



**The Politicization of the Liancourt Rocks Dispute:  
Its Effect on the Japan-South Korea Relationship**

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## Executive Summary

Northeast Asia is the site of the 21st century's greatest geopolitical challenges. Cold War legacies, including the unresolved Korean War and the ambiguous status of Taiwan, and the return of China as a great power will test the durability of the existing international order. During this tumultuous time, it is in Japan and South Korea's best interests to cooperate with each other as two U.S.-allied, democratic-capitalist societies striving to maintain regional stability and uphold the international status quo. Yet conflicts over strategically insignificant issues often sour relations between Japan and South Korea.

The diplomatic brawl over who has sovereignty over the Liancourt Rocks is one of these strategically insignificant issues that has a disproportionate negative impact on bilateral relations. The Liancourt Rocks, called "Takeshima" in Japan and "Dokdo" in South Korea, are a group of small islets located 211 km (114 nmi) from Honshu and 216 km (117 nmi) from the Korean Peninsula. The practical question of who has effective control – one of the key components of sovereignty – over the Liancourt Rocks is moot because South Korea has had effective control over the islands ever since Syngman Rhee unilaterally declared the "Peace Line" in 1952, and Japan is constitutionally prohibited from using force to settle international disputes. However, the normative issue of who ought to have sovereignty and control over the Liancourt Rocks continues to be a volatile issue in Japan-South Korea relations.

This case study analyzes how domestic politics intersect with the Liancourt Rocks dispute to sustain the issue as an impediment to strategic rapprochement between Japan and South Korea. It examines the politicization of this island dispute, specifically, why politicians on both sides of the Tsushima Strait perceive any benefit to raising the salience of an issue that they know will disrupt bilateral cooperation. By focusing on (1) three Japanese Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) members' botched attempt to visit Ulleung in August 2011 and (2) South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak's landing on the Liancourt Rocks in August 2012, this paper argues that politicians visit the islands in pursuit of domestic political benefits – but that such attempts have high strategic costs.

This case study first analyzes the ultimate and proximate causes of the politicization of the Liancourt Rocks dispute, then outlines the consequences of politicization on the bilateral relationship. Finally, it concludes by suggesting that mainstream politicians should manage the dispute by reducing the salience of the Liancourt Rocks among the citizenry of both countries so that actions of individual extremists will no longer be rewarded.



# The Politicization of the Liancourt Rocks Dispute: Its Effect on the Japan-South Korea Relationship

By M. Erika Pollmann

## Causes: When do the Liancourt Rocks become a political issue?

In analyzing the Liancourt Rocks' influence on the bilateral relationship, it is useful to distinguish between ultimate/historical causes of the tensions, which are static, and proximate/political causes, which fluctuate. The ultimate cause of the dispute is the controversy surrounding how Japan came to acquire the islands in 1905, and it explains why the issue has such resonance in Korea whenever the Liancourt Rocks become salient in public consciousness. However, as historical narratives are a constant, they are not very good at explaining the variation in contestation over time. The fluctuation of issue salience can only be explained by more proximate causes; the dispute becomes a political issue only when individual politicians choose to raise the issue of sovereignty because they desire to capitalize on nationalist, anti-Other sentiment to gain popularity.

The historical aspect of the controversy is rooted in the question of who originally owned the islands. Japan asserts that it established control in 1905 based on the principle of *terra nullius* and surveys conducted since 1895. According to the Japanese interpretation, the Liancourt Rocks are Japanese territory because they used to be unoccupied territory. South Korea claims that it has possessed the Liancourt Rocks since 512 under the Silla Dynasty. Koreans understand the Japanese incorporation of the Liancourt Rocks into Shimane Prefecture as part of Japan's greater imperial expansion into Korea, which started with the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) before official annexation in 1910. To Koreans, the Liancourt Rocks represent the "first victim of Japan's invasion."<sup>1</sup>

After Japan was defeated by the United States and its allies in WWII, Article 2(a) of the San Francisco Peace Treaty declared that, "Japan, recognizing the independence of Korea, renounces all right, title and claim to Korea including the islands of Quelpart, Port Hamilton and Dagelet," but "the Liancourt Rocks" are not specifically mentioned. The essence of the history question is, did Japan take the Liancourt Rocks legally under *terra nullius*, or illegally by "violence and greed"?<sup>2</sup> This controversy leads directly to current questions about whether or not "the Liancourt Rocks" are part of the "Korea" that Japan was forced to renounce.

