

Us and Them: Constructing South Korean National Identity through the Liancourt Rocks Dispute¹

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Abstract

The article presents a social constructivist outlook on the territorial dispute over the Liancourt Rocks between South Korea and Japan. The issue surrounding the islets, better known as Dokdo or Takeshima, keeps both countries busy issuing negative critical remarks towards one another even fifty years after the formal normalization of their diplomatic relations. Nevertheless, the status quo has remained very much unchanged. Since the unprecedented official visit by then-president Lee Myung-bak in 2012, regular tourist trips to the location have gained even more popularity than before. Japan has attempted to bring the case to the International Court of Justice several times, only to be turned down by Seoul's claims that there is no territorial dispute to be discussed.

The author focuses primarily on discursively constructed and maintained ideational properties of the conflict, discussing the territory's symbolic value attributed to Dokdo by the contemporary South Korean discourse. Using the theory of othering in the process of national-identity construction, it is argued that the image of Dokdo has been transcended by Korean nationalists beyond a mere territorial dispute. Thus the islets have now reached a status virtually equal to a modern national symbol. As such it can be conveniently invoked by the elites to fuel anti-Japanese sentiments based on legitimate grievances over shared history. This simple yet effective discursively constructed "us and them" dichotomy allows Seoul to affirm its legitimacy over the peninsula by reinforcing a much needed stable image of national identity that is specifically South Korean.

Keywords: Dokdo, discourse, Japan, Liancourt Rocks, national identity, South Korea, Takeshima, self and other, social constructivism, symbolism.

Introduction

The Liancourt Rocks dispute, more commonly referred to as the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute, represents only a single problem in the set of bilateral conflicts between the Republic of Korea and Japan. For both countries it is also just one of many active territorial conflicts. Yet this particular issue

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is not merely a legacy of Japan's colonial past, one of several ongoing clashes between a former colonial power and its historical colony. It is accompanied by a set of other disputes related to the area, while maintaining a fairly rigid status quo where any negotiated settlement is currently rather unlikely.

Dokdo/Takeshima has been continuously inhabited by Korean citizens since 1965 (Korean Overseas Information Service 2006, 10), and today the area stations South Korean national police and has also been turned into a popular tourist spot for ROK citizens in the last decade. As the islets are actively administered by the Republic of Korea, considerable investments were made to secure development of Dokdo by building a lighthouse, police barracks and more recently a desalination plant (Dokdo of Korea 2013).

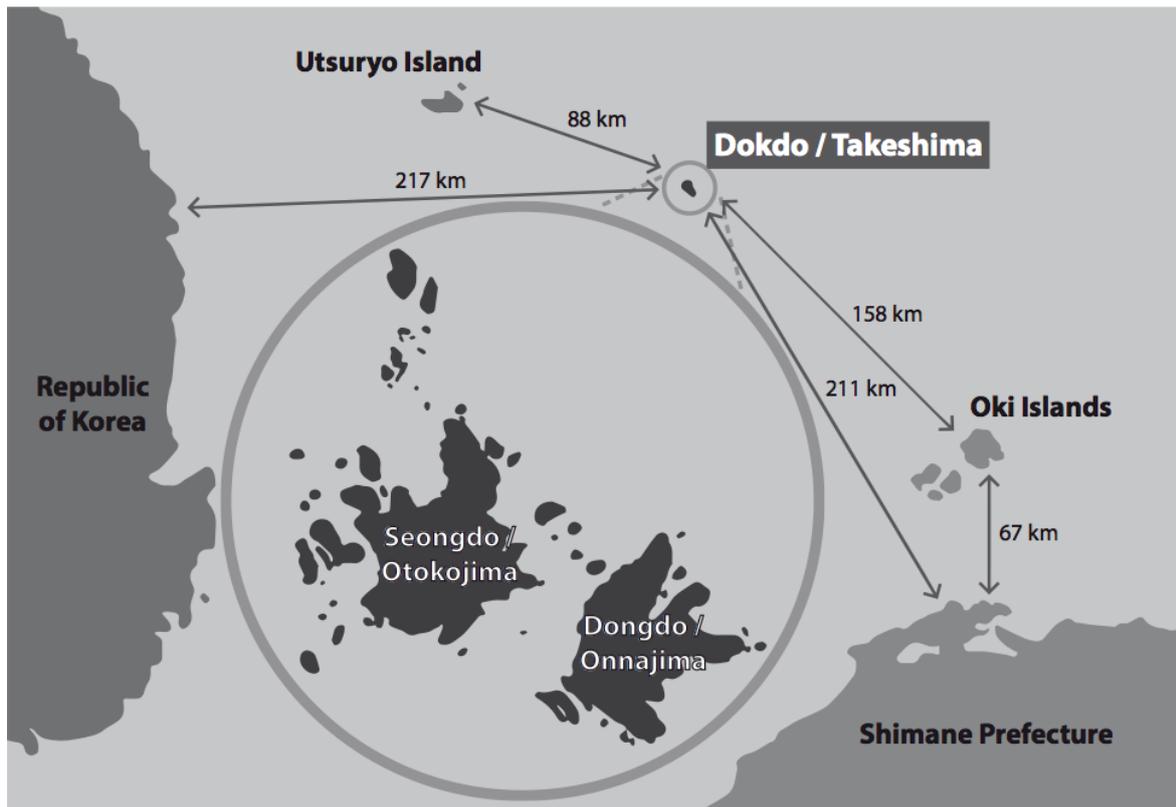
Most approaches to this issue are typically historical. Nevertheless, the range of factors affecting Dokdo/Takeshima is much wider: historical memories, domestic and international influences, as well as growing nationalist rhetoric in both countries. Regardless of the values and other characteristics shared between Japan and South Korea, prejudiced anti-Japanese and anti-Korean sentiments are a potent ideational variable capable of inhibiting any attempts at cooperation. In a situation where the disputed piece of land is only a set of miniscule rocks on the sea with rather little apparent economic value, historical sensitivity maintained by the post-war discourse, ever present in the bilateral relationship, has the potential to aggravate tensions and effectively thwart years of diplomatic effort.

