Keeping the Liancourt Rocks Dispute Afloat: Interactions Between State and Society in Korea and Japan

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Abstract

Originating in its modern form during the postwar period, the Liancourt Rocks dispute between South Korea and Japan has long exasperated observers who recognize the need for cooperation in an increasingly volatile regional political environment. While the existing literature centers on variables ranging from nationalism in the public sphere to resource acquisition, this study argues that a more powerful explanation lies in the interactions between the two governments and their respective publics. Specifically, each state has actively engaged in a major nation-building process to integrate the dispute into their national identities in order to rally the public around perceived territorial transgressions. Through these consolidated identities, the Korean and Japanese publics later compel their governments to sustain more hostile policies even during periods where the two governments may desire reconciliation or compromise, and punish them in instances of perceived defection. This dynamic between the two governments and their citizenry suggests that conventional explanations grounded in material variables—such as competition over resources—are insufficient in explaining the severity and longevity of the dispute, leaving room for identity to occupy a major role.

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Map of the East Sea/Sea of Japan*

*Ulleung Island is a territory of South Korea, while the Oki Islands are territories of Japan. The Japanese government considers the Liancourt Rocks to be a part of Okinoshima, a town on the Oki islands.

INTRODUCTION

On July 25, 2008, the US Board on Geographic Names (BGN) issued a seemingly innocuous revision that ignited a diplomatic firestorm, garnering enough attention and backlash as to involve then-US president George W. Bush: they changed the status of the Liancourt Rocks (known as Dokdo, or 독도, in Korea; Takeshima, or 竹島, in Japan) from “South Korean territory” to “undesignated sovereignty.” Immediately following the name change, Korean and Japanese media outlets, public figures, and government officials aggressively asserted their respective countries’ claims of ownership over the group of islands. This sudden antagonism between these American allies was so severe that President Bush personally intervened to reverse the BGN’s decision and reinstate the status quo of recognizing the Liancourt Rocks as South Korean territory. This remarkable display led to confusion among Western observers largely unfamiliar with East Asian history as to how such a controversy could be generated from such a small series of rocks.

The continuously changing ownership of the islands has augmented the complexity of the dispute. Beyond material considerations, the significance of the Liancourt Rocks lies in their ability to invoke powerful nationalist sentiments among both Korean and Japanese publics, fueling anti-Korean and anti-Japanese perceptions and thereby inhibiting both states from actively cooperating to resolve the disagreement over the territory. Despite the evident complexity that has defined the dispute, however, most of the current literature is limited in scope and focuses on particular aspects of the dispute, including: the strategic impact.

[2] In this paper, I use “Dokdo” when discussing South Korean policy, “Takeshima” when discussing Japanese policy, and “Liancourt Rocks” when discussing the territory in a general sense. The name “Liancourt Rocks” originates from the discovery of the island by French whalers in 1849 and has since become the default choice of name for Western observers. For additional context over the name change, see: “U.S. Did Not Inform S. Korea about Change to Dokdo Classification,” Hankyoreh, July 29, 2008, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/301303.html.

of the Liancourt Rocks on Korean and Japanese foreign policymaking; the effect of the dispute on Korean and Japanese national identities; the ability of both states to use the dispute as a distraction or leverage for other policy issues; and so forth. Previous research has evaluated how disputes between South Korea and Japan have inhibited security cooperation between the two countries by creating an environment characterized by mistrust, making it difficult to coordinate responses to challenges posed by states such as North Korea. It is therefore important to trace the contours of the dispute and determine the causes of the dispute’s longevity. This analysis examines how Korean and Japanese nation-building has integrated the territory into their respective people's national identities, and how public opinion in turn compels the governments to sustain an inflexible policy vis-a-vis the territory, thereby restricting the policy options that states see as viable and decreasing the probability that a resolution be reached which satisfies both countries.

A CENTURIES LONG DISPUTE?

A Brief History
The struggle for control of the Liancourt Rocks spans centuries. According to South Korea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), its claim to the territory extends back to the *Samguk Sagi* (The Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms). Although this historical record was only published in 1145, it included an account of the 512 discovery and subsequent


takeover of Usan-guk (State of Usan), which included Dokdo. Today, Korean media proudly tells the story of how Ahn Yong-bok, a Korean fisherman, repelled Japanese competitors from Dokdo in 1693. The Korean government argues that Japan recognized Dokdo as Korean territory following this incident — according to South Korea, Japan banned travel to Dokdo in 1696, later recognizing Dokdo as a territory of the Joseon Dynasty in 1870. Japan disputes the Korean version of events. Specifically, Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) asserts that Japan recognized Takeshima’s existence as early as 1618 and has claimed sovereignty over the islands since the mid-1600s. In January 1905, the Japanese government declared that the islands were to fall under a branch of the Shimane Prefectural Government. The ordinance reflected broader Japanese imperialist ambitions; the ordinance was issued as Japan was engaged in a bitter military conflict with Russia over control of the Korean peninsula and Manchuria, which would conclude later that year with the Treaty of Portsmouth. Included in the treaty was a concession


on the part of the Russians to concede the Korean peninsula to Japanese control.10

Unsurprisingly, then, in the context of Korea, it has been observed that the Liancourt Rocks have taken on an almost “sacred” quality as proof of Japan’s long-time efforts to infringe on Korean sovereignty.11 Losing the rocks, therefore, would invite comparisons to earlier losses to Japanese imperialism.12 To the Japanese, losing the rocks would both undermine the sense of superiority which often lingers in the mindsets of former colonial powers and validate existing feelings of unfairness at the hands of Koreans, who already suffer from a stereotype of being “untrustworthy.”13

However, while both Korea and Japan sought to assert control over the Liancourt Rocks for quite some time, the dispute that exists between the two countries today is a modern phenomenon which began with Japan’s defeat in the Pacific War. In 1951, Japanese and American officials gathered in San Francisco to negotiate the contours of the post-World War II settlement. The resultant treaty asserted that Japan renounce its rights to “Korea, including the islands of Quelport, Port Hamilton and

[10] To further emphasize the association between the Liancourt Rocks and Japanese imperial ambitions, it is worth noting that while the Treaty of Portsmouth never referenced the Liancourt Rocks themselves, Japan evidently held great interest in controlling the islands in its periphery—the treaty would involve the ceding of the southern half of Sakhalin by Russia to Japan; Andrew Glass, “Theodore Roosevelt Brokers Peace Treaty, Sept. 5, 1905,” POLITICO, September 5, 2018, https://www.politico.com/story/2018/09/05/theodore-roosevelt-brokers-peace-treaty-sept-5-1905-806208.
Dagelet” without mention of the Liancourt Rocks.\textsuperscript{14} However, the Liancourt Rocks were not included in the treaty, and then-Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs Dean Rusk later rejected a subsequent ROK appeal to have the territory explicitly included in the text.\textsuperscript{15} A variety of theories persist as to the cause, including one which posits that John Foster Dulles sought to insert “wedges” between Japan and its neighbors in order to defend against Communist expansion by retaining sources of discord.\textsuperscript{16} However, it is more probable that American diplomats were uncertain if Korea or Japan had been the original owners of the territory and deferred the dispute by allowing South Korea and Japan to come to a settlement.\textsuperscript{17}

