

# MP-IDSA

## *Issue Brief*

# The Dokdo/Takeshima Islands: A Flashpoint of 'Competitive Nationalisms'?

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## **S***ummary*

The Dokdo/Takeshima Islands, currently administered by the Republic of Korea (ROK), remain a site of contested memories of Japan's colonial rule in the ROK. In light of the resurgence of nationalist sentiment in Japan, there is a high likelihood that attempts to satisfy nationalist publics in one country may end up endangering the still-fragile rapprochement between the two countries.

## Introduction

Japan’s major territorial disputes range from the ‘South Kuriles/Northern Territories’ dispute with Russia to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute with China. However, the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands dispute between the Republic of Korea and Japan is complicated by the two countries’ growing strategic alignment as key regional allies of the United States of America amid multiple concurrent security threats. Miscalculation by either side, driven by specious attempts to gain political advantage with national electorates, could jeopardise regional security and bilateral cooperation, while emboldening revisionist powers to make further inroads. In light of the resurgence of nationalist sentiment in Japan, it is crucial to maintain the status quo to prevent a ‘clash of nationalisms’ that could seriously undermine East Asian security.

## Japan’s Claim to the ‘Takeshima’ Islands

Japan’s claim to what it calls the Takeshima Islands rests on two major pillars. The first pillar is the claim that authorities in the shogunal capital of Edo (now Tokyo) granted travel permits to Japanese traders that included passage through the Takeshima Islands in 1618. Eventually, for the Japanese ‘Takeshima, on the route from Oki to Utsuryo Island, came to be used as a navigational port, a docking point for ships and a rich fishing ground for sea lions and abalone’.<sup>1</sup> Travel was restricted after 1633, when Japan entered a period of ‘National Isolation’ (Sakoku), during which foreign travel and exchange were legally prohibited.

The Japanese claim that they ‘encountered’ two Koreans on Utsuryo Island (now Ulleongdo Island, Republic of Korea), whom they ‘brought back’ to Japan in 1693. One of these, Ahn Yong-bok, apparently attempted to ‘negotiate’ with Japanese authorities regarding Takeshima’s status over a period of three years.<sup>2</sup> The failure of these negotiations led to the Edo Shogunate barring travel to the islands, in effect recognising its disputed status.

However, the Japanese argue that the Takeshima mentioned above refers to Utsuryo Island, rather than the islands currently claimed as Takeshima. They hold the ROK responsible for confusing the status of the two different landmasses in its claim. They further argue that Ahn was ‘actually a fisherman operating around the Utsuryo

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<sup>1</sup> “Takeshima”, Office of Policy Planning and Coordination on Territory and Sovereignty, Government of Japan, 2020, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

Island’, thus denying his status as a legitimate negotiator on behalf of the Korean Joseon dynasty.<sup>3</sup>

The second pillar of the Japanese claim rests on the opening of Japan in the Meiji era (1868–1912). During this time, a modernised Japan first dispatched a warship, the *Amagi*, to map the islands lying between the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese archipelago in 1880. This study clarified the confusion surrounding the identity of Takeshima, thereby rectifying the islands’ names. Drawing on the survey, ‘the Japanese Government incorporated Takeshima into Shimane Prefecture by Cabinet decision, reaffirming its sovereignty over the islands’ in 1905.<sup>4</sup> Japan argues that it subsequently exercised ‘continuous administrative right’ over the islands, granting commercial registrations, issuing fishing and hunting licences and collecting rent and taxes under various heads from those venturing to the islands. In 1936, it granted permission to private prospectors to seek rock phosphates there.<sup>5</sup>

This continuous administrative control was disrupted (according to the Japanese account) by the United States-led Occupation of Japan after World War II. As part of its surrender conditions, Japan had accepted the Potsdam Declaration, which in Article 8 explicitly restricted ‘Japanese sovereignty...to the islands of Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku and such minor islands as we determine’.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, in 1946, the Office of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) issued directives requiring Japan to cease exercising administrative authority over any area beyond the defined limits, which came to be known informally as the MacArthur Line after the general who led SCAP.<sup>7</sup>