This article sets to explore one additional layer of the conflict: the symbolism of Dokdo and its relevance to South Korean national identity, honor and pride, while considering its ideational value and the strong potential to reactivate anti-Japanese sentiments in the country.

Geography

Dokdo 독도/獨島 (lit. Solitary Island in Korean) or Takeshima 竹島 (literally Bamboo Island in Japanese) is a set of two main islets surrounded by thirty five smaller rocks located in the Sea of Japan, positioned between mainland Japan and the Korean Peninsula. It is also known as the Liancourt Rocks in English, as the islets were named by the French in the 19th century when a ship of the name *Le Liancourt* almost sunk in the area. The total area of the disputed territory is less than 0.2 km². Located 151 meters from one another, the two main islets are known as Seodo 서도 (lit. Western Island) and Dongdo 동도 (lit. Eastern Island) in Korean. In Japanese they were named Otokojima 男島 (literally Male Island) and Onnajima 女島 (literally Female Island).

The main basis of South Korean claims over Dokdo is derived from numerous historical documents and maps repeatedly discredited by the efforts of Japanese researchers. South Korea claims that Dokdo has been a part of Korea as early as since the 6th century AD during the Three Kingdoms Period (Kaikobad 2011, 159). Speaking of historical evidence, the amount of materials presented by the ROK quite clearly outweighs Japan's (Van Dyke 2006, 236; Hori 1997, 479). Japan's colonization of Korea commenced in 1904. In early 1905 Takeshima was incorporated by the Empire of Japan as *terra nullius*, i.e. a previously uninhabited territory. As major parts of East and Southeast Asia were controlled by Japan, it is not surprising then, that prior to the end of the Pacific War, there had been no discussion or any actual traces of a dispute about the status of Dokdo/Takeshima itself.



Dokdo/Takeshima in the background of Korean-Japanese bilateral ties (map courtesy Patrik Sletchta, 2016)

Broadly speaking, the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute in the post-war era was set off by different interpretations of Japan's renunciation of the formally occupied territories, namely the 1943 Cairo Declaration, as well as the 1945 Potsdam Declaration. Since Dokdo/Takeshima was not explicitly stated in either of the two, its status clearly remained unclear. It was not until 1948 when South Korea under Syngman Rhee (*I Seungman* 이승만) first claimed Dokdo as an appendage to Ulleungdo 울릉도, the closest Korean island (Short 2012, 147). Furthermore, the final version of the 1951 San Francisco Treaty, conceived to finally resolve the position of Japan in the post-war world, ultimately does not explicitly exclude Takeshima from the surrendered Japanese territory.

Since then, the history of the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute can be characterized as a series of unilateral declarations of sovereignty, the claims often supported by various scientific studies on the basis of geography (proximity, visibility etc.), historical maps or the right of first settlement.

In 1952 South Korea established the so called Syngman Rhee Line (*I Seungman rain* 이승만 라인) (Choi 2005, 468). The boundary line included Dokdo in South Korea's territory, only to be immediately followed by Japan's note discrediting the claim. In 1954 and 1962 and later again in 2012, Japan tried to bring the case to the International Court of Justice (Van Dyke 2007, 195; Reuters 2012). This has been, however, always instantly rejected by the government of the Republic of Korea. The ROK thus maintains a 'no dispute' position, not dissimilar from Japan's official stance on the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea: where there is no dispute, there is also no need to negotiate.

Nevertheless, the existence of the disagreement was indeed recognized in the Treaty of Basic Relations (*Nikkan kihon jōyaku* 日韓基本条約 or *Hanil giban joyak* 한일기본조약), signed between

Japan and the Republic of Korea in 1965. To a certain degree the treaty was pushed by Park Chung-hee 박정희 due to economic factors in the relatively young country of South Korea (Pratt 2007, 265). Nevertheless, the document simply treats the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute as a matter to be resolved in the future.

The following decades were a period of latent anti-Japanism (Berger 2012, 208) and the conflict remained relatively inactive without drawing too much public attention. For the ROK as a new state, it was first important to attain political stability in the 1950s, the nation then strived to achieve economic stability and establish its national identity. Thus during the Cold War, neither Japan nor South Korea pushed for a resolution of the issue. Overall, prior to 1987, the authoritarian regime in Seoul was able to control and quite successfully subdue any nationalistic feeling in the country linked to the Dokdo issue, hence aside from routine diplomatic protests, the conflict remained largely dormant (Choi 2005, 468).

However, following the ROK's democratization in 1987, South Korean domestic and political conditions slowly changed, giving rise to a new civil society and non-governmental groups. Since the 1990s South Korean politicians have frequently relied on anti-Japanese sentiments (Rozman 2004, 168) for various political purposes. The conflict over Dokdo/Takeshima was again reignited in 1996, when South Korea decided to build a wharf on Dokdo after the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) by both countries earlier in the same year.

