

TERRITORIAL DISPUTES AND SOVEREIGNTY CLAIMS:
THE CASE OF DOKDO/TAKESHIMA
AND REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES



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ABSTRACT

Territorial Disputes and Sovereignty Claims:

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Asia has long been home to unresolved territorial and maritime disputes, particularly in the East China Sea and South China Sea. These disputes are not just about law or history but they also reflect the struggles over regional influence. Among these, the dispute involving the islets called Dokdo by Korea and Takeshima by Japan remains one of the most long-standing and sensitive ones in the region. An important cause is the uncertainty embedded in the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty. While the treaty officially ended World War II and required Japan to give up its colonial claims, it failed to clearly state who holds sovereignty over several islets, including Dokdo/Takeshima. This lack of clarity has allowed Korea and Japan to interpret the treaty in ways that support their respective positions. This thesis examines how the dispute has evolved by analyzing historical events, key treaties and diplomatic statements. To better understand the nature of the disputes, the thesis also compares them with other conflicts in East and Southeast Asia that share similar aspects. By doing so, it examines the impact of the U.S. on the formation of the postwar setting and explores how symbolic actions—like Korea’s “Dokdo Day” and Japan’s “Takeshima Day”—are used to strengthen national identity and public awareness. This study argues that resolving such disputes requires more than legal solutions; it also requires historical understanding and long-term diplomatic effort.

ÖZET

Toprak Anlaşmazlıkları ve Egemenlik İddiaları:

Dokdo/Takeshima Örneği ve Bölgesel Perspektifler

Asya kıtası uzun süredir, özellikle Güney Çin Denizi ve Doğu Çin Denizi'ndeki çözülmemiş deniz ve kara sınırı ihtilaflarına sahne olmaktadır. Bu anlaşmazlıklar yalnızca hukuk ya da tarih üzerinden değil, aynı zamanda bölgesel nüfuz mücadelesiyle de yakından ilişkilidir. Bu ihtilaflardan biri de Kore'de Dokdo, Japonya'da Takeshima olarak bilinen adacıklar üzerindeki egemenlik meselesidir. Bölgedeki en eski ve en hassas anlaşmazlıklardan biri olan bu sorunun temelinde, 1951 tarihli San Francisco Barış Antlaşması'ndaki belirsizlik yatmaktadır. Antlaşma İkinci Dünya Savaşı'nı resmen sona erdirip Japonya'nın sömürgeci iddialarından vazgeçmesini öngörmüş olsa da, Dokdo/Takeshima dahil bazı adacıkların kime ait olduğu açıkça belirtilmemiştir. Bu durum, Kore ve Japonya'nın antlaşmayı kendi iddialarını destekleyecek şekilde yorumlamalarına imkan tanımıştır. Bu tez, tarihsel gelişmeleri, temel antlaşmaları ve diplomatik açıklamaları inceleyerek söz konusu anlaşmazlığın zaman içindeki seyrini analiz etmektedir. Ayrıca, benzer nitelikler taşıyan Doğu ve Güneydoğu Asya'daki diğer ihtilaflarla karşılaştırmalı bir perspektif sunmaktadır. Çalışma, özellikle ABD'nin savaş sonrası dönemdeki rolüne odaklanmakta; Güney Kore'nin "Dokdo Günü" ve Japonya'nın "Takeshima Günü" gibi sembolik girişimlerinin ulusal kimlik ve toplumsal farkındalık yaratmadaki etkisini irdelemektedir. Sonuç olarak, bu tür anlaşmazlıkların yalnızca hukuki çözümlerle değil, aynı zamanda tarihsel anlayış ve uzun vadeli diplomatik çabalarla ele alınması gerektiği savunulmaktadır.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ECS	East China Sea
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
DPRK	Democratic People’s Republic of Korea
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MOFA Japan	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan
MOFA Korea	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Korea
PRC	People’s Republic of China (China)
PPS	Policy Planning Staff
ROC	Republic of China (Taiwan)
ROK	Republic of Korea
SCAP	The Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers
SCAPIN	Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers Instruction Note
SCS	South China Sea
SFPT	The San Francisco Peace Treaty
SWNCC	State–War–Navy Coordinating Committee
UK	United Kingdom
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UN	United Nations
USA	United States of America
US	United States
USAFIK	The United States Army Forces in Korea
USAMGIK	The United States Army Military Government in Korea
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of regional territorial conflicts

Territorial disputes arise between two or more countries over the sovereignty of the same land or maritime area. These may involve land borders, islands, or maritime features such as sea rocks and reefs.¹ Throughout history, these disputes have led wars, changing borders or shifts in the global power structure. In some cases, they have even led to the creation of new legal and political systems.² However, they are not only about resources or power. According to Forsberg, territorial disputes often trigger deep nationalist sentiments and strong feelings tied to history, which makes peaceful resolution even more difficult. According to him, collective memory and a sense of justice can drive conflicts as much as —sometimes even more than— strategic or economic interests.³

In the aftermath of World War II, Asia witnessed a comparatively greater number of territorial and maritime conflicts than many other regions, making up 28 percent of such disputes in the latter half of the twentieth century and rising to nearly 40 percent by the early 2000s. Many of these disputes began after the war, as newly independent countries were formed with borders that were either unclear or never properly defined— a problem that often traced back to the pre-colonial era.⁴

¹ Fravel, “Territorial and Maritime Boundary Disputes in Asia,” 1,2,4.

² Miranda and Maljak, “The Role of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,” 4.

³ Forsberg, “Explaining Territorial Disputes,” 433–449.

⁴ Fravel, “Territorial and Maritime Boundary Disputes in Asia,” 6.

In East Asia, one of the most prominent disputes is between Korea and Japan over the islets known as *Dokdo* in Korea and *Takeshima* in Japan⁵ or Liancourt Rocks⁶ internationally, which forms the main focus of this thesis. Other prominent disputes are Japan's contest with China concerning the Senkaku/Diaoyu⁷ Islands and with Russia over the Northern Territories, also called the Southern Kurils.⁸

In Southeast Asia, tensions are especially high in the South China Sea (SCS), where China asserts overlapping claims—based on its “Nine-Dash Line”—along with other claimant states such as the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan and Brunei.⁹ This introduction briefly compares the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute with other territorial conflicts in East and Southeast Asia, underlining the different historical, legal, and geopolitical aspects of each case.

Although access to natural resources and strategic advantages often motivate other disputes, Korea sees the Dokdo/Takeshima conflict as rooted mainly in national identity and historical memory. Meanwhile, Japan presents the issue mainly as a legal matter. It argues that the islets were lawfully incorporated into Japanese territory in 1905 as *terra nullius* (land belonging to no one), and that international agreements did not oblige Japan to give up sovereignty over them.¹⁰ These comparisons will serve to establish the broader regional context, while emphasizing the motivations shaping sovereignty claims in the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute.

⁵ Throughout this thesis, the term “Dokdo/Takeshima” is generally used together. However, when referring specifically to the narratives of each country, they may appear individually. This is not intended to indicate any bias, but rather to better convey their respective perspectives.

⁶ The name “Liancourt Rocks” originates from the French whaling ship *Le Liancourt*, which almost ran aground there in 1849, and the term continues to appear widely in international references.

⁷ MOFA Japan, “Senkaku Islands”

⁸ MOFA Japan, “Northern Territories”, Kim, Samuel. *Territorial Disputes in East Asia*, 80–81.

⁹ Congressional Research Service of U.S., *U.S.-China Strategic Competition*, 7, 16–17.

¹⁰ Tsukamoto, T. *The Meaning of the Territorial Incorporation of Takeshima (1905)*.

1.1.1 East Asia disputes

1.1.1.1 Dokdo/Takeshima

Within the landscape of East Asian territorial disputes, the Dokdo/Takeshima conflict between South Korea (hereafter referred to as Korea, unless otherwise stated: North Korea will be mentioned separately when relevant) and Japan holds particular symbolic and political significance. Mikyoung Kim (2012) describes the conflict as a memory war, in which each country frames the issue through its own historical experiences—Korea emphasizing colonial grievances while Japan focuses on legal claims.¹¹ These different narratives make cooperation difficult and fuel nationalist sentiment on both sides.¹²

The islets—known as Dokdo (독도, meaning Stone Island) in Korean¹³ and as Takeshima (竹島, Bamboo Island) in Japanese,¹⁴ and internationally as the Liancourt Rocks—form a small group of rocky islets in the East Sea/Sea of Japan.¹⁵ Both countries claim sovereignty over the islets and Korea currently controls them, while Japan continues to assert its sovereignty over the territory.¹⁶

Historically, the islets have been referred to by nearly ten names. Korean records mention *Usando*, *Sambongdo*, *Seok-do* and later *Jasando*, with variations in Chinese characters.¹⁷ In Japan, they were called *Matsushima* during the Edo period. During the nineteenth century, European naval expeditions introduced names such as *Liancourt Rocks* and *Hornet Rocks*, with *Ryanko Island* (a corruption of Liancourt)

¹¹ Kim, “A War of Memories: Dissecting the Dokdo/Takeshima Dispute.”

¹² Forsberg, “Explaining Territorial Disputes,” 433–49.

¹³ National Library of Korea. (n.d.). *Korean history in the eyes of the Dokdo*.

¹⁴ BBC News. “Profile: Dokdo/Takeshima islands.”

¹⁵ The body of water between the two nations is known in Japan as the Sea of Japan and in Korea as the East Sea. Using both appellations recognizes the dispute over naming and reflects both perspectives impartially

¹⁶ National Geographic, “The History of the Dispute over the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands.”

¹⁷ National Library of Korea. (n.d.). *Korean history in the eyes of the Dokdo*.

also coming into colloquial use.¹⁸ After their incorporation into Shimane Prefecture in 1905, Japan began officially referring to them as *Takeshima*.¹⁹



Figure 1. Dokdo/Takeshima viewed from Korean side
Source: MOFA Korea

Geographically, the islets lie between Korea and Japan. According to the Korean government, they lie approximately 87.4 km from Ulleungdo, the nearest Korean landmass, and 154.5 km from the nearest Japanese territory, Oki Islands.²⁰ The Japanese government states they are 88 km from Utsuryo Island (Ulleungdo) and 158 km from the Oki Islands and also emphasizes their distance from the mainland, claiming they are 211 km from Shimane Prefecture, and 217 km distance from the Korean mainland coast.²¹ Korean sources in turn, cite 215 km from the Korean mainland and 211 km from Japan. Such variations in measurement reflect differing national perspectives and are often cited in sovereignty claims.²²

¹⁸ Matsuda, *The Territory of Japan*, 95.

¹⁹ MOFA Japan, *Japan's Territorial Sovereignty over Takeshima: Recognition of Takeshima*.

²⁰ MOFA Korea, "Geographical Recognition of Dokdo"; MOFA Korea, "Facts on Dokdo"

²¹ MOFA Japan, "Japan's Consistent Position on the Territorial Sovereignty over Takeshima"

²² MOFA Korea, "Geographical Recognition of Dokdo"; MOFA Korea, "Facts on Dokdo"

Dokdo/Takeshima consists of two main islets, Seodo/Nishi-jima (the western islet, 88,740 m², a circumference of 2.6 km, and a height of 168.5 meters) and Dongdo/Higashi-jima (the eastern islet, 73,297m², a circumference of 2.8km and a height of 98.6 meters). According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Korea, the total land area of the territory, including the 89 surrounding islets amounting to 25,517m², is nearly 187.554m².²³

Korea maintains that Dokdo has long been part of its territory. The Korean government cites Japan's acknowledgment of Korean ownership in 1696, following a fishing dispute, and to the islets' official inclusion under Uldo County administration before Japan's incorporation in 1905. Seoul further asserts that Dokdo was restored to Korean sovereignty following World War II and rejects the notion that a legitimate territorial dispute exists. Korea bases its claim on a combination of historical documentation, geographical proximity, and international law.²⁴

Following the establishment of the Republic of Korea (ROK) on August 15, 1948, sovereignty over the islets remained a point of contention. Early drafts of the San Francisco Peace Treaty²⁵ referred to Dokdo as part of Korean territory. However they were removed in the later drafts in 1949, leaving the sovereignty over the islets ambiguous.²⁶

In response to these developments and to assert Korea's maritime sovereignty, Korean President Syngman Rhee unilaterally proclaimed a maritime

²³ MOFA Korea, 'Locations and Features'; MOFA Japan, *Takeshima Information*

²⁴ International Relations Review, "Dokdo: The End of Dispute and Division."

²⁵ The San Francisco Peace Treaty, signed on September 8, 1951, between Japan and 48 Allied nations, formally marked the end of World War II in the Pacific. It was enacted on April 28, 1952, restoring Japan's sovereignty. But Korea was not invited to the conference as it was not considered a signatory power of the war and, amid the ongoing Korean War, there was no consensus on which government—Seoul or Pyongyang—represented the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, Korea had been annexed by Japan during World War II and was therefore not among the Allied signatories that initiated or concluded the war.

²⁶ Hara, *Cold War Frontiers in the Asia-Pacific*, 38.

boundary line in January 1952—later known as the “Syngman Rhee Line”—just before the San Francisco Peace Treaty came into force. Korea asserted this line partly due to its belief in a stronger historical claim, supported by ancient records and the former MacArthur Line,²⁷ which implied the exclusion of Takeshima from Japan’s administration. Additionally, Rhee opposed U.S. Cold War policy that prioritized Japan, excluded Korea from the Peace Conference, and settled for containment instead of full peninsula reunification.²⁸

Subsequently, in 1954, Korea established a permanent coast guard presence on the islets, effectively exercising control over them. Despite Japan's proposal to refer the dispute to the International Court of Justice in 1954,²⁹ 1962³⁰ and 2012,³¹ Korea rejected this, maintaining that the islets were irrefutably Korean territory and not subject to negotiation or judicial settlement.³²

On the other hand, Japan asserts that Takeshima has been part of its territory based on historical documents, maps, and activities dating back to the seventeenth century. It claims that in 1905, the islands were formally incorporated into Shimane Prefecture, registered as state land, and used for economic activities such as hunting sea lions, without any international objections. Japan emphasizes that the San Francisco Peace Treaty did not list Takeshima among the territories to be renounced to Korea and cites U.S. statements affirming that the islets were not considered part of Korea.³³

²⁷ The MacArthur Line was a maritime boundary set by SCAP in 1946 to restrict Japanese fishing, in effect until the San Francisco Peace Treaty came into force in 1952.

²⁸ Hara, *Cold War Frontiers in the Asia-Pacific*, 46-47.

²⁹ In response to the Syngman Rhee Line, Japan sought to bring the case to the ICJ, but rejected by Korea, arguing its sovereignty was non-negotiable.

³⁰ It was during a foreign ministers’ meeting.

³¹ It was in response to President Lee Myung-bak’s visit to the Dokdo on August 2012.

³² MOFA Japan, “Japan’s Position on the Sovereignty over Takeshima.”

³³ MOFA Japan, “Japan’s Position on the Sovereignty over Takeshima.”

According to Japan, Korea's establishment of the Syngman Rhee Line in 1952 and its subsequent control of Takeshima constitute an illegal occupation under international law. Since then, Japan has consistently lodged diplomatic protests against Korea's military and administrative presence.³⁴

In addition to the legal and political contestation, Dokdo/Takeshima also held strategic and economic significance during World War II and its aftermath. At that time, the islets served as a forward base for monitoring naval and aerial movements in the region.³⁵ Economically, the surrounding waters have long served as traditional fishing grounds, while the area is also believed to contain valuable hydrocarbon and gas hydrate deposits. These dimensions add further complexity to the dispute and help explain why both parties attach enduring importance to the islands.³⁶

In addition to their resource potential, the location of Dokdo/Takeshima in the East Sea/Sea of Japan amplifies their strategic weight. For Japan, proximity to its mainland makes the islets a crucial point for monitoring maritime routes and projecting influence in surrounding waters, thereby reinforcing its sovereignty claims in international forums. For Korea, the islets provide a forward position to enhance maritime and aerial surveillance, strengthen national security, and assert sovereignty in a region where major powers compete for influence. Thus, Dokdo/Takeshima serve as a strategic outpost for both countries, intertwining national security with broader geopolitical considerations.³⁷

³⁴ MOFA Japan, "Japan's Position on the Sovereignty over Takeshima."

³⁵ In 1905, during the Russo-Japanese War, Japan built an observation tower on the island to track movements of the Russian Navy.

³⁶ Yilmaz, *The Dokdo and Kuril Islands: Japan's Twin Disputes*, 84.

³⁷ Muskan Jha, "The Takeshima Island Dispute," 121-122.

Beyond these dimensions, the dispute has become a matter of *symbolic politics*³⁸ for both countries, serving as a tool for shaping national identity and political narratives. While Korea and Japan have adopted different methods and strategies, each frames the issue as an essential element of its historical memory and symbolic legitimacy. In this sense, the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute stands apart from many other regional conflicts, being rooted less in immediate military, strategic, or economic imperatives and more in historically embedded identity politics.

1.1.1.2 Senkaku/Diaoyu islands

While the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute is rooted in a complex interplay of historical memory, competing legal interpretations, and unresolved issues stemming from Japan's colonial rule over Korea, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute is shaped more by questions of territorial sovereignty, strategic rivalry, and resource competition. Both, however, originated in Japan's invocation of *terra nullius* and subsequent incorporation claims.

The islands are referred to as *Senkaku* by Japan, *Diaoyu Dao* by China, and *Diaoyutai Lieyu* by Taiwan are located in the East China Sea. They consist of eight uninhabited islands, five main islets (Uotsuri, Kuba, Taisho, Kitakojima and Minamikojima Islands) and three rocks (Tobise, Okinokitaiwa and Okinominamiiwa),³⁹ covering a total area of 5.53 km², with Uotsuri being the largest

³⁸ *Symbolic politics* refers to the use of symbols, historical narratives, and emotionally resonant issues to influence public opinion and political behavior, often beyond their immediate material or strategic value. In the context of territorial disputes such as Dokdo/Takeshima, the issue functions not only as a question of legal sovereignty but also as a symbol of national pride, historical justice, and collective identity. This symbolic dimension can amplify domestic support for certain policies and make compromise more politically costly.

³⁹ Sato and Chadha, "Understanding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Dispute," 48-64.

(3.81 km²).⁴⁰ They lie about 170 km north of Ishigaki Island, the same distance from Taiwan, 410 km west of Okinawa Island and 330km from the Chinese mainland.⁴¹



Figure 2. The location of Senkaku Islands
Source: MOFA Japan⁴²

Starting in 1885, Japan, through Okinawa Prefecture, carried out repeated surveys of the Senkaku Islands and concluded that the islands were uninhabited and not under the control of any state, including the Chinese Qing Dynasty.⁴³ On this basis, in 1895, following the surveys confirming that they were uninhabited and under no state's control (*terra nullius*), Japan incorporated them into Ishigaki City, Okinawa Prefecture,⁴⁴ and currently regards them as part of the Nansei Shoto island chain (Southwestern Islands Chain of Japan).⁴⁵

Following this, Japanese settlers engaged in fishing, dried *bonito*⁴⁶ production, and bird feather collection.⁴⁷ Businessman Tatsushiro Koga, with government approval,⁴⁸ established fishing and processing facilities, and at one point

⁴⁰ MOFA Japan, *About the Senkaku Islands*.

⁴¹ MOFA Japan, *About the Senkaku Islands*.

⁴² Since the islands are currently under Japan's administrative control, Japanese government visual materials were used to illustrate their official geographic location.

⁴³ Ishigaki City, Senkaku Islands Digital Portal, "About the Senkaku Islands."

⁴⁴ MOFA Japan, *About the Senkaku Islands*; Kuniyoshi, *The Senkaku Islands*, 3-4.

⁴⁵ MOFA Japan, *The Senkaku Islands Pamphlet, Part 2*.

⁴⁶ *Bonito* (skipjack tuna), a highly valued species in Japanese fisheries, is one of the key marine resources found in the waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands.

⁴⁷ MOFA Japan, *About the Senkaku Islands*.

⁴⁸ Sasakawa Peace Foundation, *The Senkaku Islands: Industry and Development*.

the islands had over 200 temporary residents.⁴⁹ These activities are cited by Japan as proof of effective control before any dispute arose.

After World War II, the islands were placed under U.S. administration as part of the Ryukyu⁵⁰ Islands under Article 3 of the San Francisco Peace Treaty (SFPT).⁵¹ However, they were not listed among the territories Japan was required to renounce, which Japan interprets as confirmation of sovereignty with it.⁵² In 1971, the Okinawa Reversion Agreement (entered into force in 1972) was signed between the U.S. and Japan.⁵³ Under this agreement, administrative rights over the islands were returned to Japan,⁵⁴ though the U.S. retained training access to parts of Kuba and Taisho for use as a bombing range.⁵⁵



Figure 3. Disputed area in Senkaku/Diaoyu Dao
Source: Ngo, Kenton. *Untitled photograph*. Flickr.

⁴⁹ MOFA Japan, *About the Senkaku Islands*.

⁵⁰ The Ryukyu Islands, historically an independent kingdom with tributary ties to China, were annexed by Japan in 1879 and are now administered as Okinawa Prefecture. The chain stretches from Kyushu to Taiwan and includes Okinawa Island.

⁵¹ San Francisco Peace Treaty, Art. 3.

⁵² MOFA Japan, *Q&A on the Senkaku Islands*, Q3.

⁵³ Okinawa Reversion Agreement, 1971.

⁵⁴ Senkaku/Diaoyu islands were under US control between 1951 and 1972.

⁵⁵ MOFA Japan, *The Senkaku Islands Pamphlet, Part 2*.

