims. In March 2010, the Japanese education ministry approved elementary school social studies textbooks describing the disputed islets as Japanese territory, provoking an immediate Korean diplomatic response and demonstrations, which were held in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. Most recently, the Japanese Government reiterated its claims to the Tokdo/Takeshima islets in its latest diplomatic bluebook released in August 2010, causing Seoul to file an official complaint.

Natural resources

Beyond nationalism and memory politics, the Tokdo/Takeshima Islands have also been important to Japan and Korea due to the natural resources at stake. Though the islands are poor in the fresh water reserves necessary to sustain human life, they are abundant in fish. It has already been noted that the waters surrounding the islets have been exploited by fishermen from both nations for centuries. In addition, it is anticipated that their waters contain natural gas reserves estimated at 600 million tons (Weinstein, 2006). The Korea Gas Corporation projects that the amount of methane hydrate deposits to be found in the surrounding seabed would be capable of fulfilling South Korean demand for natural gas for 30 years (Kim, 2006). Gas exploration is currently undertaken at two sites in waters surrounding the Tokdo/Takeshima Islands, one by the state-owned Korea Gas Corporation and the other jointly by Korea National Oil and Australia's Woodside Petroleum. Korea imports 100 per cent of its gas in the form of liquefied natural gas (LNG). While Japan imports most of its gas in the form of LNG, it also has offshore gas fields in the East China Sea. It is often argued that Japan's renewed interest in and claims to the islands have resulted from the potential large hydrocarbon deposits to be discovered and exploited in the seabed around them. Yet it is worth noting that no natural gas of sufficient commercial value has so far been found.

Prior to the exploration for gas reserves, the availability of abundant fisheries had already caused severe conflicts between Korea and Japan, especially in the 1950s.

Two “provisional” fishing zones were established around the islands in 1999, granting both Japanese and Korean fishermen access to the waters and bringing a commitment from both countries to reduce the amount of fish caught. The 1999 fisheries agreement at least neutralized one of the benefits of sovereignty over the islets; namely, the ability to determine fishing zones (Green, 1999). Yet the issue of control over the seabed was left unsettled. Several rounds of negotiation between the two countries in 2006 produced no result when agreement over how to delineate their respective maritime boundaries could not be reached.

In the early spring of 2006, Japan dispatched two ships with the intention of conducting maritime surveys surrounding the islets, without formal notification to Seoul. The planned surveys of the waters by Japan were revoked following the complaint of the Korean Government and the dispatch of more than 20 warships. Seoul viewed the attempt as a demonstration of Japan’s expansionist ambitions (Weinstein, 2006). Yet it promised not to submit Korean names for seabed features of the area and to rename the Sea of Japan (East Sea) in return for the cancellation of the survey. Some undersea basins and ridges in the surrounding waters have not yet been named. An agreement was signed by the two parties in April 2006, which led to the suspension of the planned surveys in return for Seoul promising not to register Korean names for submarine features near the islets at an International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) meeting in June 2006. The agreement was still perceived in Korea as a concession to Japan. Notably, a statement from the Korean Secretary for Public Information declared:

Exactly 100 years after its occupation of Korea, Japan is again attempting to rob us of our history. The key to the Dokdo issue is the liquidation of the war of the Japanese imperialists’ aggression. In that sense, Dokdo stands at the centre of our efforts to rectify a history distorted by a war of aggression (as cited in Weinstein, 2006).

It is important to note that the entire incident occurred at the time of Korea’s general elections of 11 April 2006, which further escalated the nationalist rhetoric. Nationalism and the search for resources were therefore closely inter-twined in causing the escalation of bilateral tension. On its part, the Japanese Government

warned in the same year that it would send its own Coast Guard to the area should Korean surveyors infringe on their proclaimed EEZ. In July 2006, a South Korean ship conducted a survey in the disputed area, causing the Japanese foreign ministry to complain. The Korean energy ministry reiterated in August 2008 the importance of developing energy resources, such as gas hydrates, in the seabed and announced the building of a solar power facility on the disputed islands. These developments closely followed the controversy over the inclusion in curriculum guidelines of the Japanese claims to the disputed islands, which had strained relations the month before. The concern for energy security has remained since and it should, therefore, be expected that the resource aspect would continue to assume great salience in the Tokdo/Takeshima dispute.

The challenge posed by the overlapping claims to the resource rich seabed has been further complicated since the ratification by Japan and Korea of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1996. The Convention was adopted on 30 April 1982 and came into force on 16 November 1994. The Convention aims to establish a maritime regime by calling for closer cooperation on maritime issues, offering procedures for the resolution of territorial disputes, and introducing new concepts, rights and responsibilities (Wallace, 1992). Yet the 1982 Convention is based on assumptions of agreement on sovereignty and does not provide for resolution of disputes, except through a diplomatic compromise. Arbitration can be compulsory for some maritime disputes although countries can opt out of compulsory arbitration in respect of boundary disputes.