Attention has been repeatedly brought to many other historical issues which plague the relations between Japan and the ROK. This consequently led to a gradual increase of the anti-Japanese mood in South Korea, inevitably also invigorating the reactivation the Dokdo/Takeshima territorial dispute in the 1990s. During 2000s the crisis deepened again due to issues such as Japanese history textbook revisions, Korean Dokdo stamps, or the proclamation of the Takeshima Day. Starting in 2005, South Korea also allowed tourists to visit the disputed islets for the first time.

Questioning the process of normalization, then-president Roh Moo-Hyun 노무현 in 2006 publicly criticized Japan, while stressing the importance of Dokdo as a national symbol for South Korea. He also added that by claiming the islets as a part of Japanese territory, the Japanese government is conclusively negating the liberation of Korea (Presidential Archives, 2006). In his speech Roh explicitly labeled Dokdo as a symbol of the complete recovery of sovereignty bringing a closure to a painful chapter in Korea's history. This rhetoric critical to Japan's dealing with the past of its militaristic expansion can be viewed as a very powerful tool capable of activating a sense of national pride and fear of Japan's possible future expansionism or remilitarization. Koo argues that at that particular time president Roh utilized this discourse as a response to Japan's plan to carry out a maritime survey in the Dokdo/Takeshima area (2010, 95).

In 2008, as a reaction to Japan's treatment of the Takeshima dispute in the Japanese high school education curriculum, the ROK recalled its ambassador to Japan and also strengthened its surveillance in the adjacent waters in fear of Japanese right-wing groups landing on the disputed land, while Seoul experienced vocal anti-Japanese protests against the Japanese Ministry of Education (Yonhap News 08-12-28). Consequently in the same year South Korea also decided to reject Japan's offer for a bilateral meeting during the annual ASEAN regional security summit.

Tensions again escalated in 2012 when Lee Myung-Bak 이명박 became the first Korean president to officially visit Dokdo. After his controversial visit to the island, the then-president's domestic

popularity quickly rose (Yokota 2012). This time the act resulted into a temporal withdrawal of Japan's ambassador to the Republic of Korea (Global Times 12-8-13).

It seems that following a steady decline over the last decade, during the currently running presidential term of Park Geun-hye 박근혜, which coincides with the second term of PM Abe Shinzō 安倍晋三, the two countries have reached a new low point, a state of diplomatic freeze. Abe's openly rightist political views and bold policies undoubtedly further constrain the relationship. In 2014 the LDP (Jimintō 自民党) initiated a constitutional revision plan (reinterpretation) supported by the ideology of the right of collective self-defense (shūdanteki jieiken 集団的自衛権), referred to by Abe's government as proactive pacifism (sekkyokuteki heiwashugi 積極的平和主義), a largely controversial topic even on the domestic scene. Abe's ongoing efforts to normalize the country's military and subsequently change Japan's position in the regional security complex of East Asia are heavily criticized by the country's immediate neighbors (mainly the PRC and the ROK) and simultaneously lauded by the United States. The present bilateral relations between Japan and South Korea are indeed the worst since diplomatic normalization in 1965, and authors such as Kang and Lee (2011) even suggest that the present state is equivalent to a Cold War in Asia.

The discourse around Dokdo/Takeshima has thus remained largely unchanged on the background of increasingly strained economic ties between Seoul and Tokyo. Both sides of the dispute continue publishing and distributing official and unofficial materials, such as pamphlets, brochures or videos to support their claims. Annual protests at the Japanese embassy in Seoul have become a pattern to be reckoned with (Mainichi Shimbun 16-2-22), and so have South Korean denunciations of Japan's territorial claims over the islets. In Korea sharp criticism and accusations of illegal occupation sparked again when, following its increasingly assertive right wing stance, Japan announced the official approval of elementary and high school textbooks describing Takeshima as Japanese territory (Asahi Shimbun 16-3-18). Nevertheless, it is the ROK that remains in control of the disputed islets, placing Japan in a critical disadvantage. Japan's claim is also repeatedly reiterated in the White Papers annually published by the Ministry of Defense, their publishing guaranteed to provoke South Korea's obligatory rebuke urging Tokyo to stop the claims and any provocations vis-à-vis ROK's territorial sovereignty. To further support its territorial claim, for the first time since 2011 the South Korean Ministry of National Defense (국방부, Gukbang-bu) announced a Marine Corps military drill in June 2016, simulating a scenario of action against outside forces making an illicit attempt to land on Dokdo (KBS 16-6-8).

The issue of Dokdo is only a part of a complex and intertwined bilateral conflict. South Korea's inherent lingering fear of Japan's remilitarization and wider threat perceptions remain capable of stirring strong emotional reactions and no doubt plays a significant role in the ROK's stance towards the whole issue. In Korea, the modern idea of competition with Japan and strong sentiments against Japan's remilitarization is rooted in the fear of a possible repetition of history. This resulted in a broader pattern of vocal denunciation and strong public responses, including reported self-mutilation by some Korean citizens during protests in front of the Embassy of Japan in Seoul (Kirk 2001). These reoccurring phenomena are further supported by the discourse created by the South Korean elites. The idea of bilateral relationship with Japan is presented as a zero sum game (Tamaki 2010, 137), in which weakening the other's position results in a gain. Under this logic, the South Korean public tends to ignore Tokyo's positive attempts to improve ties, while focusing on vehement criticism of all

negative issues. Comparable patterns can be also traced in other countries with similar historical experience with Japan, particularly the People's Republic of China. It should be noted, that the ROK's stance on Dokdo as a part of Korean territory is also supported by North Korea, only further demonstrating that for Koreans, the anti-Japanese discourse can be a unifying element. There is also an evident lack of constructive criticism. As such, denunciations hardly ever suggest any tangible solutions to the problem. This way the countries drift further apart from the prospect of reaching a settlement in any of the discussed friction points. As public denunciation and Japan 'bashing' has become a politically rewarding strategy, anti-Japanese sentiments in East Asia do not wane.