Following the end of the U.S. occupation of Japan in 1952, the U.S. once more “feigned disinterest” to avoid having to determine final ownership of the territory, a move that would foreshadow U.S. policy for the next 70 years.\textsuperscript{18} In response to the U.S.’ decision not to settle the dispute, South Korean president Rhee Syngman announced in 1952 the Presidential Proclamation of Sovereignty over Adjacent Seas, which asserted Korea’s control over a large maritime zone which included Dokdo. This unilaterally-established boundary would come to be known as the Syngman Rhee Line (known in Korea as the “Peace Line”). Two years later, South Korea took military control of Dokdo, stationed its coast guard in the region to patrol the area surrounding the islands, and later implemented the Fishery Resources Conservation Law, which enabled the Korean...

\begin{thebibliography}{18}
\bibitem{16} Ibid, 32-3.
\bibitem{17} Ibid, 54.
\end{thebibliography}
coast guard to seize any vessels found fishing within the zone.\textsuperscript{19} While there were brief flare-ups in tension over the dispute, both South Korea and Japan remained largely conflict-averse until March 15, 2005, when Japan’s Shimane Prefecture’s assembly proposed a bill that declared February 22nd a new holiday known as “Takeshima Day.”\textsuperscript{20} Henceforth, the Liancourt Rocks became—and remained—a focal point of contention in Korean and Japanese elite and popular discourses.\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{Literature Review}

Territories are symbolic of a national sense of identity as they reflect and represent a broader national history.\textsuperscript{22} To Korean and Japanese people, it is not important that the Liancourt Rocks consist of only one permanent resident; that the infrastructure on the islands consist of only a handful of buildings, most of which are used to house Korean police officers and service small groups of tourists; or that in terms of resources, the area around Dokdo offers only fish and suspected pockets of natural gas.\textsuperscript{23} What is important is that the territory is inherently
their and part of their respective national stories. In this sense, the Liancourt Rocks’ value as a symbol is tied to its status as comprising part of the larger Korean or Japanese “homeland.” However, much of the existing literature either fails to appreciate the degree to which the Liancourt Rocks remain embedded in public consciousness in Korea and Japan or takes it for granted. At this point, a large percentage of the literature on the Liancourt Rocks dispute has centered on the dispute’s resolution. Questions related to the political problems of who has the stronger claim to sovereignty over the islands and how the dispute can be navigated and, ultimately, legally resolved are also among the more common topics of focus. More recent research has begun to investigate the impact of the dispute on national identities, domestic politics, and foreign policymaking. To many outside observers, the seemingly obvious explanation is the geographic value of the islands. Sitting at the midpoint between Korea and Japan, the geopolitical importance of the


[24] For a discussion of the centrality of territory to national histories, see: O. Yiftachel, “Territory as the Kernel of the Nation: Space, Time and Nationalism in Israel/Palestine,” Geopolitics 7.2 (September 1, 2002).


islands initially seems to be great. Certainly, they can impact the two country’s maritime borders and, by extension, access to fishing and natural resources such as natural gas.\footnote{28} However, South Korea and Japan have reached bilateral agreements that address access to resources in the Sea of Japan/East Sea in the past. During the 1960s, South Korea and Japan reached a bilateral agreement to determine equitable fishery regulations in relation to the aforementioned Peace Line.\footnote{29} Emphasizing the symbolic value of the Liancourt Rocks, other scholars argue that the dispute may also play a functional role for the Japanese and especially the Korean governments—both North and South—by serving to strengthen the countries’ respective national identities and invoke powerful nationalist sentiments.\footnote{30} Specifically, political elites in Korea and Japan may have intentionally politicized the dispute for their own personal gain by reaping domestic political benefits.\footnote{31} Notably, it has been found that Korea's bilateral disputes with Japan over Dokdo directly contribute to increased presidential popularity among the public.\footnote{32}

At the local level, a number of scholars have sought to explore the significance of the Liancourt Rocks as a symbol within the national ethos. Unsurprisingly, some of these arguments arose in response to earlier

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The biggest strength, as well as the most significant drawback, of most of the literature has been its narrow scope. Representing a first step towards comprehensively explaining the dispute, this literature provides invaluable insight into the origins, scope, and possible resolutions of the dispute. Yet, many scholars have put too much stock into the explanatory power of single factors: for example, Bec Strating asserted that “the key to understanding the dispute lies in domestic politics and the way the rocks have become totemic in broader historical debates.”\footnote{Bec Strating, “The Symbolic Politics of the Dokdo/Takeshima Dispute,” \textit{The Interpreter}, December 6, 2017, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/symbolic-politics-dokdotakeshima-dispute.} Moreover, while the scholarship on the significance of the dispute on Korean and Japanese national identities and the role of historical memory in driving the conflict has been informative, most scholars have focused
on national identity as it applies to the national group; few, if any, focus on how such identity conceptions impact the decision making of foreign policy elites and vice versa.

Therefore, the most promising research in this area has been done by researchers looking into the intersection of two domains of the dispute and Korea-Japan relations more broadly. Perhaps the most notable has been forwarded by Victor Cha, whose framework sought to synthesize materialist and culturalist explanations of Korea-Japan friction into a coherent whole. More specific analyses on the dispute have likewise sought to integrate material and ideational variables; in particular, Ralf Emmers sought to examine the intersection between nationalism and natural resources. Focusing on the “triggers” of the dispute’s periodic escalation, Sung-jae Choi argued for the importance of identifying the ways in which extralegal and “extrahistorical” variables interacted with one another. Similarly, Krista E. Wiegand asserts that domestic accountability in South Korea—that is, pressures exerted through public opinion and actions by civil society groups—is responsible for the inability of South Korea and Japan to cooperate on security issues. However, Choi’s study does not assess the role played by the Korean and Japanese governments in integrating the territory into their national identities, instead focusing on the impact of civic groups and nongovernmental organizations; Wiegand’s study likewise focuses on the Korean context, leaving space for a similar analysis to be conducted on Japan.

This study seeks to expand on the work done by Choi and Wiegand.

by evaluating the impact of the interactions between state (country leaders, executive agencies, and legislative bodies) and society (public opinion and civic groups). In particular, this study will examine how nation-building efforts by both countries’ governments have created a culture in which the Liancourt Rocks became an integral part of Korean and Japanese national identity. Moreover, it seeks to evaluate how nationalist sentiment has, in turn, ensured that each government maintains little flexibility in how they carry out their policy vis-à-vis the Liancourt Rocks, ultimately unable to pursue any sort of compromise. As Andrew Oros notes, “there is an intersubjective relationship where identity and interests are linked; actors influence their environment, and the environment influences them.”

STATE INTERESTS AND TOP-DOWN SOCIAL ENGINEERING

Material Variables
To be clear, there are definite strategic interests which contribute to the shape and form of the dispute around the Liancourt Rocks. As Japan’s 2021 Diplomatic Bluebook suggests, the permanent stationing of security personnel on the territory by the Korean military as well as the military’s occasional exercises near the territory have consistently led to diplomatic protests by the Japanese MOFA. The military and geographic components of the dispute were reemphasized the following year in the 2022 Diplomatic Bluebook. In response, South Korea responded that Dokdo is part of Korea “in terms of history, geography and international law,” though it is also possible to interpret the term as referring to conceptions of the Korean “homeland.” Indeed, in 2012, then-South Ko-

[44] “MOFA Spokesperson’s Commentary on Japan’s Diplomatic Bluebook 2022,” Min-
rean President Lee Myung-bak visited Dokdo in response to a defense white paper published by the Japanese government earlier that year, which had laid claim to the territory. Speaking to police officers stationed on the islands, he reportedly asserted that “Dokdo is truly [Korean] territory, and worth defending with our lives.”