The UN Convention imposes conditions to regulate internal waters, archipelagic waters, territorial seas, contiguous zones, EEZ, continental shelves and high seas. Maritime zones are measured from territorial sea baselines. The Convention provides coastal states with the authority to extend their sovereign jurisdiction under a specific set of rules. It authorizes expansion of the territorial sea to 12 nautical miles and limits the contiguous zone to 24 nautical miles. The EEZ “shall not extend beyond the 200 nautical miles from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured” (UNCLOS, 1983, Article 57). The sovereign rights of a coastal state over the EEZ are limited to the exploration and exploitation of its living and non-living resources. It is estimated that the 200-mile EEZs established by all the coastal states

contain over 90 per cent of all commercially exploitable fish stocks and over 80 per cent of the world's known submarine oil reserves. In some limited circumstances, continental shelves can be extended beyond a limit of 350 nautical miles from territorial sea baselines. The sovereign rights of a coastal state over the continental shelf are reduced to the exploration and exploitation of its sedentary living resources (clams, pearl shells, corals and others) as well as its non-living resources (natural gas, oil and others).

Following their 2006 ratification of UNCLOS, Japan and Korea established their respective EEZs. As Green (1999: 10) writes of the Tokdo/Takeshima dispute, of “marginal strategic importance themselves, the rocks became crucial as markers of each nation's EEZ”. Generating a 200-nautical-mile area from the baseline, an EEZ could indeed grant Tokyo and Seoul critical access to the offshore resources contained therein. Yet, as both states claim sovereignty over Tokdo/Takeshima Islands, their claimed EEZs thereby overlap, raising additional questions of legality for the two sides in their fishing and offshore exploration. Significantly, control over the Tokdo/Takeshima Islands may not be a legitimate basis for claiming an EEZ and continental shelf, as the islets appear unable to sustain human life without external assistance and have no economic life of their own. UNCLOS defines an island as “a naturally-formed area of land surrounded by water, which is above water at high tide” (UNCLOS, 1983, Article 121). An island is also said to be capable of naturally supporting life. In contrast, UNCLOS declares that “rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own shall have no EEZ or continental shelf” (UNCLOS, 1983, Article 121.3). Features that cannot sustain human life and artificial islands are only entitled respectively to a 12-nautical-mile area of territorial sea and a 500-metre safety zone. Nevertheless, despite UNCLOS's definition of what constitutes an island, Japan and Korea may still argue that the Tokdo/Takeshima Islands are in fact islands, possibly with some justification, as no good tests are available to determine the status of features (see Van Dyke, 2009). For example, drinking water was found on the western island in 1965, which still serves the people residing on the Tokdo/Takeshima Islands to this day.

Interplay of Nationalism and Natural Resources

Nationalism and the quest for natural resources have so far been found to be at the core of the Tokdo/Takeshima issue. Deriving from the legacy of the Second World War and domestic politics, the importance of nationalism and popular movements has been observed. Close attention has also been given to the access and supply of resources. Hence, intensified by Korean nationalistic sentiments and antipathy towards the former colonizer, rising nationalism in Japanese domestic politics as well as by the necessity for Tokyo to guarantee access to natural resources, the sovereignty dispute has remained a major irritant in bilateral relations.

Beyond the individual operation of the nationalist and resource attributes, this paper considers the interplay of the two considerations in the Tokdo/Takeshima dispute. As mentioned previously, it is assumed that a convergent and mutually reinforcing relationship between escalating attributes constitute the worst possible outcome of the interplay process. Rising nationalism combined with resource competition can lead to a “perfect storm” scenario and thus possibly to open conflict. It is argued here that the Tokdo/Takeshima issue has been driven by a convergent relationship linking the nationalist and resource attributes in an escalating trend. Each component of the relationship has fuelled and mutually re-enforced the other, as illustrated for example by the events surrounding the “Takeshima Day” and maritime surveys in the mid-2000s as well as the stern Korean diplomatic response to the new Japanese teaching guidelines that was followed by renewed Korean calls for developing energy resources around the islands in 2008. Entrenched nationalistic sentiments, tied to identity and memory politics, have exacerbated the situation by making any form of concessions by the Korean Government on the joint exploration and exploitation of natural resources with Japan impossible. Likewise, the current Japanese claims have exacerbated Korean nationalism by bringing to the fore memory politics associated with the period of Japanese colonialism and exploitation.