Why Dokdo matters

The disputed territory constitutes almost no obvious value by itself. With the exception of the two main islets (or larger rocks), the eroding volcanic Dokdo/Takeshima islets are uninhabitable, although a significant investment has been made by South Korea to develop and maintain a set of man-made structures on the islets. South Korea also allows tourists to visit Dokdo, nevertheless, the significance of these visits is more symbolic than economic relevance. Nevertheless, as the area surrounding the islets is an important fishing ground (Bowman 2013, 458), it has an unquestioned value in creating employment for fishers, adding to its overall economic value.

The Dokdo territorial dispute does not concern only the questioned set of rocks, but perhaps more importantly, it is a question of delimiting a definitive maritime boundary between Japan and the ROK. Is Dokdo/Takeshima an island or is it a mere rock? Even this seemingly simple fact is fairly problematic, as the formulation of the maritime law itself is rather vague and ambiguous, leaving space for different interpretations by both Japan and South Korea. Each unsurprisingly takes a different stance, making the delimitation of the maritime boundary between the two countries difficult.

Under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, in force since November 1994) Article 121.3 islands create a 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ or *haitateki keizai suiki* 排他的經濟水域), however, "*rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own shall have no exclusive economic zone or continental shelf.*" (UNCLOS, 1982) Rocks should thus create only a 12 nautical mile wide strip of territorial waters. Indeed, under present conditions Dokdo is habitable but it certainly wouldn't be if it weren't for the man-made conditions supported by the ROK. Nevertheless, similar efforts to maintain habitable conditions on a remote island can be observed in the case of the Japanese island Okinotorishima 沖ノ鳥島. Located on open sea more than 1700 kilometers south of Tokyo, the inclusion of the atoll artificially prevented from sinking under the sea level due to erosion further expands Japan's EEZ to 430 thousand square kilometers (Manicom 2010, 325)

Even though Dokdo/Takeshima is a very small piece of land in terms of its actual area, theoretically it has great potential in creating a large maritime territory, thereby granting exclusive access to the natural resources, depending on the interpretation of the UNCLOS. Under Japan's interpretation of the law, Takeshima does indeed generate an EEZ, which was declared by Japan in 1996. The ROK on the other hand maintains that the islets do not create an EEZ (Hong and Van Dyke 2009, 51). If we were to draw a meridian line between Ulleungdo and the Oki Islands, the two closest Korean and Japanese territories, Dokdo/Takeshima would fall into South Korea's territorial waters. Nevertheless, this presupposes ignoring Dokdo as an island in the delimitation process. Despite two Agreements on

Fisheries (Gjogyō ni kansuru Nihon to Daikanminkoku no aida no kyōtei 漁業に関する日本国と大韓民国との間の協定) between Japan and the ROK, no definite agreement on delimitation of maritime boundary and potentially overlapping EEZs has been reached, Dokdo being stated as the main issue preventing a successful conclusion of such agreement (Pak 2000, 59).

Although the tiny islets itself are of very little apparent economic value, it has been suggested that the surrounding area harbors substantial reserves of gas. The gas hydrate deposits are estimated to be 600 million tons, an amount equivalent to 30 years of South Korea's gas consumption (Kim and Cho 2011, 444). The first extraction of these is planned as soon as the commercial technology is available. The gas deposits may yet prove to become a problem in the future, as both states keep exploring the Sea of Japan. Due to the possible presence of significant natural resources reserves, the associated maritime territory can be extremely important for both countries, as their energy security is dependent on strategic management of imported resources.

Dokdo/Takeshima was an important strategic point in the past, especially during the Russo-Japanese War, during which it functioned as an observation tower (Ji 2011, 191). When the final draft of the San Francisco Treaty was signed after several rejected drafts, any explicit mention of Dokdo was omitted. Such exclusion can be seen as a deliberate ploy by the Allied Forces to secure a strategic point near the occupied Japan, should the North win the war on the Korean Peninsula (Hara 2001: 371). However, in the post-war period, the strategic value of Dokdo/Takeshima has been effectively nullified, as both Japan and South Korea are allied with the United States. The need for a specific strategic outpost in the Sea of Japan is thus rendered practically zero under the present security conditions in the region.

All of Japan's current territorial disputes were acquired during its imperial expansion, started in the 19th century, and they are generally prone to regular disputes. In the recent history, military conflict has been avoided so far. For Japan, Takeshima is indeed a peripheral territory. As such, the dispute is unlikely to result in an actual war, but the escalation might be soon elevated beyond the point where it is still realistically negotiable. Perhaps Takeshima's ideational value for Japan is not as strong as it is for Korea. However, as Japan is also entangled into territorial disputes over the Senkaku Islands (Senkaku shotō 尖閣諸島) with China and over the Northern Territories (Hoppō ryōdo 北方領土; more commonly known as the southern Kuril Islands) with Russia, surrender of the claim over Takeshima would not only be politically unwise, but more importantly it could significantly weaken Japan's position in the other two territorial disputes. Particularly the southern Kuril Islands, currently administered by Russia, the same way as Takeshima is controlled by South Korea, are realistically more important for Japan than Takeshima. Therefore losing face by renouncing either of the claims could essentially prove detrimental to Japan's position in the complex context of the country's territorial problems.

