

# The Dokdo and Kuril Islands: Japan's Twin Disputes

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## The Dokdo and Kuril Islands: Japan's Twin Disputes

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Whereas there is considerable scholarship on the maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), the long-lingering conflicts in the North Pacific Ocean (NPO) have received much less attention. The disagreements in these two adjacent regions have similarities: First, both are based on claims of historical title such as first discovery, first utilization, status as *terra nullius*, etc. Second, conflicts in both have geopolitical rationale such as control over key passages or access to a wider region. Third, both involve economic benefits such as exploitation of minerals, fish stocks and energy resources. Fourth, the disagreements are a legacy of colonialism and the post-WW2 arrangements of formerly colonized areas. There exists a critical difference, however: Whereas territorial conflicts in the SCS are largely between China and its neighbours, in the Northeast Asian sub-region (NEA), Japan is the country in territorial disputes with its neighbours. These disagreements have proven to be sticky and protracted due to security and economic interests. This chapter offers an account of the origins, development, and dynamics of the territorial conflicts Japan has with South Korea and Russia in the Dokdo and Kuril Islands.

### The Dokdo/Takeshima Islands Question

The Dokdo Islands (Takeshima, in Japanese) are a group of sea features located in the Sea of Japan (also known as East Sea). The features are controlled by South Korea and disputed by Japan. Composed of two islands and 89 surrounding islets, the total area of the group is approximately 187,000 square meters. The two main islands, Seodo (West Islet) and Dongdo (East Islet), host a number of structures such as a docking facility, a heliport, and living facilities. Dokdo is located over 87 kilometres southeast of the nearest Korean island, Ulleungdo, whereas the nearest Japanese island (Oki) is located more than 157 kilometres to the southeast. Designated as state-owned land, Dokdo and its surrounding waters are patrolled by the Dokdo Coast Guard and Korea Coast Guard vessels. Other than the Coast Guard, several lighthouse staff and local government officers, Dokdo is also home to a number of civilian residents.

Korean claims of ownership to Dokdo date back to the sixth century (AD 512). Over the centuries, the islands were referred to by different names, but Korean sovereignty and administrative control continued uninterrupted even after the adoption of a 'vacant island policy' from the early 15th to the late 19th centuries, which prohibited settlement on islands considered too remote from the Korean mainland (Shin 1997). Successive administrations promulgated policies to manage offshore islands, such as sending survey teams to the islands and the near waters, and updating their administrative status. Japan, it should be noted, contends that what is depicted as Dokdo in the earliest Korean text sounds more like Utsuryo Island. Nevertheless, Korea dismisses the Japanese interpretation, and officially rejects the existence of a dispute at all.

Japanese historical documents on Dokdo are relatively recent, with the earliest records dating back to the late 1700s, which is a report of a trip to Oki Island. The report has been presented by Japan as proof of sovereignty ever since the territorial question first emerged in the early post-War years. However, Korean researchers argue that the document weakens Japan's position since it mentions the proximity of Dokdo to the Korean mainland (Ji 2010). In addition to this document, Tokyo relies on a host of historical texts such as field reports, maps, and administrative

# The Dokdo and Kuril Islands: Japan's Twin Disputes

Written by Serafettin Yilmaz

proclamations. Thus, Japan claims that both historically and from the point of view of international law, a valid dispute does indeed exist over the ownership of Dokdo.

## Colonial Legacies

The Korean and Japanese contest for control over Dokdo spans over 300 years. As early as the 1600s, conflict over fishing rights off the shores of several islands, including Dokdo, led to early negotiations between the two sides. Contentions intensified with the Meiji Restoration and the opening up of Korea to Japan in the 1870s. Japanese expansionism eventually led to the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, involving, among others, competition for domination over Korea. With the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895) that ended the First Sino-Japanese War, Japan ensured the recognition of Korea as an independent state by the Qing dynasty. Likewise, the wording of the peace treaty signed at the end of the Russo-Japanese War guaranteed Russia's recognition of Japanese interests in Korea.

