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Issue Brief

Japan's Territorial Disputes and their Management

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S*ummary*

Japan's management of its territorial disputes has been pragmatic, with Tokyo opting for diplomatic posturing rather than militarisation as its response. This indicates that Japan is keenly aware of its military limitations, especially given the constraints of the Constitution forbidding 'aggressive' war (even to recover disputed territory).

Introduction

Turbulence relating to East Asia’s persistent territorial disputes flared up into the public consciousness in 2012, when the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands became the focal point of an unprecedented confrontation involving Japan and China. Until then, though scholars of the area had always been aware of them, Japan’s issues regarding territorial disputes with Russia, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and China had flown well below the radar of popular consciousness.

In large part, this was because Japan, despite its economic dynamism throughout the second half of the 20th century, largely opted to de-emphasise bilateral disputes and shunned the path of pre-emptive militarisation of the disputed areas. Concomitantly, its security guarantor, the United States, was too focussed on its systemic competition with the Soviet Union in the Cold War, and on its desire to integrate China into the international order in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, to allow Japan to upset the applecart in service of its larger aims.

Japan’s territorial dispute management offers a valuable glimpse into how a middle power keenly conscious of its military limitations manages disputes, while also shining a light on the alternative mechanisms employed by such a power to keep the issue alive in the public mind and to influence the thought-process of the rival claimant. These disputes, stemming as they do from an imperialist, colonial past, also bring into sharp relief issues of historical accountability and the animosity generated by the perceived lack thereof.

This Brief provides a brief overview of Japan’s issues regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands with China, the Takeshima/Dokdo islands with the ROK and the Northern Territories islands with Russia, in order to shed light on how Japan manages these disputes and attempts to draw some lessons from them for broader theory and practice.

The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands

The Senkaku Islands¹ are a group of uninhabited islands located at 25 degrees 44 minutes North and 123 degrees 29 minutes East. Composed of five major islands (Uotsuri, Taishō, Kuba, Kita and Minami-kojima) and three reefs, the islands are called the Diaoyutao by the People’s Republic of China and Tiaoyutao by the administration of Taiwan, which also claims the islands.

History

Japan’s claim to the Senkaku islands is the first of two that derives from the annexation of new territories, in this case, Okinawa (the former Ryukyu Kingdom).

¹ For the geographical location of the islands, see Kentaro Serita, [*The Territory of Japan: Its History and Legal Basis*](#), Springer, Singapore, 2023, p. 64.

Tokyo regularly cites Ryukyuan navigation records to indicate that the islands’ geography was well-navigated by Ryukyuan sailors. However, it claims that until 1895, the islands were *terra nullius*. Finding no evidence of prior ownership, the islands were annexed as an administrative sub-division of Yaeyama City, Okinawa Prefecture. This was followed by the granting of permissions to use the islands for processing fishing catches as well as mining guano until the late 1920s. A small community built up on the islands, numbering around 200 semi-permanent residents at their peak in the early 1900s.²

Things changed after the Second World War when the US took over the administration of Japan. At the outset, the Americans placed Okinawa under their direct military administration. This administration lasted long after the rest of Japan became formally independent again under the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951. However, under the terms of that treaty, in particular, Chapter 2, the US explicitly confirmed that the Senkakus were part of Okinawa, and thus part of Japan. Subsequently, the US began to use the islands as part of training and practice ranges for bombers and fighter jets. In 1972, when Okinawa Prefecture reverted to Japanese sovereignty, the Senkaku Islands were explicitly included in the terms of reversion.³

A 1969 report by the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE), which conducted surveys around the area and identified potential reserves of oil and natural gas, is the proximate cause the Japanese attribute to the raking up by China and Taiwan of their claims.⁴ Though Chinese leaders agreed to purportedly shelve maritime disputes in the 1970s in favour of normalisation of ties, the Taiwanese, who also claim the islands by virtue of their claim as being the former Republic of China (ROC), continued to press their claims throughout.⁵ The PRC itself changed course in the latter half of the 2000s, after spats between fishermen and the Japan Coast Guard increased.⁶