The ROK's situation is conceivably similar to Japan's position in the Kuril Islands dispute. Hypothetically it is almost impossible to imagine Seoul revoking South Korea's territorial claim on Dokdo, even if the country was somehow forced to do so after losing the case at the International Court of Justice. In this case, however, the ROK has an obvious advantage over Japan: actual control of the disputed territory. Either way, solving the issue through the ICJ would be undoubtedly politically unacceptable for the ROK. Such action would be political suicide, given the common anti-Japanese discourse supported by the public. Equally, for Japan it would be very unwise to show any

behavior hinting at a possible weakness in the territorial dispute with South Korea, as it would most certainly weaken its position against China and Russia in the other two territorial disputes.

Despite undeniable economic interdependence between Japan and South Korea characterized by high levels of trade, tourism and a mutual culture of consumerism, domestic and political factors still play a role in determining the dynamics of the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute. More importantly, the islets' symbolic value should not be underestimated. Authors such as Cha (2000: 314) have concluded that Korean nationalism largely equals 'anti-Japanism', of which the discourse around Dokdo is the epitome.

Dokdo's symbolic value is very important for Korea. A certain symbolic value can also be traced in Japan, particularly in the Shimane prefecture. Bukh suggests that the islets play a significant role in the construction of the prefecture's regional identity (2015, 64). Nevertheless, it is neither as potent nor as apparent and publicly pronounced on a national level. Since the proclamation of the Takeshima Day (Takeshima no hi 竹島の日, celebrated on February 22) in 2005, more public attention and interest have been drawn to the whole issue. Furthermore, as suggested above, conservative LDP governments have taken a tougher stance. The trend of increasing Dokdo's symbolic value among Koreans is apparent from the South Korean citizens' behavior on several occasions: protests in front of the Embassy of Japan in Seoul, flag burning, smashing birds with hammers and then dripping blood onto Japanese flags, or hurling faeces on several occasions (BBC 05-3-16; Reuters 08-6-17; The Japan Times 13-2-24). As seen previously, any future Japanese claim to the islands is likely to trigger a similar response characterized by nationalist sentiments. To this day collective memory of Japan as a colonial oppressor is stronger than the centuries of suzerainty under China (Cho and Park 2011, 290). Strong distrust of Japan can be easily used to provoke anti-Japanese sentiments in order to fulfill various political goals.

Decades after the World War II, the symbolic attachment to Dokdo has made any prospect for the resolution of the territorial dispute vaguer than ever. Any advances made by Japan are likely to create a strong opposing reaction of nationalist sentiment in South Korea. Korea's anger directed at Japan over acts perceived as provocations stems from the public attention to Japan's behavior and its alleged failure to acknowledge all historical wrongdoings committed on the Korean nation. Thus the Korean public is still very cautious about any Japanese conduct regarding topics that link the two countries together, particularly the views on shared history.

Construction of national identity through discourse and symbolism

Painful historical memories can be viewed as one of the defining elements of international relations in East Asia. Alleged historical animosity is a source of many tensions in Japan, North and South Korea or China. When dealing with identity and territorial disputes, this article utilizes a discourse-oriented social constructivist approach, emphasizing that ideational variables such as national identity and collective memory are ultimately products of the socially constructed instrumental discourse around the discussed issue between Japan and the Republic of Korea. Society and discourse are viewed as mutually constitutive, ultimately rendering historical memory and historical animosity as skillfully utilized constructs invoked by those possessing significant discursive power (e.g. elites in control of the media) in the time of need to achieve desired goals.

Following the reflectivist turn in International Relations, stressing particularly the notion of socially produced characteristics of the world, Alexander Wendt suggested an elementary constructivist

notion of identity presupposing that identities are the basis of interests (1992, 398). However, more recently this understanding of identity has been criticized for its fixed and ontologically intrinsic essentialized qualities (Epstein, 2010; Rumelili, 2004; Zehfuss, 2001). Identity construction has been thus increasingly understood through relational terms. As suggested by Bukh (2010, 16), a nation's identity is constructed through a self/other dichotomy. Moreover, authors such as Reus-Smith (1996, 2) also see the social construction of actors' identities as a challenge to rationalist conceptions of human nature. Identities are also not static; they are constructed primarily by domestic actors, and thus may play the role of a complicated factor or variable in any territorial dispute. Still, any symbolic meaning of a territory is difficult to assess and impossible to measure. However, we can assume that the meaning of such territory is dynamic. Smith (1991) identifies historic territory as one of the fundamental features of national identity, essentially working as a repository of historical memories. It is therefore easy to understand why South Korea views Dokdo as such a sensitive issue, the fact being further exacerbated through Korea's bitter historical experience with Japan, the division of the peninsula after the Korean War, South Korea's own struggle for economic development during the years that followed, and the state's slow democratization throughout the 1990s.