Japan extended its *de facto* domination over Korea through a series of treaties and on-the-ground actions, including negotiating with Russia for a greater presence in Korea in return for recognizing Russia's interests in Manchuria, setting alliances with Great Britain and the United States to ensure their consent for an eventual incorporation of Korea, and forcing Korea to sign the Korean-Japanese Protocol Agreement in 1904 (which paved the way for the deployment of Japanese troops in the country). By 1905, Korea had already fallen under full Japanese control. Eventually, the second and third Korean-Japanese Agreements (November 1905 and 1907, respectively) ended Korean sovereignty and made it a Japanese protectorate. This included the Dokdo Islands. Although Japan formally annexed Korea in 1910, the question remains whether Tokyo treated Dokdo as a Japanese territory, or as part of an occupied Korea.

## Post-War Complications

Dokdo was incorporated in 1905 as *terra nullius* (no man's land), and in spite of Korean protestations, it was placed under the jurisdiction of the Shimane Prefectural government, a prefecture located in the northern region of west Japan. The backlash by Korean officials and intellectuals was of little significance since Korea had already become a protectorate of Japan by this time. Japan's recognition of Dokdo as a no man's land implied that by the time they were consolidated as a Japanese territory, the islands had 'no traces of ownership by any country,' thus legitimizing the Japanese action. The *terra nullius* argument was rejected by a number of Korean experts, however (Ch'oe 2015). In any case, Japanese assertion of control over Dokdo was only a continuation of its policy of territorial expansion. Dokdo was significant not only as a fishing grounds, but also as a naval base that became important in the major sea battles of the Russo-Japanese War.

After more than 40 years, Japan's *de facto* control over Dokdo Islands ended when it signed the Treaty of Peace with Japan (also known as the Treaty of San Francisco) in 1951. However, much as wartime declarations had, the post-war peace treaty, too, failed to provide an effective solution, instead leaving the issue in perpetual limbo. In both the Cairo Declaration (1943) and the Potsdam Declaration (1945), the status of Dokdo remained unclear even though these documents demanded the relinquishment of the territories occupied by Japan. Furthermore, geopolitical and ideological rivalries among the victorious nations became manifest during the negotiations over a peace treaty with Japan. Reflecting internal disagreements among the Allied powers, the Dokdo islands were included in some of the early drafts of the treaty and were missing in others, including the final draft, as desired by the US side (Emmers 2010, 10).

This vagueness caused the disagreement between Japan and Korea to linger on into the post-War era: The former holds that Dokdo was not specifically mentioned in the text and therefore remained outside the scope of the treaty, since it was an inherent territory of Japan when annexed. The latter, conversely, argues that Article 2(a) of the Treaty implied that Dokdo as being included in the 'all right, title and claim' to be renounced by Japan. Thus, goes the Korean argument, the islands' lack of mention did not mean that Dokdo was not included, as more than 3,000 other offshore territories were likewise not mentioned in the text (Emmers 2010, 9; Schrijver and Prislán 2015, 290-291).[1]

# **The Dokdo and Kuril Islands: Japan's Twin Disputes**

Written by Serafettin Yilmaz

The US refusal to allow the peace treaty to clearly refer to the status of the Dokdo Islands was an outcome of the emerging Cold War geopolitics. Indeed, by 1945, the Korean Peninsula has already been divided into two zones of influence, with the north and south occupied by troops from the Soviet Union and the United States, respectively. By 1951, the United Nations was well into the war in Korea. On the one hand, Washington did not want to completely alienate its southern ally on the Korean Peninsula by explicitly ruling out Korean control over the offshore islands, including Dokdo, while, on the other, it did not want to specify the islands in the text of the treaty lest they fall in the hands of the Communists in the event that the North prevailed. Eventually, upon the US rejection of Korean requests to include several more offshore islands in the peace treaty, in January 1952, Korean president Syngman Rhee proclaimed the unilateral imposition of jurisdiction over waters off the Korean coast, circumscribing Dokdo within the affected territory (Bukh 2015, 50).[2]

The two sides signed the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea in 1965. As part of the agreement, a joint regulation zone was established, allowing fishermen from the two countries to operate in the region. Diplomatic normalization, however, did not prevent sporadic flare ups in the decades that followed. In the 1970s, bilateral relations deteriorated upon the establishment of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) by both countries with overlapping claims – the conclusion of a series of agreements on the management of the northern and southern parts of the continental shelf in the Yellow Sea notwithstanding (Zhang 2015, 377–378).