Current Status

As is well-known, the Senkaku islands are currently the site of the most ‘militarised’ territorial dispute between Japan and China. Since 2012, after the Japanese government’s *de facto* nationalisation of the islands, the People’s Republic of China has been pursuing a change in the status quo through extensive grey-zone activities.⁷

² “The Senkaku Islands”, Pamphlet, Office of Policy Planning and Coordination on Territory and Sovereignty, Government of Japan, 25 February 2020, pp. 3–6.

³ Ibid., pp. 9–12.

⁴ 中内康夫 [Yasuo Nakauchi], “[尖閣諸島をめぐる問題と日中関係—日本の領土編入から今日までの経緯と今後の課題—](#)”, *立法と調査* [Legislation and Surveys], No. 334, 2012, p. 72.

⁵ Ibid., p. 73.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 76–78.

⁷ Alessio Patalano, “[What is China’s Strategy in the Senkaku Islands?](#)”, Commentary, War on the Rocks, 10 September 2020.

In more recent years, this confrontation has begun to take on zero-sum characteristics. Beijing has escalated tensions in the region, starting from the unilateral declaration of its ADIZ including the Senkaku islands in 2013, followed by an ever-increasing pattern of incursions by both naval and air assets into the region. Most recently, in 2024, the aircraft carrier *Liaoning* transited extremely close to the median line between Japan and China on its way to exercises it purportedly conducted in the Western Pacific. On its way back, it transited again through the Miyako Strait which divides the primary islands of Okinawa and the Ogasawara Islands, which includes the Senkakus.⁸

In 2023 and 2024, Beijing went further and planted buoys it said were being used for oceanographic research in the vicinity of the islands.⁹ It also regularly deploys coastguard vessels to hamper the activities of the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) and to intimidate fishing vessels which are allowed to operate in the area. Japanese and Chinese coastguard cutters regularly often operate within dangerous distances, with each attempting to drive out the other through the use of klaxons, loudspeakers and LED signs proclaiming their respective sovereign claims. In these circumstances, it is not too much to say that even 13 years after nationalisation, the potential for a broader conflict driven by some form of mischief or mishap from either side remains high.

Adding to this complexity is the fact that the US, after maintaining studied ambiguity on the issue for decades, has under President Donald Trump committed itself to defending Japan’s claim on the islands. The joint statement issued after Prime Minister Ishiba’s inaugural meeting with President Trump explicitly averred that the Senkakus were covered under Article 5 of the 1960 US–Japan Security Treaty.¹⁰ Though it has always held that the islands were part of Japan’s territory, Washington’s overt commitment to defending the Senkakus gives a large measure of comfort to Tokyo, and is sure to infuriate Beijing.

Japan’s management strategies

With regard to the Senkakus, Japan, the administering power, has employed a suite of options to challenge and negate Chinese attempts to overturn the status quo. The islands are the site of significant JSDF concentration, with both the Air Self-Defence Forces (ASDF) and the Maritime Self-Defence Forces (MSDF) active in the area. The JCG is the primary agency responsible for security, and enforces a strict no-go zone around the islands. Few exceptions are permitted, including local fishermen as well as government officials conducting surveys of the islands’ geographical and ecological

⁸ Jesse Johnson, “[Chinese Carrier Sails between Japanese Islands near Taiwan for First Time](#)”, *The Japan Times*, 19 September 2024.

⁹ Sotaro Hata, “[China Removes its Buoy near Senkaku Islands as Tensions Ease](#)”, *The Asahi Shimbun*, 12 February 2025.