The 'self' cannot be realized until otherness is defined through an oppositional relationship. National identity is a fundamentally shared product of social interaction able to construct differences between self and the other (McSweeney 1999, 157). In a similar way, a particular image of Japan is established and preserved in South Korea. The ROK maintains its own subjectivity through its own perceptions of the environment in contrast with external stimuli. In the case of the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute, identity can be utilized as an explanatory tool. Wendt defines identity as a property of international actors that generates motivational and behavioral dispositions (1999, 224). Individuals act towards objects or symbols on the basis of meaning attributed to them. Moreover, states can acquire social identity through their interactions with one another, but interests and identity come primarily from the society itself (Maguire 2010, 212). South Korea creates its unique national identity through the past experience and more importantly through contemporary interests of its own society. However, the identity is further refined through a contextual interplay with the surrounding states. In case of Dokdo the ROK and its sovereignty is forced to face Japan. As anti-Japanese sentiments have been repeatedly discursively utilized with great success, it is easy to understand how the interests of South Korean elites are a potent driving force shaping the nation's identity through elevating Dokdo to the position of a new modern national symbol. The territorial dispute attached to this issue inevitably serves as a mechanism which further fortifies the symbolism drawn from the discourse about the past experience vis-à-vis Japan. Identity is created as a narrative and only realized when activated through symbols when put into practice, such as when triggered as a response to certain stimuli, particularly the acts viewed as Japanese provocations. Individuals do not think about identity, instead they think "with" it (Gillis 1996, 5). In case of the Dokdo/Takeshima territorial dispute, such reactive stimuli can be any action by the Japanese that may be subconsciously understood as a threat to South Korean national integrity.

Smith further asserts that individual national identities are built upon nationalism. The stronger ethnic identity, the more likely a nation is to emerge based on that identity. National identity is viewed as a multi-level phenomenon, a form of culture based on a unique social and cultural matrix and possibly also a social and political movement capable of achieving goals (Smith 1991, 71-72). Despite Korea's relatively long ancient history, the ROK itself is a rather new nation inevitably strained by the pressure of ensuring and proving its own legitimacy on at least two levels: domestically and against North Korea.

South Korean nationalism is primarily ethnic, and as such it is maintained through the country's idea of autonomy, unity and identity. In other words, members are easily distinguished from non-members. Nevertheless, a very similar discourse of homogeneity can be discerned in Japan, too. National symbols shared by the community obviously play an important role in any context, as the nationalistic discourse utilizes them alongside ceremonials to create a complex abstraction, ultimately forming a national identity. These symbols are the most potent and durable aspects of nationalism, since they are capable of evoking instant emotional responses (ibid. 77). As such, Korea's ethnic nationalism would be very difficult to construct solely against North Korea as the 'Other', as the North shares ancient history and ethnicity with the South, despite the peninsula's division in relatively recent history. Due to its colonial experience, Korean national identity, pride and honor are prone to be constructed in a dichotomy against Japan under the influence of increasingly assertive populism in South Korea. It is a part of a wider common trend of nationalism rising in East Asian countries observed in the post-2000s.

Furthermore, the progressive tendency of symbolic entrenchment (Hassner 2007, 109) makes the treatment of such territorial disputes increasingly more difficult to be settled over time. This is particularly true for Dokdo/Takeshima, as we have seen that the issues of dealing with Japan's colonial past in the Pacific have become increasingly more problematic to address, particularly in the last two decades. As the number of people directly affected by the historical issues slowly diminishes, the issues remain stored in the nations' discursively constructed collective memories from which they can be reactivated and utilized by younger generations, resulting in reactions stronger than ever before. This propensity might prove even more dangerous in the future than it is now. It comes as no surprise that disputed territories are prone to be invested with additional nationalist, ethnic and other emotional value which naturally tends to stimulate the society to produce evidence supporting historical links to the disputed territory (ibid. 113). This trend can indeed be observed not only in South Korea but also in Japan. Education and propaganda in the public discourse are then likely to be utilized by the elites to strengthen the argument in its national environment. Dokdo/Takeshima has been now integrated into both of the nations' identities, yet for reasons stated above, it is the Republic of Korea which is the more strident about the dispute. It can be surmised that in South Korea, the rocks have been transformed into an image equal to a national symbol and a reminder of Japan's past aggression. Mazarr (2012) also suggests that Dokdo has been internalized into Korea's cultural narrative; it is now a part of Korea's own identity and the mark of the emotional trauma of Japanese oppression and occupation. This notion was publically stated by Roh Moo-Hyun in his 2012 speech.

For South Korea the 1950s were a struggle for political stability, followed by a decade of striving for economic stability in the 60s, then by searching for a national identity in the 70s. Finally the 90s saw a rise of a new civic society in the ROK and together with it a number of non-government groups engaged in the Dokdo/Takeshima territorial dispute (Choi 2005, 470). The Korean government has been indeed trying to keep a relatively low profile to avoid provoking Japan or internationalizing the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute, even though in the ROK it is still an important domestic political issue. Since the mid-1990s, national governments have capitalized on anti-Japanese or anti-Korean flavored issues to attain individual political goals (ibid. 489). South Korea has also been greatly impacted by pressure from various civic groups.