According to the Japanese government, neither China nor Taiwan objected to Japan's sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands until the 1970s,⁵⁶ when a 1968 UN survey suggested the presence of potential oil reserves in the area.⁵⁷

In 1971, Taiwan formally objected to the reversion of the islands to Japan, noting historical records that placed them within Chinese maritime boundaries since the fifteenth century. Taipei also argued that they were included in the territories ceded to Japan under the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895).⁵⁸ The People's Republic of China, upon normalizing relations with Japan in 1972, presented similar claims. In 1970–1971, the PRC government asserted that the Diaoyu Islands had historically been part of Taiwan,⁵⁹ and therefore belonged to China. In 1992, Beijing's Law on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone (LTSZ)⁶⁰ declared the islands part of Chinese territory, alongside claims to other disputed areas (Paracel and Spratly Islands) in the South China Sea, officially for the first time.⁶¹

According to China's 2012 white paper *Diaoyu Dao, an Inherent Territory of China*, the islands have been part of Chinese territory since ancient times, used for navigation and defense, and administered under the Ming and Qing dynasties.⁶² The white paper stresses that Japan's 1895 incorporation was unlawful, carried out during the First Sino-Japanese War, and therefore invalid. It also argues that postwar declarations such as Cairo (1943) and Potsdam (1945) required Japan to return territories seized through aggression, which, in China's view, includes the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.⁶³

⁵⁶ MOFA Japan, *Q&A on the Senkaku Islands*, Q5.

⁵⁷ MOFA Japan, *Q&A on the Senkaku Islands*, Q5.

⁵⁸ U.S. Department of State, *FRUS, 1969–1976*, vol. XVII, doc. 115.

⁵⁹ Sato et al., *Understanding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Dispute*, 49.

⁶⁰ This law is a domestic legal measure enacted by the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China.

⁶¹ MOFA Japan, *China's Maritime Activities in the Asia-Pacific Region*, video.

⁶² MOFA China, *Diaoyu Dao, an Inherent Territory of China*, State Council Information Office

⁶³ MOFA China, *Diaoyu Dao, an Inherent Territory of China*, State Council Information Office

China maintains that the islands were not *terra nullius*, emphasizing their long use by Chinese fishermen and their role as navigation markers between China and the Ryukyu Islands. Moreover, Beijing contends that following Japan's victory in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), the Diaoyu Islands were among the territories ceded to Japan under the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki. It argues that they should therefore have been returned under the Cairo and Potsdam Declarations, as well as the San Francisco Treaty. On this basis, China maintains that U.S. postwar control over the Diaoyu Islands was illegitimate.⁶⁴

On the other hand, Japan rejects the existence of a territorial dispute. It argues that incorporation in 1895 was lawful under international law and unrelated to the cession of Taiwan, which the Treaty of Shimonoseki does not mention.⁶⁵ Tokyo emphasizes that the islands were never administered as part of Taiwan and that preparations for incorporation began in 1885, before the First Sino-Japanese War.⁶⁶

Japan also cites documents such as a 1920 letter from the Chinese Consul in Nagasaki referring to the “Senkaku Islands, Okinawa Prefecture” and Chinese publications from the 1950s listing the islands as part of the *Ryukyu* chain.⁶⁷ It also rejects China's claim that old Chinese and foreign maps—such as those from the eighteenth century—have legal validity, due to such evidence lacking legal standing under international law.⁶⁸ These claims make the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute not only a bilateral issue but also a flashpoint with broader regional and global implications.

⁶⁴ De Oliveira, *Assessing Neutrality: The United States' Role in the Diaoyu Islands Dispute*, 122-123.

⁶⁵ MOFA Japan, *Japan's Territorial Sovereignty: The Senkaku Islands*; Kuniyoshi, *The Senkaku Islands*, 3-4.

⁶⁶ MOFA Japan, *Situation of the Senkaku Islands*; Ishigaki City. *History and Culture: Recognition of the Senkaku Islands*

⁶⁷ MOFA Japan, *Q&A on the Senkaku Islands*, Q5, Q8.

⁶⁸ MOFA Japan, *Q&A on the Senkaku Islands*, Q7.

Currently, Japan's administrative control is increasingly challenged by the presence of PRC Coast Guard vessels and other naval forces.⁶⁹ From the mid-2000s, Chinese maritime and aerial activity around the islands increased sharply. Major incidents include the 2010 collision between a Chinese fishing boat and Japanese patrol ships,⁷⁰ and Japan's 2012 nationalization of some islands.⁷¹ Japan's purchase reignited memories of its imperial wars with China, sparking mass protests in 85 Chinese cities that weekend,⁷² and was followed by China's first airspace intrusion,⁷³ as well as China's 2013 declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) covering the islands.⁷⁴ Tensions rose further after China's Coast Guard Law came into effect in 2021, granting the Chinese Coast Guard authority to use force against foreign vessels in waters claimed by China, which would also apply to the Senkaku/Diaoyu.⁷⁵

On February 2025, four Chinese vessels entered waters claimed by Japan, prompting protests from Tokyo.⁷⁶ On 4 May 2025, Tokyo accused a Chinese coast guard helicopter of violating its airspace, while Beijing denied the claim.⁷⁷ In June 2025, China conducted unprecedented simultaneous drills with its *Shandong* and *Liaoning* aircraft carriers near the islands, leading to close encounters with Japanese aircraft.⁷⁸ That same month, the *Liaoning* operated fighter jets in the East China Sea, about 200 km from the Senkakus, for the first time.⁷⁹ Other incidents included

⁶⁹ Sato et al., *Understanding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Dispute*, 48.

⁷⁰ The Guardian, "Japan and China in Row over Fishing Boat Collision"

⁷¹ In September 2012, Japan bought three of the Senkaku Islands (Uotsuri, Kitakojima, and Minamikojima) from a private owner and made them state property. The government said it was only an administrative step, but China saw it as illegal and reacted with protests and more patrols at sea.

⁷² Lee, Ivy, and Ming Fang. *Deconstructing Japan's Claim of Sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands*. 4.

⁷³ MOFA Japan, *China's Maritime Activities in the Asia-Pacific Region*, video.

⁷⁴ MOFA Japan, *The Basic Facts on the Senkaku Islands*, video.

⁷⁵ CSIS, "Force Majeure? China's Coast Guard Law in Context."

⁷⁶ Anadolu Agency, "China rejects Japan's claim of airspace intrusion in East China Sea."

⁷⁷ Anadolu Agency, "China Rejects Japan's Claim of Airspace Intrusion in East China Sea."

⁷⁸ BBC News. "Chinese Navy Drill near Japan Sparks Concern and Protest."

⁷⁹ Japan News, "Chinese Aircraft Carrier Conducts Fighter Jet Operations in East China Sea."

warning shots at the Japanese destroyer *JS Suzutsuki* in August 2025,⁸⁰ and a June 2025 protest over Chinese resource development in contested waters.⁸¹

The Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute has a different character from the Dokdo/Takeshima issue. For Korea, Dokdo is deeply tied to historical memory and national identity, while Japan frames it largely as a matter of legal rights under international law. In the Senkaku case, however, Japan adopts the opposite logic. Although Japan denounces Korea's control of Dokdo as "illegal occupation" and urges Seoul to take the case to the ICJ. However it does not submit the Senkaku dispute to international adjudication, insisting that "no territorial dispute exists."⁸²

Japan instead bases its stance on its interpretation that the United States, under the 1972 Okinawa Reversion Agreement, transferred the islands to its control—an act Tokyo views as confirming sovereignty. Yet the agreement restored only administrative control, leaving sovereignty unresolved. China rejects Japan's claim, arguing that administrative control does not equate to legal ownership and supporting its position with historical evidence.⁸³

The lack of clarity in the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki⁸⁴ and the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty⁸⁵ over whether the islands were part of Taiwan's cession added to the dispute. Similar to the San Francisco Peace Treaty's silence on

⁸⁰ McCartney, "China Fired Warning Shots at US Ally's Warship in Chinese Waters: Report."

⁸¹ Anadolu Agency, "Japan Lodges Protest with China over Resource Development in East China Sea."

⁸² Lee, Ivy, and Ming Fang. *Deconstructing Japan's Claim of Sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands*. 26.

⁸³ Lee, Ivy, and Ming Fang. *Deconstructing Japan's Claim of Sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands*. 26.

⁸⁴ The Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895) ceded Taiwan (Formosa) and "all islands appertaining or belonging to it" to Japan. However, because the treaty did not specify the geographical scope of the "appertaining islands," it remains unclear whether the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands were included.

⁸⁵ SFPT (1951) renounced Taiwan and its islands without clear scope, placing Senkaku under U.S. administration until 1972, when it was returned to Japan without resolving sovereignty.

Dokdo/Takeshima, the Okinawa Reversion Agreement and SFPT avoided the issue of sovereignty, leaving space for competing claims and ongoing tensions.

In this context, the United States plays a supportive but important role. Washington has repeatedly reassured Tokyo that the U.S.–Japan Security Treaty applies to the Senkaku Islands—for instance, in 2021 President Biden pledged a strong defense of Japan, explicitly affirming that the United States’ commitment extends to the disputed islets in the East China Sea.⁸⁶

More recently, in January 2025, U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth reaffirmed this stance in a call with Japan’s Defense Minister, explicitly confirming that Article 5 of the U.S.–Japan Security Treaty—which obliges the United States to defend Japanese territories—also applies to the disputed Senkaku Islands.⁸⁷ While the United States plays more of a supporting role, reassuring Japan with security guarantees, it is Japan’s own naval and Coast Guard buildup that ultimately gives real weight to Washington’s commitment.⁸⁸ Whereas the United States has maintained a neutral position on the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute, it has taken a clear supportive stance toward Japan on the Senkaku issue.”

1.1.1.3 Northern Territories/Southern Kuril island

Following the Dokdo/Takeshima and Senkaku/Diaoyu disputes, the third major unresolved territorial issue in East Asia involves the islands known in Japan as the Northern Territories and in Russia as the Southern Kurils. The dispute concerns four islets; Etorofu (Iturup), Kunashiri (Kunashir), Shikotan, and the Habomai islets, located off the northeastern coast of Hokkaido. Together, they cover about 5,000

⁸⁶ Asahi Shimbun, “Biden, Kishida Affirm U.S. Commitment to Defend Senkakus.”

⁸⁷ *Asahi Shimbun*, “Japan and U.S. Confirm Security Treaty Covers Senkakus.”

⁸⁸ Sato et al., *Understanding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Dispute*, 57-58.

km²—roughly the size of Chiba Prefecture—and represent approximately 1,3% of Japan’s total land area.⁸⁹

They are located near abundant fishing grounds and contain valuable natural resources, including hot springs, minerals, and rare earth metals essential for manufacturing supersonic aircraft.⁹⁰ For the former Soviet Union(USSR) and now Russia, the Southern Kuril Islands hold both military and economic value. Their surrounding waters provide rare ice-free access from the Sea of Okhotsk to the Pacific Ocean, along with deep-water harbors suitable for year-round naval operations. The islands have hosted Russian military facilities, including a base and radar installations, reinforcing their role as a strategic outpost in the Far East.⁹¹



Figure 4. Disputed area map of Northern Territories/Southern Kurils
Source: Sasakawa Peace Foundation

⁸⁹ Office of Policy Planning of Japan, “Outline of the Northern Territories.”

⁹⁰ Choudhury, “A Dispute for the Decades.”

⁹¹ Quillen, *The Kuril Islands or the Northern Territories*, 635.

For Japan, the Northern Territories hold strategic significance as they are vital for protecting Japan's northern maritime borders.⁹² The islands are also viewed as historically lost territory from the post-World War II settlement, making their return a persistent national issue and a central element in Japan's diplomatic stance toward Russia.⁹³

According to Japan, the absence of a peace treaty between Japan and Russia for over seventy years after the end of World War II underscores the need to resolve this dispute and conclude a formal agreement.⁹⁴ When Vladimir Putin first took office, he explored resolving the Northern Territories dispute with Japan based on the 1956 Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration, signaling Moscow's willingness to return two of the four islands. However, Tokyo rejected the proposal, insisting on the transfer of all four islands. As Russia's political and economic power grew, its interest in the two-island compromise faded.⁹⁵

In Putin's second term, Moscow reinforced its hold over the territory by launching an 18-billion-ruble development plan (2007-2015) and upgrading the defenses of the 18th Artillery Division stationed on Kunashiri. While armed conflict is unlikely, analysts believe these measures demonstrate Russia's determination to retain the islands and could push Japan to prioritize other bilateral issues.⁹⁶

Although earlier negotiations saw both sides agree in principle to settle the attribution of the Four Northern Islands and conclude a peace treaty,⁹⁷ Russia today rejects the necessity of such talks⁹⁸ and considers its sovereignty non-negotiable.⁹⁹

⁹² Niquet, "The Northern Territories Issue," 35.

⁹³ MOFA Japan, "Northern Territories Issue Q&A"

⁹⁴ Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, *Japan's Response Respecting Law and Order in the International Community*.

⁹⁵ Gorenburg, *Russia's Evolving Tactics in the Kuril Islands Dispute*, 3-4.

⁹⁶ Gorenburg, *Russia's Evolving Tactics in the Kuril Islands Dispute*, 3-4.

⁹⁷ MOFA Japan, *Northern Territories Issue*.

⁹⁸ Reuters, "Russia Sees No Reason to Discuss Peace with Japan, the Kremlin Says."

⁹⁹ Iwashita, *Bested by Russia: Abe's Failed Northern Territories Negotiations*.

The war in Ukraine has further hardened Moscow’s stance, with measures such as banning foreign vessels from surrounding waters, warning residents over pro-Japan remarks, and announcing President Putin’s planned visit to the islands.¹⁰⁰

Japan traces its claim to the Northern Territories to the early seventeenth century, when the Matsumae Domain established control over Ezochi (Hokkaido) and surrounding islands.¹⁰¹ Records such as the *Shinra no Kiroku* and the 1644 *Shōhō Map of Japan* identified Kunashiri and Etorofu, based on domain explorations in 1635. By the mid-eighteenth century, the Matsumae had expanded trade with *Ainu*¹⁰² and opened a trading post on Kunashiri.¹⁰³

In the eighteenth century, Russia advanced south through the Kuril Islands, prompting the Tokugawa shogunate to strengthen control over Ezochi (Hokkaido). By 1798, Japan had placed the area under direct rule, marked sovereignty on Etorofu, and begun developing settlements, fishing grounds, and defenses on Shikotan, Kunashiri, and Etorofu.¹⁰⁴



Figure 5. Japan’s Etofuru station pole
Source: Northern Territories Issue Association of Japan

¹⁰⁰ Lee, *Japan–Russia Tensions Flare Over Ukraine War Amid Decades-Long Land Disputes*.

¹⁰¹ Office of Policy Planning of Japan, “Basic Information on the Northern Territories” Northern Territories Issue Association, *History of the Northern Territories Issue*.

¹⁰² The Ainu are an Indigenous people of Japan, traditionally inhabiting Hokkaido, Sakhalin, and the Kuril Islands

¹⁰³ Northern Territories Issue Association, *History of the Northern Territories Issue*.

¹⁰⁴ Northern Territories Issue Association, *History of the Northern Territories issue*.

The 1855 Treaty of Shimoda, signed with Russia, formalized the boundary by recognizing the four islands as Japanese and the northern Kurils as Russian, while leaving Sakhalin under joint administration.¹⁰⁵ This changed with the 1875 Treaty of St. Petersburg,¹⁰⁶ in which Japan ceded Sakhalin in exchange for the entire Kuril chain. Tokyo maintains, however, that the four disputed islands were never part of the Kurils and thus were excluded from any later territorial renunciation.¹⁰⁷

Russo-Japanese rivalry over Korea and Manchuria escalated in the early twentieth century, culminating in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905).¹⁰⁸ Japan viewed Russian expansion as a threat to its own regional ambitions, especially with the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway, which enabled Russia's military reach easily.¹⁰⁹ This rivalry culminated in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905.¹¹⁰ Japan's victory not only expanded its influence in Korea and Manchuria but also resulted in the ceding of southern Sakhalin through the Treaty of Portsmouth.¹¹¹

In 1945, the Yalta Agreement promised the Kuril Islands to the Soviet Union in return for entering the war against Japan.¹¹² Japan rejects the validity of this arrangement, arguing it was not a party to the agreement.¹¹³ On August 9, 1945, in violation of the 1941 Neutrality Pact, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and occupied the islands, deporting all 17,000 Japanese residents by 1948.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁵ Stephan, *The Kuril Islands*, 149-150; MOFA Japan, "Japan's Northern Territories"; The Tokugawa Shogunate's policy of national seclusion (*sakoku*), implemented in the early seventeenth century, aimed to suppress Christianity and prevent the rise of powerful regional daimyos through tightly controlled foreign trade. This isolationist stance remained in effect until the Convention of Kanagawa was signed with the United States in 1854, effectively ending more than two centuries of seclusion and opening Japanese ports to Western powers under pressure.

¹⁰⁶ Stephan, *The Kuril Islands*, 149-150.

¹⁰⁷ Office of Policy Planning of Japan, "Northern Territories Issue."

¹⁰⁸ Kim, "Russo-Japanese Rivalry Over Korean Buffer," 2.

¹⁰⁹ Kim, "Russo-Japanese Rivalry Over Korean Buffer," 3.

¹¹⁰ U.S. Department of State, *Portsmouth Treaty*.

¹¹¹ Kim, "Russo-Japanese Rivalry Over Korean Buffer," 31.

¹¹² U.S. Department of State, *The Yalta Conference*.

¹¹³ Northern Territories Issue Association, "The Northern Territories Issue"

¹¹⁴ Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, *Basic Understanding of the Northern Territories Issue*.

The 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty required Japan to renounce the Kuril Islands and southern Sakhalin but did not list the Four Northern islets, which Japan cites as evidence that they were not included.¹¹⁵ The Soviet Union, which did not sign the treaty, interpreted “Kuril Islands” in Article 2(c) as including the Northern Territories and viewed their 1945 seizure as a legitimate wartime outcome.¹¹⁶ The 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty omitted a clear definition of the Kuril Islands, leaving the territorial scope of the Northern Territories unresolved.¹¹⁷

In this context, the Japanese government established the Northern Territories Issue Association under the 2002 Act on the Northern Territories Issue Association, tasked with promoting public awareness, conducting research, and supporting initiatives related to resolving the dispute.¹¹⁸ Domestically, the Japanese government has promoted the return of the islands as a legitimate right through public campaigns. On February 7, 1981—the date of the 1855 Treaty of Shimoda—was designated “Northern Territories Day” and marked annually by a national rally attended by political leaders, former residents, and government officials.¹¹⁹ Tokyo’s 2025 Diplomatic Bluebook reiterates its commitment to dialogue and exchange programs, particularly for ancestral grave visits.¹²⁰

Beyond their legal and historical dimensions, commemorative events and public campaigns over the Kuril Islands serve as a form of symbolic politics, reinforcing Japan’s narrative of rightful sovereignty and Russia’s framing of the 1945 acquisition as a legitimate wartime outcome. These symbols—such as national

¹¹⁵ Northern Territories Issue Association, *About the Northern Territories Issue*.

¹¹⁶ Choudhury, “A Dispute for the Decades.”

¹¹⁷ Niquet, “The Territorial Dispute over the Kuril Islands,” 30.

¹¹⁸ Northern Territories Issue Association, “The Northern Territories Issue”

¹¹⁹ Northern Territories Affairs Administration of Cabinet Office of Japan, *Campaign for the Return of the Northern Territories and Northern Territories Day*.

¹²⁰ MOFA Japan, *Diplomatic Bluebook, 2025*; Iwashita, *Bested by Russia: Abe’s Failed Northern Territories Negotiations*.

rallies—serve to maintain domestic consensus and project non-negotiable sovereignty. And while the U.S. refrains from direct intervention, it consistently frames the dispute as a bilateral issue between Japan and Russia, offering political support to Tokyo while carefully avoiding escalation with Moscow.¹²¹

However, just as Dokdo/Takeshima embodies a powerful postcolonial memory and national identity for Koreans, the “Northern Territories” carry a similar weight of national sensitivity for Japan. For Tokyo, the issue is not merely about territorial integrity but also about preserving national pride. Any concession would be seen as unacceptable both in domestic politics and in public opinion. Reflecting this sentiment, Japan observes “Northern Territories Day” every year on February 7, a commemoration designed to reinforce public awareness of the dispute and keep the territorial claim alive in the national consciousness.¹²² In this sense, the Kuril dispute, like Dokdo/Takeshima, is more than a territorial question—it is bound up with symbolic politics and national identity, though it has been shaped less by colonial memory than by Cold War geopolitics and the unresolved wartime settlement with Russia.

From Russia’s perspective, the Kuril Islands are not merely territory but a strategic outpost for the Pacific Fleet, reinforced since 2015 with missile systems, radars, and air defenses.¹²³ The surrounding waters also provide rich fisheries and potential energy resources. These strategic and economic factors underpin Moscow’s uncompromising stance that sovereignty is non-negotiable—a position hardened even further after the war in Ukraine, when Russia effectively closed the door on any negotiations.

¹²¹ Choudhury, “A Dispute for the Decades.”; MOFA Japan, “Northern Territories Issue.”

¹²² Northern Territories Issue Association, “History of the Irredentist Movement.”

¹²³ CSIS, “*Russia’s Militarization of the Kuril Islands.*”

The U.S. position on the Kuril Islands has been ambivalent. While the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty required Japan to renounce the Kurils, it left ambiguity over whether the “Northern Territories” were included¹²⁴—an omission that, as with Dokdo/Takeshima, created enduring uncertainty in the postwar settlement. During the Cold War, Washington politically supported Japan to counterbalance the USSR, but officially framed the dispute as a matter to be resolved bilaterally.¹²⁵ Today, the U.S. does not recognize Russia’s 1945 occupation as legitimate, yet takes no practical steps to challenge Moscow’s control. In sum, the Kuril dispute illustrates how unresolved wartime settlements and Cold War legacies have been transformed into symbolic politics, sustaining the conflict not only through legal and diplomatic claims but also through rituals, narratives, and national pride.

1.1.2 South China Sea disputes

While many maritime disputes in East Asia—such as those over Dokdo/Takeshima, the Northern Territories/Southern Kurils or the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands—are bilateral in nature,¹²⁶ the South China Sea(SCS) presents a markedly different picture. In the SCS, overlapping claims involve multiple states, creating one of the most complex and contested maritime regions in the world.

Over recent decades, China has steadily increased its influence in the SCS through both diplomatic engagement and an expanding military presence.¹²⁷ China’s

¹²⁴ Hara, “*San Francisco Peace Treaty*.”

¹²⁵ Schaller, “*US-Japan Ties Since the San Francisco Peace Treaty*.”

¹²⁶ Koo, “East Asian Maritime Disputes,” 3, 6.