While analysts often overstate the geopolitical significance of Dokdo, there is some truth to the notion that there are material components which contribute to both states’ desire to control the territory. Japan may feel that it must commit to the Liancourt Rocks dispute because to withdraw from it would mean jeopardizing Japan’s claims to other Pacific territories—namely, the Senkaku Islands and Kurile Islands (known in Japan as the Northern Territories). Any concessions made over the Liancourt Rocks may embolden China and Russia—the other disputants in the Senkaku/Diaoyu and Kurile/Northern Territories disputes—to view Japanese claims as a sign of weakness and more aggressively contest Japan over those territories. In addition, the problem of determining each states’ Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) has a number of implications for access to natural resources, which will factor into each states’ respective calculus over whether to continue pursuing control of the territory. For example, the Korea National Oil Corporation detected for the first time in 1998 a commercially viable layer of natural gas near the islands; drilling began in 2004, with two other deposits being located nearby since then. Given that both Japan and South Korea are among


[47] This dynamic, whereby initially small defeats produce a positive feedback loop such that a state’s enemies perceive the state as weak and therefore prone to conceding on other issues, is discussed in greater detail in Robert Jervis’ System Effects (1999).

the top importers of liquefied natural gas, even the possibility of large deposits of natural gas near the Liancourt Rocks would incentivize both to lay claim to the territory.49

Considering the above factors, as well as the popularity of economics- and resource-based arguments with regard to the origins of Japan’s imperial ambitions in the middle of the 20th century, it would seem reasonable to perceive Dokdo as being the product of resource-based motivations.50 However, materialist explanations fail on several accounts. To begin with, legal scholars have noted that it is unlikely that the Liancourt Rocks would alter a state’s EEZ given that the rocks lack self-sustaining resources that allow for human habitation.51 More significantly, if the dispute was strictly limited to material considerations, it is highly probable that the two states would have reached a bilateral agreement long before the its revival in 2005. After all, as noted earlier, South Korea and Japan have successfully reached an agreement over fishing rights before, and it is difficult to imagine that other resource-based factors would preclude a similar agreement from being reached today. This becomes especially apparent considering that most of the estimated natural gas deposits near the Liancourt Rocks have not actually been discovered, and the perceived need for natural gas has declined in both countries as a result of decreasing domestic demand and increased nuclear energy production.52


Additionally, given the U.S.’ recognition of the importance of the U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral relationship, it is unlikely that a territorial conflict rooted solely in disagreements over resource acquisition would see the U.S. remain on the sidelines for 70 years. More concretely, materialist arguments fail to explain the fact that Korean protests against Japanese policy towards Dokdo are often tied to complaints over Japanese history textbooks, lack of culpability over the comfort women issue, and other explicitly identity-based factors. The inability of material factors to sufficiently explain the dispute leaves space for ideational considerations as well as identity to assume a major role in explaining how the dispute has managed to become generational.

**Seeing Like a State: Perception, Memory, and Identity**

Identity formation is a process laden with emotions related to perceived commonalities among an in-group and differences with out-groups, often grounded in abstract “memories” of the experiences of a group. In developing what would become one of the cornerstones of social psychology—social identity theory—Henri Tajfel argued that in categorizing themselves into social groups and comparing their group against other out-groups, people will seek to determine the negative elements of out-groups in order to enhance their self-esteem. These social identities are causative in that someone's social identity partially determines their behavior. Thus, one can expect that the emotions and identities of de-


cision makers play a significant role in shaping the dispute and increasing its longevity as a byproduct. In the context of the dispute between South Korea and Japan over the Liancourt Rocks, there are two main components of identity that are especially relevant: 1) Identity helps shape how decision makers themselves perceive their adversary, determines which options and alternatives are viable, and dictates how committed a state is to a particular interest. It can transform topics that are otherwise of no interest into a vital interest which commands national attention from policymakers and the public. 56 2) Identity is a malleable construct, thereby allowing the state to manipulate its form and content. 57

While competing ideas exist over the substance of their respective national identities, both Korea and Japan retain a strong sense of national pride. As Sven Saaler argues, history forms the core of Japanese nationalism, and historical memory — the contours of Japan’s national identity. 58 Indeed, as a parliamentarian, former prime minister Shinzo Abe played a critical role in organizing the Historical Examination Committee within the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in 1993, where he helped advocate for historical revisionist perspectives on Japanese aggression in the Pacific, comfort women, the Tokyo War Crimes Trials, and other historical issues. 59 Yet Abe’s mission was just one part of a broader LDP effort to produce and reinforce a conservative and nationalist identity in Japan. 60 While the two major parties in Korea have not experienced the

[56] While the transformation of political issues into a vital security issue suggests the applicability of securitization theory, the case of the Liancourt Rocks precludes easy application. Although Dokdo/Takeshima is seen as an important geographic and symbolic issue, both governments tend to avoid tying the issue to security.
[57] Referred to as “official nationalism” by Benedict Anderson in his Imagined Communities (1983), national identities crafted in a top-down manner have become a popular area of research, with imperial Japan being a prominent case study.
[59] Ibid.
same form of single-party dominance as the LDP has enjoyed in Japan, both promote a sense of Korean nationalism; since the two Koreas split in 1945, both regimes have sought to assert themselves as the legitimate representative of the Korean nation.\textsuperscript{61}

Unsurprisingly, then, one of the more interesting—and prominent—dynamics in the Korea-Japan relationship concerns their colonial past. As Victor Cha argues, the colonial history of Japan manifests in contemporary politics as a superiority complex towards Korea — a complex “inherent in the collective mindsets of former colonizers.”\textsuperscript{62} For Japan, then, losing to Korea is unacceptable because it would compromise their sense of exceptionalism, which defines Japanese national identity. For Korea, on the other hand, a sense of anti-Japanism pervades discourses on Korean national identity; government officials loathe the prospect of losing to Japan because each loss is perceived against the backdrop of the historical memories related to Japan’s colonization of Korea.\textsuperscript{63} In fact, as Cha asserts, Korea’s anti-Japanism is sometimes intense enough whereby “making a concession to Japan becomes synonymous with treason.”\textsuperscript{64} Thus on August 2, 2019, at the outbreak of a trade dispute between Korea and Japan, then-president Moon Jae-in promised cabinet members as well as the Korean public that they would “never again lose to Japan,” signaling the beginning of a prolonged quarrel between the two states.\textsuperscript{65}

This highly personal view of the other as an antagonist—or even an enemy—derives from their identities, grounded in a particular understand-
ing of their national histories. Both Korean and Japanese policymakers, therefore, have a personal stake in ensuring that they come out victorious over the other.66 As such, although both Korea and Japan wish to be perceived by the international community as adhering to international legal norms, both countries’ commitment to “winning” the dispute means their commitment to resolving disputes between one another through established legal mechanisms is weakened.