As preparations for the San Francisco Peace Treaty gained steam, Japan argues, the US and the United Kingdom discussed which territories to demarcate as Japanese territory. While initially partial to considering Takeshima as a part of Japan, the final draft drawn up by the two powers enjoined Japan to renounce ‘all right, title and claim to Korea’, including islands referred to as Dagelet, which Japan argues do not refer to Takeshima.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the ‘unilateral’ declaration of ‘maritime sovereignty’ over the islands by ROK President Syngman Rhee in 1952 is regarded as an ‘illegal occupation’, a stance that Japan has maintained to the present day.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 5–6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 7–8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 10–11.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

## The ROK’s Claim to the ‘Dokdo’ Islands

The ROK’s position on its administrative control over the Dokdo Islands is tightly interwoven with the Japanese narrative, but with interpellations throughout the historical discussion. It rests its current ownership of the islands on the ancient kingdom of Silla, whose ‘subjugation’ of the islands in 512 it believes forms the basis of its claim.<sup>10</sup> It also cites records from 1454, which mention that the islands Ulleungdo (Utsuryo) and Dokdo (Takeshima) ‘belong to the Uljin county of Gangwon province’ and are visible with the naked eye.<sup>11</sup>

While acknowledging the Edo Shogunate’s travel licences to Japanese merchants in 1625, the ROK’s interpretation of Ahn Yong-bok’s travel to Japan is that he was ‘abducted’ by Japanese fishermen, after which a ‘dispute over the ownership of Ulleungdo broke out between Joseon and Japan’.<sup>12</sup> As a result of the dispute, the ROK argues that the rulers of Korea at the time ordered the dispatch of biannual survey teams to ‘inspect’ the disputed islands. It cites evidence from the Japanese side purporting to show that local authorities were aware that the islands were not Japanese territory, including a 1696 letter to the Korean side regarding the Shogunate’s travel ban.<sup>13</sup>

Regarding the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Korean side presents as evidence a ‘confidential report’ submitted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1870, which states that ‘Takeshima’ (Ulleungdo/Utsuryo) and ‘Matsushima’ (Dokdo/Takeshima) came to be under Joseon’s jurisdiction.<sup>14</sup> It further cites an 1877 order issued at the highest levels of the Japanese government, which states that ‘[Japan] has nothing to do with’ either Ulleungdo or Dokdo.<sup>15</sup>

Koreans attribute the Japanese volte-face on the territorial ownership of Dokdo/Takeshima to the Russo-Japanese War and their subsequent colonial policy towards Korea. They argue that the 1905 notice declaring the islands Japanese territory stemmed from ‘military needs in the face of possible maritime clashes with Russia in the East Sea [Sea of Japan]’ and were ‘a part of Japan’s gradual aggression against Korea’s sovereign rights’.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> [“Why Dokdo is Korean Territory”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

From a Korean perspective, directives issued by SCAP after World War II bolster their claim, as the MacArthur Line, as defined in the directive of 29 January 1946, clearly excludes Dokdo/Takeshima from the zone of Japanese activity.<sup>17</sup> As such, the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty is, to them, conclusive proof that Japanese claims to the islands were rejected. The ROK is at pains to point out that [t]he mere fact that Dokdo is not named in the said article [2a, cited above], does not suggest that Dokdo is not included among those territories of Korea that have been separated from Japan.<sup>18</sup> President Rhee’s declaration of sovereignty over the islands, then, is a natural assertion of legitimate territorial rights in the eyes of the Korean side.