¹²⁷ “China’s Influence Operations in the South China Sea and the Global South as a Means of Power Projection,” *Modern Diplomacy*

claim is centered on the “Nine-Dash Line,” a sweeping demarcation that overlaps with the maritime zones of Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Brunei.¹²⁸

This disputed area covers nearly 80 percent of the South China Sea, with the main contested areas being the Paracel and Spratly Islands.¹²⁹ China has controlled the Paracel Islands since 1974, but Vietnam and Taiwan also claim them. The Spratly Islands are even more complicated. Several countries including China and Taiwan, claim parts of the islands, even though some of them are already occupied by Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei.¹³⁰

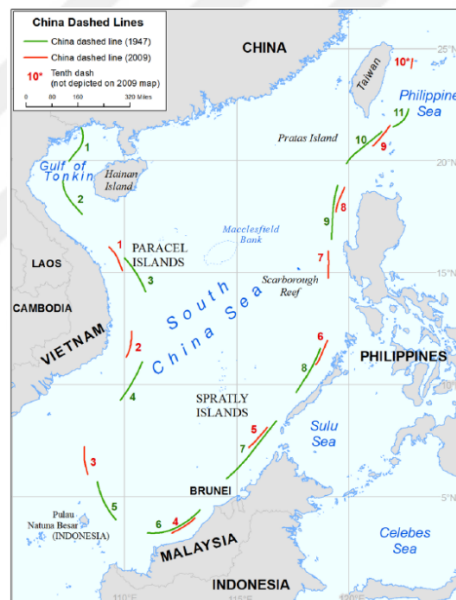


Figure 6. Comparison of China’s dashed line in 1947 and 2009 map
Source: U.S. Department of State, Limits in the Seas

The origins of China’s claim date back to 1947, when the Nationalist government led by the *Kuomintang*(KMT)¹³¹ of the Republic of China (ROC)

¹²⁸ Simoes, Leticia. "The role of ASEAN in the South China Sea disputes"; Miranda and Maljak, “The Role of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in the South China Sea Disputes.”; De Souza, Karalekas and Coutaz, *Asian Territorial and Maritime Disputes*, 4-25.

¹²⁹ Dolven, Manyin, and Kan, *Maritime Territorial Disputes in East Asia*

¹³⁰ Simoes, “The Role of ASEAN in the South China Sea Disputes,” 26-47.

¹³¹ The Kuomintang is the Nationalist Party that ruled China before 1949, led Taiwan under Chiang Kai-shek, and remains active in Taiwanese politics today.

published an “Eleven-Dash Line” map.¹³² After the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) retained the claim but removed two dashes in the Gulf of Tonkin, partly to improve relations with Vietnam during its communist struggle. This adjustment produced the Nine-Dash Line that defines the contemporary discourse.¹³³ The area within this line—roughly two million square kilometers, about 22 percent of China’s claimed area—includes major disputed features such as the Paracel (Xisha) and Spratly (Nansha) Islands, the Scarborough Shoal, and numerous reefs.¹³⁴

China’s claims gained renewed prominence in 2009, when Vietnam and Malaysia jointly submitted a claim to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), asserting rights to parts of the southern South China Sea as part of their extended continental shelves.¹³⁵ In May 2009, China sent a note verbale to the UN objecting to Malaysia and Vietnam’s continental shelf claims, attaching for the first time its nine-dash line map in an official UN communication. In these notes, China asserted “indisputable sovereignty” over the South China Sea and asked the UN CLCS not to consider the joint submission.¹³⁶

Following China’s 2009 submission of its Nine-Dash Line map to the United Nations, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines lodged formal protests through notes verbales, rejecting the claim and defending their own maritime entitlements.¹³⁷ Tensions rose again in August 2023, when China issued a revised “national map”

¹³² Campbell, “Just Where Exactly Did China Get the South China Sea Nine-Dash Line From?”

¹³³ Council on Foreign Relations, *Timeline: China’s Maritime Disputes*.

¹³⁴ U.S. Department of State, *Limits in the Seas* No. 143-144.

¹³⁵ U.N., “Malaysia/Viet Nam Submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf”

¹³⁶ China’s Permanent Mission to the UN, *Note Verbale CML/17/2009*.

¹³⁷ Bautista, “Diplomatic Notes and the South China Sea Disputes”, 87.

that added a tenth dash,¹³⁸ positioned east of Taiwan—effectively linking its South China Sea claims to its position on Taiwan.¹³⁹



Figure 7. South China Sea oil and natural gas basins
Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration

The SCS lies at the center of the Indo-Pacific—home to more than 60% of the world’s population. It is also one of the busiest shipping routes, carrying about one-third of global trade each year.¹⁴⁰ Energy security is another driver of interest in the area. The U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) estimates that the sea contains proven and probable reserves of 3.6 billion barrels of oil and 40.3 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, with further potential in unexplored areas.¹⁴¹ For China—which imports about 80 percent of its crude oil through these waters—the SCS is sometimes described as a “second Persian Gulf.” Control over its shipping lanes, fisheries, and potential hydrocarbon reserves is thus closely tied to national security and economic stability.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Boston Political Review, “China’s New Map: The 10 Dash Line.”

¹³⁹ U.S. Energy Information Administration, “South China Sea,”

¹⁴⁰ Feinman, D. “Lost at the South China Sea”, 976.

¹⁴¹ U.S. Energy Information Administration, *South China Sea*, 2.

¹⁴² Business Insider. “Why the South China Sea Is so Crucial.”

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides the legal framework for maritime entitlements, particularly under Article 121, which grants a 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) to islands capable of sustaining human habitation or economic life. Rocks, by contrast, are entitled only to a 12-nautical-mile territorial sea, and features submerged at high tide generate no maritime entitlements.¹⁴³

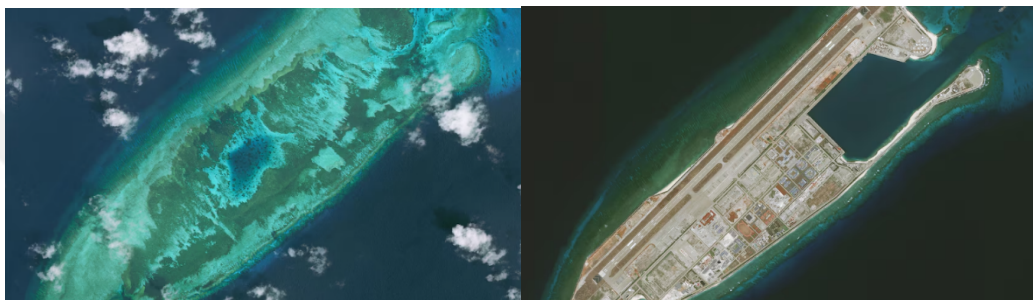


Figure 8. Fiery Cross Reef: pre- and post-land reclamation (2009–2020)
Source: Australian Broadcasting Corporation

China’s extensive claims, however, often rest on historical arguments rather than solely on these legal provisions. In several cases, Beijing has engaged in large-scale land reclamation,¹⁴⁴ turning reefs into artificial islands¹⁴⁵ equipped with airstrips, ports, and military facilities¹⁴⁶— actions that other claimant states argue are inconsistent with UNCLOS.¹⁴⁷

Beyond China’s expansive claims, other states (Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, and also Taiwan) in the region have advanced their own overlapping assertions of sovereignty. Vietnam asserts sovereignty over both the Paracel and Spratly Islands based on historical usage dating to the seventeenth century and the

¹⁴³ United Nations, *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*.

¹⁴⁴ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, *What Makes an Island? Land Reclamation and the South China Sea Arbitration*.

¹⁴⁵ Kohl, “China’s Artificial Island Building Campaign,” 917.

¹⁴⁶ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, “Tracking Militarisation in the South China Sea.”

¹⁴⁷ United Nations, *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*.

1933 French colonial claim.¹⁴⁸ It has reinforced this position through domestic legislation¹⁴⁹ and physical occupation of features in the Spratlys.¹⁵⁰ Malaysia's claims, first formalized in a 1979 map, extend to parts of the Spratly Islands and are based on its continental shelf and EEZ rights.¹⁵¹ Brunei's limited claim is confined to areas within its EEZ, most notably Louisa Reef. The Philippines bases its claims on both historical usage and provisions of UNCLOS, with a particular focus on the Scarborough Shoal and the Kalayaan Island Group.¹⁵²

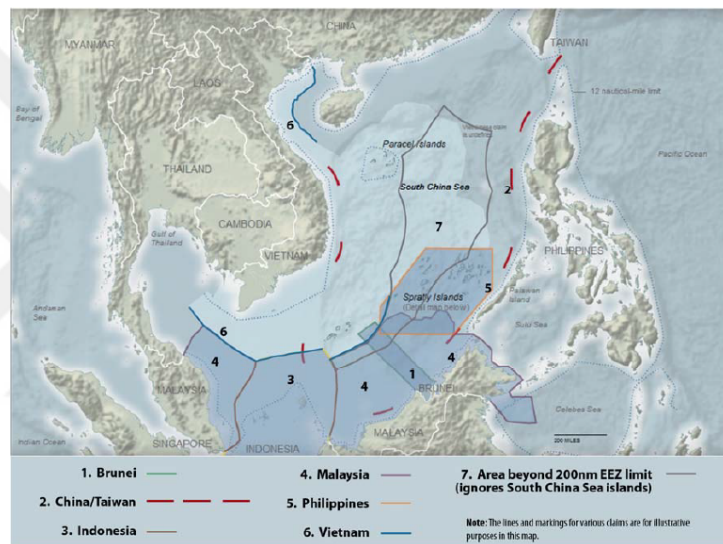


Figure 9. States individual maritime claims in South China Sea
Source: *New York Times* on May 31, 2012

In 2013, Manila brought a case against China before the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), which ruled in 2016 that China's Nine-Dash Line had no legal basis. Although the decision was legally binding, Beijing rejected it outright. Taiwan,

¹⁴⁸ Vietnam considers the 1933 French colonial claim over the Paracels as transferred to its present government.

¹⁴⁹ Vietnam officially made its claims over the Paracel and Spratly Islands part of its national law in 2012, equiring that all naval ships from foreign states register with Vietnamese authorities when passing through the region.

¹⁵⁰ U.S. Energy Information Administration. *South China Sea*.

¹⁵¹ Malaysia claims 10 Spratly features and controls 7, maintaining five military outposts; its recent approach emphasizes international law, stronger U.S. ties, and ASEAN unity.

¹⁵² U.S. Energy Information Administration. *South China Sea*.

meanwhile, claims continuity with the original 1947 ROC map and maintains control over Itu Aba (Taiping Island), the largest natural feature in the Spratlys, which it argues is entitled to a full EEZ—contrary to the PCA’s classification of it as a “rock.”¹⁵³

U.S. policy in the SCS prioritizes freedom of navigation. While Washington takes no formal position on sovereignty, it regularly conducts Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs). The Obama administration emphasized adherence to international law and ASEAN’s Code of Conduct negotiations; the Trump administration took a more confrontational stance by declaring China’s claims illegal, and the Biden administration has maintained a firm approach while emphasizing alliances with states such as the Philippines, Japan, and Australia.¹⁵⁴

The South China Sea has long been one of the most contested areas in East and Southeast Asia. Despite decades of legal proceedings, arbitration attempts, and diplomatic negotiations, tensions remain high. The dispute is not only about control of territory but also about fishing rights, energy resources, and the number of countries involved. China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei all make claims. The United States is also an important player. It rejects China’s “Nine-Dash Line,” sends ships for freedom of navigation operations, and supports its allies. This makes the South China Sea not only a regional issue but also a key part of the U.S.–China rivalry.¹⁵⁵

While the South China Sea dispute is driven mainly by resources and strategic control, Dokdo/Takeshima is sustained by symbolic and legal claims. This makes Dokdo/Takeshima more emotional and tied to national identity than most

¹⁵³ U.S. Energy Information Administration. *South China Sea*.

¹⁵⁴ Gervais & Henderson, US policy in the South China Sea across three administrations, 102-120.

¹⁵⁵ Hayton, *The South China Sea*, 121-152.

other maritime disputes in the region. The South China Sea, on the other hand, shows how resources and great-power rivalry can make a conflict more complex. The sea has rich fishing grounds, possible oil and gas reserves, and some of the busiest shipping lanes in the World and many states claim parts of it. The United States also plays a major role by rejecting China's "Nine-Dash Line," sending ships for freedom of navigation, and working with its allies. Because of this, the South China Sea has become not only a dispute over territory but also a key stage in the U.S.–China competition.

1.2 Research question

This thesis seeks to examine how historical narratives, legal interpretations, and political strategies have shaped the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute and its place within broader East and Southeast Asian territorial conflicts. In particular, it asks which historical, legal, and political sources Korea and Japan draw upon to support their respective claims, and how this dispute differs in its origins from other regional territorial conflicts.

1.3 Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative and comparative approach to examine the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute within the broader context of territorial conflicts in East and Southeast Asia. It combines historical analysis, legal examination, and media discourse analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the dispute is framed by both Korea and Japan.

The first step involves examining historical and legal documents that have shaped the territorial claims of both countries. Key documents include the Cairo

Declaration (1943), the Potsdam Declaration (1945), the San Francisco Peace Treaty (1951), and the 1965 Korea-Japan Normalization Treaty. In addition, the study analyzes official statements and reports from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Korea (MOFA Korea) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA Japan) to understand each country's legal and diplomatic positions. Archival documents from the U.S. State Department and the U.S. National Archives will also be used to explore how the United States approached the issue, especially during the post-WWII and treaty negotiations.

The second part of the methodology focuses on comparing the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute with other major territorial conflicts in East and Southeast Asia. This comparison aims to identify what makes the Dokdo/Takeshima case unique in terms of historical origins, legal complexity, and geopolitical importance, as was largely covered in the first sections of this introduction chapter.

Third, the study analyzes how Dokdo Day (October 25, 2000) in Korea and Takeshima Day (February 22, 2005) in Japan have been used in public diplomacy and national identity-building. This involves reviewing news reports, government statements, and public reactions from both countries to understand how media discourse influences the public's view of the dispute.

This study relies on both primary and secondary sources:

- Primary sources include government documents, international treaties, legal texts, official statements, and media articles.
- Secondary sources consist of academic books, journal articles, and expert analyses.

By combining these methods, the thesis offers a historically grounded, legally informed, and media-aware analysis of the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute, contributing to a broader understanding of regional geopolitics and East Asian territorial conflicts.

1.4 Argument and contribution

This thesis argues that the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute is not only about who owns the land. It is also a conflict about history, national identity, and power in the region.

Korea argues that Japan began asserting its claim over the islets in 1905, during the Russo-Japanese War, due to their strategic location, and prior to the full annexation of Korea in 1910. According to Korea, Japan's decision to include Dokdo was part of its imperial expansion, not a fair or legal action. Korea's position is that Dokdo was already known as Korean land long before Japan took control of Korea and is a symbol of resistance against colonialism for Koreans.

Japan, on the other hand, frames the issue primarily as a matter of international law, claiming that it lawfully incorporated Takeshima in 1905 as *terra nullius*—land belonging to no one—and that its sovereignty has been continuous ever since. Tokyo argues that historical Korean records do not prove effective control and that post-war settlements, including the San Francisco Peace Treaty, did not require Japan to renounce Takeshima. For Japan, the dispute is thus a legal disagreement rather than a colonial injustice, and it has repeatedly called for referral to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). In this context, Japan has made efforts to present itself as a state committed to international law, using the Dokdo/Takeshima issue to construct a narrative of legal legitimacy and postwar statehood, aimed at reshaping its national identity in line with peaceful and law-abiding principles.

These very different views of history and law make the dispute hard to settle. After World War II, the United States did not clearly take sides, and its ambiguous position—especially during the drafting of the San Francisco Peace Treaty—has kept the disagreement alive. This thesis also looks at other disputes in East Asia to show that legal arguments alone cannot solve such issues. To ease tensions and build trust, countries must also understand the history and emotions behind these conflicts.

1.5 Literature review

Academic research on the Dokdo/Takeshima issue can be categorized into several thematic areas, including historical and legal foundations, identity politic and nationalism, educational and media narratives, geopolitical dynamics, international law, public diplomacy, and environmental considerations. These diverse approaches reflect the multifaceted nature of the dispute and help explain why the conflict remains unresolved despite decades of legal claims and diplomatic efforts.

Many scholars have examined the Dokdo/Takeshima conflict through the lens of historical documents and legal treaties. For example, Jo (2023) and Ch'oe (2015) argue that Japan's 1905 incorporation of Dokdo lacked legitimacy and was part of its broader imperial strategy. They use early records like the *Isotakeshima Oboegaki* and Dajokan Directive to support Korea's claim.¹⁵⁶¹⁵⁷ Na (2007) and Lee and Van Dyke (2010) further emphasize that early drafts of the *San Francisco Peace Treaty*(*SFPT*) mentioned Dokdo as Korean territory but were later altered due to Cold War pressures.¹⁵⁸¹⁵⁹ Other works, like Schwartz and Yoo (2022) and Hosaka (2014) argue

¹⁵⁶ Jo, "Isotakeshima Oboegaki,"

¹⁵⁷ Ch'oe, "Japan's 1905 Incorporation of Dokdo/Takeshima,"

¹⁵⁸ Na, *The Korean-Japanese Territorial Dispute over Dokdo/Takeshima*.

¹⁵⁹ Lee and Van Dyke, "The 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty" 745.

that treaties like the SFPT and Rusk Letter are legally ambiguous and shaped more by geopolitics than clarity on sovereignty.¹⁶⁰¹⁶¹

Another significant body of literature suggests that Dokdo is not just a legal issue, but also a matter of national identity. Kim (2012) refers to the conflict as a “memory problem” shaped by unresolved colonial trauma.¹⁶²Kozisek (2016) and Bukh (2013) analyze how Dokdo has become a national symbol for Koreans and part of Japan’s domestic identity politics.¹⁶³¹⁶⁴ Studies such as Choi (2005) and Kim (2014) also highlight how political elites and media in both countries mobilize nationalism using the Dokdo issue.¹⁶⁵¹⁶⁶

On the other hand, some studies focus on how Dokdo is presented in education and media. Do and Lee (2023) and Choi (2020) explore how school curricula in both countries shape public perception of the dispute from an early age. They argue that Korea emphasizes historical sovereignty, while Japan increasingly promotes its legal claim. These narratives contribute to persistent identity-based tensions, especially among the younger generation.¹⁶⁷¹⁶⁸

Also, several authors analyze how external actors, especially the U.S, influenced the dispute. Lee (2011) and Bae (2012) argue that U.S. Cold War strategy shaped territorial arrangements ambiguously to avoid conflict between allies.¹⁶⁹¹⁷⁰ Schwartz and Yoo (2022) and Jo (2021) assert that U.S. neutrality or indecision,

¹⁶⁰ Schwartz and Yoo, “Maritime Territorial Disputes in Asia”

¹⁶¹ Hosaka, “Is the So-Called ‘Rusk Letter’,” 145.

¹⁶² Kim, “A War of Memories,” 74-77.

¹⁶³ Kozisek, “Us and Them”

¹⁶⁴ Bukh, “Japan’s National Identity,” 171-186.

¹⁶⁵ Choi, “The Politics of the Dokdo Issue,” 467.

¹⁶⁶ Kim, “Escaping the Vicious Cycle,” 31-60.

¹⁶⁷ Kyung and Lee, “Dokdo Describe Changes in ‘Curriculum’,” 81-101.

¹⁶⁸ Choi, “Godeunghakgyo Hanguksa Sueop-ui Saryohakseup,” 7–52.

¹⁶⁹ Lee, “Dokdo: The San Francisco Peace Treaty,” 361-380.

¹⁷⁰ Bae, “Territorial Issue in the Context of Colonial History,”19-51.

particularly in the *San Francisco Peace Treaty* and *Rusk documents*, helped sustain the territorial ambiguity.¹⁷¹¹⁷²

From a legal standpoint, Attia (2023) and Schwartz and Yoo (2019) stress that treaties like UNCLOS or the SFPT lack the legal specificity to resolve sovereignty.¹⁷³¹⁷⁴ Kim and Cho (2011) and Mayali and Yoo (2018) argue that both countries selectively interpret legal documents to support their national claims, and that international arbitration remains unlikely due to identity-related resistance.¹⁷⁵¹⁷⁶

Moreover and Bukh (2015) analyze how symbolic acts like *Dokdo Day* or *Takeshima Day* are used in public diplomacy to reinforce territorial claims. These acts not only strengthen national identity but also heighten diplomatic tensions.¹⁷⁷ Recent literature, such as Choi and Lim (2024) and Choi (2019), introduces ecological dimensions to the debate. They argue that designating Dokdo as a Marine Protected Area could serve both conservation and sovereignty goals, promoting Korea's effective control while inviting regional cooperation.¹⁷⁸¹⁷⁹

In contrast to Korean perspectives, Japanese scholars often emphasize the legitimacy of Japan's sovereignty over Takeshima based on historical precedents and legal frameworks. For instance, Nakatani (2017) argues that Japan's claim is supported by pre-1905 administrative acts and remains valid under international law despite Korea's effective control.¹⁸⁰ Serita (2023) reinforces this view by citing Shimane Prefecture's administrative practices and disputing Korea's historical

¹⁷¹ Schwartz and Yoo, "Maritime Territorial Disputes in Asia," 727-783.

¹⁷² Jo, "The Shadow of Cold War Politics," 98.

¹⁷³ Attia, "Revisiting Jurisdiction of UNCLOS Courts," 5-26.

¹⁷⁴ Schwartz and Yoo, "Asian Territorial Disputes and the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty," 505.

¹⁷⁵ Kim and Cho, "A New Approach to a Territorial Dispute," 431.

¹⁷⁶ Mayali and Yoo, "Resolution of Territorial Disputes in East Asia."

¹⁷⁷ Bukh, "Shimane Prefecture, Tokyo and the Territorial Dispute," 47-70.

¹⁷⁸ Choi and Lim, "Establishing a Marine Protected Area in the Waters Surrounding Dokdo."

¹⁷⁹ Choi, "Godŭnghakgyo Hanguksa Sup ūp ūi Saryohaksŭp." 7-52.