## **Post-Cold War Optimism and Rising Tensions**

In the early post-Cold War era, there were several reasons to be optimistic about Korea-Japan relations in general, and the Dokdo question in particular. First, in both Japan and Korea, domestic political developments suggested a likely shift in attitude: In Japan, the dominant political party, the Liberal Democratic Party, lost power for the first time in 1993. In the same year, the first freely-elected civilian leader assumed the presidency in South Korea. Also, the end of the Cold War heralded a normalization of politics in East Asia, allowing the two countries to participate in the emerging regional security regimes.

Furthermore, in 1996, South Korea and Japan signed the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which paved the way for the two sides to determine their EEZ and agree on overlapping claims. Later, in 1998, Korea and Japan signed a new fisheries agreement to replace the 1965 accord, which created intermediate zones which fishing vessels could enter (Xue 2005). Finally, on the economic plane, the impact of the Asian financial crisis of 1996 led the two countries to participate in regional frameworks such as the Chiang Mai Initiative and the ASEAN+3.

Such optimism was short lived, however. Domestically, the two governments' official positions on maritime claims followed those of their predecessors even though, theoretically, both countries now shared similar democratic values and adhered to basic international norms. Also, the wave of regionalism in East Asia did not lead to any meaningful change in attitude toward sovereignty-related issues. Participation in the UNCLOS or growing bilateral trade and people-to-people communication – positive as these developments were – did not preclude contentions over overlapping maritime claims (Bong 2013, 194–195).

In fact, a series of developments in the 2000s brought the Dokdo question to the fore. In 2004, Korea issued postage stamps depicting Dokdo, leading to protests in Japan. A year later, Shimane Prefecture ordained 22 February as Takeshima Day. In the same year, Tokyo announced a maritime surveillance mission in the vicinity of Dokdo Islands, which prompted Korea to send gunboats to the area (Bukh 2015, 56; YNA 2020). Bilateral relations were further strained when the Japanese government asked textbook publishers to describe Dokdo as Japanese territory.

Tensions over the contested territories continued throughout the second decade of the new millennium as well. In 2012, Lee Myung-bak paid a visit to Dokdo, becoming the first Korean president to do so. In reaction, members of the Japanese cabinet and the ruling party participated in Takeshima Day celebrations (Ismail 2017, 86–87). South Korean military drills aimed at defending Dokdo as part of the country's new defense concept 'with a focus on responding to potential threats by neighbouring countries, particularly Japan' generated backlash in Tokyo several times over the past decade (Jeong 2018). More recently, Japan's reopening of the National Museum of Territory and

# **The Dokdo and Kuril Islands: Japan's Twin Disputes**

Written by Serafettin Yilmaz

Sovereignty, where the Dokdo islands are presented as national territory, elicited criticism from Korea.

## **Dokdo Islands: Political and Economic Significance**

The claim to sovereign control based on historical entitlement has been a strong rationale in contests over territory, especially in East Asia. In the case of the Dokdo Islands, nationalism on both sides has been a critical impediment to a negotiated solution (Wiegand and Choi 2017). However, even though the utility of nationalist sentiment in generating a rally effect in domestic politics has been demonstrated (Hwang, Cho, and Wiegand 2018; Fearon 1994), beneath those sentiments of national pride lie other geopolitical and economic rationales (Pereslavitsev 2018, 76).

Among the factors complicating the territorial claims is the geographic location of the islands as a forward base for the observation and monitoring of military activities.[3] Dokdo can help enhance sea and air situational awareness, especially if it is further enlarged using island-building techniques. Dokdo also holds significant economic value in the form of marine and hydrocarbon resources. In terms of marine wealth, the waters surrounding the islands have been traditional fishing areas for centuries. The islands also provide shelter for fishing boats as a resting area in peace time and a safe harbour during storms. According to the Korean Website K-Dokdo, the region is also believed to contain large amounts of gas hydrate deposits.