The so-called Dokdo movement consists of public campaign initiatives, as well as political and interest groups trying to push the government into a more aggressive policy towards Japan. The South Korean

government's allegedly lax treatment of the Dokdo issue is also often criticized by the opposition calling for a more assertive approach (Bong 2013, 197). Other civic groups not explicitly linked to Dokdo but representing anti-Japanese views in a broader sense also exist in South Korea (Choi 2005, 471). These groups naturally don't hesitate to support the Dokdo movement and take the opportunity to express their anti-Japanese stance, particularly on the occasion of highly symbolic national holidays: March 1 which commemorates the massacre of the March 1st Movement (Samil undong 삼일 운동) anti-Japanese demonstrations in 1919; as well as August 15 (Gwangbokjeol 광복절), the celebration of the liberation of the Korean nation from the Japanese Empire in 1945 (Japan Daily Press 13-8-16; South China Morning Post 14-3-10).

Having established Dokdo as a national symbol of the Republic of Korea, we can surmise that the islets are of vital national importance to the country. For South Koreans Dokdo does not represent a rock on the sea, nor does it only stand for reserves of natural gas in the surrounding area. Dokdo is primarily perceived as a symbol of Korean independence and sovereignty vis-à-vis Japan. The context of the territorial dispute cannot be fully understood without recognizing the role of the present discourse alluding to the historical experience of Korea under the Japanese colonial rule and its implications for the post-war formation of South Korean collective memory linked to the state's modern national identity.

Apart from the more apparent and conventional national symbols such as a national flag and anthem, Koreans traditionally feel a special relation to Baekdu-san (백두산 or Mt. Paekdu). The 2744 meter mountain with a caldera lake on top located on the North Korean border with China is not an official symbol of the ROK, but it is traditionally viewed as the place of the ancestral origin of all Korean people (Alton and Chidley 2013, 22). The ancient legend has its roots in the era of Gojoseon 고조선, Korea's first ancient kingdom.

Even though foreign historical records often suggest otherwise, North Korean state propaganda maintains that the former leader Kim Jong-il was also allegedly born on top of Baekdu-san and the peak is also depicted on the official emblem of North Korea. Thus the symbolism of the sacred mountain is being heavily employed by the North. Even though the mountain is now on the territory controlled by North Korea, many South Korean tourists still visit the place from the Chinese side (Yonhap News 14-06-04). In every way, it is difficult to see Baekdu-san as a national symbol of post-division South Korea.

Since Baekdu-san is essentially located in enemy territory, Dokdo, despite its lack of ancient history linked to the origin of Korean ethnicity and cultural heritage, can be viewed as a suitable and convenient substitute for the previous traditional and sacred national symbol. A much needed symbol of the Republic of Korea as a modern state, constructed upon the convenient dichotomy of 'us' and 'them' (or Self and Other) that utilizes Japan as the non-member, the symbolic *evil enemy*, contrasted with the *good us* naturally represented by South Korea.

Considering the more acute security threat in the north, South Korea should perhaps constitute its national identity in a dichotomy against North Korea, which would most certainly be deemed perfectly rational. Yet on the basis of many legitimate historic grievances, the 'Other' is easily and conveniently embodied by Japan. To many South Koreans this fact represents a more morally acceptable variant, as the ROK public is still in many cases ambiguous about North Korea (Kelly 2013). Not only are Koreans still subconsciously afraid of Japan and its militaristic expansion, the fear of

which is indeed maintained by the present narrative, but this explanation also offers obvious political benefits in present social discourse. Furthermore the other half of the peninsula is controlled by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. This fact represents a certain problem for establishing the legitimacy of South Korea as a young state. The possession of the more traditional symbol, Baekdusan, by North Korea presents a further challenge, as the modern state of the Republic of Korea is stripped of the ability to capitalize on this mythological symbol of Korean ethnicity and cultural identity. On a symbolic level, North Korea has possibly a somewhat stronger position than the ROK.

Due to its legacy of colonial past and rather tragic experience with its neighbors, Japan is quickly identified as a simply available target for South Korea's self-definition in the dichotomy intentionally constructed as black and white, or good and evil. This is very convenient, as it draws attention away from the discord between the North and the South. Should the ROK attempt to construct its own identity in contrast to North Korea, it would inevitably create some internal confusion. The commonly shared dislike for the Japanese is a much stronger unifying element capable of provoking a strong emotional response on which the elites are able to easily capitalize. Dokdo and Japan are therefore a very effective replacement, much needed as a national symbol and the "them" part in the equation which institutes a notion of national identity. Such discourse conveniently unifies much of the nation while circumventing the problem of dealing with the legitimacy of North Korea at the same time.

Contrastingly, Japan's public appears much less agitated about the issue, although recently there has been a shift in the political discourse. Unlike South Korea, Japan has been actively struggling with reassessment and interpretation of its imperial colonial past to appear in a more positive light in the modern period. Such acts are regularly criticized by China and the Koreas as attempts to whitewash all the injustice committed by the pre-war Empire of Japan.

Both Korean and Japanese nationalisms are broad topics and they take their immediate form based on the context of beliefs, sentiments and symbols. Anti-Japanese and anti-Korean sentiments are only one of their respective features. Korean nationalism has a long history and has gone through several phases of development: from the 19th century Donghak movement 동학, through the anti-colonial resistance to a form known as New Nationalism (Shin 2006, 178) emerging in the 1990s during the process of South Korea's democratization. Contemporary Korean nationalism is capable of driving public policy, generating national consensus and a sense of sovereignty in confrontations with South Korea's neighbors. Anti-Japanism in the ROK is also further regularly fueled by Japanese officials' visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, comments about the Comfort Women (*ianfu* 慰安婦) issue or Japan's attempts at historical revisionism. Various NHK (Nippon hōsō kyōkai 日本放送協会) opinion polls carried out in 1991, 1999 and 2010 suggest that the number of South Korean respondents expressing dislike for Japan increased from 58% to 63% and 71% respectively (Kono and Hara, 2011: 32). These figures indicate that anti-Japanese sentiments in South Korea are still well preserved and can be invigorated more successfully than ever before by those who possess formidable discursive power. The rising numbers during a period of normal relations further prove that this trend is constructed discursively.