¹⁸⁰ Nakatani, "The Northern Territories, Takeshima and the Senkaku Islands," 205.

claims as politically motivated.¹⁸¹ Similarly, Yokokawa (2017) presents the 1905 incorporation as legitimate and criticizes Korea's post-1952 control as unlawful. Miyoshi (2015) introduces the "critical date" principle, asserting Korea's actions after 1952 lack legal effect, while Nakano (2021) reevaluates the 1696 travel ban as weakening Japan's historical claim.¹⁸²¹⁸³

Others, like Usuki (2021) and Ikeshima (2017), critique the internal inconsistencies in Japan's legal reasoning, especially its colonial legacy and shifting interpretations of sovereignty.¹⁸⁴¹⁸⁵ Tsukamoto (2014, 2017) supports Japan's historical and administrative claims, dismissing Korea's effective control as unlawful and symbolic.¹⁸⁶ Fukuhara and Sato (2021) and Kaseda (2021) examine how Japan's government and political actors have institutionalized nationalist education and used the dispute to bolster domestic support.¹⁸⁷¹⁸⁸ Suzuki (2021) links the issue to Japan's national identity, arguing that territorial narratives help manage perceptions of decline.¹⁸⁹

In contrast, Wada (2005), a Japanese historian and emeritus professor at the University of Tokyo, challenges Japan's official stance. He views the dispute as rooted in unresolved colonial trauma and calls for dialogue and recognition of Korea's sovereignty as a gesture of historical reconciliation.¹⁹⁰ Similarly, Hara (2001, 2016) situates the dispute within Cold War geopolitics and calls for multilateral resolution frameworks.¹⁹¹ Scholars like Kanehara (2011), Atanassova-

¹⁸¹ Serita, *The Territory of Japan: Its History and Legal Basis*, 129–144.

¹⁸² Miyoshi, "The 'Critical Date' of the Takeshima Dispute."

¹⁸³ Nakano, "Loss of Title to Territory."

¹⁸⁴ Usuki, "Japan's Claim to Takeshima."

¹⁸⁵ Ikeshima, "Diplomatic and Legal Challenges," 45.

¹⁸⁶ Tsukamoto, "The Late-Seventeenth-Century 'Takeshima' Dispute."

¹⁸⁷ Fukuhara and Sato, "Takeshima in Japanese Education, Media and Culture."

¹⁸⁸ Kaseda, "Takeshima in Japanese Politics and Foreign Policy."

¹⁸⁹ Suzuki, "The World Is Marveling at Japan!," 88.

¹⁹⁰ Haruki, "Takeshima/Tokdo—A Plea to Resolve a Worsening Japan-Korea Dispute."

¹⁹¹ Hara, "50 Years from San Francisco."

Cornelis(2015), and Ikegami (2009) also propose joint management and peacebuilding mechanisms to de-escalate tensions beyond legal sovereignty debates.¹⁹²

Despite extensive research on Dokdo/Takeshima and other territorial conflicts, several gaps remain. Most studies focus on individual disputes rather than drawing broader comparisons between Dokdo/Takeshima and other Asian territorial issues. And while Korea's cultural diplomacy has been acknowledged, there is little research on its effectiveness in shaping international opinion on the Dokdo dispute. The role of the United States, China, and regional organizations in managing territorial disputes has not been fully explored in relation to Dokdo/Takeshima.

While the existing literature provides valuable insights, there is a need for more comparative studies and deeper analysis of soft power strategies. This thesis seeks to address these gaps by examining how historical narratives, legal arguments, and public diplomacy shape territorial disputes in Northeast Asia.

1.6 Theoretical framework

This study adopts the symbolic politics framework to analyze the Dokdo/Takeshima territorial dispute between Korea and Japan. Kim (2014) argues that such disputes are shaped less by material interests than by identity conflicts and emotionally charged symbols. In Japan, these dynamics are usually elite-led, as politicians and conservative media promote symbolic narratives. In Korea, they are more mass-led, with public opinion and civic groups pushing leaders toward firm positions.¹⁹³

Kim also notes that disputes over issues like comfort women, colonial history, or territorial claims are “not about the past per se” but about the meanings

¹⁹² Kanehara, “A Possible Practical Solution for the Dispute,” 71-89.

¹⁹³ Kim, “Escaping the Vicious Cycle,” 31-53.

they hold in the present. In this light, Dokdo represents Korean victimization and sovereignty, while Takeshima reflects Japan's revisionism and efforts to restore national pride. As Sarcinelli (2008) further explains, symbolic politics is not only about formal decisions such as laws or treaties, but also about the use of symbols, rituals, and dramatic acts that make politics easier to understand and more emotionally powerful.¹⁹⁴

Instead of viewing the Dokdo/Takeshima issue only through international law or strategic interests, symbolic politics shows how both countries' actions are rooted in competing historical narratives and collective memory. Political elites may amplify or downplay these disputes depending on domestic incentives, public opinion, and nationalist sentiment. In Korea, leaders often invoke Dokdo to reinforce national identity and mention distance from Japan's colonial past, especially during diplomatic tensions. In Japan, officials promote Takeshima through education, public speeches, and symbolic events like "Takeshima Day" to assert sovereignty and appeal to nationalist feeling.

The symbolic politics theory is chosen for the thesis because it explains why such a small group of islets carries disproportionate importance in political debates and identity-building. Unlike approaches focused only on law or strategy, symbolic politics focuses on how history, memory, and emotion are mobilized through commemorative days, curricula, or public messages. Since the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute is not so much a matter of territory as of contested history and national pride, symbolic politics provides the most suitable lens to understand its persistence and central role in both Korean and Japanese discourse.

¹⁹⁴ Sarcinelli, *Symbolische Politik*, 1-2.

While this thesis primarily focuses on the Dokdo/Takeshima case, the symbolic politics framework will also be applied to other disputes in the region, including the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the Northern Territories/Southern Kuril Islands, and the South China Sea. Like Dokdo/Takeshima, these conflicts are not only about legal sovereignty or strategic interests but also about history, identity, and symbols. Examining them through the same approach will show both the common patterns of symbolic politics in East and Southeast Asia and the specific features that make each dispute unique.

1.7 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the topic, situates the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute within the broader context of East and Southeast Asian territorial conflicts, and outlines the research questions, methodology, and contribution. Chapter 2 reviews the historical and legal background, including treaties, agreements, and U.S. involvement after World War II. Chapter 3 examines Korea's stance, focusing on its historical claims, the impact of colonial rule, and the role of Dokdo in national identity and public diplomacy. Chapter 4 analyzes Japan's position, covering its legal arguments, political narratives, and appeal to international law. Chapter 5 concludes by comparing other regional disputes and highlighting both common themes and the unique aspects of the Dokdo/Takeshima case.

CHAPTER 2

CHRONOLOGY OF DOKDO/TAKESHIMA DISPUTE

The territorial dispute over Dokdo/Takeshima between Korea and Japan has deep historical foundations, but it intensified in the early twentieth century, when Japan expanded its imperial influence over the Korean Peninsula. Following victories in the First Sino-Japan War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), Meiji Japan emerged as a dominant power in East Asia. The Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895)¹⁹⁵ and the Treaty of Portsmouth (1905)¹⁹⁶ reduced the influence of other powers, such as China, in Korea and enabled Japan to strengthen its political and military presence in the region.

These developments marked the beginning of a series of steps through which Japan gradually extended its influence over Korea and the nearby territories.¹⁹⁷ This chapter summarizes all major treaties, agreements, and official documents relevant to the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute, tracing their historical context and implications in chronological order.

To understand the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute, it is important to examine the treaties signed between Korea and Japan in the early twentieth century. These documents not only shaped bilateral relations but also illustrate how Japan gradually expanded its authority over Korea.

¹⁹⁵ Treaty of Shimonoseki, April 17, 1895; It forced the Qing Dynasty to recognize Korea as an independent state, effectively removing it from China's traditional sphere of influence. This opened the door for Japan to exert its own influence over the Korean Peninsula.

¹⁹⁶ Treaty of Portsmouth, September 5, 1905; It acknowledged Japan's predominant interests in Korea by mediating Russian withdrawal from the region.

¹⁹⁷ Budiarto, *Land of the Morning Calm*, 1.

Just two weeks after the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War on February 23, 1904,¹⁹⁸ Japan and the Korean Empire signed the Japan–Korea Treaty, officially framed as a step toward “permanent friendship” and “peace in the Far East” through Japan’s administrative advice.¹⁹⁹ However, Japan had the right to occupy strategic locations and intervene in Korea’s affairs by this treaty, weakening Korea’s sovereignty.²⁰⁰

Another subsequent agreement on 22 August 1904 authorized Japan to appoint advisors to key Korean ministries—particularly finance and foreign affairs—whose recommendations were binding.²⁰¹ This marked the beginning of Japan’s direct involvement in Korea’s internal administration and paved the way for further political and military actions, including activities around Dokdo.

Taking advantage of its privileges under these treaties, Japan identified Dokdo as an observation point for monitoring Russian naval movements during the Russo-Japanese War, without prior notification or consent from the Korean Empire. The Japanese navy constructed a network of twenty observation towers, two of which were on Ulleungdo and one on Dokdo/Takeshima.²⁰² This early military use reflected the islets’ growing strategic importance.

In late 1904, fisherman Nakai Yozaburo requested rights to exploit the waters around the islets. Japan’s Naval Ministry responded by treating the territory as *terra nullius*, directing him to submit the application to Japanese authorities. Subsequently, on February 22, 1905, the Governor of Shimane Prefecture issued a public notice formally incorporating the islets into Japanese territory under the name “Takeshima.”

¹⁹⁸ Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Russo-Japanese War.”

¹⁹⁹ Protocol between Japan and Korea, February 23, 1904.; *Japan–Korea Protocol*, February 23, 1904.

²⁰⁰ *Japan–Korea Protocol*, February 23, 1904.

²⁰¹ MOFA Korea, *Korea-Japan Protocol of August 1904*.

²⁰² Lee, “A Refutation of Japan’s Territorial Claim to Dokdo,” 6.

Japanese fishermen—often with government support—used the area for sea lion hunting and marine products.²⁰³

Following Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, Japan strengthened its strategic ambitions such as geopolitical control over the Korean Peninsula.²⁰⁴ The April 1905 agreement transferred Korea's postal, telegraph, and telephone systems to Japanese supervision, while the August 1905 agreement authorized the stationing of Residency-General officials in the provinces.²⁰⁵

On November 17, 1905, Japan concluded the Protectorate Treaty (Eulsa Treaty), placing Korea under Japanese control in foreign affairs.²⁰⁶ As a result, Korea came under Japan's de facto control five years before formal annexation.²⁰⁷ According to Korea, this treaty was signed under force, while Japan claimed it was voluntary. With this treaty, Korea lost its right to make agreements with other countries, and its foreign affairs came under Japanese control.

During the 1905 Eulsa Treaty negotiations, the United States and Great Britain remained passive, viewing Japan's ascending influence over Korea as a counterbalance to Russian expansionism in Northeast Asia.²⁰⁸ The Taft-Katsura Memorandum of July 1905, though not a formal treaty, reflected mutual recognition of Japan's interest in Korea and U.S. authority over the Philippines.²⁰⁹

In February 1906, Emperor Gojong published a letter in a national Korean newspaper denying his consent to the 1905 treaty with Japan, asserting that he had

²⁰³ Van Dyke, "Legal Issues Related to Sovereignty over Dokdo," 175-176.

²⁰⁴ "Japanese Annexation of Korea," *EBSCOhost Research Starters*

²⁰⁵ Schmid, *Korea Between Empires*, 28.

²⁰⁶ The 1905 Protectorate Treaty, also known as the Eulsa Treaty or the Second Japan-Korea Agreement was signed under coercion by the Korean Empire and made Korea a protectorate of Japan. It stripped Korea of its diplomatic sovereignty and established the Japanese Resident-General's office in Seoul.

²⁰⁷ "Convention between Japan and Korea, 1905," *World and Japan Database*.

²⁰⁸ "Japanese Annexation of Korea," *EBSCOhost Research Starters*

²⁰⁹ "Count Katsura and Secretary Taft," *World and Japan Database*

never agreed to its terms. In the following year, Gojong secretly sent envoys to the Second Hague Peace Conference²¹⁰ in the Netherlands to inform the international community of Japan's oppressive control and de facto rule over Korea, and to seek international support. But they were not allowed to attend, as Korea was no longer considered sovereign in diplomacy.²¹¹

Korea's opposition to Japan's claim that Dokdo was *terra nullius* became largely symbolic politics, as the country had already lost control over its foreign affairs. Nevertheless, Korea consistently maintained that it had exercised effective control over Dokdo for centuries.²¹²

Despite domestic protests, Korea was forced to sign the Treaty of Annexation on 22 August 1910, ceding all sovereign rights to Japan. Dokdo/Takeshima, under Japanese administration since 1905, thus became part of Japan's colonial domain.²¹³ The Joseon Dynasty, which began in 1392 and was renamed as Korean Empire in 1897, ended with this annexation; Korea remained under Japanese rule until 1945.²¹⁴

Japan's defeat in 1945 changed the future of Korea. Although the Allies promised Korean independence, Cold War dynamics shifted priorities. The Korean Peninsula became a site of U.S.–Soviet rivalry, and decisions over territories like Dokdo/Takeshima reflected strategic and political calculations as much as historical claims.²¹⁵

²¹⁰ It was an international diplomatic meeting held in the Hague, Netherlands, aimed at promoting peaceful dispute resolution and codifying the laws of war.

²¹¹ Schmid, *Korea Between Empires*, 28.

²¹² Kim, "The US and the Territorial Dispute on Dokdo/Takeshima," 97.

²¹³ "Treaty Regarding the Annexation of Korea," *World and Japan Database*

²¹⁴ "Japanese Annexation of Korea," *EBSCOhost Research Starters*

²¹⁵ Hara, "Takeshima/Dokdo Problem," 26-28

2.1 Post-war treaties

Following the end of World War II, the Allied Powers sought to redefine Japan's territorial boundaries and restore Korea's independence. The Cairo Declaration (1943) and the Potsdam Declaration (1945)²¹⁶ laid out the basic framework for this process. Subsequent measures—including directives issued by the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAPINs), internal U.S. treaty drafts, and the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty—further clarified Japan's post-war status and influenced the handling of contested territories such as Dokdo/Takeshima.

2.1.1 1943 Cairo Declaration and 1945 Potsdam Declaration

The postwar reconstruction plans developed by the United States and its allies following Japan's defeat included decisions about the territories that Japan had forcibly acquired since 1895. That year marked the beginning of Japan's imperial expansion, following its victory in the First Sino-Japanese War and the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki.²¹⁷

At the Cairo Conference in November 1943, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, U.K. Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Chinese President Chiang Kai-shek agreed that Japan would be expelled from the lands which it had taken by force. They also declared that Korea would become independent at the appropriate time, recognizing the suffering endured under Japanese rule.²¹⁸

This commitment was reaffirmed in the Potsdam Declaration, issued on July 26, 1945, by the United States, the United Kingdom, and later joined by the Soviet Union. It stated that Japan's sovereignty would be limited to Honshu, Hokkaido,

²¹⁶ *Proclamation Calling for the Surrender of Japan, 1945, The Potsdam Conference.*

²¹⁷ The 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki ended the First Sino-Japanese War, ceded Taiwan to Japan, and marked the end of Korea's tributary status to China by recognizing its independence.

²¹⁸ U.S. Department of State, "The Cairo Conference, 1943."

Kyushu, Shikoku, and other small islands chosen by the Allies.²¹⁹ Both declarations gained legal effect when Japan announced its unconditional surrender on 15 August 1945. Japan formally accepted the Potsdam Declaration by signing the instrument of surrender on September 2, 1945.²²⁰

However, neither the Cairo nor the Potsdam Proclamations explicitly addressed the status of Dokdo/Takeshima, which was later interpreted differently by the parties.²²¹ Over time, these documents acquired a *symbolic politics* dimension, as both Korea and Japan invoked their omissions to reinforce national narratives and sovereignty claims. For Korea, they symbolized the promised restoration of territories lost during colonial rule; for Japan, the absence of explicit mention allowed space to maintain its position. This interpretive contest illustrates how historical documents can transcend their immediate legal function and become instruments in the construction of national identity.

2.1.2 The instructions of Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers(SCAPINs)

Following Japan's unconditional surrender in August 1945, both Korea and Japan came under the administration of the Allied Powers, with the United States exercising primary control.²²² General Douglas MacArthur was appointed as the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), giving the U.S. de facto authority in Japan between 1945 and 1952. Under SCAP, the U.S. pursued a comprehensive program to demilitarize Japan and implement democratic reforms.²²³

²¹⁹ U.S. Department of State, "The Potsdam Conference, 1945."

²²⁰ Hosaka, "Rusk Letter," 147.

²²¹ Kim, "The US and the Territorial Dispute"

²²² Lee and Van Dyke, *The 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty*, 743.

²²³ U.S. Department of State, "Occupation and Reconstruction of Japan."

Although institutions such as the Far Eastern Commission and the Allied Council for Japan existed, their roles were largely advisory; SCAP served as the principal authority.²²⁴ Before the Far Eastern Commission became operational in 1946, key directives were issued that reflected U.S. policy and were often drafted within American agencies, notably the State–War–Navy Coordinating Committee (SWNCC).²²⁵

In contrast, Korea—under Japanese colonial rule since 1910—was liberated but immediately divided along the 38th parallel.²²⁶ The Soviet Union occupied the North, while the United States occupied the South.²²⁷

From 1945 to 1948, the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK), led by General John R. Hodge under MacArthur’s authority in Tokyo, exercised full administrative and legal control in the South. This military administration continued until the establishment of the Republic of Korea on 15 August 1948.²²⁸

During this time, as part of its administrative functions, SCAP issued numerous directives known as Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers Instructions (SCAPINs). Among them, there are two key directives (SCAPIN 677 and 1033) that directly addressed the status of Dokdo/Takeshima.²²⁹

Firstly, SCAPIN 677, issued on January 29, 1946, defined Japan’s territory as its four main islands—Hokkaido, Honshu, Kyushu, and Shikoku—and

²²⁴ Kim, “The US and the Territorial Dispute on Dokdo/Takeshima,” 102-104

²²⁵ Hara, *Cold War Frontiers in the Asia-Pacific*, 25.

²²⁶ The 38th parallel was proposed by two U.S. officers, Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel, in August 1945 as a temporary administrative division to facilitate the surrender of Japanese forces in Korea. The line was accepted by the Soviet Union, leading to the establishment of separate zones of occupation. Although intended as a temporary measure, the division hardened as U.S. and Soviet policies diverged.

²²⁷ U.S. Department of State, *FRUS 1945, The British Commonwealth, The Far East*, doc. 776.

²²⁸ “History of the United States Army Forces in Korea,” Korean History Database.

²²⁹ Van Dyke, “Legal Issues Related to Sovereignty,” 182.

approximately 1,000 smaller islands, while explicitly excluding Ulleungdo (Utsuryo), Liancourt Rocks (Dokdo/Takeshima), and Quelpart (Jeju) Island.²³⁰ However, Paragraph 6 of the directive stated that this exclusion was not a final determination of sovereignty, as stipulated in Article 8 of the Potsdam Declaration. In other words, Japan lost administrative control over Dokdo/Takeshima, but the question of ownership remained unresolved.²³¹

Secondly, it was followed by SCAPIN 1033, issued on June 22, 1946, and known as the “MacArthur Line,” which prohibited Japanese vessels and personnel from approaching within twelve nautical miles of Takeshima or making any contact with it.²³² This reinforced the restrictions of SCAPIN 677 and confirmed that the islets were outside Japan’s control during the Allied occupation, while again clarifying that the directive was not a final sovereignty decision.²³³

For Korea, these measures became a key reference in asserting that Dokdo/Takeshima was not considered Japanese territory in the immediate postwar order.²³⁴ Japan, in contrast, maintains that SCAPINs were purely administrative and had no bearing on sovereignty. According to Japan, these directives were just meant to set rules for how Japan would be managed after the war and did not reflect an international determination of the ownership of Takeshima.²³⁵

In the same month as SCAPIN 1033, an internal U.S. policy paper — SWNCC 59/1—prepared by the State–War–Navy Coordinating Committee, also addressed the postwar disposition of Japanese-held islands. The document specifically listed Takeshima (Dokdo), Quelpart (Jeju), Port Hamilton (Geomundo),

²³⁰ MOFA Korea, *Why Dokdo Is Korean Territory*.

²³¹ SCAPIN-677, *Governmental and Administrative Separation of Certain Outlying Areas from Japan*

²³² MOFA Korea, *Why Dokdo Is Korean Territory*.

²³³ SCAPIN-1033, *Area Authorized for Japanese Fishing and Whaling*

²³⁴ Lee, *The Shadow of Cold War Politics*, 11-12.

²³⁵ MOFA Japan, “*Takeshima Immediately After World War II*”

and Dagelet (Ulleungdo) as belonging to Korea, suggesting early U.S. recognition of Korean sovereignty in working-level policy.²³⁶

Later, on September 16, 1947, SCAPIN 1778 designated Dokdo as a bombing range for the U.S. Far East Air Force. In June 1948, U.S. forces based in Okinawa conducted live bombing exercises on the islets, dropping 76 bombs; fourteen Korean fishermen, unaware of the designation, were killed, sparking widespread protests in Korea.²³⁷ These administrative measures laid the groundwork for the San Francisco Peace Treaty.

Over time, these postwar directives and policy documents took on a meaning beyond their original administrative purpose. For Korea, they are seen as proof that the international community recognized its sovereignty over Dokdo, supporting a sense of historical justice and national pride. For Japan, they are viewed as temporary occupation measures, reinforcing the idea that sovereignty over the islets is still unresolved.

2.2 SFPT drafts and U.S. internal deliberations

Between 1947 and 1951, the drafting process of the San Francisco Peace Treaty (SFPT) went through multiple revisions, reflecting shifting U.S. strategic priorities during the early Cold War. The March²³⁸ and August 1947²³⁹ drafts of the treaty specifically listed Liancourt Rocks as territory that Japan would relinquish to Korea. These provisions were consistent with earlier U.S. internal documents, such as SWNCC 59/1, which regarded Dokdo as Korean territory. From late 1947 through

²³⁶ Hara, *Cold War Frontiers in the Asia-Pacific*, 25.