Though historical ambiguity generates the source material that fuels continued disagreement over who ought to own the Liancourt Rocks now, it does not have to hinder Japan-South Korea bilateral relations. Cooperation can be achieved without resolution, as exemplified by Japan and South Korea signing the Treaty on Basic Relations between Korea and Japan in 1965. At the time, the intractability of the issue led to an affirmation by both sides that "the issue required no immediate resolution and would be settled at a future date."<sup>3</sup> Another example of

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<sup>1</sup> "Editorial: The Takeshima Issue," *Asahi Shimbun*, March 12, 2005, <http://www.asahi.com/english/opinion/TKY200503120135.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Seokwoo Lee, "The 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty with Japan and the Territorial Disputes in East Asia," *Pacific Rim Law and Policy Journal* 2, no. 1 (2002), 94-6.

<sup>3</sup> Victor Cha, "Bridging the Gap: The Strategic Context of the 1965 Korea-Japan Normalization Treaty," *Korean Studies* 20 (1996), 158.

cooperation is the 1999 fisheries agreement, which set quotas for each country's fishermen and established a joint fishing zone, but made it very clear that this agreement would not "prejudice" any future decision on the delimitation of exclusive economic zones.<sup>4</sup>

When other issues are more important, decision-makers can muster the political will to manage the history question. In 1965, Park Chung Hee's need for Japanese development loans drove the compromise. In 1999, Kim Dae-Jung saw the agreement through with his personal commitment to improving ties with Japan. Hence, the salience of the Liancourt Rocks in the Japan-South Korea relationship is – proximately – a function of domestic politics, or the political will to resist nationalist pressure and work around the issue.

Recent tensions can be traced back to the failure of the 1999 fisheries agreement to protect Japanese interests. Shimane Prefecture established "Takeshima Day" in 2005 to commemorate the centennial of the incorporation of the Liancourt Rocks. From the Shimane prefectural government's perspective, they wanted to appeal to the central government to more proactively protect agreed-upon interests. They did not want to inflame relations with South Korea. Sumita Nobuyoshi, then-governor of Shimane Prefecture, explained, "Though this prefecture had urged the *national government* to establish Japanese territorial rights to Takeshima for many years, there was no progress whatsoever. ... Therefore, this ordinance was formulated because many citizens of the prefecture wanted to inform Japanese public opinion and encourage active efforts at the *national level*" (emphasis added).<sup>5</sup>

Shimane locals would have undoubtedly understood that this move could damage relations with South Korea. But their concerns about overfishing and fishing access outweighed such considerations. They were attempting to force the conclusion of a pragmatic solution allowing them to continue fishing close to the Liancourt Rocks. Governor Sumita makes this clear in his declaration by expressing his wish to continue exchanges with North Gyeongsang Province of Korea and keep the territorial issue separate from the Japan-South Korea bilateral relationship as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

Yet Governor Sumita's wish went unfulfilled because from the South Korean perspective, "Takeshima Day" is seen as the celebration of Japan beginning its colonial conquest of the Korean peninsula. Seoul demanded that the bill be immediately withdrawn (which Tokyo refused to do, because it would not interfere with decisions made by local legislatures), and postponed Foreign Minister Ban Ki Moon's scheduled visit to Japan. North Gyeongsang Province recalled all staff from Shimane, and Shimane staff in North Gyeongsang were ordered to not report to work.<sup>7</sup> In his first public address following the ordinance, President Roh Moo-Hyun lambasted Japan: "In dealing with the past, the different attitudes of Germany and Japan teach us a lot. As the attitudes of the two countries are different, the degree of trust each has won from its neighbors is different."<sup>8</sup> In a 2006 "Special Message" on Korea-Japan relations, Roh

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<sup>4</sup> Sun Pyo Kim, "The UNCLOS Convention and New Fisheries Agreements in Northeast Asia," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Korea.

<sup>5</sup> Shimane Prefectural Government, "On the Occasion of Takeshima Day," accessed Sept. 28, 2014, [http://www.pref.shimane.lg.jp/soumu/takesima\\_eng/take8.html](http://www.pref.shimane.lg.jp/soumu/takesima_eng/take8.html).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> "Editorial: The Takeshima Issue."

<sup>8</sup> Cheong Wa Dae: Office of the President, "Address on State Affairs Marking the Second Anniversary of His Inauguration," Feb. 25, 2005,



declared: “Japan’s present claim to Dokdo is tantamount to maintaining a right to what it had once occupied during an imperialist war of aggression and, what is worse, to reasserting colonial territorial rights of bygone years. . . . For Koreans, Dokdo is a symbol of the complete recovery of sovereignty.”<sup>9</sup> Roh’s heated rhetoric created a situation where South Korea could not even consider negotiating over the dispute, as doing so would be seen as a post-facto legitimation of Japan’s colonial rule.<sup>10</sup>

Between 1999 and 2005, the Japanese and South Korean central governments could ignore the sovereignty dispute. But when Shimane fishermen came to believe that they could not pursue their economic interests without central government intervention,<sup>11</sup> they took the fateful step to elevate the issue to the national, and by extension, the bilateral, level. Though they had no wish to worsen relations with South Korea, such an outcome was inevitable considering the island’s fraught historiography.