¹⁰ “[Japan-U.S. Summit Meeting](#)”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, 7 February 2025.

status. The frequent incursions by the PLA in the sector are promptly responded to by the relevant arm of the SDF.¹¹

In recent years, a growing number of SDF forces are being diverted to the Okinawa islands as part of the ‘Nansei shift’ (*Nansei Shoto*, or Southwestern Islands, being the collective name for the Okinawa islands).¹² At present, several divisions’ worth of ground troops are augmented by the 9th Air Wing under the newly launched Southwestern Air Defence Force (SWADF) theatre command set up in 2019.¹³ Since 2024, heavy artillery and rocket forces are also being despatched to the region to support the US Marine Corps’ new doctrine of ‘distributed lethality’, under which small detachments of troops are embedded throughout the islands to provide advance warning of a Chinese attack and to repel any attempt to encircle or blockade the islands to prevent a US–Japan response in the event of a Taiwan contingency.

Meanwhile, Japan continues to challenge China’s claims at the diplomatic level as well, with its representatives giving talks to a general audience and reaching out to political elites to convince them of the validity of Japan’s ownership.

Takeshima/Dokdo

Takeshima¹⁴ or Dokdo, as it is known in Korean, is a group of 91 islets and rock features located at 37 degrees 14 minutes North and 131 degrees 52 minutes East, 37 of which are suitable for human habitation. Composed primarily of two major islets called Otoko-jima and Onna-jima in Japanese, the islands are currently claimed by Japan and administered by the Republic of Korea (ROK), which calls the two islands Seodo and Dongdo.

History

Takeshima’s situation is different in the sense that Japan claims it as a territory in its own right, without its claim resting on annexation of a formerly independent state. It provides evidence of the island having been mapped by feudal authorities in the 16th century, who subsequently began granting permissions to merchants to transit through the area. Two families were even given rights to land on the islands and

¹¹ “[尖閣諸島周辺海域における中国海警局に所属する船舶等の動向と我が国の対処](#)” [Activities of Vessels Affiliated to the China Coast Guard in Seas near the Senkaku Islands and Japan’s Reponse], 海上保安庁 [Japan Coast Guard Agency].

¹² “[自衛隊が進める「南西シフト」とは？空白のエリアを埋める防衛戦略](#)” [What is the ‘Nansei Shift’? A Strategy to Fill Up Gaps in Defence], *Mamor-JP*, 17 November 2023.

¹³ “[南西航空方面隊: 部隊紹介](#)” [Southwestern Air Defence Force: Unit Introduction], 航空自衛隊 [Japan Air Self-Defence Forces].

¹⁴ For maps, see Kentaro Serita, [The Territory of Japan: Its History and Legal Basis](#), no. 1, p. 94.

conduct business there, which primarily consisted of fishing as well as the hunting of sea lions.¹⁵

A recurring thread throughout this narrative is the presence of Korean fishermen in the region. All indications are that the region remained a neutral zone between Korea under the Koryo Kingdom and Japan under the Edo Shogunate. The blame for disrupting this balance, in Japanese eyes, lies with the former, who in 1693 sent ‘representatives’ (it is unknown how official these were) to challenge Japan’s claims to the islands.¹⁶ This, the Japanese allege, is primarily due to the Koreans having confused Utsuryo (or Ulleungdo Island) with the islands currently known as Takeshima, which they failed to accurately represent cartographically.¹⁷

In the early 20th century, Japan demonstrated sovereignty over the islands by incorporating it into Shimane Prefecture’s administrative authority in 1905. Japan claims that it subsequently exercised ‘continuous authority’ over the territory, including allowing commercial registrations, taxing sea lion hunting, collecting rent for state-owned land, etc. This continued until the wartime period.¹⁸

In the aftermath of Japan’s defeat in 1945, Takeshima was apparently included in maps issued by the Occupation authorities as part of Japan, though there exists some evidence that the principal powers there were not entirely agreed on its status. However, Japan argues that Chapter 2 of the San Francisco treaty, which includes a list of territories on which Japan surrendered its claim, does not include Takeshima by name (despite considerable diplomatic pressure from Seoul). Tokyo argues that the ROK, having been rebuffed diplomatically by the Occupation authorities, unilaterally imposed a military solution on them by drawing the 1952 ‘Syngman Rhee line’ (a putative maritime boundary between Japanese and Korean waters) which it then used as a pretext to ‘illegally occupy’ the islands while Japan was still nominally under Occupation authority.¹⁹