²³⁷ Northeast Asian History Foundation, “Dokdo, Bombed.”

²³⁸ Hara, *Cold War Frontiers in the Asia-Pacific*, 25-26

²³⁹ Hara, *Cold War Frontiers in the Asia-Pacific*, 25-26

1948, only minor textual changes occurred, and Dokdo remained recognized as Korean.²⁴⁰

However, the establishment of the Policy Planning Staff under George Kennan marked a strategic turn. By 1949, after the communist victory in China and increasing instability on the Korean Peninsula,²⁴¹ U.S. policymakers began to prioritize Japan's role as a regional ally over Korea's territorial claims.²⁴²

A turning point came with William J. Sebald's 1949 memorandum, which advised recognizing Takeshima as Japanese territory to preserve strategic flexibility, citing possible uses for weather or radar facilities. Sebald, a political adviser to the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) and later the U.S. Ambassador to Japan, played a key role in shaping postwar U.S. policy toward Japan.²⁴³

In 1950, John Foster Dulles, a U.S. State Department official who later became Secretary of State, took over treaty drafting. Dulles adopted a simplified approach with Sebald—removing detailed territorial lists. Dokdo/Takeshima disappeared from the treaty text, not necessarily as a rejection of Korean claims, but as a deliberate omission to avoid alienating Japan and to leave room for future negotiations.²⁴⁴

2.2.1 British role in the treaty drafting process

From 1947 onward, the United Kingdom prepared its own detailed draft for the Japanese Peace Treaty. This draft set Japan's sovereignty limits through specific coordinates, excluded Takeshima from Japanese territory, and envisaged Korea's

²⁴⁰ Hara, *Cold War Frontiers in the Asia-Pacific*, 25.

²⁴¹ The Korean Peninsula, including adjacent islands, extends about 966 km long and covers roughly 221,621 sq. km, with the ROK comprising 45% and the DPRK 55% of its territory.

²⁴² Hara, *Cold War Frontiers in the Asia-Pacific*, 28-29

²⁴³ Takai, *The Alleged Title over the Island of Takeshima*, 2.

²⁴⁴ Hara, *Cold War Frontiers in the Asia-Pacific*, 37-38.

transfer to the Republic of Korea under the United Nations framework. However, the United States opposed this approach, arguing that such detailed boundary demarcations would have a negative “psychological effect” on Japan. Eventually, Britain accepted the U.S.’s simpler formula, which named only specific territories to be excluded from Japan.²⁴⁵

In the 1951 joint U.S.-UK draft, Korea’s independence was recognized and the islands of Quelpart, Port Hamilton, and Dagelet were included as Korean territory, though Dokdo/Takeshima was not explicitly mentioned.²⁴⁶

2.2.2 Rusk documents and U.S.’s rejection to Korea

Early U.S. drafts in 1949 drew a distinction between Korea as a sovereign state and Korea as a geographic area. During the Korean War, under Dulles’s direction, the U.S. approach shifted toward a minimalist formula: Japan would renounce its claims, but sovereignty over certain territories would not be clarified. This reflected the Potsdam Declaration but omitted any reference to the Cairo Declaration. In response, Korea requested that the treaty explicitly identify Dokdo as part of its territory. However the U.S., influenced by Sebald’s view, rejected this in the August 10, 1951 “Rusk document,” stating that according to U.S. information, the islets had never been treated as part of Korea and had been under Japan’s Shimane Prefecture jurisdiction since 1905.²⁴⁷

Some argue this was a deliberate U.S. strategy to create tension between Japan and its neighbors,²⁴⁸ while others emphasize that American diplomats were

²⁴⁵ Hara, *Cold War Frontiers in the Asia-Pacific*, 39-42.

²⁴⁶ Hara, *Cold War Frontiers in the Asia-Pacific*, 39-42.

²⁴⁷ Hara, *Cold War Frontiers in the Asia-Pacific*, 42-46.

²⁴⁸ Hara, “Takeshima/Dokdo Problem in the San Francisco System,” 32.

simply unsure of the islets' original ownership and left the issue unresolved for Korea and Japan to settle.²⁴⁹

From a *symbolic politics* perspective, these treaty drafts became more than just legal instruments. For Korea, the earlier versions that explicitly named Dokdo became historical proof of international recognition of its sovereignty, reinforcing a narrative of historical justice and rightful restoration. For Japan, the later omissions are used to argue that sovereignty was never conclusively transferred, sustaining its claim in the present. The evolution of these drafts thus illustrates how diplomatic documents—shaped by geopolitical strategy—can later acquire symbolic weight, becoming tools in the construction of national identity and political legitimacy.

The position set out in the Rusk Letter directly influenced the drafting of the San Francisco Peace Treaty. By rejecting Korea's claim to Dokdo/Takeshima and framing the islets as historically Japanese territory, the United States ensured that Dokdo was omitted from the list of islands Japan would renounce in favor of Korea. At the same time, the treaty did not explicitly affirm Japanese sovereignty over the islets, leaving their status ambiguous. This diplomatic choice reflected Cold War strategic considerations and created the legal uncertainty that continues to shape the dispute between Korea and Japan today.

2.3 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty

Although Korea regained its independence after World War II, the sovereignty dispute with Japan over Dokdo/Takeshima continued in the postwar period. The Treaty of Peace with Japan, signed at San Francisco on September 8, 1951, and entered into force on April 28, 1952, was one of the most important post-war

²⁴⁹ Hara, "Takeshima/Dokdo Problem in the San Francisco System," 54.

agreements. It formally ended the war between Japan and the Allied Powers and established a legal basis for Japan's postwar international status.²⁵⁰

In Article 2 of the San Francisco Peace Treaty (1951), Japan recognized the independence of Korea and renounced all right, title, and claim to its former colonial territories, including Korea and its associated islands—Quelpart (*Jeju Island*), Port Hamilton (*Geomun-do*), and Dagelet (*Ulleungdo*). Additionally, Japan relinquished sovereignty over Formosa (Taiwan) and the Pescadores, the Kurile Islands, the southern part of Sakhalin, as well as the Spratly and Paracel Islands in the South China Sea.²⁵¹

However, the treaty did not resolve questions of sovereignty in several cases. Dokdo/Takeshima was not explicitly mentioned, leaving room for conflicting interpretations between Japan and Korea. Likewise, Japan's renunciation of the Spratly and Paracel Islands did not specify succession, opening the way for multiple states to assert competing claims. The treaty also required Japan to renounce the Kuril Islands but did not define their scope, leaving ambiguity over the northern territories. Similarly, while the Senkaku Islands were placed under U.S. administration as part of the Ryukyus, no determination was made regarding sovereignty.

Finally, the third article of SFPT transferred administrative authority over the Ryukyu Islands, the Daito Islands, the Bonin Islands, and Marcus Island to the United States.²⁵² This provision laid the legal foundation for U.S. administration of Okinawa from 1945 until the islands were formally returned to Japan under the 1971 Okinawa Reversion Agreement, which came into effect in 1972.²⁵³

²⁵⁰ Hara, *Cold War Frontiers in the Asia-Pacific*, 46.

²⁵¹ Treaty of Peace with Japan, Art. 2 (1951)

²⁵² Treaty of Peace with Japan, Art. 3 (1951)

²⁵³ Japan and United States, *Agreement concerning the Ryukyu Islands*, 1971.

2.4 Korea-Japan bilateral agreements

Following the signing of the San Francisco Agreement in 1951, and the deliberate ambiguity left over Dokdo/Takeshima's legal status. After the U.S. occupation of Japan ended in 1952, the United States avoided taking a clear stance on islets' ownership. In the same year, President Syngman Rhee issued a presidential proclamation titled "Proclamation on Sovereignty over the Adjacent Seas" (commonly known as the Syngman Rhee Line), which declared Dokdo to be part of Korea and ordered Japanese fishermen and vessels to stay out of the designated area. It was just three months before the San Francisco Peace Treaty came into effect.²⁵⁴

Japan responded with a note of protest to the Korean government on January 28, 1952, but Korea has retained control of the island ever since.²⁵⁵ By 1954, Korea had established military control, stationed its coast guard there, and enforced a fisheries law allowing the seizure of vessels fishing in the zone.²⁵⁶

2.4.1 1965 Normalization treaty and agreements between Japan and Korea

At the start of the 1960s, Dokdo/Takeshima re-emerged as a central sticking point in efforts to normalize ROK–Japan relations. Talks had begun in 1951 but stalled amid President Syngman Rhee's hard line and strong anti-Japanese sentiment in Korea. After Rhee's ouster on April 26, 1960, Washington hoped a new government in Seoul would be more receptive, urging a deal it viewed as essential to regional strategy. For the U.S., Japanese economic assistance and market access would speed

²⁵⁴ Serita, *Takeshima*, 93–94; Schwartz and Yoo, "Asian Territorial Disputes," *Chinese Journal of International Law* 18, no. 3, 507.

²⁵⁵ Government of Japan, *Note verbale of protest to the Government of the Korea*

²⁵⁶ Starkweather, "Keeping the Liancourt Rocks Dispute Afloat," 16.

Korea's development, reduce reliance on U.S. aid, and strengthen the non-communist camp in Asia while bolstering Seoul against North Korea.²⁵⁷

After negotiations and U.S. mediation during the Cold War, Korea and Japan signed the Treaty on Basic Relations on June 22, 1965, which officially restored diplomatic ties between the two countries.²⁵⁸ Alongside this treaty, several agreements were signed covering economic cooperation, property claims²⁵⁹ and the legal status of Koreans residing in Japan.²⁶⁰

During the negotiations for the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations, Japan sought to raise the Takeshima issue. However, Korea rejected this attempt, arguing that Dokdo was an inherent part of its territory and therefore not a matter for bilateral discussion. As a result, the treaty left unresolved critical historical and territorial issues, particularly the sovereignty dispute over Dokdo/Takeshima.²⁶¹ Although Seoul kept Dokdo off the agenda, a late U.S. cable says Korea was willing to add wording for later consultations and, if Japan wanted, even third-party involvement on "remaining issues." However, the final treaty included no such clause.²⁶²

Moreover, other contentious issues—notably the unresolved grievances over "comfort women" (Korean women forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military) and forced labor during Japan's colonial rule—were left unaddressed. The treaty mainly focused on economic compensation rather than Japan's colonial-era actions. As a result, the 1965 normalization agreement, while successful in restoring

²⁵⁷ Roehrig, "US Policy and the Dokdo/Takeshima Dispute," 227–8.

²⁵⁸ *Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea*

²⁵⁹ Agreement on the Settlement of Problems concerning Property and Claims and on Economic Cooperation, *United Nations Treaty Series* 586

²⁶⁰ Agreement concerning the Legal Status and Treatment of Nationals of the Republic of Korea Residing in Japan, *United Nations Treaty Series* 586

²⁶¹ Muskan Jha, "The Takeshima Island Dispute" 119.

²⁶² Roehrig, "US Policy and the Dokdo/Takeshima Dispute," 227–31.

diplomatic and economic ties between Korea and Japan, was widely criticized for prioritizing political expediency over historical accountability and justice.

2.4.2 1974 Korea-Japan agreement for Joint Development Zone(JDZ)

After the diplomatic normalization agreement failed to resolve regional and historical tensions, Korea and Japan focused on maritime boundary management and economic cooperation. One of these earliest efforts in this direction was the 1974 Agreement on the Joint Development of the Continental Shelf regarding the continental shelf in the East/Japan Sea.²⁶³

The agreement established a Joint Development Zone (JDZ) where both countries could conduct joint resource exploration and development. Although the JDZ did not directly address the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute, its geographical proximity to the islets and its emphasis on concepts of shared sovereignty shaped the parties' positions on maritime jurisdiction.²⁶⁴

In particular, it provided a new framework for continental shelf claims and maritime resource sharing, promoting the idea that sovereignty and boundary issues could be managed through economic cooperation. However, this approach made the legal status of the areas around Dokdo even less clear. As areas under de facto control overlapped with zones of cooperation, tensions gradually became more complicated over time.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ Japan and Republic of Korea, *Joint Development Agreement*, 1974.

²⁶⁴ Japan and Republic of Korea, *Joint Development Agreement*, 1974.

²⁶⁵ Japan and Republic of Korea, *Joint Development Agreement*, 1974.

2.4.3 Other bilateral arrangements affecting maritime jurisdiction

In addition to the joint development and fisheries agreements, Korea and Japan have concluded other arrangements that, while not directly addressing the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute, have influenced maritime governance and operational cooperation in contested waters.

In the 1974 Northern Continental Shelf Agreement, the Dokdo/Takeshima issue was sidestepped,²⁶⁶ and in 1978 two sides brought into force the Agreement Concerning Joint Development of the Southern Part of the Continental Shelf. While it promoted joint exploration and fostered maritime coordination,²⁶⁷ no profitable resources were found, and after UNCLOS (1994)²⁶⁸ most of the zone was treated as Japan's EEZ. The 50-year agreement will expire in June 2028, with either side able to terminate it from June 2025, making renewal sensitive in bilateral ties.²⁶⁹

Efforts to delimit EEZs since 1996 have also failed due to the sovereignty dispute, leading to the 1998 Fisheries Agreement that introduced "provisional zones" in contested waters.²⁷⁰ As shown in Figure 10, overlapping maritime claims demonstrate why, although the two countries have cooperated pragmatically, the unresolved Dokdo/Takeshima dispute continues to limit trust and prevent a final settlement on EEZ and continental shelf boundaries.²⁷¹

²⁶⁶ Muskan Jha, "The Takeshima Island Dispute," 120.

²⁶⁷ Japan and Korea. *Agreement Concerning Joint Development of the Southern Part of the Continental Shelf*, 1974. United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 1225, 1978.

²⁶⁸ UNCLOS introduced the 200-nautical-mile EEZ principle, which placed most of the Joint Development Zone closer to Japan and thus favored Tokyo's claim.

²⁶⁹ Korea Times, *Korea, Japan at Crossroads over Future of Continental Shelf Development Project*

²⁷⁰ MOFA Korea, UN Convention on the Law of the Sea," *Treaties & International Law* section.

²⁷¹ Roehrig, "The Rough State of Japan–South Korea Relations."

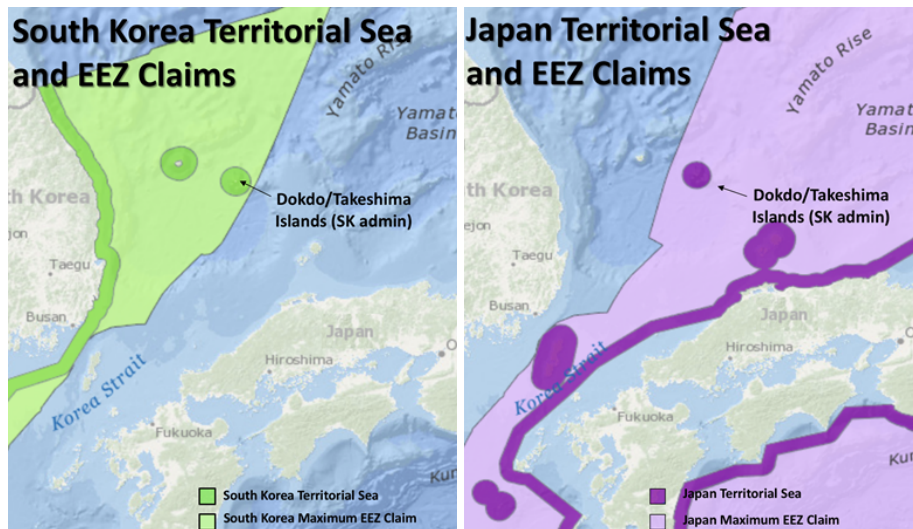


Figure 10. Korea and Japan's territorial sea and EEZ claims
Source: The National Bureau of Asian Research

Since the early 2000s, Korea and Japan have developed various technical cooperation mechanisms to manage maritime tensions, including joint research on fisheries and coast guard drills.²⁷² However, these efforts remained limited in scope and ultimately failed to produce a lasting resolution to their disputes.

²⁷² U.S. Coast Guard, "U.S., Japan, and Korea Coast Guards Conduct Trilateral Operations,"

CHAPTER 3

KOREA'S POSITION ON DOKDO

The Dokdo/Takeshima dispute is not merely a legal contest, but also a symbolic confrontation deeply rooted in conflicting historical narratives. As Mikyoung Kim (2012) puts it, it constitutes a “memory war” in which both Korea and Japan reinterpret the past to support their sovereignty claims, national identities, and moral legitimacy.²⁷³

In this chapter, the Dokdo issue will be examined from Korea's perspective. Korean terminology and official expressions will be used where relevant to reflect Korea's position accurately. This approach is intended to present Korea's official stance in its own terms and does not imply endorsement or agreement with any particular claim.

The term *symbolic politics*, refers to the strategic use of historical documents, rituals, and collective memory to legitimize present-day claims. This perspective frames Dokdo not merely as a territorial entity but as a symbol deeply embedded in Korea's national identity and historical consciousness. For Korea, Dokdo represents resistance against colonial rule, a restoration of historical justice, and a tangible marker of sovereignty that affirms the nation's hard-won independence. It has thus become a powerful focal point of patriotic sentiment, cultural expression, and public diplomacy, extending the dispute far beyond questions of international law or material interests.

²⁷³ Kim, “*A War of Memories*.”

3.1 Pre-modern historical records

According to the Korean government, Dokdo is an integral part of Korea based on historical records, geographical proximity, and international law. The government asserts that there is no territorial dispute over Dokdo and therefore rejects any diplomatic or judicial resolution attempts regarding its sovereignty.²⁷⁴



Figure 11. Location of Dokdo
Source: MOFA Korea

From a Korean historical perspective, Dokdo has been recognized as Korean territory since ancient times. According to *Samguksagi* (The Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms), General Isabu of the Silla Kingdom subjugated Usan-guk²⁷⁵ in 512 AD, a state that included both Ulleungdo and Dokdo. This incorporation into Silla marks the beginning of Korean sovereignty over the islets.²⁷⁶ Silla (57 BCE–935 CE), one of the Three Kingdoms of Korea, is known for its long-standing stability and its eventual unification of much of the Korean Peninsula in 668 AD.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁴ MOFA Korea. 후쿠시마 오염수 방류 관련 우리 정부 입장 [The Korean Government's Position Regarding the Release of Fukushima Wastewater]. 2023.

²⁷⁵ Usan-guk (于山國) was a small island polity generally understood to include both Ulleungdo and Dokdo, mentioned in several historical Korean texts such as *Samguksagi* and *Sejong Sillok Jiriji*.

²⁷⁶ MOFA Korea. *Why Dokdo Is Korean Territory*.

²⁷⁷ Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Silla*, n.d.; Korean Culture and Information Service, *Unification of the Three Kingdoms under Silla*.

Further support for Korea's historical claim on Dokdo can be found in *Sejong Sillok Jiriji*²⁷⁸ (The Geography Section of the Annals of King Sejong's Reign), compiled in the fifteenth century during the early Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897). The text records that both Ulleungdo and Dokdo belonged to Uljin County of Gangwon Province and specifically states that "the two islands of Usan (Dokdo) and Mureung (Ulleungdo) are not far apart from each other, and Usan (Dokdo) is visible from Ulleungdo on a clear day." While this statement shows the proximity between the two islands, it also supports Korea's historical awareness and administrative ownership of Dokdo.²⁷⁹

In addition to presenting its own historical records on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, the Korean government also cites early Japanese documents related to Dokdo/Takeshima. According to the Ministry, in 1618 or 1625, the Tokugawa Shogunate issued a pass to the Japanese Oya and Murakawa families that allowed them to travel to Takeshima, which today is defined as Ulleungdo.²⁸⁰ Japan interprets this document as evidence of early activities in the region, while Korea does not see it as a recognition of territorial sovereignty, but as a limited permission to cross to the island.

A few decades later, maritime tensions between the Joseon Dynasty of Korea and Tokugawa Japan intensified following an incident near Ulleungdo in 1693. At that time, Korean fishermen—An Yong-bok and Park Eodun—who were fishing near Ulleungdo, were kidnapped by Japanese fishermen working for the Oya and Murakawa families and forcibly taken to Japan. This event led to a diplomatic crisis

²⁷⁸ *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* (世宗實錄 地理志, 1454) is the Geography Section of the Annals of King Sejong's Reign, published in 1454. It provides a detailed geographical record of Korea during the Joseon Dynasty, including references to Ulleungdo and Dokdo as Korean territories.

²⁷⁹ MOFA Korea. *Why Dokdo Is Korean Territory*.

²⁸⁰ MOFA Korea. *Why Dokdo Is Korean Territory*.

between the two countries over territorial rights in the Ulleungdo region, which is known as the Ulleungdo Dispute.²⁸¹

Following the incident, the Joseon government sent a regional official named Jang Hansang to inspect Ulleungdo in 1694. Later, at the request of Prime Minister Nam Guman, Joseon decided to conduct regular inspections of the island every two years, a process that came to be known as *Suto*.²⁸²

In 1696, An Yong-bok made a second voyage to Japan, where he declared to Japanese fishermen that “Matsushima is Jasando (Dokdo), which is Korean territory,” and protested Japan’s encroachment on Ulleungdo and Dokdo.²⁸³ This statement is recorded in a Japanese document titled *Genrokku Kyu Heishinen Chosenbune Chakugan Ikkan No Oboegaki* (Memorandum on the Arrival of a Boat from Joseon in 1696), and is regarded by the Korean government as further historical evidence of Korea’s longstanding awareness of and administrative authority over Dokdo.²⁸⁴

Another key piece of evidence cited by the Korean government is the Tottori-han’s²⁸⁵ submission in 1695. In response to an inquiry from the Edo Shogunate regarding the jurisdiction over Ulleungdo, the Tottori-han reportedly stated that Takeshima (Ulleungdo) and Matsushima (Dokdo) did not belong to its domain. Korea interprets this as a formal acknowledgment that these islands were not considered Japanese territory at the time.²⁸⁶

²⁸¹ MOFA Korea. *Why Dokdo Is Korean Territory*.

²⁸² MOFA Korea. *Why Dokdo Is Korean Territory*.

²⁸³ MOFA Korea, *Q&A on Dokdo, Question 5*.

²⁸⁴ MOFA Korea. *Why Dokdo Is Korean Territory*.