Appealing to national opinion has had a negative effect on Shimane fishermen’s ability to achieve a peaceful solution that benefits them, as Japan’s national-level politicians captured the issue to advance their own political careers and agendas. On Aug. 1, 2011, three ultra-conservative members of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Shindo Yoshitaka (Saitama Prefecture),<sup>12</sup> Inada Tomomi (Fukui Prefecture),<sup>13</sup> and Sato Masahisa (Fukushima Prefecture)<sup>14</sup> tried to visit Ulleung, an island close to the Liancourt Rocks, but Korea’s immigration office stopped them at Gimpo Airport, causing a media sensation.

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[http://16cwnd.pa.go.kr/cwd/en/archive/archive\\_view.php?meta\\_id=en\\_speeches&page=10&m\\_def=&ss\\_def=&category=&navi=president&sel\\_type=1&keyword=&id=419e67897a9333b10cfa1f10](http://16cwnd.pa.go.kr/cwd/en/archive/archive_view.php?meta_id=en_speeches&page=10&m_def=&ss_def=&category=&navi=president&sel_type=1&keyword=&id=419e67897a9333b10cfa1f10).

<sup>9</sup> Cheong Wa Dae: Office of the President, “Special Message by President Roh Moo-hyun on Korea-Japan Relations,” April 25, 2006,

[http://16cwnd.pa.go.kr/cwd/en/archive/archive\\_view.php?meta\\_id=en\\_speeches&page=6&m\\_def=&ss\\_def=&category=&navi=president&sel\\_type=1&keyword=&id=f5186819ab5188f8b22a67c6](http://16cwnd.pa.go.kr/cwd/en/archive/archive_view.php?meta_id=en_speeches&page=6&m_def=&ss_def=&category=&navi=president&sel_type=1&keyword=&id=f5186819ab5188f8b22a67c6).

<sup>10</sup> Dong-Joon Park and Danielle Chubb, “Why Dokdo Matters to Korea,” *The Diplomat*. Aug. 17, 2011, <http://thediplomat.com/2011/08/why-dokdo-matters-to-korea/>.

<sup>11</sup> Even now, in a 2013 survey of 1,202 Shimane residents, the most popular response to the question, “What should Shimane Prefecture do to resolve the Takeshima dispute?” is “Request strong support from the *central government* (emphasis added)” at 38% of respondents. Shimane Prefectural Government, “Takeshima Mondai Kaiketsu no tame ni Kenn ga subeki koto (What the Prefecture must do to resolve the Takeshima Problem),” accessed Sept. 28, 2014, <http://www.pref.shimane.lg.jp/admin/seisaku/koho/yoron/H25report/3-3.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Shindo’s motivations are quite clear in a Sosei Nippon announcement publicized on his website three months before the incident at Gimpo airport, which calls on the Japanese government to strongly protest the South Korean government’s construction on the Liancourt Rocks. Shindo Yoshitaka Official Webpage, “Takeshima Mondai no huhou senryou kyouka ni taisuru kougi (Protesting the strengthening of the illegal occupation of Takeshima),” April 14, 2011,

<http://www.shindo.gr.jp/%E5%89%B5%E7%94%9F%E6%97%A5%E6%9C%AC%E7%AB%B9%E5%B3%B6%E6%B1%BA%E8%AD%B0.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> In her political manifesto, Inada prioritizes the protection of Japan’s independence and securing Japan’s terrestrial and marine territory. INADA Tomomi Official Homepage, “Dentou to Souzou: Dougi Taikoku Jitsugenn no tame ni (Tradition and Creation: To become a moral superpower),” accessed Sept. 28, 2014, <http://www.inada-tomomi.com/plitical-idea/political.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Sato is a former Japanese Ground Self-Defense Forces officer and a strong supporter of constitutional reinterpretation of Article 9. Sato Masahisa Official Website, accessed Sept. 28, 2014, <http://hige-sato.jp/index.html>. Inada and Sato are also regular worshippers at the Yasukuni Shrine, another touchstone in Japan-South Korea relations.