Current status

Takeshima or Dokdo is widely characterised by most Japanese experts as a ‘tough case’.²⁰ In the present day, the ROK has heavily fortified the islands, with military personnel permanently stationed there, sheltered by anti-aircraft guns and heavy artillery as well as a helipad capable of landing hundreds of support troops within a matter of hours. These military forces have given rise to acrimony over denial of access to Japanese fishermen and others in the surrounding area, even as Koreans

¹⁵ “Takeshima”, Pamphlet, Office of Policy Planning and Coordination on Territory and Sovereignty, Government of Japan, 25 February 2020, p. 3.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 7–8.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 9–12.

²⁰ [“Editorial: Takeshima Day: Think About the Importance of Protecting Territory”](#), *The Japan News by the Yomiuri Shimbun*, 23 February 2025.

are encouraged to visit the islands almost as a pilgrimage site. The ROK’s national discourse around the islands has also been replete with emotional overtones, as Korean politicians have elided their possession of the islands into the nation-building project of recovering lost territory from the hated former colonial overlord.²¹

At present, Japan has few options available to keep the issue alive. No legal option can be explored, as the ROK has consistently refused arbitration under international law (the last such attempt being launched in 2012). Diplomatically as well, the ROK has refused to admit the existence of a dispute, shutting the door squarely in Tokyo’s face. The position of their mutual security guarantor, the US, is also of no help, as it maintains silence on the issue (despite initially favouring Tokyo in the immediate aftermath of Rhee’s actions).

Japan’s management strategies

Due to the difficulties mentioned above, Japan has been forced to depend almost exclusively on diplomatic claims, which have had little to no effect on interlocutors from the international community. Instead, Japan’s attention has been focused exclusively inwards. There are significant local movements, most prominently in Shimane Prefecture (which formerly administered the islands), which are aimed at preserving and transmitting the validity of Japan’s claim across space and time. The prefecture’s annual Takeshima Day event, which is held every year on 22 February, sees participation from a designated representative of the central government in Tokyo, alongside prefectural officials.²² There is also a lot of effort that has been put into unearthing historical evidence of Japan’s claims through the efforts of the Takeshima Issue Research Group, also set up by the prefectural government.²³ Members of this group regularly conduct classes on Japan’s territorial issues at Shimane University and other universities.

The target of much of this effort is the youth. There is an annual essay contest organised by the prefecture for all middle- and high-schoolers across the prefecture, with the winner earning the right to read their winning essay as a speech during the proceedings of Takeshima Day. At the university level, besides the courses mentioned earlier, students are encouraged to join hobby groups to raise awareness of the issue. However, Matsue, the capital of Shimane prefecture, continues to allege that Tokyo has a significantly lower degree of enthusiasm about these efforts, as it does not fund these in any significant way, nor does it grant official sanction to Matsue’s more aggressive attitude towards the ROK.²⁴

²¹ [“The Lines that Define the Rocky Relationship Between Japan and South Korea”](#), *South China Morning Post*, 25 February 2015.

²² Jiji Press, [“Parliamentary Vice Minister Joins Takeshima Day Event for 13th Year”](#), *Nippon.com*, 22 February 2025.

²³ [“Takeshima: Japan’s Territory”](#), Pamphlet, Shimane Prefecture Board of Education, Shimane Prefecture, 2013, p. 6.

²⁴ [“The Lines that Define the Rocky Relationship Between Japan and South Korea”](#), no. 21.