²⁸⁵ The Tottori-han was a feudal domain under the Tokugawa Shogunate during the Edo period in Japan, governed by the Ikeda family. It held jurisdiction over parts of western Honshu.

²⁸⁶ MOFA Korea. *Why Dokdo Is Korean Territory*.

Another historical source often cited by the Korean government is the *Dongguk Munheon Bigo*²⁸⁷ (東國文獻備考, Reference Compilation of Documents of Korea, 1770), a government compilation completed in 1770 that documents Joseon's civilization, geography, and institutions. This text said that Ulleung and Usan are both territories of Usan-guk and that Usan is what the Japanese refer to as Matsushima (an old Japanese name for Dokdo).” This reference supports the geographical understanding shown in the Sejong Sillok Jiriji (1454) and is seen by Korea as further confirmation of its historical awareness and territorial claim over Dokdo as early as the eighteenth century.²⁸⁸

Another piece of evidence often mentioned by the Korean government is a Japanese report from 1870 called *Chōsenkoku Kōsai Simatsu Naitansho* (Confidential Inquiry into the Particulars of Relations with Joseon). It was reported to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and explains how Takeshima (Ulleungdo) and Matsushima (Dokdo) came to belong to Joseon (Korea), which Korea sees as proof that Japan recognized Dokdo as Korean territory at that time.²⁸⁹

Historical records also include the 1877 *Dajōkan* Order, which the Korean government sees as proof of Japan's acknowledgment that Dokdo lies outside its territory. Issued by Japan's highest administrative authority at the time, the *Dajōkan*, this order was sent to the Japanese Ministry of Home Affairs following consultations with the Joseon government regarding the Ulleungdo dispute. The order explicitly

²⁸⁷ *Dongguk Munheon Bigo*(동국문헌備考) is a Korean historical reference book compiled in 1770. It includes various geographical, administrative, and historical details about Korean territory, confirming that Dokdo was considered part of Korea during the Joseon Dynasty.

²⁸⁸ MOFA Korea. *Why Dokdo Is Korean Territory*.

²⁸⁹ MOFA Korea. *Why Dokdo Is Korean Territory*.

stated that Japan had no claim over Takeshima (Ulleungdo) and another island (Dokdo), reinforcing Korea's historical sovereignty over these islets.²⁹⁰

3.2 Late-Joseon to Korean Empire: Japan's incorporation of Dokdo

The transition from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century was a critical period for Korea's territorial assertions amid increasing foreign pressures. During this time, Western powers expanded their influence in Asia due to the industrial growth and capitalism. Neighboring countries like China and Japan were forced to open their borders, but Korea resisted, even fought off attacks from France in 1866 and the United States in 1871. However, Japan forced Korea to sign the *Ganghwa*²⁹¹ Treaty in 1876, to open its ports to Japanese trade.²⁹²

In 1897, Korea declared itself an empire, marking a shift from the centuries-old Joseon Dynasty, and undertook various modernization and sovereignty reinforcement efforts under the Korean Empire.²⁹³ These included formalizing territorial claims such as those in Imperial Decree No. 41 (October 25, 1900), which placed Ulleungdo, Jukdo, and Seokdo (now called Dokdo) under Uldo County's jurisdiction. This was a clear and formal assertion of territorial control prior to Japan's involvement.²⁹⁴

According to Korea, Japan's strategic interest in Dokdo shifted markedly after its victories in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905). After defeating the Qing Dynasty in 1895 and the Russian Empire in 1905, Meiji Japan emerged as a dominant power in the East Asia.

²⁹⁰ MOFA Korea. *Why Dokdo Is Korean Territory*.

²⁹¹ The Ganghwa Treaty was signed in 1876 between Korea and Japan, which opened Korean ports to Japanese trade under military pressure and marked the start of Japanese influence in Korea.

²⁹² Korean Culture Center in Newyork. "Korea Information – History."

²⁹³ Korean Culture Center in Newyork. "Korea Information – History."

²⁹⁴ MOFA Korea. *Why Dokdo Is Korean Territory*.

These victories were formalized through the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895)²⁹⁵ and the Treaty of Portsmouth (1905),²⁹⁶ which reduced the influence of other powers in Korea and allowed Japan to expand its political and military control in the region. These agreements marked the beginning of a series of steps through which Japan gradually extended its influence over Korea and the surrounding region.²⁹⁷

While the Japanese government had initially denied any interest in the islets, wartime needs—such as installing watchtowers and laying submarine telegraph cables—made them valuable for military operations in the East Sea/Sea of Japan. This period also coincided with a series of unequal agreements—such as the 1904-1905 Korea–Japan Protocol and the Japan–1905 Protectorate Treaty, discussed in detail in Chapter 2—which progressively undermined Korea’s sovereignty.²⁹⁸

These arrangements eroded Korea’s sovereignty, placing its foreign and domestic affairs under Japanese control and paving the way for the full annexation of Dokdo during the Russo-Japanese War. Japan incorporated Dokdo into its territory by a cabinet decision through Shimane Prefecture Public Notice No. 40. Japan claimed Dokdo as *terra nullius*—land belonging to no one—and used this notice to justify its annexation of the islets. For Korea, this act was part of a broader pattern of Japanese aggression against Korea’s sovereignty and is considered illegal under international law, as it violated Korea’s historically established territorial rights over Dokdo.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁵ Treaty of Shimonoseki, April 17, 1895; It forced the Qing Dynasty to recognize Korea as an independent state, effectively removing it from China’s traditional sphere of influence. This opened the door for Japan to exert its own influence over the Korean Peninsula.

²⁹⁶ Treaty of Portsmouth, September 5, 1905; It acknowledged Japan's predominant interests in Korea by mediating Russian withdrawal from the region.

²⁹⁷ Budiarto, *Land of the Morning Calm*, 1.

²⁹⁸ Kim, “The US and the Territorial Dispute on Dokdo/Takeshima,” 99–100.

²⁹⁹ MOFA Korea. *Why Dokdo Is Korean Territory*.

Additionally Japan did not inform the Korean government of its 1905 decision to incorporate Dokdo, nor did it notify any other country, in clear disregard of diplomatic norms under international law. The act was not published in the official government gazette (*Kanpō*), but only in a local bulletin issued by the Shimane prefectural government. This stands in contrast to Japan's earlier incorporation of the Bonin Islands in 1876, when it followed proper international procedures by notifying the United States, Great Britain, and several European powers.³⁰⁰

According to Prof. Hong Nack Kim from West Virginia University, the absence of such protocol in the Dokdo case suggests that Japan exploited Korea's weakened political status at the time, particularly after the 1905 Protectorate Treaty. The Korean government only learned of the incorporation in 1906 through unofficial channels.³⁰¹

3.3 Japanese colonial rule and post-World War II settlement

Upon learning of Japan's unilateral incorporation of Dokdo, Korean officials at both local and central levels lodged strong objections, viewing it as a clear violation of Korea's territorial sovereignty.³⁰² However, due to the constraints imposed by the 1905 Protectorate Treaty, Korea had already lost its right to conduct independent diplomatic affairs, making it impossible to challenge Japan's move through international channels.³⁰³

This diplomatic paralysis became evident in March 1906, when Ul-do County Magistrate Sim Heung-taek reported to the Uijeongbu (State Council) that Japanese officials had visited the county and claimed Dokdo as Japanese territory. In his

³⁰⁰ Kim, *The US and the Territorial Dispute on Dokdo/Takeshima*, 100.

³⁰¹ Kim, "The US and the Territorial Dispute on Dokdo/Takeshima," 100.

³⁰² Kim, "The US and the Territorial Dispute on Dokdo/Takeshima," 100.

³⁰³ Kim, "The US and the Territorial Dispute on Dokdo/Takeshima," 100.

report, Sim reaffirmed that Dokdo was under the jurisdiction of Uldo-gun in accordance with Imperial Decree No. 41 (1900). The Uijeongbu responded with Directive No. 3, formally rejecting Japan's claim and reiterating Korea's sovereignty.³⁰⁴ Yet, with foreign affairs already under Japanese control, Korea could not escalate the matter beyond domestic protest, and no reply was received from Japan.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the early twentieth-century treaties between Korea and Japan—culminating in the 1905 incorporation of Dokdo/Takeshima—were viewed by Korea as coercive acts within a broader imperial project. In symbolic terms, these events transformed the islets into a lasting emblem of lost sovereignty and national resilience.

These events were among the last administrative actions by Korea to assert sovereignty over Dokdo before Japan's full annexation in August 1910. Even after losing the right to conduct independent diplomacy under the 1905 Protectorate Treaty, Korean officials continued to voice objections.³⁰⁵ Although these protests could not alter the course of events, they stood as a symbolic reaffirmation of sovereignty in the face of encroachment.

After Korea's formal annexation in August 1910, Dokdo came under Japan's colonial administration.³⁰⁶ Throughout the colonial period, the islets were effectively managed by Japan without Korean consent, and their significance was reinforced by their strategic location in the East Sea/Sea of Japan. For Japan, Dokdo was both a practical asset—supporting fisheries and serving as a watchpoint³⁰⁷—and a symbolic

³⁰⁴ MOFA Korea. *Why Dokdo Is Korean Territory*.

³⁰⁵ "Treaty Regarding the Annexation of Korea," *World and Japan Database*

³⁰⁶ "Japanese Annexation of Korea," *EBSCOhost Research Starters*

³⁰⁷ Kim, "The US and the Territorial Dispute on Dokdo/Takeshima," 99–100.

marker of its imperial reach. For Koreans, however, it became a reminder of lost sovereignty and a tangible emblem of resistance.

During the colonial era, Japan undertook various administrative and economic measures in relation to the islets, such as granting fishing rights to Japanese citizens and integrating the surrounding waters into its economic zones. While there was no large-scale settlement on Dokdo, its usage for fishing and as a maritime marker strengthened Japan's de facto control. Korean fishermen, though sometimes allowed to fish in the area, faced restrictions and needed permits issued under Japanese law, further underscoring the loss of Korea's autonomous authority.³⁰⁸

As detailed in Chapter 2, Allied directives after Japan's surrender—most notably SCAPIN No. 677 (January 1946) and SCAPIN No. 1033 (June 1946)—removed Dokdo from Japan's administrative control and restricted Japanese activities around the islets. While these orders did not constitute a final legal settlement, Korea perceived them as de facto recognition of its sovereignty. In symbolic terms, such measures not only marked a practical break from Japanese administration but also reinforced Korea's post-liberation narrative of restored territorial rights.

That is why, after Japan surrendered in 1945, Korea expected the return of all territories taken during the colonial period, in line with Allied promises of independence. But with the onset of the Cold War, the priorities of the United States and the Soviet Union shifted toward securing influence in the region. In this environment, the question of Dokdo/Takeshima became tied to strategic calculations

³⁰⁸ Fukuzawa, Taiji. *The Takeshima Dispute*. 3-14.

in the postwar settlement—most notably in the San Francisco Peace Treaty—where, in Korea’s view, political convenience outweighed historical justice.³⁰⁹

As noted in Chapter 2, early drafts of the San Francisco Peace Treaty explicitly listed Dokdo/Takeshima as Korean territory, reflecting Allied discussions on reversing Japan’s colonial acquisitions. However, in later revisions, this reference was removed—a change that Korea viewed as politically motivated and inconsistent with the principles set out in wartime declarations. This omission became a lasting source of disagreement, with Seoul framing it as evidence that strategic calculations in the early Cold War took precedence over historical justice.

The Treaty of Peace with Japan, concluded by the Allied Powers at the end of World War II, formally recognized Korea’s independence and territorial rights. Article 2(a) of the treaty states that Japan “recognizing the independence of Korea, renounces all right, title, and claim to Korea, including the islands of Quelpart, Port Hamilton, and Dagelet.” Although Dokdo is not explicitly mentioned by name, these three islands are cited as representative examples among Korea’s approximately 3,000 islands. Therefore, the omission of Dokdo by name does not imply that it was excluded from the territories renounced by Japan. This understanding reinforces Korea’s sovereignty over Dokdo as part of the broader territorial rights acknowledged in the treaty.³¹⁰

3.4 The 1947 exploration of Dokdo and 1948 bombing range

The year 1947 marked a decisive moment in shaping the postwar positions of Korea, Japan, and the United States on Dokdo. Two years after liberation and before the establishment of the Republic of Korea, the Korean Interim Government—responded

³⁰⁹ Kim, *Dokdo: Historical Evidence and the San Francisco Peace Treaty*.

³¹⁰ MOFA Korea.. *Why Dokdo Is Korean Territory*.

to reports of Japanese fishermen landing on the islets and Japan's sovereignty claims in the context of the forthcoming San Francisco Peace Treaty (SFPT).³¹¹ Korea dispatched a joint scientific survey team with the Korean Alpine Club.³¹² This nine-day expedition, including one day on Dokdo and four days on Ulleungdo, conducted detailed studies and publicized their findings through exhibitions, reports, and press.³¹³ After their return, their findings were distributed to public through exhibitions.³¹⁴ These activities revived public consciousness of Dokdo, making it an object of academic, governmental, and societal interest.³¹⁵

In April 1947, a Korean fishing boat operating near Dokdo was fired upon by Japanese forces, drawing press coverage and fueling domestic awareness.³¹⁶ Overfishing, boundary violations, and illegal encroachment intensified Korean perceptions of Dokdo as a vulnerable national asset requiring protection.³¹⁷

The interest generated in 1947 escalated further with the bombing of Dokdo on June 8, 1948, which killed 14 Korean fishermen.³¹⁸ Initially unidentified, the attackers were soon confirmed as U.S. Air Force units stationed in Japan.³¹⁹ The bombing was conducted under SCAPIN No. 1778 (September 16, 1947), which had designated Dokdo/Takeshima as a bombing range. Following public outrage, General John R. Hodge admitted the incident, and U.S. forces permanently closed the range by June 28, 1948.³²⁰

³¹¹ Jung, *Dokdo 1947*, 6,7, 27.

³¹² Korean Alpine Club was a Korean mountaineering society established in the colonial period and reactivated after 1945, organized a research expedition to Dokdo in 1947 to document the islets' geography and natural environment.

³¹³ Jung, *Dokdo 1947*, 53.

³¹⁴ The display included 16 photos and some 600 scientific specimens. They were viewed by 7,000 to 10,000 people on a daily basis in Seoul, Daegu, Busan and Ulleungdo.

³¹⁵ Jung, *Dokdo 1947*, 57.

³¹⁶ Jung, *Dokdo 1947*, 37.

³¹⁷ Jung, *Dokdo 1947*, 41.

³¹⁸ Jung, *Dokdo 1947*, 69. Hong Seong-gun, 2003 "Analysis Of the bombing incident from an international law perspective"

³¹⁹ Jung, *Dokdo 1947*, 69-74.

³²⁰ Jung, *Dokdo 1947*, 89.

The 1948 bombing occurred during the transition from U.S. military governance to the Korean government and became a rallying point for national unity. The Constitutional Assembly, local governments, and civil organizations framed the incident as both a violation of Korean sovereignty and a symbol of resilience.³²¹ While U.S. authorities claimed the attack was accidental, it deepened anti-Japanese and anti-American sentiment, reinforcing the perception of Dokdo as inseparable from Korean territory.³²² The United States, concerned that such sentiments could fuel communist influence, viewed the escalation of anti-American attitudes as a potential threat to regional stability and the nascent Korean government.³²³

In August 1948, the Patriotic Old Men's Association petitioned General MacArthur for the return of Dokdo, Parangdo, and Tsushima to Korea. Although criticized for including geographically and politically questionable claims, its emphasis on Dokdo reflected the strength of domestic territorial consciousness.³²⁴ The association's prior success in recovering Korea's royal seals from Japan in 1946 lent credibility to its voice, despite U.S. dismissal of the petition as unofficial.³²⁵

At the same time, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs began distributing pamphlets to the U.S. and Allied Powers, asserting that Dokdo/Takeshima and Ulleungdo were Japanese territories and dismissing Korean claims.³²⁶ Although the early 1947 SFPT draft prepared by the U.S. Department of State explicitly recognized Dokdo as Korean territory, Japanese lobbying—particularly through

³²¹ Jung, *Dokdo 1947*, 90.

³²² Jung, *Dokdo 1947*, 90-96.

³²³ Jung, *Dokdo 1947*, 90-96.

³²⁴ Jung, *Dokdo 1947*, 96-100.

³²⁵ Jung, *Dokdo 1947*, 96-100.

³²⁶ Jung, *Dokdo 1947*, 27.

William Sebald, a political adviser to SCAP—shifted U.S. policy. By late 1949, references to Dokdo as Korean territory disappeared from subsequent treaty drafts.³²⁷

By the early 1950s, these developments had transformed Dokdo from a little-known offshore islet into a powerful national symbol. The convergence of postwar diplomatic maneuvering, violent incidents, and civic activism embedded Dokdo firmly in the political and cultural fabric of the newly established Republic of Korea. Even U.S. officials were struck by the extent to which Koreans—across ideological divides, whether communist or anti-communist—rallied together in response to incidents over Dokdo, revealing a rare moment of national unity. This broad-based solidarity underscores how Dokdo transcended ordinary territorial politics to become a potent case of symbolic politics, where the islets embodied collective identity, historical memory, and resistance to external threats.³²⁸

Frustrated by repeated U.S. refusals to explicitly recognize Dokdo as Korean territory, President Syngman Rhee took matters into his own hands. On January 18, 1952, he issued the Presidential Declaration on Sovereignty over Adjacent Seas—later known as the Syngman Rhee Line—unilaterally extending Korea’s maritime boundaries to include Dokdo. Shortly thereafter, Korean authorities carried out a physical landing and established a visible presence on the islets.³²⁹

³²⁷ Jung, *Dokdo 1947*, 27, 30, 32.

³²⁸ Jung, *Dokdo 1947*

³²⁹ Lee, “The 1952 Presidential Declaration,” 306; Song, “S. Korea Holds Event to Commemorate 1954 Dokdo Battle.” Takabayashi, “Normalization of Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea,” 16.



Figure 12. Facilities on Dokdo
Source: MOFA Korea

Since then, Korea effectively governs Dokdo by maintaining a permanent police presence, enforcing territorial laws, and ensuring the protection of its maritime and airspace. The Korean government firmly defends its sovereignty over Dokdo and rejects any Japanese claims as historically and legally unfounded. Dokdo remains a symbol of Korean sovereignty and a reminder of Korea's historical struggles against Japanese imperialism.³³⁰

3.5 Dokdo in contemporary Korea

In contemporary Korea, Dokdo is not only a matter of territorial sovereignty but also a focal point of cultural identity, public diplomacy, and consumer culture, such as using “Dokdo” as a brand name for cosmetics. Through symbolic politics, the islets transcend their geographic reality and become a stage where competing national narratives are performed, contested, and reinforced.

Korea demonstrates its effective control over Dokdo through measures such as stationing security forces, building facilities, conducting surveys, and increasing the number of registered residents. This assertion of sovereignty has also been reinforced by high-profile visits, including President Lee Myung-bak in 2012 and

³³⁰ MOFA Korea. *Dokdo, Beautiful Island of Korea*.

Moon Jae-in, then Chairman of the Minjoo Party, in 2016. Each of these visits prompted strong protests from Japan.³³¹

Government-supported institutions, such as the Dokdo Museum in Ulleungdo³³² and the Dokdo Museum in Seoul³³³ (operated by the Northeast Asian History Foundation), preserve and display historical maps, documents, and interactive exhibits. These spaces serve dual purposes: they educate the public and reinforce Korea's sovereignty narrative both domestically and internationally. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also operates a dedicated Dokdo portal offering real-time webcam visuals, multilingual videos, and interactive content—transforming the islets into a living, accessible symbol of national identity.³³⁴

As of June 2025, Dokdo has a small permanent population of around 26, including police officers, lighthouse managers, and staff from the Dokdo Office. Civilian settlement began in 1965 with Choi Jong-duk.³³⁵ Long-term residents such as Kim Sin-yeol³³⁶ embody the human element of Korea's claim. Tourism also amplifies this symbolic presence. Since 2005, more than 3.5 million people have visited Dongdo (East Islet) of Dokdo, with a daily average of around 500 tourists as of June 2025. Access to Seodo (West Islet) remains restricted, requiring prior permission from Ulleung-gun authorities. Entry to Dongdo is managed through a cruise line reservation and permit issuance process.³³⁷ The issuance of honorary "Honorary Dokdo Citizenship" certificates since 2010

³³¹ Muskan Jha, "The Takeshima Island Dispute" 120-121.

³³² Dokdo Museum. *Official Website*.

³³³ Dokdo Museum Seoul. *Dokdo Information System*.

³³⁴ MOFA Korea, *Dokdo, Beautiful Island of Korea*.

³³⁵ Choi Jong-deok became the first civilian to live permanently on Dokdo in March 1965, relocating from Ulleungdo to pursue octopus fishing and later installing rudimentary facilities (he officially registered his residence there in 1981)

³³⁶ In 1991, Kim Sung-do and his wife Kim Sin-yeol moved to Dokdo as permanent residents; Kim Sung-do, often referred to as the "Guardian of Dokdo," passed away in October 2018. Since then, Kim Sin-yeol has remained as the island's only civilian resident.

³³⁷ MOFA Korea, "Residents & Visitors." *Facts about Dokdo*.

exemplifies symbolic politics in practice. By transforming an abstract sovereignty claim into a tangible and emotionally charged symbol, this ritual strengthens collective identity and mobilizes public support for Korea's position on Dokdo.³³⁸

Groups like the Dokdo Volunteer Defense Force³³⁹—founded in the 1950s—are celebrated for their role in defending the islets during the politically unstable post-war years. Although no longer active militarily, their legacy is institutionalized through commemorations such as the 70th anniversary ceremony in 2024, attended by senior officials. More recently, their memory has also been honored through the *Dokdo Heroes Festival*, which combines performances, exhibitions, and educational programs to connect younger generations with the sacrifices of the 33 defenders. Such events keep the narrative of grassroots patriotism alive and adapt it to contemporary cultural forms.³⁴⁰ These commemorations exemplify symbolic politics by turning historical sacrifice into rituals and cultural symbols that reinforce national identity and collective memory.