While these three politicians were moved by a personal ideological commitment to restore pride in the Japanese nation and make Japan a “normal” country, the LDP approved the visit – despite South Korean warnings that they would be stopped – based on a cynical political calculus: the LDP hoped it would make the ruling party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), look weak on territorial issues. That July, the LDP still trailed the DPJ in the Upper House elections. As Lee Jae-Oh, a South Korean politician and the minister of special affairs at the time, commented, “The Japanese LDP people are picking on Dokdo to save their reduced domestic status.”<sup>15</sup> After the incident, every South Korean political party issued a statement denouncing the trio as opportunists trying to reap political benefits by appealing to the right-wing base.<sup>16</sup> Given the costs to the bilateral relationship, the LDP may not have been so eager for its members to attempt the visit if the party had not been in such a weak position.

Even the South Korean response was determined by domestic politics: most South Korean officials opposed denying entry to the LDP politicians because it would create the perception that a dispute does exist, but Lee Jae-Oh’s recommendation to stop the LDP members was accepted because of *consideration of public opinion*.<sup>17</sup> Lee wanted to run for president as the conservative Grand National Party’s (GNP) candidate the following year, and his desire to cater to nationalist sentiment determined the South Korean government’s inept response.

Bringing up the Liancourt Rocks dispute can be politically expedient in South Korea as well, as exemplified by President Lee’s visit on Aug. 10, 2012. A lame duck president with declining popularity mired in corruption scandals, Lee timed his visit, in the middle of the London Olympic Games, to maximize domestic political benefits. In a government poll, 80 percent of Koreans approved of the visit. The political nature of the visit is also highlighted by the fact that it was Lee’s personal decision and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was not involved in planning it.<sup>18</sup> The visit was extremely damaging diplomatically, especially considering how closely this visit followed the South Korean National Assembly’s failure to ratify the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and the Acquisitions and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) with Japan. While South Korean political parties are generally united in their anti-Japanism, in this instance, opposition politicians criticized Lee for using the incident to score political points.<sup>19</sup>

While historical narratives give politicians the leeway to cloak the dispute with artificial depth and inflated importance, a superficial and cynical political calculus initiates these territorial crises. Individually, politicians who choose to politicize the issue generally do not suffer for their indiscretion. Shindo and Inada attained Cabinet positions during Abe Shinzo’s second round as prime minister. Inada is now chairwoman of the LDP’s policy research council.

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<sup>15</sup> “Lawmakers’ visit tied to Japan’s politics,” *The Korea Herald*, Aug. 1, 2011, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20110801000798>.

<sup>16</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, “Japanese Lawmakers Denied Entry in South Korea,” *The New York Times*, Aug. 1, 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/02/world/asia/02korea.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Shinichi Nishiwaki and Inukai Naoyuki, “Takeshima Mondai: Ulleungtou shisatsu, giin nyuukoku kyohi, Nihonn, Kannkoku ni kougai, ryouseifu choukika nozomazu (The Takeshima Problem: Ulleung visit, Congress members denied entry into the country, Japan protests South Korea, neither government wants the problem prolonged),” *Mainichi Shinbun* Tokyo Morning Edition: 7, Aug. 2, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Kee-Seok Kim, “Lee Myung Bak’s stunt over disputed islands,” *East Asia Forum*, Aug. 19, 2012, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/08/19/lee-myung-baks-stunt-over-disputed-islands/>.

<sup>19</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, “South Korea’s visit to Disputed Islets Angers Japan,” *The New York Times*, Aug. 10, 2012 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/11/world/asia/south-koreans-visit-to-disputed-islets-angers-japan.html>.

Sato is the director of the committee on foreign affairs and defense and director of the special committee on legislation for the peace and security of Japan and the international community for the Upper House. Lee was an outgoing president, so he suffered no electoral consequences, and in fact regained some popularity. Yet their actions negatively affect their respective states' security by fostering ill will between the two potential allies.

The high level of animosity between Japan and South Korea makes it impossible for the two states to plan jointly for contingencies, for example, on the Korean Peninsula. This also hampers U.S. preparedness in the region, as it makes it difficult for the U.S. to predict how South Korea and Japan will react in response to a North Korean provocation. Would South Korea let Japanese ships visit the peninsula to evacuate Japanese citizens in times of crisis? What would Japan's role be in providing support to U.S. and South Korean forces? These are important questions. As a 2015 U.S. Congressional Research Service study notes, "A poor relationship between Seoul and Tokyo jeopardizes U.S. interests by complicating trilateral cooperation on North Korea policy and other regional challenges."<sup>20</sup>

Another challenge is the lack of an information-sharing mechanism despite shared concerns about a mutual adversary. The December 2014 signing of a memorandum of understanding between the United States, Japan, and South Korea that allows Japan and South Korea to share information with each other using the United States as an intermediary was hailed as progress, but there is no denying that this was a backup plan made necessary by the failure of GSOMIA in June 2012. GSOMIA would have made possible the direct sharing of information between Japan and South Korea.