The Northern Territories

The so-called Northern Territories²⁵ refer to a set of four islands claimed by Japan but currently administered by Russia, which calls them the Southern Kuril Islands. Located at 44 degrees 6 minutes North and 146 degrees 42 minutes East, they comprise the four islands of Iturup (called Etorofu in Japanese), Kunashir (Kunashiri in Japanese), Shikotan and Habomai.

History

The case of the Northern Territories is the second case derived from Japan’s prior annexation of new territory, in this case, Hokkaido Prefecture, which was earlier a frontier zone shared with the Ainu (the indigenous people of northern Japan). Long known as a traditional fishing ground for the Ainu, Japanese records indicate that the islands were believed to be zones of interaction between them and indigenous peoples from Siberia, especially the Kamchatka Peninsula and Sakhalin.²⁶

However, in the mid-19th century, the increased presence of Tsarist Russian trading vessels led to official negotiations between the two governments. In boundary agreements signed in 1855, 1875 and 1905, the northern border of Japan gradually began to extend outwards; the last date mentioned, 1905, being the year of the Treaty of Portsmouth, under which Russia ceded southern Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands to Japan after its defeat in the Russo-Japanese War.²⁷ Contrary to the two prior cases, from the outset Japan maintained high concentrations of permanent residents in the four islands. At its peak, the islands boasted 17,000 residents primarily engaged in fishing and mining activities.²⁸

The twist in the tale, according to Japan, comes during the Second World War, when the USSR under Joseph Stalin, is alleged to have convinced the UK and the US to include the northern islands of Japan as territories to be ‘recovered’. Specifically relevant here is the Atlantic Charter and the subsequent Cairo and Yalta conferences, which Japan argues it never accepted the outcomes of. Adding insult to injury, Stalin in 1945 violated the Neutrality Pact signed with Japan in 1941 and invaded the northern islands to ostensibly ‘assist’ the Allies who were approaching from the south.

This invasion continued even after the articulation of Japan’s surrender on 14/15 August 1945, and stopped only when all four northern islands were occupied.²⁹ The Japanese residents of the islands were initially placed under Soviet occupation, and initial policy indicated that the victors intended to naturalise the Japanese. However,

²⁵ For maps, see Kentaro Serita, [*The Territory of Japan: Its History and Legal Basis*](#), no. 1, p. 39.

²⁶ “The Northern Territories”, Pamphlet, Office of Policy Planning and Coordination on Territory and Sovereignty, Government of Japan, 1 February 2023, p. 3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

unspecified policy changes led to their deportation and replacement by Soviet citizens by 1948.³⁰

Japan presently argues that in the list of territories it agreed to vacate in Chapter 2 of the San Francisco Treaty, it never included the Northern Territories, only the Kuriles and Sakhalin. Meanwhile, the subsequent history of the dispute is a tale of close-calls, with Khrushchev in 1956 agreeing to return two of the four islands given certain conditions, followed by several near-misses where an incompatibility of stances continues to the present day.³¹

Current status

The Northern Territories offer the same challenge to Japanese diplomacy as Takeshima, though the dispute over these islands represents the most ‘mature’ dispute in that both sides are somewhat willing to keep discord within narrow limits (and Russia on its part has been willing to consider a partial cession of territory under certain conditions as late as 2019). The situation basically resembles permanent deadlock, with basic negotiating positions not having altered at all in recent years.

For its part, Russia has heavily militarised the islands.³² It has placed several ballistic missile batteries there, along with a permanent garrison of the Russian Army. The Soya Straits, on which the islands lie, form the optimum point of access to the Pacific Ocean for the Russian Pacific Fleet which is based across Sakhalin and the Kamchatka Peninsula.³³ This heightens their strategic significance, as Russia remains all-too-aware that its defeat in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–05 was entirely due to the lack of access to the Pacific.