### *Strategies for Dokdo*

As a historical issue, Dokdo conjures different meanings in Korea and Japan. From a Korean perspective, Dokdo is as much a question about its past as its present. For Japan, on the other hand, the question is a modern one detached from any emotional attachment to the past. Herein lies the problem of closure: For Japan, the treaty of 1965 normalizing ties with Korea ended a chapter in its history, including its pre-war efforts bent on territorial expansion. Japan's attitude of letting bygones be bygones, however, does not find an audience in Korea, for which Dokdo is considered historical territory.

Japan presents Dokdo as a contemporary dispute waiting for a practical resolution. Part of this strategy involves internationalization of the question as a legal debate, which explains why Japan has attempted to take the Dokdo issue to the International Court of Justice several times in the past (Park and Chubb 2011). For Korea, the Japanese 'proposal ... is not even worthy of consideration' since 'there is no territorial dispute over [Dokdo]' (MOFA of the ROK 2012). Accordingly, the question of whether earlier cases might constitute a legal precedent for the present conflict is moot. First and foremost, Korea officially rejects the existence of a dispute. Second, since each territorial conflict has its own characteristics, citing precedent is rather difficult (Schrijver and Prislán 2015).

## **The Kuril Islands/Northern Territories Question**

The Kuril Islands (Kurilskiye Ostrova, in Russian, and known as Northern Territories/Southern Chishima in Japan, or Chishima-rettō) form a natural barrier between the Sea of Okhotsk and North Pacific Ocean. Extending 1,200 kilometres between the southern tip of the Kamchatka Peninsula and the Japanese island of Hokkaido, it consists of 56 islands that cover 15,600 square kilometres. The four islands (the Southern Kurils) at the heart of the dispute are Iturup (Etorofu), Kunashir (Kunashiri), Shikotan, and Habomai. The islands are currently administered by Sakhalin Oblast as South Kuril District. Tectonically and volcanically active, the Kuril archipelago is inhabited by over 10,000 people from various ethnic groups, as well as several thousand Russian troops (Kaczynski 2007; Elleman, Nichols, and Ouimet 1999, 490).

Officially, Japan considers Russia's control over 'four islands located off the northeast coast of the Nemuro Peninsula of Hokkaido' an 'occupation.' Japan's claims are historical and based on first discovery and continuous settlement. It calls for a 'flexible' negotiated solution with Russia eventually ceding control, reiterating that it would not subject the 'Russian current residents on the islands' to any sort of forced relocation or deportation (MOFA of Japan 2011).

Russia stresses that its sovereignty over the islands is not to be discussed, holding that its possession of the South

# The Dokdo and Kuril Islands: Japan's Twin Disputes

Written by Serafettin Yilmaz

Kurils is legal, thus, especially in view of the amendments to the Russian Constitution which bars any transfer of national territory, 'no changes are possible in this position' (Zakharova 2020). The Russian government also rejects the argument that the islands would be returned to Tokyo upon the completion of a peace treaty with Japan (MOFA of the Russian Federation 2020).

## *Kuril Islands Conflict: Historical Development*

Originally settled by Ainu people, the Kuril Islands saw a number of expeditions carried out by Dutch, Japanese, and Russian explorers. Czarist Russia incorporated the islands into the empire in 1786. Japan exerted effective control over the islands by the early 19th century. In the Treaty of Shimoda (1855), the two sides partitioned the island chain, with Japan retaining the southern Kuril Islands of Iturup, Kunashir, Shikotan, and Habomai. However, since the treaty left the question of the ownership of Sakhalin unanswered, conflicts continued until the Treaty of St. Petersburg (1875) in which Russia ceded control over all of the Kuril Islands in exchange for keeping Sakhalin (Hasegawa 1998, 8). The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 resulted in the defeat of the Russian Navy and led to the Portsmouth Peace Treaty (1905), in which Japan took the southern part of Sakhalin below the 50th parallel (Martin 1967; Keene 2002, 628). From 1875 to 1945, the entire Kuril Islands chain remained under Japanese control.