Manufacturing an Official Nationalism

Education represented the most effective means by which the Korean and Japanese governments could advance their concept of their respective national identities as well as their particular understanding of the dispute. In Japan, the nationalist character of education has become a topic of intense scrutiny as external observers began to criticize the revisionist versions contained within textbooks and taught in classrooms. Notably, a number of textbook publishing executives have deep networks with LDP officials and share many of the same conservative views on Japan’s recent past. One such executive is Hiromichi Moteki, the founder of the publishing firm Sekai Shuppan and acting chairman of the right-wing and historical revisionist Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact, which has affiliations with government officials.67

In 2016, when South Korean lawmakers visited Dokdo on Liberation Day, Hiromichi Moteki described the act as “stupid and ridiculous” and “purely propaganda.”68 Later in 2017, Hiromichi Moteki even went so
far as to deny that Korea was oppressed by Japan, arguing instead that "Japan spent so much money that you could say it was the Koreans that exploited us."\[69\] Moreover, despite the volume of international criticism and outrage found in Korea, China, the Philippines, and other former colonies of Japan, Abe Shinzo himself had asserted that such revisions were necessary to eradicate the postwar regime that had been established during the period of US occupation from 1945-1952.\[70\]

Government manipulation of historical education extended to the question of Takeshima as well. In 2012, Japanese textbooks referred only to “disagreements” over Takeshima.\[71\] However, as part of a broader effort by Shinzo Abe to eliminate “masochistic” feelings among Japanese regarding their history, replace such feelings with patriotism, and strengthen their territorial claims, Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) announced in 2014 that it would revise its teaching guidelines and recommend that teachers instruct students that Takeshima, as well as the Senkaku Islands, were both Japanese territories.\[72\] Later in 2019, Japan’s MEXT announced that beginning in 2020, social studies textbooks for 5th and sixth graders would state that Takeshima is an “inherent part of Japan’s territory” and

\[69\] At the time, Sekai Shuppan was embroiled in a controversy concerning the use of a particular set of history textbooks published by Sekai Shuppan and used across 50 junior high schools. Specific grievances regarding the textbooks included the omission of the Nanjing Massacre of 1937, which saw hundreds of thousands of Chinese dead, the omission of the comfort women issue, wherein hundreds of thousands of women in Korea, China, the Philippines, etc. were forced into sexual slavery, and for asserting that the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 was justified as the US’ prior embargo was itself an act of war; Julian Ryall, “Japan’s ‘nationalist’ School Books Teach a Different View of History,” Deutsche Welle, August 15, 2017, https://www.dw.com/en/japans-nationalist-school-books-teach-a-different-view-of-history/a-40092325.

\[70\] Ibid.


\[72\] Ibid.
that it is illegally occupied by Korea. This trend in education over historical and territorial issues marks a broader generational shift in Japan. As Andrew Horvat noted in an interview with Reuters, “the failure to reach consensus on a difficult past ... has resulted in a lack of tolerance in a new generation that sees things in a less nuanced manner, devoid of real experience.” With these developments, some Japanese scholars noted that Takeshima was now “consolidated among people”—that Japan had embraced a nationalist perspective on the Takeshima dispute. In other words, the Japanese government had succeeded in integrating the territorial dispute over Takeshima into Japan’s national identity, and was able to use it to ensure that its policy towards the territory remains stable. Taking advantage of these developed nationalist inclinations, Japanese officials, including former Foreign Minister Kono Taro, repeatedly described Korea’s actions in disputes as being unfair and resulting in “unjust disadvantages” for Japan. Japan then sought to shore up support to continue with the dispute by presenting Japan’s own approach as being in accordance with international norms—Japan was attempting to resolve the disputes through established legal mechanisms, and Korea was unilaterally and unfairly rejecting Japan’s proposals and behaving irrationally.


[78] Ibid.
tional, unfair Korea, the LDP could rally support around the perceived need to overcome injustice and punish cheaters. Importantly, this process is not unique to Japan, and a similar process can be observed in South Korea.

Following its impressive economic development and transition to democracy, as well as the rise of new generations who did not live through the Pacific War, South Korea has become another illustrative example of how the state can use education to ensure that views conducive to its policy choices are sustained.\(^7^9\) Certainly, while some observers interpreted Japan’s 2012 history textbooks as referring to Takeshima in relation to other ongoing disagreements, the Korean government interpreted the term as being suggestive towards a claim over the islands.\(^8^0\) In response to this perceived slight, the Korean Ministry of Education announced that it would distribute supplementary textbooks to all public schools dedicated entirely to teaching Dokdo’s history and “raise students’ awareness of the necessity for guarding [their] territorial rights over Dokdo and the history of strong responses against Japan’s territorial claim.”\(^8^1\) Later, in 2017, the Korean Ministry of Education indicated that it would strengthen education on Dokdo by designating a full week in April to Dokdo, in which schools would organize events and contests to raise awareness.\(^8^2\) The ministry also stated that it would provide materials suggesting that the idea of Dokdo being a Korean territory is, in fact, not disputable.\(^8^3\)

While the Korean government’s focus on educating the public about Dokdo may appear uniquely intense, this phenomenon is in fact not exclusive to Dokdo. Korean education on Japanese colonialism more

\(^{79}\) While not a rigid date, South Korea’s democratic transition can be marked as having finalized in 1987 with the first democratic national election, which resulted in the election of president Roh Tae-woo.


\(^{81}\) Ibid.


\(^{83}\) Ibid.
broadly tends to focus on the Koreans’ lived experiences and, in particular, their victimhood.84 Understandably, victim groups—whether they be former comfort women, laborers, or other victimized individuals—have served as especially strong advocates for education regarding these topics.85 This focus, while perhaps more historically accurate than what is represented in Japanese textbooks, has greatly contributed to modern feelings of animosity towards the Japanese among Koreans who never directly experienced the brutality of colonial rule.86 But efforts to raise awareness on Dokdo go beyond the classroom. In the Central Hall of the War Memorial of Korea in Yongsan-gu, one can find a small display containing a scaled-down model of Dokdo and information on the island’s history. Above it is a screen which plays a film on the dispute, wherein it is argued that Dokdo is Korean territory and, more importantly, that Japan knows this.87 Just as in Japan, the Korean government has found that framing Japan’s role in the dispute as an unjust and unfair one does much to appeal to the powerful emotions which accompany national identities, thereby functioning as a means to elevate the status of the territory and the significance of the dispute in the minds of Korean citizens, in turn securing their position regarding the dispute.88

Along a similar line, several Korean organizations, including Samsung and the Northeast Asian History Foundation, have established museums devoted to educating the Korean public about Dokdo’s history and

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[85] Ibid, 637.


[87] Unfortunately, there is no information regarding the display on official websites, though a photo is attached in Appendix A. Furthermore, it is on open display in the Central Hall near the Korea War Rooms I and II.

politics.\textsuperscript{89} While not within the strict context of government, many of these economic and academic elites have deep connections within the Korean government, and on many occasions, lawmakers themselves have publicly supported, participated in, and even helped organize efforts initiated by these groups.\textsuperscript{90} In other cases, policymakers themselves founded groups such as the Dokdo Love Society, an organization founded in 2000 by twenty-nine Korean legislators for the express purpose of pushing the National Assembly to enact policies that would reinforce Korea’s claim on Dokdo.\textsuperscript{91} These educational institutions play a similarly critical role to national education by advancing perspectives of Dokdo as Korean territory and promoting views favorable to the Korean state’s foreign policy objectives. The result has been to integrate Dokdo into the broader national narratives, and that South Koreans have been socialized into understanding “Koreanness” as involving a belief in Dokdo as being inherently part of Korea.\textsuperscript{92}

However, while many in the public sphere began to openly express powerful anti-Japanese sentiments, the Korean government consistently decided not to escalate disputes with Japan prior to 1996, instead opting to normalize relations. Faced with other issues that demanded more immediate attention, South Korean leaders made the conscious decision not to pursue the series of grievances which had surfaced immediately following the end of Japanese colonization. Two components of this phenomenon are that the authoritarian governments of Rhee Syngman, [89] Krista E. Wiegand and Ajin Choi, “Nationalism, Public Opinion, and Dispute Resolution: The Dokdo/Takeshima Dispute,” Journal of Asian Pacific Communication 27.2 (January 1, 2017): 241, https://doi.org/10.1075/japc.27.2.05wie; the museums themselves contain an impressive collection of materials on Dokdo’s history and present much of this information in 3-D format—for more information on the Dokdo Museum in Seoul, see: http://dokdomuseumseoul.com/en/about/.
[90] Ibid.
Park Chung-hee, and Chun Doo-hwan were highly insecure about the stability of the regime and, ideologically, more anti-Communist than they were anti-Japanese—Rhee in particular had spent considerably more time living and being educated in the U.S. than in Korea, and had to contend with other political figures such as Kim Gu, an independence activist who had led the Korean government-in-exile and maintained a legendary stature. Thus, although the early Korean leaders did harbor anti-Japanese sentiment, these feelings were overshadowed by the need to consolidate their domestic authority and the looming threats of North Korea and China.