The Pacific Fleet of the tsarist Russian Navy, forced to circumnavigate the world to reach the site of that war, was subsequently handily destroyed by Admiral Heihachiro Togo at the Battle of Tsushima, causing Russia to capitulate and sue for peace.³⁴ President Vladimir Putin himself seems to have given up on his accommodative stance towards Tokyo in the wake of the latter’s stance on the Ukraine conflict, and seems committed to retaining all the four islands in perpetuity.³⁵

³⁰ [“Basic Understanding of the Northern Territories Issue”](#), Office of Policy Planning and Coordination on Territory and Sovereignty, Government of Japan.

³¹ “The Northern Territories”, no. 26, pp. 8–12.

³² Ike Barrash, [“Russia’s Militarization of the Kuril Islands”](#), Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 27 September 2022.

³³ James D. J. Brown, [“The Accomplice: Japanese Threat Perceptions of Russia”](#), Special Forum, The Asan Forum, 23 April 2024.

³⁴ Rotem Kowner, [“Time to Remember, Time to Forget: The Battle of Tsushima in Japanese Collective Memory since 1905”](#), *Asia-Pacific Journal Japan Focus*, Vol. 20, No. 12, 2022.

³⁵ See [“「領土は確定済み」「将来訪れる」露、北方領土巡り次々と強硬発言 日露対立の長期化必至”](#) (**“The Territorial Issue is Settled, Will Visit Soon’: Russian Leader Makes Repeated Strong Statements Regarding the Northern Territories; Japan-Russia Long-Term Confrontation Inevitable**), *産経新聞* (Sankei Shimbun), 7 February 2024; 廣瀬陽子 (Yoko Hirose), [“プーチンは「北方領土を返す気が1ミリもな](#)

Simultaneously, as the only disputed territory with a historical record of permanent settlement by Japanese citizens, Tokyo finds itself having to appease a domestic vested interest that refuses to compromise on the basic stance that all the four islands must be returned at once. To be sure, this population is quickly fading beyond living memory as its members age and die out, but how much leeway this would provide to Tokyo, and whether Tokyo wants to make use of this leeway, is in question. In this case, at least, the US position has historically been in favour of Japan, so there is some assurance that Washington would back Tokyo to an extent if negotiations with Moscow lead to a positive outcome.

Japan’s Management Strategies

With regard to the Northern Territories, Japan’s options are limited, leading it to pursue public diplomacy and soft power tools exclusively. As in the Takeshima case, there is a substantial perceived gap between local advocacy by Nemuro City in Hokkaido prefecture and Tokyo. The city operates an excellent museum and information centre on Cape Nosappu, which is the spit of land that lies closest to the islands, and agitates frequently against any moves by Russia.³⁶ The city has recently constructed a huge monument built to symbolically represent the four lost islands, with an eternal flame burning underneath that is only to be extinguished the day the islands return to Japanese sovereignty.³⁷

Nemuro City has also launched an extremely successful social media campaign that has left an impression on many young Japanese citizens beyond Hokkaido prefecture. The campaign’s mascot, Erika-chan, whose name is derived from Etopirika (a bird native to the area), is well-known throughout Japan for being shrilly vocal about Japan’s claim.³⁸ The tenor of her social media posts is usually quite confrontational towards Russia and supporters of its claim, which has made her the subject of many Japanese memes and boosted recognition of the issue domestically.

Interestingly, until 2019, Japan also attempted to convince Russian citizens directly to support Japan’s claim. Nemuro City is well-known as the only Japanese city to have public signs marked distinctively in Cyrillic characters. The Nihoro complex, another facility run by the city, conducted regular exchanges with delegations of Russians till 2019. Its showcase displays are still full of Russian *matryoshkas* and

[い」と考えられる根拠](#)” [Why Putin Thinks He Will ‘Never Return the Northern Territories’], 現代ビジネス (Gendai Business), 27 April 2022.

³⁶ “[根室市と北方領土](#)” [Nemuro City and the Northern Territories], Nemuro City, Hokkaido Prefecture, 5 March 2025.

³⁷ Called the Shima no Kakehashi [Bridge to the Four Islands]. See “The Northern Territories”, no. 26, p. 14, picture 7.