## Nationalism as an Intervening Factor

The dispute over the Dokdo/Takeshima islands is currently frozen. Japan has repeatedly sought bilateral negotiations over the islands and has attempted to bring the case to international arbitration, but the ROK has refused to cooperate. Seoul has taken care to militarise the islands, constructing a helicopter landing pad and other military facilities there to prevent any potential Japanese incursion. In the past, it had even shot at approaching Japanese fishing vessels, after which Japan dissuaded its fishermen from entering the area.<sup>19</sup>

The issue gained renewed significance in the previous year. In response to the ROK’s conduct of ‘surveys’ and ‘patrols’ around the islands, Japan’s then-minister in charge of territorial issues reasserted his country’s claim on the islands and promised to promote Japan’s view abroad. The ROK conducted a new round of drills around the disputed islands in December 2025, prompting an immediate Japanese response, including a temporary downgrading of military-to-military exchanges.<sup>20</sup>

Domestically, both countries find in the islands a ready-made vehicle for mobilising nationalist opinion. The ROK has historically been the more active practitioner of this. Complicating simplistic binaries, Korean progressives have generally shown a greater willingness to adopt a tougher line towards Japan. They are generally more ‘nationalist’ *vis-à-vis* the former colonial metropole than conservatives. A visit to the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> “Takeshima”, no. 1, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> [“Japan’s Renewed Sovereignty Push Over Disputed Liancourt Rocks Irks South Korea, China”](#), *South China Morning Post*, 19 November 2025; [“South Korea Holds Military Drills Near Takeshima Islands”](#), *NHK World Japan*, 24 December 2025; [“ROK Pulls Out of Joint Search and Rescue Exercise with Maritime Self-Defense Force; Japanese, Korean Governments Seek to Calm Anger That Could Damage Bilateral Relations”](#), *The Japan News by the Yomiuri Shimbun*, 17 November 2025.

islands by a Korean politician, especially a progressive, is a sure-fire way to bolster their popularity among voters. Statements by Japanese politicians or officials regarding the islands are closely monitored, and fiery protests often follow language deemed insufficiently respectful of the ROK’s stance. Above all, the islands present a potent lightning rod for a host of issues relating to Japan’s colonial history in the Korean peninsula, serving as a tangible reminder of the cruelty and outrage suffered by the Korean people during 35 years of Japanese rule.<sup>21</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that the most recent round of drills took place after the government of President Lee Jae Myung, a progressive, assumed office.

On the Japanese side, Occupation-era reforms and the broader aftermath of defeat in World War II have led to the issue of the islands gaining traction primarily among the archconservative side of Japanese politics. It was through their collaboration that Shimane Prefecture (which still claims to administer the island) declared 22 February an annual Takeshima Day in 2005.<sup>22</sup> The official event held on that day in Shimane is often attended by a senior politician within Japan’s long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party. However, the official status of the attendees has gradually become more important.<sup>23</sup>

While the ROK’s nationalist outbursts against Japan’s colonial past are well-known, there are strong indications that a parallel nationalist consciousness (crudely speaking) is emerging in Japan as well. The latter is currently undergoing a pronounced rightward shift, driven largely by a generation of youth facing unprecedented declines in their prosperity and well-being amid global uncertainties. This phenomenon deserves greater attention and care, as (in the words of a researcher studying modern Germany)

in contrast to the older generation that rejected nationalism because of its association with the country’s...past, the younger...embrace[s] the nation as a source of identity and solidarity. Because the educational system explicitly delegitimises their national identification, many...are drawn toward involvement in radical right-wing politics.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Mikyoung Kim, “[A War of Memories: Dissecting The Dokdo/Takeshima Dispute](#)”, *Global Asia*, Vol. 7, No. 3, September 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Alexander Bukh, “Shimane Prefecture, Tokyo and the Territorial Dispute over Dokdo/Takeshima: Regional and National Identities in Japan”, in Linus Hagstrom (ed.), *Identity Change and Foreign Policy: Japan and its ‘Others’*, Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Kim Ji-won, “[Japan Withholds Minister from Takeshima Day in Diplomatic Gesture](#)”, *The Chosun Daily*, 12 February 2026.

<sup>24</sup> Bart Bonikowski, “[Nationalism in Settled Times](#)”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 42, 2016, p. 433.