However, by far the most significant reason was that South Korea needed to secure the economic aid that would provide the stimulus to grow the Korean economy in the decades following the Korean War. For example, in 1983, then-Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro had announced that he would become the first prime minister to visit South Korea, not only as a sign of goodwill but also to discuss plans to provide $4 billion in loans to South Korea. In addition, 1983 saw the twelfth Korea-Japan ministerial meeting and the eleventh round of meetings between members of the Korea-Japan Assembly Members’ League. Just the year prior, however, a program hosted in 1982 by the government-owned Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) debuted Jeong Kwang-tae’s song, “Dokdo is Our Land,” which immediately achieved

popular acclaim.\textsuperscript{96} Fearing that the song could provoke anti-Japanese sentiment, the authoritarian Chun government preemptively banned the song from July to November 1983.\textsuperscript{97}

Later in 1987, South Korea underwent a democratic transition, after which the government began to publicly express offense at perceived Japanese neo-colonialism, such as high-level visits to Yasukuni Shrine—that is, a Shinto shrine used to honor Japan’s war dead, including the fourteen Class-A war criminals, among many Class-B and Class-C war criminals, convicted during Tokyo War Crimes Trials following World War II.\textsuperscript{98} Yet, there was a delay between Korea’s democratic transition, which occurred in 1987, and its changing policy vis-a-vis its disputes with Japan, which is identified as taking place in 1996. This lag can be explained by several factors. To begin with, although Korea held its first democratic elections in 1987, the winner of the presidential election was Roh Tae-woo, a former general in the army and close ally of the former dictator Chun Doo-hwan. As such, although Korea had democratized, the Roh administration retained many authoritarian tendencies. For instance, despite descriptions of Roh’s 1987 liberalization drive as a “golden age” for the Korean press, such impressions belie the fact that through the Roh administration, all cultural products were required to undergo a review system and receive official authorization before being publicly circulated.\textsuperscript{99} Worse yet, while the Roh administration made meaningful

\textsuperscript{96} “Dokdo is Our Land”, Khan, August 16, 2021, https://m.khan.co.kr/article/202108160300115.

\textsuperscript{97} Since the ban was lifted in November 1983, the song has grown in popularity to become a household name, even being represented in the recent globally-acclaimed South Korean film Parasite.

\textsuperscript{98} Steven E. Lewentowicz, “In Response to Yasukuni: The Curious Approach the Chinese and South Korean Governments Take toward an Unresolved Link to the Past” (Master’s Thesis, Monterey, California, Naval Postgraduate School, 2013), 87, https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/34697; the author is careful to note that the political system, and the increased importance of public opinion, is only one factor, albeit a major one—economic development also played a significant role in giving the state a greater range of options that it could pursue; Higurashi Yoshinobu, “Yasukuni and the Enshrinement of War Criminals,” nippon.com, July 1, 2023. https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/a02404/.

\textsuperscript{99} Hun Shik Kim, “Media, the Public, and Freedom of the Press,” Social Indicators
attempts to open up diplomatically to the Communist bloc—a long-term process which required careful diplomatic maneuvering throughout the entirety of his presidency—the administration was also largely concerned with amassing personal wealth and power. Later in 1995, Roh would be convicted alongside Chun Doo-hwan and others within his circle on charges of bribery, having amassed over $300 million in bribes from thirty corporate entities.\[100\]

The post-1996 shift in the Korean government’s policy regarding disputes itself can be explained in three ways. First, between 1945 and 1993, the South Korean government maintained strict control over all media. Deemed necessary to maintain the fragile relationship with Japan and secure key loans that would stimulate Korea’s economic development, the controls enabled the Korean government to prevent information about Japanese provocations from entering public consciousness and manifesting in anti-Japanese attitudes that could sour relations between the two states.\[101\] These controls were largely removed in 1996, when the South Korean Supreme Court ruled them unconstitutional.\[102\] Second, Kim Young-sam, who was elected president in 1993 after Roh Tae-woo’s, did not face provocations from Japan between 1993 and 1995. However, between 1995 and 1996, Korean policymakers became increasingly

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angered by a series of comments made by Japanese policymakers, including an assertion by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama that the annexation of Korea was legally valid.\footnote{Sung-jae Choi, “The Politics of the Dokdo Issue,” Journal of East Asian Studies 5, no. 3 (December 2005): 479, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1598240800002071.} Third, there were domestic political incentives to adopt a harsher line on Japan. Although President Kim maintained approval ratings nearing 90% between 1993 and 1995, his party faced one of the largest scandals in the country’s history on October 1995—just half a year before the 1996 general election—when it was finally discovered that Roh Tae-woo and Chun Doo-hwan, both members of the same party as Kim Young-sam, had engaged in corrupt practices. Kim’s approval rating crashed to 33.4%, and other polls indicated that the opposition party was leading the incumbent party in the upcoming general election by over 16%.\footnote{Ibid.} Recognizing the dire prospects they would face if the country’s attention remained on the Roh presidency, the ruling party saw an opportunity to exploit the Japanese provocation concerning Dokdo—in fact, the party’s president, Kim Yun-hwan, bluntly asserted that “[the dispute] is clearly good material for us since an external trouble unites a nation.” In February 1996, following Seoul’s announced plans to construct a wharf facility on the Liancourt Rocks, the Japanese foreign minister claimed the territory as Japanese.\footnote{Ibid.} Seoul issued public statements countering the claim in response, and President Kim personally and publicly called the maritime police stationed on the territory, a move that was followed by the deployment of naval and air forces to conduct exercises near the islands. Despite having lost the country’s first nationally-held local elections in December 1995, Kim’s party, the New Korea Party, rebounded during the legislative elections held in early 1996 to win the majority of seats in the National Assembly, though it failed to win a majority.\footnote{B. C. Koh, “South Korea in 1996: Internal Strains and External Challenges,” Asian Survey 37.1 (1997): 1–9, https://doi.org/10.2307/2645768.; unfortunately, no verifiable public opinion data regarding the Kim administration in 1996 appears to exist—while figures can be found to be referenced in Namuwiki, the Korean equivalent of Wikipedia, there is no sourcing found. Searches in the digital archives for the major Korean news-}
Taking this into consideration, it is clear that in instances of Japanese provocations, “political systems appear to have some bearing on anti-Japanese nationalism because the government felt compelled to be responsive to public opinion in a manner different from the previous decades.” Moreover, they are able to utilize diversionary tactics to distract the public from internal issues. Altogether, the efforts to integrate the territorial issue within the scope of national identity and use it to advance their particular policies have ultimately been successful in both South Korea and Japan. Across two surveys conducted by Genro NPO in both Japan and Korea in 2013, 50.1% of Japanese respondents and 84.5% of Korean respondents indicated that the Takeshima/Dokdo dispute was a cause of the negative attitudes of both countries towards the other. Interestingly, in order to bolster its claim on Takeshima, Japan leveraged another opinion survey conducted by the Territorial and Sovereign Issues Planning and Coordination Office, which found that 94.5% and 63% of Japanese respondents were familiar with the Takeshima dispute and agreed with the assertion that South Korea was illegally occupying the territory, respectively. In response, South Korea filed a formal complaint against the “provocative action” amidst further public anger. More recently, the dispute was inflamed once more during the 2018 PyeongChang Olympics, when the Inter-Korean Unification flag that represented the joint North-South Korean team included a depic-

papers also yielded no results.
tion of Dokdo. In response, Tokyo lodged a complaint with the International Olympic Committee, resulting in a pledge by South Korea not to use the same flag in the future. Later that year, Japan passed guidelines to teach high school students about Takeshima, and through 2023, roughly two-thirds of the Japanese public remains interested in the territorial dispute.