³⁸ “[北方領土エリカちゃん](#)” [Northern Territories Erika-chan], X.com.

other trinkets that the visitors have gifted their Japanese counterparts throughout the years.³⁹

Yet, as the gaps between both positions harden, it is increasingly difficult to see a solution to the issue. The JCG reports that the Russian Coast Guard (RCG) has become quite active in the disputed area, with both coastguards chasing each other out of narrow patrolling corridors. There is also concern that the improvement of security ties between China and Russia could open the door to linkage in territorial disputes as well.⁴⁰

Conclusions

From the foregoing, we can discern certain features of Japan’s territorial dispute management. Firstly, it is instructive that Japan’s management of territorial disputes is quite pragmatic. Despite two of the three disputes discussed above being functional cold cases, Japan has not opted for militarisation as its response, choosing instead to pursue the more realistic option of weak diplomatic posturing. This indicates that Japan is keenly aware of its military limitations, especially given the constraints of the Constitution forbidding ‘aggressive’ war (even to recover disputed territory).

Even in the case of the Senkakus, there is a strong argument to be made that Japan has only chosen to divert the SDF to the region under two (interrelated) circumstances: (1) escalation of tensions by China after 2012 by embarking directly on aggressive action around the area; and (2) the continued commitment of the US to defend the area as well as to use it as a springboard to deter a Taiwan contingency. These facts indicate that Japan has clearly internalised the post-war norm of seeking diplomatic solutions to interstate disputes on which the current rules-based international order stands. As it continues to represent a key flashpoint in the Indo-Pacific region even today, it is important for all regional countries to pay attention to the evolving scenario around the Senkaku islands.

Japan’s territorial dispute management has much learning of value, not least in the ways by which territory occupied by a hostile power is memorialised and the challenge to its sovereignty contested. Takeshima/Dokdo showcases the importance of a ‘first mover advantage’ in territorial disputes, whereby one claimant may exploit weakness or distraction in the other’s decision-making process to essentially create ‘facts on the ground’. This is not only a positive strategy, but also a ‘reverse teacher’ (反面教師), as it highlights the need for policymakers to come up with viable means to challenge and negate this advantage. In this, it is helpful to look at the Japanese emphasis on soft power diplomacy and people-to-people exchange, especially in the

³⁹ See “The Northern Territories”, no. 26, p. 13.

⁴⁰ [“Development of Russian Armed Forces in the Vicinity of Japan”](#), Ministry of Defence, Government of Japan, September 2024.

case of the Northern Territories, as an instructive example. Also instructive is the continued effort to keep the disputed territories in the public consciousness, whether through events like Takeshima Day or through social media campaigns such as Erika-chan’s crusade against Russian claims to the Northern Territories.

Finally, there is a theoretical lesson to be learnt from Japan’s territorial disputes as well, one that scholars of law, territory and borders would be well-placed to investigate. As seen above, two of Japan’s three territorial disputes are at root issues derived from the complexities deriving from the annexure of formerly independent entities (the Ryukyu Kingdom in the case of the Senkakus, the Ainu lands of Hokkaido in the case of the Northern Territories). As such, these throw up knotty questions common to geopolitical areas where imperial legacies continue to haunt current-day states.

How does a modern state argue for the legal validity of a territorial claim where it has not had any historical presence (or where its presence is mediated by an independent state which it subsequently absorbed)? What amount of substantive authority invested in the authorities controlling an independent entity (Ryukyu and Ainu Mosir) can be considered sufficient for a modern state to claim that the lands in question ‘unquestionably’ belong to it, even as it acknowledges separately the independence of the entity in question? Can a modern state even claim ‘eternal’ rights to territories administered by feudal authorities which were only functionally allegiant to a ‘central’ government? If so, how can the modern state prove its succession? These questions and more are pertinent to all modern territorial disputants, and ones which Japan may provide an interesting test-case to seek answers for.

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