The Kuril question resurfaced at the Yalta (Crimea) Conference in February 1945 in which, in an effort to enlist Russia in the war against Japan, the allied powers promised to give the Kurils and Sakhalin to the Soviet Union upon Japan's defeat. This led to the USSR's withdrawal from the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact of 1941, which was to have been in effect for five years. Japan argues that the Yalta Accords were contrary to the language of both the Atlantic Charter (1941), to which the Soviet Union pledged allegiance, and the Cairo Declaration (1943), which stressed the USSR's acquiescence to the Atlantic Charter. It further holds that, as per the Cairo Declaration, 'it is clear that the Northern Territories do not constitute territories that Japan seized "by violence and greed"' (MOFA of Japan, n.d.).

The USSR took control of Southern Sakhalin and four Kuril islands between 18 August and 1 September 1945 without any resistance from what was left of the Japanese military (Elleman, Nichols, and Ouimet 1999, 492–494). On 2 September 1945, Japanese Foreign Minister Mamoru Shigemitsu and General Yoshijiro Umezumi signed the Instrument of Surrender on the deck of the USS Missouri. As stipulated by the terms of the Potsdam Declaration of July 1945, Japan's sovereignty was limited to the four main islands (Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, and Shikoku) as well as minor islands to be determined by the allies. The Soviets incorporated the Kuril Islands in February 1946 and, over the following three years, deported most of the Japanese-speaking residents to Hokkaido.

The Treaty of Peace was designed to bring an effective end to the war and settle all questions related to territories occupied by Japan during its period of military expansion. Along the lines of the Yalta agreement, Article 11(c) of the treaty stated that 'Japan renounces all right, title and claim to the Kuril Islands, and to that portion of Sakhalin and the islands adjacent to it' (Treaty of peace with Japan 1952). The Soviet Union participated in the conference, however it did not sign the Treaty because, among other reasons, the Treaty did not promulgate to which states these territories were going to be transferred. Japan stresses the USSR's non-participation in the treaty and argues that the four southern islands were not included in the Kuril chain.

During the decades leading up to the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Kurils remained a major impediment of a conclusive peace treaty between Japan and the USSR. The two sides agreed on a joint declaration on ending the state of war and normalized diplomatic relationship in 1956. Historical records show that Japanese negotiations over a peace treaty with Russia were strongly influenced by ideological considerations and the Washington's own geopolitical interests. At the outset of the talks held in London in June 1955, Japan asked for a two-island solution, namely, the return of Habomai and Shikotan – a proposal that was initially rejected by the Soviets. However, as the talks proceeded, the Russian side acceded to the Japanese request on the condition that Tokyo would keep the islands demilitarized and promise that its security alliance with the United States would not target a third state. The US delegation objected to the Russian conditions, especially those related to naval access to the Sea of Japan, which brought the negotiations to a standstill (Elleman, Nichols, and Ouimet 1999, 497). Furthermore, when in mid-1956 Japan seemed to eventually agree on the terms of a peace treaty with Russia in

# **The Dokdo and Kuril Islands: Japan's Twin Disputes**

Written by Serafettin Yilmaz

return for the retention of two of the four southern islands, the US government notified the Japanese side that if Japan did not reclaim all four islands, the United States would not return Okinawa (Schoenbaum 2008, 121; Clark 2005, 3). As a result, although the two sides restored diplomatic relations in 1956, the territorial disagreement remained unsettled.

It is stated in the Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration that the USSR 'agrees to hand over to Japan the Habomai Islands and the island of Shikotan ... the actual handing over these islands to Japan shall take place after the conclusion of a peace treaty' (MOFA of Japan 2001). Drawing on this, Japan argues that, as a legally binding document, the treaty established Japan's sovereignty over the islands. Russia, however, argues that 'following Japan's signing a security treaty with the United States in 1960, the former Soviet Union revoked its liabilities concerning the transfer of the islands' (TASS 2019).