Berger points out that institutionalization of Korean collective memory is causing young Koreans to be even more anti-Japanese than any of the previous generations (2010, 198). In the recent decade, the rising trend of antipathy against Japan can be observed in a series of public opinion polls conducted in South Korea. In a 2014 survey published by the Asian Institute for Policy Studies in Seoul, Abe Shinzō was viewed even less favorably than North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un (Gale 2014). This

again supports the argument, that Japan is still perceived as an active threat in the ROK and Japan's current leadership is identified as a strong factor leading to deterioration of the strained bilateral relations.

In case of the South Korean perception of the Dokdo issue, psychological value attached to the symbol clearly outweighs the islets' actual territorial value. Fighting for Dokdo as an integral part of the ROK's territory is seen as an act of protecting the country's national identity, which is also further drawn from and build upon the symbolism of the islets instrumentalized for the process of creating a national identity partly based on anti-Japanism as an element strengthening the legitimacy of South Korea as a state.

Successful reconciliation between Japan and South Korea would most likely require a transfer of some materially valuable property, as well as acknowledgement of the historical wrongdoings attributed to Japan's colonial past in East Asia. As seen many times in the past, an apology itself, albeit being an important step, is not sufficient. All the past apologies made by Japanese leaders have been dismissed by South Korea as not sincere: PM Murayama's personal apology to Comfort Women and his apology for Japan's colonial aggression in 1993, PM Obuchi's apology for the occupation in 1998 or PM Koizumi's apology in 2001. In December 2015 Abe and Park reached an unprecedented formal agreement to bilaterally settle the Comfort Women issue through a series of steps. The majority of these attempts by Japan have been considered a mere empty gesture by the ROK (Wagatsuma and Rosett 1986, 461). Particularly the last instance was again greeted with animosity and dissatisfaction with the Korean public accusing the government of being pro-Japanese and giving up too much for too little (Yonhap 15-12-29).

Galvin labels this reoccurring phenomenon as "playing the Japan card", further stressing how convenient Japan-bashing is for its aggrieved neighbors (2003, 112). Japan is blamed over and over regardless of any actions taken by the Japanese government to rectify the situation, and conversely only actions viewed as provocations are brought to light and subjected to perpetual criticisms. Similarly Lind (2010, 197) warns that conservative backlash is highly likely to accompany any real attempts to settle the ongoing disputes. With Dokdo being elevated to the status of a South Korean symbol of national pride and identity, the hope for resolving the dispute is weaker than ever, as the simple idea of giving up the islets, however unlikely, would be felt as another humiliating and unjust defeat in relation to Japan. In this case safeguarding Dokdo simply equals protecting South Korea's sovereignty.

Conclusion

From a more practical perspective, Japan and the ROK share common strategic interests and should build a bilateral relationship with the goal of protecting other territories against the progressively expanding People's Republic of China and even more so against the unpredictable North Korean regime. However, discursively reproduced historical prejudice, nationalism and the symbolic value attached to Dokdo/Takeshima adds more tension to the already toxic relationship, thereby inhibiting most cooperation efforts and attempts at rapprochement as long as Japan is still perceived as a regional threat.

In the end, perhaps Japan is not the only one to be blamed for the current strained situation. Even though all the grievances and hardships caused by the expansive politics of the Empire of Japan to its neighbors are undeniable historical facts, even today there seems to be rather little effort to suggest

actual solutions to the problems linked to the countries' shared history. It is perhaps because Japan has become an easily accessible and convenient enemy, always at hand. As these trends are likely to continue in the future, populist sentiments may further prove to have a negative effect not only on the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute, but also on Japan-South Korea bilateral ties in general.

At present the dispute is unlikely to be resolved without taking South Korea's moral perspective into account. Korea is vocal about its dissatisfaction with Japan not taking enough responsibility for its past. The lack of moral responsibility stems from the mindset of a victim created by US occupation forces (Orr 2001, 7), stored in Japan's collective memory even to this day and apparent in many other issues frequently angering not only Korea but also China. Nevertheless, Korea's main argument - historical links, are hardly enough to convince Japan. Thus the two remain in a deadlock situation.

Any swift resolution of the Dokdo/Takeshima territorial dispute is thus virtually impossible, at least without prior confidence and trust building between the two states. More importantly though, avoiding further escalation of the current conflict should be prioritized at all costs, as the bilateral ties between Japan and the ROK are already burdened by a plethora of issues and mending them will most certainly require great effort and patience. Prospects for resolution in a short- to medium-term time frame are indeed slim. National identity constructed upon the "us and them" dichotomy realized through national symbolism and the current discourse is a strong variable that may be hard to change, as it is locked in the mutually constitutive relationship between society and discourse. Nevertheless, in the end it is not cast into stone. What happens next depends largely not only on what Japan and South Korea choose to do, but also on what they do not do. Any misstep, particularly represented by Japan's assertive actions fueled by neo-revisionist opinions, could further solidify already frozen bilateral relations.

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