Sanae Takaichi, Japan’s first female Prime Minister and a widely described archconservative, is emblematic of this shift. As she consolidates her hold on power, her policy stances on territorial disputes could gain considerable strength.<sup>25</sup> The LDP’s new electoral ally, the Japan Innovation Party (*Nippon Ishin no Kai*), is also currently uninterested in territorial issues, but that could change given sufficient provocation.

In addition to the tailwinds propelling interest in territorial nationalism, the far-right Sanseito has been gaining strength over the past six years. Though this insurgent party’s platform is currently focused on promoting science denial, anti-globalism and xenophobia, it may only be a matter of time before territorial disputes with China, Russia and the ROK could feature on its list of priorities. Given the ease with which this party has harnessed the power of social media to shape voters’ perspectives on its existing list of issues, it would not be difficult for it to use prominent occasions such as Takeshima Day to create a lightning rod of its own, that can create a more aggressive environment demanding leaders to ‘do something’ to recover ‘lost territory’.<sup>26</sup>

As such, the risk of a competitive ‘clash of nationalisms’ is a live possibility in the region. An assertion of control over the islands by President Lee’s government or by forces affiliated with it could incite a reciprocal counteraction by forces emerging within Japan. This could potentially push both countries into an escalation spiral that would return the status quo to 2018–19, when rival administrations of Moon Jae-In and Shinzo Abe presided over the worst phase of Japan–ROK relations in decades.

Scholars studying nationalist protests and their potential constraint on government actions have pointed out that

The impact of protests on interstate disputes hinges largely on beliefs about the constraints governments face...divergent perceptions can

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<sup>25</sup> Takaichi has in the lead-up to her election signalled tougher stances on Takeshima and the Northern Territories already; see [“Japan’s Renewed Sovereignty Push Over Disputed Liancourt Rocks Irks South Korea, China”](#), no. 20; and [“2026 National Rally to Demand the Return of the Northern Territories”](#), Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, Government of Japan, 7 February 2026. Contrast this with Kim Ji-won, [“Japan Withholds Minister from Takeshima Day in Diplomatic Gesture”](#), no. 23, which implies that her rhetoric has so far not transformed into policy.

<sup>26</sup> A body of research indicates this is already very easy to do, even without the amplification afforded by social media. See Jamie Gruffydd-Jones, [“Dangerous Days: The Impact of Nationalism on Interstate Conflict”](#), *Security Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 2017. On how governments respond to nationalist protest, see John D. Ciorciari and Jessica Chen Weiss, [“Nationalist Protests, Government Responses, and the Risk of Escalation in Interstate Disputes”](#), *Security Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2016.

lead to conflict, particularly when a government perceives itself as severely constrained but foreign rivals are incredulous.<sup>27</sup>

Though both the ROK and Japan are relatively mature democracies with institutionalised guardrails and strong norms against the frivolous deployment of armed forces, it is not out of the question that a high degree of diplomatic and security-related pain may be an attendant effect of worsening relations between the two, led almost entirely by protesting nationalists on both sides, imposing their distorted perspectives on both parties.

## Conclusion

In this light, actions undertaken by the ROK in and around the islands cannot but be seen as needlessly provocative in Japan, given that they come amid the still-fragile rapprochement process between the two sides. Korean nationalism, to be sure, has a strong case against Japan, and Korean sentiments concerning their historical grievances are only natural. However, the discernible rightward shift among the Japanese electorate and the political entrepreneurs who enable it are points of concern that Seoul needs to account for. ‘Competitive nationalism’ may be a viable domestic policy, but it is inadvisable for maintaining the region's overall security and stability. Keeping the dispute frozen in its own silo may well be the best outcome for all concerned.

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<sup>27</sup> John D. Ciorciari and Jessica Chen Weiss, “[Nationalist Protests, Government Responses, and the Risk of Escalation in Interstate Disputes](#)”, no. 26, p. 582.

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