For obvious domestic political reasons, successive Korean and Japanese governments have been forced to pay close attention to their respective nationalist groups and their actions. By maintaining the dispute on the wider political agenda, nationalists in both countries have kept the pressure on the policymakers and translated the sovereignty question into an enduring escalating force. Any concession on the territorial claims by

the respective disputants has been made impossible due to the heavy domestic political costs involved. To grasp the political weight of these conservative political platforms, it is worth repeating here that former Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi visited the Yasukuni Shrine yearly between 2001 and 2006 to please and guarantee the support of right wing Diet members from the LDP and nationalist groups in Japan. Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni were pandering to his conservative base so that he could move forward on his own reformist agenda. Foreign affairs with Korea and China were not seen as a priority and suffered accordingly.

Significantly, one should note that Japan-Korea ties have somewhat improved since Koizumi stepped down as prime minister in September 2006. When examined in the wider context of Northeast Asian cooperation, improving bilateral ties between Tokyo on the one hand and Beijing and Seoul on the other contributed to the organization of the first Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit Meeting held in Fukuoka, Japan, in December 2008. Yet, beyond improving the climate of relations, greater regionalism in Northeast Asia should not be expected to lead towards the resolution of maritime territorial disputes in the region, given the nature of Asian cooperative security arrangements and their propensity to avoid sovereignty questions as well as the fact that China may not want to get involved in such issues, seeing that it too has territorial concerns of its own.

It was previously noted that gas reserves are suspected to lie in the seabed surrounding the Tokdo/Takeshima Islands. The possible discovery of gas reserves has arguably driven Japan's renewed interest in the disputed area. Its priority to guarantee access to the area's maritime resources is not surprising in light of Korea's control over the islets and overlapping EEZ with Japan. At the heart of Japan's security policy has traditionally been its concern over energy security, as the country is infamous for its lack of natural resources. Japan's dependency on external sources of energy had previously led the state to justify its attack on Pearl Harbour and its expansion into the Sumatran oil fields during the Second World War. Its dependency on external sources of energy remains, to this day, Japan's major weakness.

Let us now examine how nationalism has escalated the resource attribute, and vice versa. It is assumed that natural resources in themselves cannot be used to explain

conflict or cooperation independently from other considerations, as this arguably depends on notions of sovereignty, nationalism and identity. It is, therefore, asserted that nationalistic sentiments and the historical legacy of Japanese colonialism have transformed the resource issue into a source of conflict rather than potential cooperation in the context of the Tokdo/Takeshima dispute. It is, therefore, not surprising that no progress has been made towards joint energy exploration and development. A climate of relations characterized by deeply-rooted nationalism and memory politics has not been conducive to negotiating an agreement on the common development of natural resources in the Sea of Japan (East Sea). The ratification of UNCLOS has further complicated the situation in the disputed area and demonstrated the existing links between the overlapping territorial claims and the energy calculations of the disputants.

Looking at the other facet of the same coin, it is significant to note that the Japanese claims to the islands have fuelled nationalism and anti-Japanese sentiments in Korea. Disregarding the historical legacy of the dispute, the Japanese claims have infuriated Korean nationalist groups and popular sentiments. Korea regards the Japanese claims and its desire to exploit energy resources as a provocation that evokes memories of colonialism and exploitation. The dispute is representative of the emotional tension accompanying the bilateral relationship, as it is perceived in Korea as an illustration of Japan's failure to confront its history.

Japan's attempts at addressing cooperatively the resource dimension of the conflict by seeking jointly to solve the issue of control over the seabed have fuelled nationalistic sentiments in Korea. By focusing on the resource dimension while omitting the historical legacy of the conflict, Tokyo's diplomatic approach has only succeeded in further escalating the situation. Consequently, a divergent relationship between the nationalist and resource attributes, where the operating trends of the two respective considerations are reverse, seems unlikely in the context of the Tokdo/Takeshima dispute. Concretely, this means that collaborative energy schemes, where both parties gain economically from the joint exploitation of resources, should not be expected to soften the escalating impact of nationalism. A reverse outcome should instead be anticipated in the case of Korea. As a result, it is argued in the conclusion of this paper that the root causes of the conflict need to be addressed simultaneously.

Nevertheless, while the Tokdo/Takeshima dispute has repeatedly caused tension in Japan-Korea ties, it is important to stress that no direct clash of arms has so far occurred in the Sea of Japan (East Sea). This can be explained by a Korean and Japanese attempt at keeping the convergent relationship in check and not to allow the dispute to spiral out of control. Nationalist politics and resource competition over the disputed islands have, therefore, not been allowed to jeopardize stable and mutually benefiting economic relations. Despite strong domestic sentiments often manipulated by successive governments for political benefits, Seoul and Tokyo have been careful to keep nationalism in check and to maintain the conflict at a rhetorical level. Likewise, despite rising competition over access to energy resources in the Sea of Japan (East Sea), economic interests as well as the influence of other domestic factors in both countries have certainly contributed in preventing open conflict.