## **Post-Cold War: Japan's Monetization Attempt**

Whereas during the years preceding diplomatic normalization Japan mostly maintained a hawkish strategy of 'politics first, economy second,' by conditioning cooperation in trade to the solution of the Kurils question, its diplomatic efforts, especially in the first decade of the post-Cold War era, evolved to one in which it sought to retain the islands by offering economic assistance in return (Chang 1998, 176).

Although the two countries officially ended the war and normalized relations, Cold War divisions and geopolitics forestalled any meaningful solution. Up until the 1970s, the Soviet Union rejected the existence of a dispute, and peace treaty negotiations came to a standstill. Diplomatic dialogue over the islands started only when General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev paid a state visit to Japan in 1991 when the two sides signed the Japan-Soviet Joint Communiqué and acknowledged the existence of a territorial issue (MOFA of Japan 2001).

Russia officially recognized the Kuril dispute in 1993. Confirming the 1956 Joint Declaration, the Tokyo Declaration on Russian-Japanese Relations expressed that the two parties 'have undertaken serious negotiations on the issue of where Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan and the Habomai Islands belong' (MOFA of Japan 1993). Throughout the 1990s, well aware of the political and economic challenges the Russian Federation faced, Japan embarked on an ambitious course of money diplomacy to take back the claimed territories. However, in spite of several high-profile exchanges between the two parties throughout the 1990s, the territorial problem remained unsolved (Tarlow 2000, 127-128; Chang 1998, 189).

Thus, in the first two decades of 2000, the debate gradually shifted from the return of the islands to Japan to the management and development of the region. Improving domestic conditions was a key factor in this shift: better political and economic stability in Russia revived a stronger sense of territorial control. The policy of semi-acknowledgement of a dispute evolved into a complete rejection of the existence of a territorial issue. In Japan, nationalist sentiment grew against the backdrop of disputes with China and South Korea. Gradually, therefore, a Japanese solution to the Kurils issue became a distant likelihood (TASS 2020).

The Kuril Islands are significant, both economically and geopolitically. In terms of resources, 'the four islands are believed to be rich in minerals...' (Chang 1998, 182). They are also 'surrounded by rich fishing areas, where a third of the amount of fish caught in the Far East seas is caught' (Hamzah, Esmael, and Abbas 2020). The islands' geographic location is crucial in view of the opening up of the Russian Arctic coastline (the Northeast Passage) as an alternative sea route for East Asian trade, especially that from China via the Sea of Japan and the Sea of Okhotsk (Yilmaz 2017, 65-66). Furthermore, considering the extensive and growing level of energy cooperation between China and Russia in the Arctic region, the Kuril Islands are of strategic importance for the sea-based energy trade (Chun 2020).

Militarily, too, the Kuril Islands are important. They serve as a practical outpost overlooking the North Pacific Ocean. The Russian military objects to any sort of transfer of the South Kurils, given that they are instrumental 'to prevent American submarines to pass through the straights around the island' and 'to protect the Far East coastline against

# The Dokdo and Kuril Islands: Japan's Twin Disputes

Written by Serafettin Yilmaz

potential threats from the US, China and Japan' (Chang 1998, 181). The islands 'control the movements of the Russian fleet in the Pacific located in Vladivostok,' and therefore foreign ownership of the islands would pose a potential threat to Russia's naval presence in the Pacific (Hamzah, Esmael, and Abbas 2020; AP News 2020).

## Japan's Twin Disputes: Comparison and Prospects

It should be understood that Japan's two territorial conflicts have some commonalities and differences. First, the parties that enjoy *de facto* control over the islands decline to acknowledge that a dispute even exists. This is especially true in the case of South Korea. As for Russia, over the past two decades, the country's strategy has shifted from considering a monetized or two-island solution to a policy of rejecting the existence of a dispute. Japan's position vis-à-vis the Kuril Islands is therefore weaker now than it was in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Second, in both cases, practical considerations appear to be more pronounced even though the presence of strong nationalist sentiments cannot be ignored. Both Dokdo and the Kuril Islands are of economic and geopolitical importance to the countries claiming them. Economically, the islands and their surrounding waters are destinations for marine tourism, mineral resource extraction, and fishing activities. The location of both island groups offers advantages in terms of naval outreach, as well as, in the case of the Kurils, control over the sea routes in the Arctic-bound trade between East Asia and Western Europe.