Beyond support for policy options themselves, the effect of this project of nation-building around issues of historical memory—including those involving territorial disputes such as Dokdo/Takeshima—has real benefits for incumbent leaders and parties in Korea. In particular, the Dokdo dispute not only has the capacity to rally domestic support for these issues, but also to increase presidential approval ratings, a dynamic which became critical following Korea’s democratic transition. The dispute would benefit later presidencies as well. In particular, President Lee Myung-bak’s approval ratings increased following his controversial visit to Dokdo in 2012. The 2021 controversy over a Japanese diplomat’s comments leading up to the Tokyo Olympics presents an even stronger case. During the lead-up to the Tokyo Olympics, which took place in summer 2021, Korea and Japan became embroiled in another Dokdo-related controversy when a senior diplomat at the Japanese embassy in Seoul suggested to a Korean reporter that President Moon’s upcoming visit to Tokyo to repair relations amounted to “masturbation.”

[112] Ibid.
[116] “South Korea’s Moon Cancels Japan Trip amid Spat over Insult,” Al Jazeera, July
Contributing to the controversy was a decision made earlier that May by the Tokyo Olympic Committee to include Takeshima in its torch relay map; when South Korea protested to the International Olympic Committee, Japan doubled down.\textsuperscript{117} Unsurprisingly, the Korean public was outraged; in response, Moon canceled his planned trip to Tokyo, a move supported by over 65\% of Koreans.\textsuperscript{118} However, what makes this incident especially interesting is the domestic context in which Korean leaders were operating. Several months earlier, in March, the Democratic Party—President Moon’s party—had been embroiled in the largest scandal of Moon’s presidency. Ten individuals, all associated with the party, were found to have been engaging in real estate speculation, a discovery viewed as particularly offensive given President Moon’s very strong commitment to curbing skyrocketing housing prices.\textsuperscript{119} In light of this scandal, Moon’s approval rating dropped to 34.1\%, with his disapproval rating jumping to 62.2\%, the highest it had ever been.\textsuperscript{120} After Moon’s public decision to cancel his trip to Tokyo, his approval rating jumped to 46.9\%, demonstrating the effectiveness of satisfying popular demands not to concede to Japan on improving presidential approval ratings, even in light of otherwise large domestic scandals.\textsuperscript{121}


Therefore, it can be theorized that in the case of Korea, the top-down nation-building effort serves two purposes: 1) to shore up public support for the government’s policy position on Dokdo, based in large part on leaders’ own nationalist beliefs regarding territorial sovereignty and the prospect of “losing” to Japan, and 2) to allow the government to use the dispute as a distraction to either engage in other policies or divert attention away from controversies. Indeed, the first is one of the major findings of Ji-Young Lee and Jaehyun Lee’s study on South Korean domestic politics in relation to the dispute—that is, that “narratives on Dokdo ... are first and foremost designed to enhance South Korean territorial sovereignty over the islands.” While this may also be the case for Japan, there have yet to be similar empirical studies conducted. Similar to Japan, the manner in which Korea has designed its educational materials on Dokdo has fulfilled a similar purpose in provoking nationalist sentiments over Japanese colonialism and perceived neo-colonial ambitions, and thereby shoring up domestic support for Korea’s foreign policies on Dokdo.

This section began with a brief discussion on the material value—that is, value derived from the resources that can be extracted, such as oil and fish—of the Liancourt Rocks. Despite the initial appeal of resource-based arguments, however, the Liancourt Rocks dispute has evaded the same sort of resolution that has been reached in other disputes over resources, even in the narrow context of South Korea-Japan relations, thereby suggesting the relevance of other, non-material factors. This study focuses on the significance of national identity and how it shapes the way in which Korean and Japanese leaders perceive their counterparts, or adversaries, and helps frame the desirability of certain policy options. Furthermore, how leaders understand their nation’s history in particular—including the history of the Liancourt Rocks—informs what they perceive to be the right course of action. In order to sustain the dispute

and achieve victory—or perhaps to distract from domestic issues and gain favorability among domestic audiences—the two governments are incentivized to use education to nurture a national identity in which the territory is tied to people’s sense of “homeland.” While the content of history textbooks have been the most visible evidence of this dynamic, the process of official nation-building extends beyond written text to include trips to museums, special exhibitions, and annual commemorations, all designed to raise awareness and interest in the territory and the dispute concerning it among the respective populations.

DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY AND BOTTOM-UP PRESSURES

Disdain between the Korean and Japanese governments was not always externally obvious. For instance, in an analysis of reactions by the Korean and Chinese governments following visits to Yasukuni Shrine by Japanese prime ministers, Steven E. Lewentowicz found that the South Korean government ignored all Japanese visits prior to 1996, the time period that encompasses Korea’s authoritarian period. After 1996—that is to say, soon after Korea’s democratic transition—the Korean government objected to such visits. 123 Describing Korea’s approach under the dictatorship of President Park Chung-Hee, Lewentowicz argues that while normalization of diplomatic relations was a core element within Park’s plan for South Korean economic development, the Korean public reacted negatively at what it saw as a governmental betrayal. 124 This public backlash against visits to the shrine would have impeded Park’s efforts to normalize Korea’s economic relations with Japan, however “Park’s violent political suppression in 1965 ensured that public opinion did not guide policy nor challenge the regime.” 125

[124] Ibid, 74.
[125] Ibid.
However, while policy shifts were easier to implement in South Korea under the authoritarian regime, the status of the two countries today as modern democracies presents a significant challenge—the two governments may find themselves unable to shape public opinion to be amenable to cooperation with the other regarding the territorial dispute. Identities, while malleable, are also typically slow-changing. Old identities can be replaced only when alternative ideas are proposed and achieved through “social salience,” whereby they are supported by important constituencies or influential groups.\footnote{Andrew L. Oros, Normalizing Japan: Politics, Identity, and the Evolution of Security Practice (Stanford University Press, 2008), 27.} Without adequate political willpower on the part of political elites, it is likely that the status quo will remain unchanged. In Japan, this has certainly been the case, as the LDP retains staunchly conservative views of the Japanese nation. If a state were to shift its narrative to an extent that is too far and too sudden, it risks losing its audience and its legitimacy among voters.\footnote{James D. Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes,” The American Political Science Review 88.3 (1994): 577–92, https://doi.org/10.2307/2944796.} Naturally, this risk is far greater in states with democratic forms of government. Using an experimental approach, Michael Tomz found that audience costs—that is, domestic political costs that a leader incurs as a result of backing down in a dispute, typically in the form of lower approval ratings or decreased support in future elections—arise in conditions where the country’s citizens care about the reputation of the country or its leader.\footnote{Michael Tomz, “Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach,” International Organization 61.4 (2007): 835.} In fact, audience costs can sometimes be so great that “war may be preferable to concessions.”\footnote{Shuhei Kurizaki and Taehee Whang, “Detecting Audience Costs in International Disputes,” International Organization 69.4 (ed 2015): 949–80, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818315000211.}