In this context, two mitigating factors to the dispute should be mentioned; namely, deep economic inter-dependence linking the Korean and Japanese economies and their respective defence alliance with the United States. Drawing on Liberal Peace theories arguing that conflict between inter-twined economies tends to be prevented due to the severe financial costs involved, Koo (2005) demonstrates that when lacking a high level of trade in the 1950s, the Tokdo/Takeshima conflict escalated. Conflict in the 1970s, however, faded due to deeper security and economic cooperation, attributable to greater bilateral trade as well as fears of a U.S. retraction from its regional defence commitments. Hence, Koo (2005) argues that the different level of tension between Korea and Japan over the dispute can be associated with varying degrees of inter-dependence between their economies in the post-war period. While this argument is convincing, it is important to note that economic inter-dependence alone failed to prevent a rapid escalation of tension in the mid-2000s. The manoeuvring of strong domestic sentiments in the midst of a general election, as was the case in Korea in early 2006, can for a short time at least undermine the long-term de-escalating impact of economic inter-dependence. With regards to their respective relations with Washington, Cha (2000: 315) argues that the “two allies are so dependent on the great-power patron that at any time this dependence is threatened, security concerns take precedence over everything else for the two, including historical animosity”. Still, a possible U.S. decline and/or relative disengagement from Northeast Asia may hinder the superpower’s ability to pressurize Japan and

Korea into maintaining friendly ties, which may eventually lead to a further surge in nationalism.

Conclusion: Which way forward?

The paper has argued that nationalism and the quest for resources have, in the context of the Tokdo/Takeshima issue, been locked in a convergent and escalating relationship. Nationalistic sentiments and the imperative to guarantee access to natural resources have reinforced each other in fuelling the dispute. In light of these escalating factors, let us conclude this paper by assessing some potential strategies available for achieving conflict management and resolution in the Sea of Japan (East Sea). International arbitration does not constitute a likely scenario to resolve the Tokdo/Takeshima dispute. Japan is keen to present the overlapping claims to the ICJ but Korea has refused to defer the question to an international arbitration. As mentioned before, Seoul does not recognize the dispute as it considers the islands to be indisputably Korean territory. Tokyo has a different attitude to arbitration as it links the Tokdo/Takeshima issue to other territorial disputes it is involved in, namely, the North Territories/Kurils with Russia and the Senkaku/Diao yu Islands with China and Taiwan. Besides the limited prospect for international arbitration, there is, at this stage, no formal framework between Korea and Japan for seeking to resolve the issue bilaterally.

It is asserted, therefore, that the first step towards conflict management should be to reverse the existing convergent and escalating relationship linking the nationalist and resource attributes. A de-escalating relationship between the two driving considerations would create the right set of conditions to manage tensions peacefully and perhaps even resolve the dispute in the longer term. This can only be achieved by addressing the root causes of the conflict simultaneously. While the Japanese Government is distressed by Seoul's defiance of the current denomination of the seabed features, Korea is aggrieved by Japan's challenge to its control over the islands (Weinstein, 2006). Thus, the dispute could potentially be de-escalated if Japan were to recognize Korea's sovereignty to the islets and Korea were to concede Japan greater access to the area's resources. This could mitigate the nationalistic sentiments and resource considerations that have historically fuelled the dispute.

The prospects of such a scenario are unclear, however. As nationalism, identity and the historical legacy of occupation remain so deeply inter-twined in Korea, it seems unlikely that Seoul will be ready any time soon to concede Japan greater access to the area's maritime resources. Making any concession to Japan would be dangerous for Korean policymakers, since nationalistic fervour is very strong in Korea on this issue. Likewise, the likelihood of Japan recognizing Korean sovereignty remains small at this stage, as the Tokdo/Takeshima issue continues to resonate with Japanese nationalist groups and evoke domestic nationalistic sentiments. The prospect of a de-escalating relationship between nationalism and natural resources, therefore, depends greatly on a sustained and long-term process of bilateral reconciliation based on the reduction of nationalistic dispositions and popular antipathy. The Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan and his government issuing an apology in August 2010 to mark the 100th anniversary of Japan's annexation of the Korean peninsula should be noted in that context. Furthermore, a deepening of cooperation among the major Northeast Asian powers and increased partnership between Korea and Japan may work to change stereotypical images and thought patterns between the two nations. The emerging process of Northeast Asian regionalism, typified by the Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit meetings, should therefore be welcomed as a step in the right direction.

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