Moreover, as the disputing party in both cases, Japan's strategy provides insights into the pragmatism of the country's foreign policy. One such instance was Tokyo's attempt to use check book diplomacy in the 1990s to assume control over the Kurils against the backdrop of the crisis Russia was undergoing. Finally, in both instances, Japan has actively sought internationalization. This is especially true in the case of Dokdo, in which Japan has attempted several times to bring the dispute to international arbitration. For its part, South Korea has firmly ruled out any third-party arbitration and instead seeks to highlight Dokdo by promoting its nature, culture, and folklore. Tokyo's attempts reflect its capacity to devise flexible diplomatic solutions, since the government objects any sort of internationalization of the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands by denying the existence of a dispute over these East China Sea features. Meanwhile, unlike Korea, Russia seems less concerned about Japan's internationalization attempts vis-à-vis the Kuril Islands.

Obviously, to fully account for the two territorial questions, one needs to factor in the ideological and geopolitical considerations of the United States in the years immediately after WW2 and the ensuing Cold War. US opposition to any explicit reference to the Dokdo Islands during the drafting of the Peace Treaty out of concern that Korea might fall to the Communists no doubt contributed to the present-day dilemma. Similarly, in the years leading up to the normalization of Japan-Russia relations, Washington objected to a two-island solution. It is also worth noting that, at present, the United States maintains a more-or-less neutral position on the Dokdo question between Japan and South Korea, whereas on the issue of the Kurils, it has publicly endorsed the Japanese position (Japan Times 2014).

It follows that, in the post-war era, political and economic normalization has failed to lead to a solution in either of the territorial conflicts. In fact, Japan today has much less room to manoeuvre on its territorial claims than before (much like the rest of the territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas). Deepening economic ties, ideological affinity, and the all-encompassing US security umbrella involving both Japan and South Korea have all failed to facilitate a negotiated solution on the Dokdo Islands. In the same way, diplomatic normalization and huge economic potential has fallen short of providing a basis for constructive communication between Russia and Japan over the Kuril Islands. Furthermore, while international law is theoretically applicable through the voluntary employment of dispute-resolution mechanisms, this has proven ineffective since both South Korea and Russia refuse to entertain such an idea. This intransigence is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

In both cases, perhaps the strategy with the highest chance of success is a realistic one: one that best manages the differences between the relevant parties and having the aim of promoting stable relations, rather than continuing to try to bring those disagreements to an amicable end. Such a shelving of disagreements may lead to a protracted situation, further solidifying mutually exclusive positions. Management of the differences in the interpretations of territorial title, therefore, needs to focus on finding mechanisms for communication and information-sharing to avoid

# The Dokdo and Kuril Islands: Japan's Twin Disputes

Written by Serafettin Yilmaz

misunderstandings, and making sure that disagreements do not impede cooperation in other issue areas.

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[1] In fact, the Peace Treaty annulled the MacArthur Line, which demarcated the waters in the area and kept Japanese fishing boats away from the region, leading to numerous confrontations over fishing activities.

[2] Up until the repeal of Rhee's proclamation in 1965, thousands of Japanese fishermen were arrested in the waters defined by the line.

[3] During the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, Japan monitored the Russian Navy using an observation tower on the island.

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## About the author:

**Serafettin Yilmaz** (Yao Shifan), PhD, is an Associate Professor in School of Political Science and Public Administration at Shandong University, China. His research interests include energy security, global governance, and East Asia regional development. His articles have appeared in *Asian Politics & Policy*, *Asian Perspective*, *Pacific Focus*, *Asia Europe Journal*, *Energy Strategy Reviews*, *International Relations of the Asia Pacific*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, *Issues and Studies*, and *International Critical Thought*.