Public opinion can therefore exert significant pressure on a government to sustain or even escalate their policy in a dispute, particularly in cases where the other actor is perceived as a rival.\footnote{It is unclear whether South Korea and Japan can be considered to be rivals. None-}
Korea specifically, attempts to change tack and reach compromises with Japan would simply be unacceptable in the eyes of many Koreans who often perceive such shifts as bowing before the former colonial power. In Lewentowicz’s analysis, one of the political consequences of the democratic transition was public demands for responses to Japanese provocations.\textsuperscript{131} On this point there is a difference in the degree of freedom which Korea and Japan can exercise in selecting among policy alternatives. In Japan, the LDP has maintained near hegemonic power over the domestic political scene since 1955 with the exception of two brief periods (1993-1994 and again in 2009-2012). While Japan is not necessarily a one-party state, the LDP’s deep and expansive system of pork barrel politics has allowed it to wield an immense amount of political clout, shadowing all other opposition parties.\textsuperscript{132} Korea, on the other hand, is similar to the U.S. in that two parties are dominant, with power regularly shifting between the two parties. Therefore, Korean leaders must be more sensitive to public opinion, as failing to do so gives opportunities for the opposition party to make electoral gains.

The 2005 Transition

Similar to how Korean objections to Japanese visits to Yasukuni Shrine became consistent only after 1996, Korean assertions over control of Dokdo and objections to Japanese claims became pronounced after 2005, when Shimane Prefecture instituted “Takeshima Day” as a prefectural holiday. Prior to 2005, both Korea and Japan had largely allowed the territorial dispute to lurk in the background in order to pursue clos-


er bilateral relations. In fact, just two months prior to Shimane Prefecture's announcement, then-Korean president Moo-hyun Roh made an official visit to Japan—during the visit, the two governments designated the year 2005 as the “Korea-Japan Friendship Year” to mark the 40th anniversary of Korea and Japan’s diplomatic normalization in 1965. But, having been picked up by Korea's domestic media outlets, Shimane Prefecture's February proposal generated a public firestorm in Korea, made worse when the Japanese ambassador to Korea, Toshiyuki Takano, made a statement asserting that Takeshima was Japanese territory. The situation became further inflamed on March 16, when the bill was passed and February 22 officially became Takeshima Day. Just two days prior to the official announcement, a large demonstration demanding that Japan drop the new policy was organized in front of Japan's embassy in Seoul. In the wake of this public outrage, Korea’s MOFA issued official complaints on February 23 and March 16 pressing Shimane Prefecture to remove the ordinance and asserting that Dokdo is Korean territory. Thereafter, Korean media would report on every Takeshima Day celebration in Japan, and nearly every time, Korea's MOFA issues a press


release on the event.

Three factors offer partial explanations of this shift: 1) from the perspective of the political elite, Korea’s successful economic development made economic relations with Japan less critical (especially in light of Japan’s Lost Decade), thereby allowing the Korean government to pursue historical issues; 2) the Korean media apparatus in the 2000s was more robust compared to the 1990s, allowing news to be disseminated more rapidly across a broader audience; 3) the democratic transition allowed Korean voters to have a greater influence on foreign policy—leaders who failed to match the public’s expectations about proper responses to Japanese actions would be voted out in the next election and replaced by opposition candidates. The latter two factors are of particular interest in the context of bottom-up pressure impacting foreign policy decision making.

**Democratic Accountability and Commitment Problems**

The value of public opinion lies partly in its ability to prevent a government from pursuing particular policy options that are deemed undesirable. In Korea, activists spent decades establishing a more accountable government. Korea’s democratic transition helped ensure that the government would be compelled to respond to public opinion to a far greater degree than under previous regimes. Thus, in the context of the Liancourt Rocks dispute more broadly, if either the Korean and Japanese governments wish to make amends, reach a compromise, or otherwise adopt a more friendly approach to improve bilateral relations, they may be unable to do so without risk of major political costs domestically. While this has affected both Korea and Japan, it is especially significant in Korea, where two parties must continuously compete with one another for domestic political power. As discussed previously, Korean domestic public opinion and civil society groups have been major factors in preventing more friendly security relations with Japan.\[137\] In

other words, democratic accountability, while a critical feature of democratic governance, may have increased the dispute’s longevity by preventing either government from pursuing compromise.

At first glance, public opinion in Korea and Japan on the Liancourt Rocks seems to provide a favorable outlook. In both countries, over 70% of respondents to the 2013 Genro NPO survey indicated that relations with the other country were important. Furthermore, over 80% of Japanese and over 90% of Korean respondents indicated that the Takeshima/Dokdo issue was the primary barrier to the development of deeper bilateral relations. Under normal circumstances, this appears to suggest that the Korean and Japanese publics would push their governments to seek and reach an agreement to settle the dispute, allowing the two countries to cooperate further on other security, economic, and diplomatic fronts. Yet, the opposite has been observed. While Koreans and the Japanese alike wish to resolve the dispute, both groups view the territory as inherently theirs and therefore blame the other for maintaining the dispute unjustly, leading to calls for each government to pursue the dispute even more vigorously.

In the case of Korea: in reaction to the Tokyo Olympics controversy described earlier, nearly 70% of Koreans responding to a survey taken by the Korean Society Opinion Institute supported an official boycott of the Tokyo Olympics, and a later survey by Realmeter showed that over 60% opposed President Moon’s planned visit to Japan during the Olympics. While Moon resisted public pressure to boycott the Olympics entirely, he opted instead for the softer alternative and canceled his scheduled visit to Japan during the Olympics. In this way, he was able


[139] Ibid.

to satisfy domestic expectations while not angering Japan even further.

In Japan, while the impact of public opinion may be weaker relative to Korea as a result of its single-party dominance, public opinion still functions as a signal to Japan’s foreign policy elites regarding the extent to which they are able to pursue the dispute. Assessing the results of several different surveys, Kevin Stahler found that following Korean president Lee Myung-bak’s visit to Dokdo in 2012—which, as was noted earlier, resulted in higher approval ratings among Koreans—Japanese perceptions of Korea experienced an unprecedented collapse as roughly 58% of respondents indicated they did not feel that Japan was close to Korea; in mid-2011 that figure was roughly 35%. Caught between the need to maintain relations with South Korea in the face of increased Chinese military activity and North Korean missile tests, as well as the need to respond to mounting public outcries among the Japanese public, Tokyo also opted for a “softer” policy by summoning the Korean ambassador, Shin Kak-soo, and later recalling the Japanese ambassador from Korea.141

To further illustrate the efficacy of public opinion in shaping foreign policy outcomes, the 2022 controversy concerning a Korean marine survey offers perhaps the strongest case for how public opinion can compel a government to sustain a more hostile approach. At a press conference on May 17, Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa announced that Japan suspected that a research vessel owned by a Korean state-owned company was operating just south of Takeshima.142 As Korea itself would confirm later that month, the Hae Yang 2000, which belonged to the Korea Hydrographic and Oceanographic Agency, had been con-

ducting a marine survey in an area north of Takeshima that was within Japan’s Exclusive Economic Zone.\textsuperscript{143} The incident led to public anger among the Japanese public, especially as Japanese media outlets made clear in their reports that the incident marked a break in Japan’s bid to maintain calm relations with Korea, thereby reinforcing perceptions of Korea as the sole instigator.\textsuperscript{144} In response to the ship’s presence, Tokyo, once again balancing the need to respond to the latest apparent provocation and the more important need to cooperate with Seoul on regional security issues, forwarded formal complaints to several Korean diplomats.