Commercial products also bring Dokdo's symbolism into everyday life. The Korean skincare brand Round Lab, for instance, created a special line called "1025 Dokdo," which includes cleansers, toners, and masks named after the islets. By promoting this collection with Dokdo's name and imagery, the brand turns a disputed territory into something familiar in daily routines. This shows how symbolic politics works not only in diplomacy or commemorations, but also in consumer culture, where national identity and pride are woven into ordinary products.³⁴¹

³³⁸ MOFA Korea, "Dokdo Issues Honorary Citizenship."

³³⁹ It is a civilian militia organized in the early 1950s by South Korean fishermen and local residents to protect Dokdo from Japanese attempts to assert control during the politically unstable period following the Korean War. Operating without formal military status, the group conducted patrols, maintained a presence on the islets, and played a key role in repelling an attempted Japanese landing in 1954.

³⁴⁰ Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs of Korea, *Dokdo Heroes Festival*

³⁴¹ Round Lab, *1025 Dokdo Collection*.



Figure 13. Dokdo cosmetic mask sheet
Source: Author's personal photograph, 2025

Dokdo is also reinforced through official commemorations and public rituals. Dokdo Day,³⁴² celebrated annually on October 25 since 2000, commemorates the 1900 Imperial Edict No. 41, in which King Gojong of the Korean Empire formally placed Dokdo (then referred to as Seokdo) under the jurisdiction of Ulleungdo.³⁴³ The day integrates education, performances, and public exhibitions to strengthen collective memory and national identity.³⁴⁴ Alongside these cultural celebrations, Seoul has repeatedly voiced objections to Japanese claims, including in white papers, textbook authorizations, and museum reopenings. Such actions show that sovereignty is not merely a legal entitlement. It is also a performative assertion, reiterated across political, educational, and cultural arenas.³⁴⁵

³⁴² Dokdo Day, first proposed by civic groups in 2000, was followed by a 2008 bill in the National Assembly and a 2010 declaration by major educational and civic organizations, making it a widely observed commemorative day in Korea, but it has not been made a public holiday.

³⁴³ Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries. *Dokdo Information System*.

³⁴⁴ *Korea Herald*, "Braving wind and high water."

³⁴⁵ Korea.net. "Dokdo Museum Seoul Preserves History, Sovereignty of Island."

Beyond these symbolic acts, the Korean government also issues formal diplomatic protests throughout the year in response to Japan's repeated sovereignty claims. Even in 2025 alone, Seoul lodged multiple protests against various Japanese initiatives, ranging from national defense,³⁴⁶ diplomatic bluebooks,³⁴⁷ to textbooks³⁴⁸ and museum exhibits.³⁴⁹ In each case, the Korean government reaffirmed that Dokdo is indisputably Korean territory historically, geographically, and under international law, demanded the immediate withdrawal of such claims, and stressed that such provocations undermine efforts to build a "future-oriented" bilateral relationship.

Alongside diplomatic measures, since 2021 Korea has conducted annual defense drills around Dokdo, involving the Navy and Coast Guard. These exercises, while denounced by Japan as provocative, serve for Korea as both a deterrent security measure and a tangible demonstration of its resolve to safeguard sovereignty. They reinforce not only symbolic but also practical control over the islets.³⁵⁰

Taken together, these commemorations, protests, and defense exercises show how Dokdo functions within Korea's symbolic politics. The islets are not just territory to administer but emblems of historical justice, resistance to colonialism, and national dignity. By placing Dokdo in museums, products, education, celebrations, and military drills, Korea turns sovereignty into a lived and reaffirmed experience. In this sense, the Dokdo dispute transcends legal discourse and emerges as a performative practice where historical memory, national identity, and political contestation converge.

³⁴⁶ MOFA Korea, "MOFA Spokesperson's Commentary on 'Defense of Japan 2025'"

³⁴⁷ MOFA Korea, *MOFA Spokesperson's Commentary on Japan's Diplomatic Bluebook 2025*

³⁴⁸ MOFA Korea, *MOFA Spokesperson's Statement on Japan's Authorization of High School Textbooks*

³⁴⁹ MOFA Korea, *MOFA Spokesperson's Statement on Japanese Government's Reopening of "National Museum of Territory and Sovereignty"*

³⁵⁰ Reuters, "S. Korea holds annual drills around sets of disputed islets."

CHAPTER 4

JAPAN'S POSITION ON TAKESHIMA

Japan's total land area is approximately 378,000 square kilometers—comparable in size to Germany or Vietnam. Its postwar territorial boundaries were formally established through the San Francisco Peace Treaty, which was signed in 1951 and came into force in 1952 following the end of World War II.³⁵¹

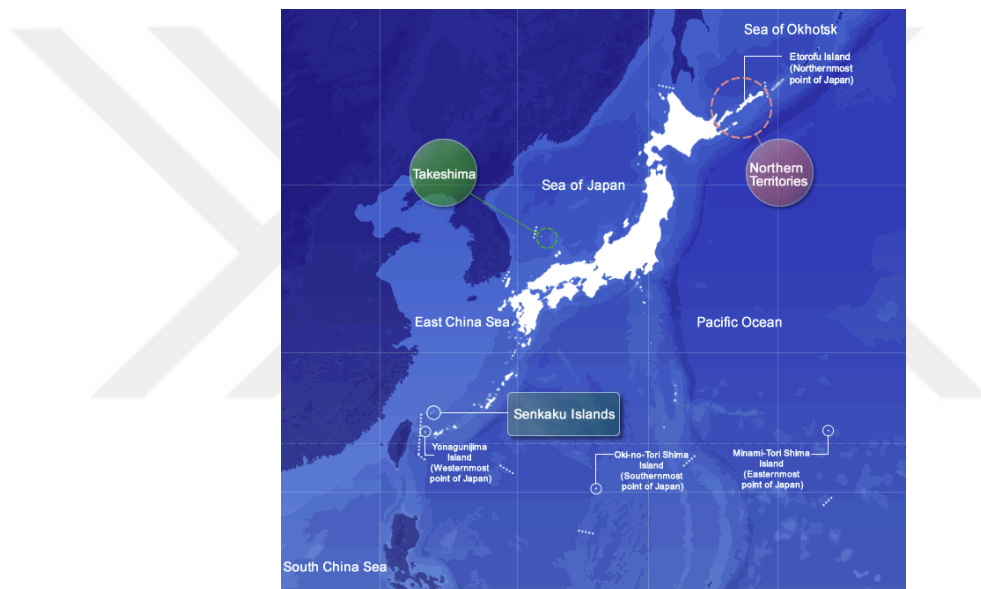


Figure 14. Japanese territory issues³⁵²
Source: MOFA Japan

Despite the formal establishment of its postwar borders, Japan continues to face several unresolved territorial issues with neighboring countries. The three major issues include the Takeshima dispute with the Republic of Korea (and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea),³⁵³ the Northern Territories dispute with

³⁵¹ MOFA Japan, *Japanese Territory, Q&A*, Q2-Q3.

³⁵² Japanese government documents use only the term “Sea of Japan,” without mentioning Korea’s preferred name, “East Sea,” reflecting their differing views on the naming issue.

³⁵³ Fukuhara and Sato, “Takeshima in Japanese Education, Media and Culture”, 171.

Russia,³⁵⁴ and the Senkaku Islands dispute³⁵⁵ with the People's Republic of China(involving Taiwan as well). Japan asserts that all three territories are inherently part of its sovereign domain, both historically and legally.³⁵⁶

While Korea argues that the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute began in 1905 with Japan's incorporation of the islets into Shimane Prefecture,³⁵⁷ Japan presents a different view. According to its official position, the dispute began with President Syngman Rhee's unilateral proclamation of the "Rhee Line" on January 18, 1952, encompassing Takeshima in violation of international law. Japan asserts that Korea's occupation is illegal, has no legal basis, and that the islets were excluded from the territories Japan was required to renounce under the San Francisco Peace Treaty.³⁵⁸

This view was later reaffirmed by Japan's proposal to bring the case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 1954,³⁵⁹ and again in 1962. A third proposal, made in August 2012, was likewise rejected by Korea again.³⁶⁰ During the negotiations for the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations, which normalized Japan-Korea ties, the issue was discussed but ultimately excluded, as Korea refused to address the matter, asserting Dokdo as its inherent territory.³⁶¹

By using these historical events as proof of its long-standing sovereignty, Japan presents Takeshima not only as a legal claim but also as a symbol of its national identity. After World War II, Japan's focus on legal and diplomatic arguments—rather than military force—helped shape its image as a peaceful and law-abiding member of the international community. In this way, Takeshima

³⁵⁴ Cabinet Secretariat, Government of Japan, "What Is the Northern Territories Issue?"

³⁵⁵ MOFA Japan, "Senkaku Islands"

³⁵⁶ MOFA Japan, *Japanese Territory*.

³⁵⁷ MOFA Korea, "Ten Reasons Why Dokdo Is Korean Territory"

³⁵⁸ MOFA Japan, *Takeshima: 10 Issues to Understand the Facts*, Parts 1–2.

³⁵⁹ MOFA Japan, *An Outline of the Japanese Position on Sovereignty over Takeshima*

³⁶⁰ MOFA Japan, *Takeshima: 10 Issues to Understand the Facts*, Part 1

³⁶¹ Fukuhara and Sato, "Takeshima in Japanese Education, Media and Culture", 171.; Japan made the same proposal in March 1962 and in August 2012.

becomes more than a territorial dispute; it represents Japan's commitment to international rules and its place as a legitimate state in the postwar order.³⁶²

This chapter analyzes the Takeshima dispute from Japan's perspective. Accordingly, Japanese terminology will be used throughout this chapter to represent Japan's position accurately. This usage does not imply endorsement of Japan's claims but serves to reflect its official narrative as presented in primary sources.

4.1 Overview of the Takeshima dispute

The Takeshima dispute is one of the most enduring and politically sensitive territorial conflicts in East Asia. Although the islets are geographically small, the issue carries strategic, historical, and symbolic weight for both Korea and Japan, which makes settlement difficult.³⁶³

From the perspective of symbolic politics, the dispute goes beyond legal arguments. It reflects how national identity, historical memory, and domestic politics shape foreign policy choices. The islets are treated not simply as land but as symbols of sovereignty, pride, and historical justice.

From Japan's standpoint, Takeshima is considered an inherent³⁶⁴ part of its territory, both historically and under international law. Japan claims to have established effective control over the islets by the mid-seventeenth century, citing records of Japanese fishermen using the area with official permission from local Japanese authorities.³⁶⁵ The islets were formally incorporated into Shimane

³⁶² Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 28-29.

³⁶³ Kim, "A War of Memories,"

³⁶⁴ According to the Japanese government, calling Takeshima an "inherent territory" does not mean it has always belonged to Japan. Rather, it means that no foreign country had ever occupied it before the dispute began. Japan argues that its incorporation of Takeshima in 1905 was legal under international law. Therefore, unless South Korea or another country can prove that they had historically occupied the islets, Japan considers them as inherently Japanese territory.

³⁶⁵ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*. 3.

Prefecture in 1905 through a Cabinet decision, following Japan's determination that the territory was *terra nullius*.

The Japanese government also maintains that Korea exercised no effective control before that time. It therefore regards Korea's administration of the islets, established in the early 1950s, as an illegal occupation lacking legal basis.³⁶⁶ These arguments underline Japan's concern with territorial integrity and maritime rights, which it presents as central to national security and as markers of its post-war status.

Japan further emphasizes that the San Francisco Peace Treaty—not the Cairo Declaration or SCAP directives—is the decisive legal document for determining post-war territorial boundaries. Since Takeshima was not listed among the territories Japan was required to renounce, Tokyo argues its sovereignty remains intact.³⁶⁷ Despite Korea's continued control over the territory, Japan asserts that it seeks a peaceful resolution and has repeatedly proposed referring the dispute to the ICJ, which Korea has declined each time.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁶ MOFA Japan, *Takeshima: Japan's Consistent Position on the Territorial Sovereignty over Takeshima*.

³⁶⁷ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*, Q&A section, 22-23

³⁶⁸ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*. 12.; Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, "Japan made proposals to refer the issue to the ICJ, the ROK rejected them."

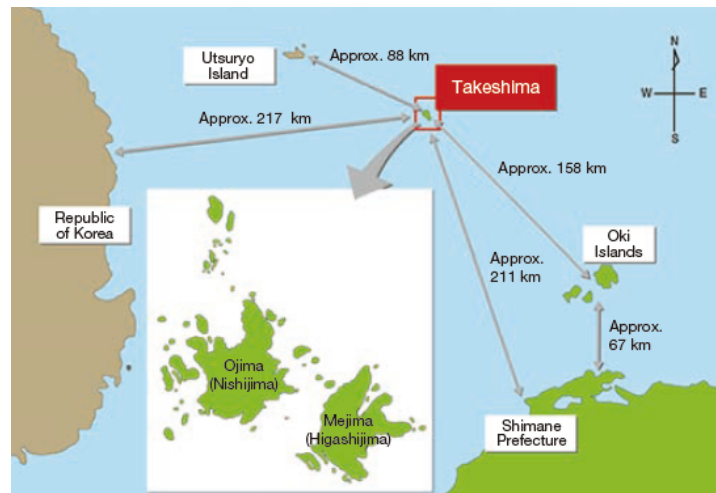


Figure 15. Location of Takeshima

Source: MOFA Japan

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Takeshima is located in the Sea of Japan and administratively belongs to Okinoshima Town in Shimane Prefecture. The total land area is approximately 0.21 square kilometers, slightly larger than Hibiya Park in Tokyo,³⁶⁹ consisting mainly of two islets: Higashijima (Mejima) and Nishijima (Ojima). These islands are characterized by rugged volcanic rock terrain and limited sources of drinking water.³⁷⁰

4.2 Historical claims and incorporation

Japan traces its claim over Takeshima to the early seventeenth century, when merchant families from Yonago, such as the Ohya and Murakawa clans, received official permission from the Tokugawa Shogunate to voyage to Utsuryo (Ulleungdo) Island. On their way, they used Takeshima as a navigational stop, a place to anchor their ships, and a site for hunting sea lions and collecting marine products. According to the government, by the mid- seventeenth century, Japan had effectively

³⁶⁹ Matsuda, *The Territory of Japan*, 93.

³⁷⁰ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*. 2.

established control over the islets. In the early 1900s, fishermen from Shimane Prefecture continued to use Takeshima for sea lion hunting, further demonstrating Japan's continued use of the territory.³⁷¹



Figure 16. Sea lion hunting on Takeshima
Source: MOFA Japan

Japan has long recognized the existence of Takeshima through various historical maps and official documents. In earlier times, Takeshima was referred to as “Matsushima,” while today’s Utsuryo Island was called “Takeshima” or “Isotakeshima.” This naming confusion was further complicated by European explorers in the eighteenth century who mistakenly charted Utsuryo Island as two separate islands—naming them “Dagelet” and “Argonaut.” As a result, some European maps inaccurately depicted two islands where there was only one.³⁷²

In 1840, the German doctor Philipp Franz von Siebold created a map based on Japanese sources but assigned the European names in reverse order—labeling

³⁷¹ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan’s Territory*. 3.

³⁷² MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan’s Territory*. 5.

“Argonaut”³⁷³ as “Takeshima” and “Dagelet”³⁷⁴ as “Matsushima.” This further confused the identity of the islands, despite the fact that Japanese maps such as the *Kaisei Nippon Yochi Rotei Zenzu* (1779) had clearly recorded both Takeshima and Utsuryo at their correct locations between the Oki Islands and the Korean Peninsula.³⁷⁵ During the nineteenth century, Utsuryo Island began to be called “Matsushima” in Japan, which had traditionally referred to the current Takeshima.³⁷⁶

In 1904, Nakai Yozaburo, an entrepreneur from the Oki Islands, submitted a petition to the Japanese central government requesting the incorporation of the islets—referred to at the time as the “Lyanko Islands”³⁷⁷—into Japanese territory. Citing the presence of sea lions and strategic importance of securing natural resources, he also requested a ten-year exclusive lease for hunting and economic activities. Nakai pointed out that the sovereignty status of the islands was unclear at that time and that this could lead to potential disputes with foreign countries, which proved to be true.³⁷⁸

After consultations with Shimane Prefecture, the Cabinet concluded that there were no legal or diplomatic obstacles to this incorporation. In 1905, it was officially decided that the islets would fall under the jurisdiction of the Oki Islands Office

³⁷³ Argonaut was the name given to Ulleungdo by British explorer James Colnett in 1789, based on inaccurate charting. It contributed to later cartographic confusion by appearing as a separate island from “Dagelet” (another name for Ulleungdo) on European maps.

³⁷⁴ Dagelet was the name given to Ulleungdo by the French explorer Jean-François de La Pérouse in 1787. Due to inaccurate mapping, Dagelet and Argonaut were mistakenly depicted as two separate islands, although both referred to Ulleungdo.

³⁷⁵ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan’s Territory*. 5.

³⁷⁶ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan’s Territory*. 19.

³⁷⁷ “Lyanko Islands” was an informal Japanese name for Takeshima, based on the Western term “Liancourt Islands.” In the nineteenth century, mapping errors by European explorers led to Utsuryo(Ulleungdo) being mistakenly called “Matsushima,” and Takeshima being identified as “Lyanko.”

³⁷⁸ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan’s Territory*. 12.; Ocean Policy Research Institute of Japan, *Takeshima Facts & Figures – Overview*.

affiliated to Shimane Prefecture and be formally named "Takeshima"³⁷⁹ with effect on February 22, 1905.³⁸⁰

The Japanese government asserts that its sovereignty over Takeshima was reaffirmed in 1905 through this Cabinet decision. The announcement was published in the newspapers of the day, registered in the Shimane land records, and followed by the introduction of a sea lion hunting license system that remained in effect until 1941.³⁸¹ From Japan's perspective, this incorporation represented a peaceful administrative act and a lawful assertion of territorial sovereignty. No formal objections from foreign states were recorded at the time. This action followed growing economic activity in the area, particularly the exploitation of marine resources by Japanese fishermen.³⁸²



Figure 17. Takeshima Fishing Company
Source: MOFA Japan / Kokon Shoin

This incorporation reveals both material and symbolic dimensions. It advanced Japan's maritime strategy by consolidating control over resources in the

³⁷⁹ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*. 11.

³⁸⁰ Matsuda, *The Territory of Japan*, 93.

³⁸¹ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*. 11.

³⁸² MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*. 3.

Sea of Japan. At the same time, the formal naming, registration, and licensing of activities gave symbolic weight to the act, projecting authority and legitimacy. Within the symbolic politics framework, the 1905 incorporation was not only a practical measure but also a statement of identity, setting the stage for later narratives of rightful ownership.³⁸³

4.3 Japan's position to Korea's claims

While Korea asserts historical sovereignty over Dokdo based on pre-modern records and administrative actions, Japan offers a contrasting interpretation. This part presents Japan's official response to these claims.

According to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Korea's claim that "Usan Island" refers to today's Takeshima lacks clear historical basis. While Korean historical documents such as *Samguksagi* (1145), *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* (1454), and *Dongguk Munheon Bigo* (1770) mention Usan alongside Utsuryo(Ulleungdo), Japan disputes these references. It argues that the descriptions—such as inhabited land and bamboo forests—do not match the geography of Takeshima, which is rocky, barren, and uninhabitable.³⁸⁴

From Japan's perspective, these texts are more likely referring to Utsuryo(Ulleungdo) itself or possibly a mythical or misidentified landmass. Moreover, traditional Korean maps often depict Usan as a sizable landmass west of Utsuryo (Ulleungdo), whereas Takeshima is located to its east. For Japan, such inconsistencies undermine Korea's historical claim over the islets.³⁸⁵

³⁸³ Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 2001.; Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 1948.

³⁸⁴ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*. 7.

³⁸⁵ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*. 7.

Japan also questions the reliability of Korea's reliance on the testimony of Ahn Yong-bok³⁸⁶ and other pre-modern sources. According to Japanese records, Ahn claimed in 1696 that the Tokugawa Shogunate had recognized Ulleungdo and Takeshima as Korean territory. However, Japan considers his statements both procedurally and chronologically problematic. In particular, Japanese documents indicate that by 1696, a travel ban to Utsuryo(Ulleungdo) had already been imposed by the Shogunate to prevent further conflict with Korea,³⁸⁷ following a series of incidents known as the *Takeshima Ikken* (Takeshima Affairs)³⁸⁸.

These events began in 1693, when Japanese fishermen operating near Ulleungdo encountered Korean fishermen, including Ahn Yong-bok and Pak Eo-doon, who were subsequently taken to Japan. Although the two men were repatriated via Tsushima and diplomatic exchanges followed, no formal agreement was reached regarding Ulleungdo's status. In 1696, the Shogunate responded by banning Japanese travel to Ulleungdo. However, this ban did not extend to Takeshima. For Japan, this is a critical point: under the strict 1635 isolation policy (*sakoku*), voyages to foreign territory were generally prohibited. The absence of such restrictions on Takeshima is interpreted by Japan as evidence that the islets were not regarded as foreign territory, but part of its own domain, and thus remained outside the scope of the dispute.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁶ Ahn Yong-bok was a Korean fisherman active in the late seventeenth century, often cited in Korea's claims over Dokdo for reportedly asserting Korean sovereignty during his travels to Japan. Japan considers Ahn Yong-bok's testimonies unreliable, arguing that his claims are based on hearsay and later interpolations rather than verified state records.

³⁸⁷ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*. 7.

³⁸⁸ *Takeshima Ikken* refers to a series of diplomatic and territorial incidents between Japan and Korea in the 1690s concerning fishing activities and sovereignty claims over Utsuryo(Ulleungdo) and nearby islets, including Dokdo/Takeshima.

³⁸⁹ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*. 7,8,9.