What is particularly interesting about this incident, however, is not the Japanese response to the incident, but rather Korea’s reaction. In contrast with his predecessor, Korea’s new president, Yoon Seok-yeol, had throughout his campaign signaled his intention to “reset” relations with Japan.\textsuperscript{145} Considering his desire to improve the Korea-Japan relationship, many tentatively expected Yoon to seek to avoid conflict with Japan—he had, after all, criticized former President Moon’s antagonistic and conflict-prone posture towards Japan.\textsuperscript{146} Instead, the Yoon administration


has made no concessions to Japan, nor did it make any announcements indicating that maritime research near Dokdo would cease, a development which Japan views as critical when considering that South Korea’s Institute of Ocean Science and Technology had planned to send its own research ship, the *Dokdo Nuri*, to conduct regular surveys near Dokdo.

While a variety of factors likely contributed to Yoon’s decision not to concede to Japan, the strongest explanation is that Yoon had to confront the realities of directing Korean foreign policy, and has found that pursuing a reset in Korea-Japan relations was not as simple as it seemed during his campaign trail. As Japanese audiences reacted with anger at what they perceive to be Korean encroachment of Japanese territory, Korean audiences responded in kind with anger toward what they see as Japanese anti-Korean sentiments.\[147\] Having to consider domestic public opinion in order to maintain his own support base, Yoon likely feels it necessary to refrain from appeasing Japan over the incident. Given the anti-Japanism that is ever-present in Korea’s national consciousness, ending the maritime survey would have appeared to Koreans as caving in to Japanese pressure instead of as defending Korean interests.\[148\] That the incident occurred only five months into his presidency makes the importance of public opinion even greater as Yoon seeks to establish his agenda and retain his voter base through concrete policies. As such, even though Yoon desired a rapprochement with Japan and an end to the controversy, Korean public opinion has compelled him to continue a far less conciliatory path in order to avoid incurring domestic political costs, thereby preventing the South Korean government from pursuing a settlement with Japan over the dispute.

**CONCLUSION**

\[147\] As Genro NPO’s 2013 survey showed, 31% of Koreans believe that anti-Korean sentiment among the Japanese people is a barrier to the development of bilateral relations.

A curiosity of the South Korean-Japanese relationship has been the relative lack of security agreements despite sharing a large, active, mutual ally. In many cases, disputes in certain domains appear to spill over into other domains and become tied into broader national discourses of antagonism by the other. This study argues that dynamics between decision makers in government as well as the collective public opinion in Korea and Japan explain the severity and longevity of the Liancourt Rocks dispute. The state succeeds in their effort to continue the dispute by shaping the content of their national identity, integrating the territory into the national story. Public opinion, in turn, keeps officials “on course” by imposing political costs for perceived instances of defection. The Liancourt Rocks dispute itself has managed to remain relevant for over half a century because Korea and Japan have sought to integrate the dispute into their respective national identities for the purpose of aligning popular conceptions of the nation with elite conceptions, thereby leading to increased support for the government’s chosen foreign policies. Then, largely because of these consolidated national identities, the Korean and Japanese publics can, and often do, compel their governments to sustain their more hostile policies even during periods where the two states may desire reconciliation or compromise.

Since 1965, the Korean government has sought to continue normal relations with Japan so that it could maintain favorable economic ties. However, the 2005 transition became a catalyst for the dispute to leap to the forefront of larger debates over Korean and Japanese identity and historical memory. Recognizing that relations with Japan were not as critical as they were in the 1960s, and pushed by domestic public opinion, the Korean government thereafter consistently and publicly opposed any perceived Japanese provocations related to Dokdo. At first, Seoul found this public support helpful in moments when it actively sought conflict with Tokyo; the history curricula it had designed successfully created powerfully nationalist sentiments grounded in historical memories of victimization by Japan. However, the Korean government came to realize that the increased importance of public opinion and democratic accountability is a double-edged sword, as it also found that public opinion could compel it to maintain its current hostile approach even
in moments when it wished to pursue a more reconciliatory approach, such as during the recent maritime survey incident.

In contrast with Korea, Japan’s political system, defined by pork barrel politics and single-party domination, has rendered the impact of Japanese public opinion slightly less crucial. The LDP has been able to exercise relatively more freedom in how it engages Korea in its disputes as a result. Nonetheless, domestic public opinion still has a similar influence in shaping the elites’ perceptions of viable alternatives and the degree to which they can engage in a conflict with Korea. Similar to Korea, Japan has found a consolidated national identity to prove useful in pursuing disputes with Korea. But while national identity in Korea vis-à-vis Japan is predicated on a sense of victimhood, national identity in Japan vis-à-vis Korea is predicated on a colonial mindset of superiority, often implied in Japanese stereotypes of Koreans as “emotionally” or “irrationally” rejecting Japanese proposals to resolve the dispute through legal mechanisms.

Approaches synthesizing material and ideational explanations have the potential to offer more comprehensive explanations for current events. Unfortunately, in the context of the Liancourt Rocks, a resolution is unlikely in the near future as it would require an immense amount of political will on the part of both political elites as well as the public in Korea and Japan. Both sides would be required to make concessions despite neither side wanting to do so—and even when one side wishes to, they may find themselves unable. Nonetheless, looking at the interactions between state and society in Korea and Japan may reveal new ways to comprehend the dispute as well as novel ways to resolve it. One possible solution is the “Aland model,” whereby Korea and Japan pursue a strategy of “softening sovereignty” through demilitarization, neutralization, and autonomy for the local population.¹⁴⁹ Specifically, Seoul and Tokyo should first declare the rocks as part of their national parks without de-

¹⁴⁹ The “Aland model” refers to a dispute over the Aland Islands between Finland and Sweden that was settled by the League of Nations in 1921; Masako Ikegami, “Solving the Dokdo/Takeshima Dispute: Searching for Common Ground Through the Aland Model,” The Journal of East Asian Affairs 23.1 (2009): 15.
nying the other’s claim—this would serve to “soften the border”; second, both states must reach agreements concerning shared access to natural resources similar to ones made previously; third, both coast guards should conduct joint patrols to monitor for poaching and illegal fishing—the significance here lies in engaging in joint security operations and building trust; lastly, the territory and surrounding areas should be declared a demilitarized zone.150

The Aland model represents a unique solution; however, it would also be prudent for Tokyo to apply pressure to Shimane Prefecture to repeal its claim to the territory, and for both states to pursue an agreement regarding education. It is clear that the narratives surrounding the territory are strongly nationalist ones. Given this, both countries should form a joint historical committee to develop a de-mythologized history of the islands and detach the territory from people’s beliefs concerning their “homeland.” Moreover, just as the Aland model suggests instituting joint coast guard patrols, it may be worthwhile to convert independent research surveys, which at this point are largely conducted by South Korean teams, into joint operations to further build trust and break down feelings of animosity. Beyond political solutions, it would be in both South Korea and Japan’s best interest to continue investing in nuclear power to reduce demand for natural gas, thereby undermining any potential efforts to sustain the dispute by referring to the natural gas deposits that are suspected to exist nearby. Fortunately, both states have already declared a commitment to increasing nuclear energy production, with South Korea and Japan hoping to see nuclear energy make up 30% and 20-22% of total energy production by 2030.151 However the two


states decide to pursue resolution, traditional means of conflict resolution have proven to be insufficient, and more creative means to temper public reactions and satisfy the others’ interests are necessary.
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