Japan also disputes Korea's interpretation of the 1900 Imperial Ordinance,³⁹⁰ particularly the claim that "Ishi-jima" refers to present-day Dokdo. According to the Japanese government, the ordinance does not mention either "Dokdo" or "Usan," and therefore cannot be used as legal evidence of administrative jurisdiction over the islets.³⁹¹ While Korea maintains that the ordinance designated "Takeshima" and "Ishi-jima" as part of Utsu County's jurisdiction—alongside Utsuryo (renamed from Ulleungdo)—Japan argues that "Takeshima" likely refers to Jukdo, a small island adjacent to Utsuryo, and that the identity of "Ishi-jima" remains unclear.³⁹²

Some Korean scholars assert that "Ishi" (stone) may correspond to "Dok" in Korean dialects and thus "Ishi-jima" could linguistically align with "Dokdo." However, Japan questions why, if "Ishi-jima" truly referred to Dokdo, the ordinance did not use the more established names such as "Dokdo" or "Usan Island," which Korea also claims to have been historical names for the islets. Furthermore, Japan contends that there is no concrete evidence showing Korea exercised administrative control over Takeshima at the time the ordinance was issued. For Japan, the ambiguity surrounding the identity and location of "Ishi-jima" weakens Korea's claim that the 1900 ordinance constitutes legal proof of sovereignty.³⁹³

Also, the Q&A section titled "Answering the Questions Regarding the Takeshima Dispute" by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs presents key legal and historical arguments aimed at refuting Korea's claim over Takeshima. Japan argues that geographical proximity alone does not establish sovereignty under

³⁹⁰ Korea's royal decree that renamed Ulleungdo as Ulido and established Ulido County, outlining its administrative jurisdiction. It mentions "Uldo, Takeshima, and Ishi-jima," but the exact identification of these islands remains contested.

³⁹¹ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*. 10.

³⁹² MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*. Q4.

³⁹³ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*. 12.

international law, citing precedents such as the Island of Palmas case (1928) and the *Ligitan and Sipadan* judgment (2002).³⁹⁴

Moreover, the Q&A section questions the reliability of Ahn Yong-bok, a historical figure frequently referenced by Korea in support of its claim. Japan contends that Ahn acted independently, exaggerated his authority and that his statements were subsequently dismissed by the Korean royal court.³⁹⁵

The document also rejects Korea's claim that Takeshima was among the territories renounced by Japan under the Cairo Declaration or the SCAP directives issued by the Allied Powers following World War II. It asserts that the San Francisco Peace Treaty, which came into effect in 1952, was the definitive legal instrument determining Japan's postwar territorial boundaries. Therefore, according to Japan, any treatment or classification of Takeshima by SCAP prior to the treaty's entry into force holds no legal weight under international law.³⁹⁶

In conclusion, Japan argues that there is no credible historical, legal, or cartographic evidence proving Korean sovereignty over Takeshima prior to Japan's official incorporation of the islets in 1905.³⁹⁷

From a symbolic politics perspective, Japan treats historical narratives not only as evidence but also as tools to reinforce legitimacy and territorial identity. The focus on long-standing usage, official records, and administrative continuity serves to strengthen sovereignty claims by linking them to cultural memory and state identity. In this way, maps and documents are not simply legal proof but symbolic acts that legitimize Japan's claim through continuity and tradition.

³⁹⁴ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*, Q&A section, 18

³⁹⁵ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*, Q&A section, 22-23

³⁹⁶ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*, Q&A section, 24

³⁹⁷ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*, Q&A section, 18-26

4.4 Post-war developments and international treaties

Following the end of World War II, the question of territorial sovereignty over Takeshima/Dokdo became a contested issue during the formulation of the postwar settlement in East Asia. This part introduces Japan's interpretation of postwar legal developments, including the San Francisco Peace Treaty, U.S. diplomatic correspondences, and Korean actions such as the Syngman Rhee Line. Through these events, Japan frames its current legal stance on the islets, asserting that the postwar order did not recognize Korean sovereignty. The following analysis presents these developments chronologically and from Japan's point of view.

During the drafting process of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, Korea formally requested that Takeshima be explicitly listed among the territories Japan was to renounce. In July 1951, Korean Ambassador Yang Yu Chan sent a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson, urging that "Dokdo and Parangdo" be included in Article 2 of the peace treaty as part of Korea's rightful territory. However, this request was rejected by the United States, and the final text of the treaty—signed in September 1951—did not mention Takeshima. For Japan, this omission is considered a clear indication that the Allied Powers did not recognize Korean sovereignty over the islets.³⁹⁸

In August 1951, the United States further clarified its position through a letter from Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk to Korean Ambassador Yang. The letter explicitly stated that Dokdo—also known as Takeshima or the Liancourt Rocks—had never been recognized as Korean territory and had been under the jurisdiction of the Oki Islands Branch Office of Shimane Prefecture of Japan since around 1905.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁸ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*. 13.; This request was based on the fact that some of the earlier SFPT drafts had identified Dokdo as belonging to Korea, giving Seoul grounds to believe that the final version should reflect the same position.

³⁹⁹ Dean Rusk, *Letter to Ambassador Yang Yu Chan*, August 10, 1951.

This view was later reinforced in 1954 by U.S. Ambassador Van Fleet, following his visit to Korea, during which he echoed the American stance that Takeshima was not among the territories to be renounced by Japan.⁴⁰⁰

Meanwhile, in July 1951, Takeshima was designated as a bombing range⁴⁰¹ for U.S. forces stationed in Japan by SCAPIN No. 2160, and the designation was reaffirmed in 1952 under the Japan-U.S. Administrative Agreement following the ratification of the San Francisco Treaty.⁴⁰² Japan interprets this designation—as officially published by its Ministry of Foreign Affairs website—as evidence that Takeshima was regarded as part of Japanese territory under the postwar international order. However, following protests from Japanese fishing communities, the United States ceased using the islets for military exercises by 1953, and the bombing range designation was formally lifted.⁴⁰³ Nevertheless, SCAP directives clearly stated that such designations did not determine sovereignty. Therefore, Japan’s interpretation remains legally disputed.

Shortly thereafter, new tensions emerged. On January 18, 1952, Korean President Syngman Rhee unilaterally declared the *Presidential Proclamation of Sovereignty over the Adjacent Seas*—commonly known as the Syngman Rhee Line—establishing a maritime boundary that included Takeshima within Korean waters. Japan viewed this declaration as a violation of international law. In the following years, confrontations between Japanese and Korean vessels increased. Korean forces fired on a Japanese patrol ship and began protecting Korean fishermen operating near the islets.⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰⁰ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan’s Territory*. 14.

⁴⁰¹ Dokdo/Takeshima was designated as a bombing range in 1947 as well.

⁴⁰² MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan’s Territory*. 15.

⁴⁰³ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan’s Territory*. 15.

⁴⁰⁴ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan’s Territory*. 16.

On January 28, 1952, Japan lodged a formal protest against Korea's claim over Takeshima, asserting that the islets were indisputably Japanese territory. In response, Korea cited SCAPIN No. 677,⁴⁰⁵ which excluded Takeshima from the territories over which Japan was permitted to exercise administrative control during the Allied Occupation, as evidence against Japan's claim. Since then, both countries have continued to exchange diplomatic protests concerning the islets.⁴⁰⁶

Since July 1954, Korea has stationed permanent security personnel on Takeshima(Higashijima/Mejima) and constructed facilities, thereby establishing continuous administrative control. Japan has consistently condemned these actions as an illegal occupation lacking any basis in international law and lodged formal protests.⁴⁰⁷

While Japan views its 1905 incorporation of Takeshima as a lawful act under international law, Korea argues that Dokdo has historically been Korean territory, that Japan's 1905 annexation is invalid, and that Allied decisions—ranging from the Cairo Declaration to postwar treaties—affirm Korean sovereignty over the islets.⁴⁰⁸

The postwar competition over Takeshima reflects the centrality of national interests and strategic positioning in shaping the regional order. While Korea sought to secure its maritime boundaries amid Cold War insecurity, Japan emphasized legal formalism to safeguard its strategic interests. The U.S. rejection of Korea's request reflects its own geopolitical calculations during the Korean War and its efforts to reinforce Japan as a stable ally in East Asia.

⁴⁰⁵ SCAPIN No. 677, issued by the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, defined Korea's administrative jurisdiction over Dokdo/Takeshima following Japan's surrender, but it explicitly noted that it did not determine final territorial sovereignty.

⁴⁰⁶ Matsuda, *The Territory of Japan*, 93-94.

⁴⁰⁷ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*. 16.

⁴⁰⁸ Matsuda, *The Territory of Japan*, 94-95.

From a symbolic politics approach, Korea's assertion of control over Dokdo was not only a territorial act but also a form of national restoration and identity assertion in the aftermath of colonial rule. Conversely, Japan's insistence on legal resolution and reference to Allied documents served to restore a narrative of legitimate sovereignty and international recognition.

Japan has consistently called for the sovereignty dispute over Takeshima to be settled peacefully through international law, including by referring the case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Such proposals were made in 1954, 1962, and most recently in 2012, following President Lee Myung-bak's visit to the islets. However, Korea has rejected each of these offers.

Since ICJ proceedings require the consent of both parties, Japan's efforts have been unsuccessful. Japan, having accepted the Court's compulsory jurisdiction since 1958, continues to argue for a legal arbitration, while Korea maintains its position that there is no dispute to adjudicate.⁴⁰⁹

Viewed through symbolic politics, Tokyo's ICJ appeals are not only legal measures but also performances of a rules-based national identity. By consistently seeking adjudication, Japan portrays itself as a state that resolves disputes through law rather than force, thereby reinforcing an image of legitimacy at home and abroad. These appeals also increase the domestic cost of compromise, since withdrawing or softening Japan's claim would appear as a betrayal of national integrity. At the same time, shifting responsibility to an international court allows Japanese leaders to externalize the dispute, deflect domestic pressure, and presents Japan as a responsible actor in the international community.

⁴⁰⁹ MOFA Japan, *Definitive Clarifications as to Why Takeshima Is Japan's Territory*. 17.

4.5 Current situation

In April 2025, Japan released its annual *Diplomatic Bluebook*. Once again, it stated that Takeshima is “clearly an inherent part of Japan’s territory, both in light of historical facts and under international law,” while accusing Korea of maintaining an “illegal occupation.” These phrases have been included regularly—sovereignty claims since 2008 and the “illegal occupation” wording each year since 2018. At the same time, the Bluebook also referred to Korea as an “important partner,” stressing cooperation on regional security issues such as the North Korean threat.⁴¹⁰ This mixture of firmness and partnership demonstrates Japan’s effort to keep its claim alive while remaining open to practical cooperation.

A few months later, in July 2025, Japan lodged a strong protest against Korea’s routine military drills near the Takeshima. Masaaki Kanai, head of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau at the Foreign Ministry of Japan, conveyed to the Korean Embassy in Tokyo that the exercises were “totally unacceptable and extremely regrettable.” Japan repeated its stance that the islets are part of its territory.⁴¹¹ Korea’s navy, however, explained that the training—the first under President Lee Jae-myung—was of the same scale as in previous years, did not involve landings, and remained closed to the public.⁴¹² While Seoul described the drills as defensive and routine, Japan used the occasion to reaffirm its claims.

Japan has not relied on protests alone. It has also repeatedly proposed bringing the dispute before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), most prominently in 2012.⁴¹³ These proposals had little chance of success but served a symbolic

⁴¹⁰ MOFA Japan, Bluebook 2025, 20.

⁴¹¹ Kyodo News, “Japan Protests South Korean Military Drills Near Disputed Islets”

⁴¹² Korea Times, “Korea Holds 1st Regular Defense Drills around Dokdo under Lee Govt.”

⁴¹³ MOFA Japan, “Proposal of Referral to the International Court of Justice,”

function, reinforcing Japan's image as committed to international law while signaling resolve to domestic audiences.

Also, over the past two decades, it has built institutions such as the Takeshima Reference Room (2007)⁴¹⁴ and the The National Museum of Territory and Sovereignty (2018),⁴¹⁵ which exhibit historical maps, documents, and educational materials. These institutions are designed to inform the public and reinforce Japan's narrative of sovereignty, turning the dispute into part of collective memory. From the perspective of symbolic politics, such museums function as tools of identity construction, projecting Japan's position domestically and legitimizing it internationally by embedding the issue in cultural and educational discourse.⁴¹⁶

Shimane Prefecture has been central in this process. Since 2005, it has organized "Takeshima Day" each February, and what started locally has grown into a nationwide effort. By the early 2010s, Japanese textbooks described Takeshima as "an inherent part of Japan's territory," and by 2015 a teacher's handbook was in place to frame the issue in terms of sovereignty and international law. Shimane even produced its own classroom materials, which by 2014 were used in nearly all schools in the prefecture. This local activism helped elevate the issue to the national stage.⁴¹⁷

More recently, cultural and academic programs have reinforced the same message. In August 2025, the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIJA) held events in Okinoshima and Nishinoshima town of Shimane Prefecture to present a new book on sea lion hunting around Takeshima, based on a 1934 photographic album. The restored images and accompanying lectures were used to connect local

⁴¹⁴ MOFA Japan, "Reference Room: Takeshima"

⁴¹⁵ Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, "National Museum of Territory and Sovereignty"

⁴¹⁶ Government of Japan, *Takeshima Reference Room*; Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, *Documents Classified by Holding Institutions: Takeshima Reference Room*

⁴¹⁷ Fukuhara and Sato, "Takeshima in Japanese Education, Media and Culture," 176–190

history with the contemporary sovereignty debate, drawing in both older residents and younger students.⁴¹⁸

The media has also played a role in encouraging the government to take a tougher line on Takeshima. Around the 20th anniversary of “Takeshima Day” in February 2025, the conservative *Sankei Shimbun* urged the Ishiba administration to elevate the commemoration to a national holiday rather than leaving it as a local event. The newspaper criticized the prime minister for not attending the ceremony and argued that Shimane Prefecture has been carrying responsibilities that ought to rest with the national government. Such commentary shows how media outlets help keep the issue politically charged and pressure leaders to respond more assertively.⁴¹⁹

Taken together, these examples show how Japan has integrated the Takeshima issue into multiple spheres of public life—diplomacy, education, media, and culture. The islets are no longer treated only as a legal matter but have become symbols of national pride and political legitimacy. From a symbolic politics perspective, the repeated wording in the Diplomatic Bluebook, ICJ proposals, and protests over Korean drills act as performative assertions of sovereignty. Museums, schoolbooks, and “Takeshima Day” embed the claim into everyday memory, while media outlets keep the debate alive and press leaders to act. In this way, Takeshima functions both as a marker of identity domestically and as a means for Japan to project legitimacy internationally.

⁴¹⁸ *The Japan Institute of International Affairs*, “Commemorative Lecture Event for the Publication of Sea Lion Hunting around Takeshima, Sea of Japan”

⁴¹⁹ The Sankei Shimbun Editorial Board, “Staking a Claim: First, Make Takeshima Day a National Day,”

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The Dokdo/Takeshima dispute is one of East Asia's most persistent and symbolically charged territorial conflicts. The islets themselves are tiny ; however, they carry profound symbolic significance, tied to questions of historical justice, national pride, and the postwar legal order. The dispute is not simply about lines on a map or narrow legal definitions. It is rooted in the legacy of Japan's colonial rule, the uncertainties left by Allied postwar agreements, and the strategic choices of major powers—especially the United States. As Kimie Hara reminds us, the roots of Dokdo/Takeshima, Sakhalin, and even the Spratlys lie in the San Francisco system, whose gaps continue to shape regional disputes today.⁴²⁰

U.S. position illustrates these tensions. The early treaty drafts leaned toward Korea's claim, but Cold War realities soon pushed the United States to a neutral stance. Officially, it avoids the sovereignty question and refers to the islets simply as the "Liancourt Rocks." Yet even in 1960 Ambassador Douglas MacArthur II acknowledged that the issue touched directly on U.S. responsibilities in Northeast Asia. Because the dispute involves two U.S. allies,⁴²¹ alliance management and symbolic politics remain inseparable.⁴²² The American approach has therefore been one of quiet encouragement and risk-reduction, rather than pressing for a definitive settlement.

⁴²⁰ De Oliveira, *Assessing Neutrality: The United States' Role in the Diaoyu Islands Dispute*, 124-125.; Muskan Jha, "The Takeshima Island Dispute," 126-127.

⁴²¹ Roehrig, "US Policy and the Dokdo/Takeshima Dispute," in *The Dokdo/Takeshima Dispute*, 222.

⁴²² Roehrig, "US Policy and the Dokdo/Takeshima Dispute," in *The Dokdo/Takeshima Dispute*, 222.; de Oliveira, *Assessing Neutrality: The United States' Role in the Diaoyu Islands Dispute*, 123.

For Korea, economic needs drove reconciliation with Japan after 1965, but the creation of “Dokdo Day” in 2005⁴²³ pulled the islets firmly into the realm of identity politics. Public campaigns and textbooks mobilized strong support, but also created domestic costs that make compromise nearly impossible. For Koreans, Dokdo is inseparable from the memory of colonial domination. In Korea, the 1905 incorporation is seen not as legal but as the start of Japan’s imperial expansion, and since 1950s, controlling the islets has symbolized both sovereignty and national dignity.

Japan, under long LDP rule, has had somewhat more room to maneuver, yet its leaders are also constrained by a narrative that insists on legal rectitude and adjudication. Put simply, Korea frames Dokdo as a reminder of colonial victimhood, while Japan frames Takeshima as a matter of law. In symbolic politics terms, both narratives limit the space for cooperation.⁴²⁴

Material interests complicate matters further. For Japan, backing down on Takeshima could be read as weakness in other disputes, notably the Senkaku/Diaoyu and the Kurils, inviting pressure from China and Russia.⁴²⁵ Unsettled EEZ boundaries and reports of undersea gas reserves raise the stakes still higher. Energy needs, legal ambiguity, and reputational concerns combine with alliance politics to lock both sides into their positions.⁴²⁶

When compared with other disputes in the region, clear patterns emerge. The Senkaku/Diaoyu conflict revolves around sovereignty and resources, the Kurils around wartime settlements, and the South China Sea around multilateral rivalry. All

⁴²³ This year marks the year that Shimane Prefecture declared February 22 as Takeshima Day and Japan's textbooks began referring to Takeshima as Japanese territory.

⁴²⁴ Starkweather, “Keeping the Liancourt Rocks Dispute Afloat.” 107-108.

⁴²⁵ Starkweather, “Keeping the Liancourt Rocks Dispute Afloat.” 79.

⁴²⁶ Starkweather, “Keeping the Liancourt Rocks Dispute Afloat.” 79-80.

are shaped by colonial legacies and postwar settlements, but Dokdo/Takeshima stands apart for the intensity of its symbolic politics. It is less about the rocks themselves than about what they signify.⁴²⁷

Beyond these dimensions, the dispute has become a matter of symbolic politics for both countries, serving as a tool for shaping national identity and political narratives. Symbolic politics, as Sarcinelli (2008) explains, is not just about “real” decisions like laws or treaties, but about the use of symbols, rituals, and dramatic acts to make politics understandable and emotionally powerful.⁴²⁸

In August 2012, President Lee Myung-bak’s visit to Dokdo, coinciding with Liberation Day celebrations, reinforced Korea’s sovereignty claims but further strained relations with Japan.⁴²⁹ Korean officials framed it as a legitimate assertion of sovereignty, while Japan condemned it as “utterly unacceptable.” Some analysts also saw it as a move to shore up Lee’s domestic popularity amid political controversies.⁴³⁰ From a symbolic politics perspective, the visit was a bold act that stirred national feelings, turned a complex dispute into a clear show of defiance, and made Dokdo a symbol of identity and authority at home and abroad.

In Japan as well, Takeshima has likewise been mobilized as a tool of symbolic politics. Since Shimane Prefecture declared ‘Takeshima Day’ in 2005, ceremonies, election campaigns, and Defense White Papers have been used to reinforce sovereignty claims and appeal to nationalist voters. Leaders such as Shinzo Abe called for a firmer stance during the 2012 campaign, while subsequent elections and textbook revisions kept the issue alive. The media also contributed, most notably in Japan Forward’s 2025 editorial, which labeled Korea’s control an ‘illegal

⁴²⁷ Jha, “The Takeshima Island Dispute,” 126-127.

⁴²⁸ Sarcinelli, *Symbolische Politik*, 1-2.

⁴²⁹ Korea JoongAng Daily, “Lee Myung-bak Makes Historic Visit to Dokdo”

⁴³⁰ VOA News. “South Korean President Visits Islets Disputed with Japan.”

occupation’ and urged that Takeshima Day be elevated to a national holiday to demonstrate stronger resolve.⁴³¹

A final settlement will require more than maps or treaties. It demands engagement with the national narratives that both sides treat as core to their identity, while creating mechanisms to prevent flare-ups from spiraling. Short of that, pragmatic cooperation and trilateral coordination with the United States remain the most realistic ways to keep tensions down. The 2023 Kishida visit to Seoul and the trilateral summit later that year show that cooperation is possible when strategic needs align, even if the core dispute remains unresolved.⁴³²

Meanwhile, North Korea’s denunciation of Japan’s claim in 2021 shows that Dokdo/Takeshima is more than a South Korean issue—it resonates across the peninsula. The fact that both Seoul and Pyongyang agree on Dokdo underscores its symbolic power, making it less a legal dispute than a matter of identity and historical memory.⁴³³

Finally, ecological pressures add another often overlooked dimension. Rising sea temperatures, fragile ecosystems, and resource stress make the islets not only a sovereignty issue but also an environmental one.⁴³⁴ In the end, Dokdo/Takeshima endures less for its material attributes than for what it represents: sovereignty, history, and national pride. This symbolic weight makes compromise politically costly and causes the dispute to remain a persistent focal point in East Asia’s unfinished postwar order.

In conclusion, the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute reminds us that history and emotion often weigh as heavily as law and diplomacy. It reflects not only unresolved

⁴³¹ Japan Forward, “Staking a Claim: First, Make Takeshima Day a National Day”

⁴³² Jha, “The Takeshima Island Dispute,” 126.; Lee and Lim, “*Return of Shuttle Diplomacy*.”

⁴³³ *The Korea Times*, “North Korea Blasts Japan.”

⁴³⁴ Choi and Lim, “Establishing a Marine Protected Area”

boundaries but also the deep wounds of the past that both nations continue to carry. Despite political and legal tensions, the people of Korea and Japan share centuries of cultural exchange, mutual curiosity, and respect that are too often overshadowed by disputes like this.

True reconciliation may not come quickly, but small steps can still make a difference. Encouraging dialogue, joint research, and youth exchange programs could help build new forms of understanding, slowly replacing mistrust with empathy. In this sense, Dokdo/Takeshima can one day represent not only division, but also the possibility of healing—a symbol of how history, when faced honestly, can bring people closer rather than keep them apart.

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