Finally, greater Japan-South Korea cooperation would be in Japan and South Korea's interest because it would increase deterrence against North Korea. Deterrence works best when the state doing the deterring is at its most capable. While Japan and South Korea separately have an impressive array of capabilities in partnership with the United States, the two states could do more together. Unfortunately, continuing rows over the Liancourt Rocks makes such cooperation very difficult.

### **Consequences: Making cooperation more difficult by ingraining us-versus-them mentality**

Politicization of the Liancourt Rocks disrupts Japan-South Korea cooperation because it very publically highlights sources of disagreement and conflict at the expense of discussing reasons for mutual cooperation. Politicians' visits are especially damaging because politicians physically being stopped at an airport or traveling to an island are exciting, and commercial media entities are incentivized to cover these events instead of more mundane instances of cooperation, such as conferences or bilateral workshops. Nationalistic media coverage frames how Japanese and South Korean viewers should think about the Liancourt Rocks and constrains politicians from making "concessions" on the issue. This has long-term consequences because highlighting the dispute and framing the issue as a combative one erodes South Korean citizens' strategic trust in the Japanese state as a potential ally.

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<sup>20</sup> Emma Chanlett-Avery, Mark E. Manyin, Ian E. Rinehart, Rebecca M. Nelson, Brock R. Williams, "Japan-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, April 23, 2015, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33436.pdf>.

When there is disagreement over perceptions of shared historical events, the only way to deal with such issues is to either (1) agree on a common perception of the issue, which may be impossible, or (2) change the importance people ascribe to a particular dispute. The importance ascribed to the issue is a matter of relativity, and Kan Kimura recommends that governments take a “passive” approach, simply letting the matter quietly wither away instead of “actively” trying to convince people to stop caring about the issue, which risks a domestic backlash.<sup>21</sup> In the case of the Liancourt Rocks dispute, this means taking the approach agreed to in the 1965 Basic Treaty – not dealing with the question of sovereignty until the majority of Japanese and South Korean citizens do not care very much about it. This process needs to happen more in South Korea than in Japan, because in Japan, “there is a small group for whom it matters and a smaller group for whom it matters in an emotional sense,” but in South Korea, “it is really a mobilizing, energizing situation that has managed to strike a chord.”<sup>22</sup>

Politicians’ visits interfere with efforts to “passively” change the discourse and downgrade issue salience because they get a lot of play in the media. Coverage of “Takeshima” and “Dokdo” spiked after the LDP members’ attempted visit on Aug. 1, 2011 and President Lee’s visit on Aug. 10, 2012 (Tables and graphs can be found in Appendix I). However, there are two important differences between summer 2011 and summer 2012. First, when the LDP politicians attempted to visit, there was barely any difference in coverage of the Liancourt Rocks for Japan (based on search terms “Takeshima” in English and Japanese) while there was a notable increase in South Korea (based on search terms “Dokdo” in English and Korean). The LDP politicians’ attempted visit enraged South Koreans, but seems to have little to no impact in Japan. Second, the 2012 visit by President Lee generally got a lot more coverage than the LDP politicians’ attempted visit in both countries. Looking at trends since 2004, at no other time has there been such extensive coverage of the Liancourt Rocks. The only time it came close was in 2005, after Shimane’s declaration of “Takeshima Day.”

Observers of Japanese and South Korean political developments note how the Liancourt Rocks dispute takes away coverage from more important issues. David Kang and Jiun Bang write in *Comparative Connections* for summer 2011 that, “Coverage of the political sparring [over South Korea’s denial of entry to the LDP politicians] occurred at the expense of shedding light on other issues that deserved as much attention, if not more.”<sup>23</sup> A year later, Kang and Bang describe the tenor of news coverage of President Lee’s visit as “one dimensional,” with media outlets in both countries insisting on their respective country’s sovereignty claims.<sup>24</sup>

Following politicians’ visits, the visit and its subsequent consequences dominate discourse on Japan-South Korea relations. Such a focus emphasizes generally negative and uncompromising aspects of the relationship, rather than the more positive and negotiable facets. High-profile events increase issue salience, necessitating high-level responses, which makes it

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<sup>21</sup> Kan Kimura, “How can we cope with historical disputes? The Japanese and South Korean experience,” in *Changing Power Relations in Northeast Asia: Implications for Relations between Japan and South Korea*, ed. Marie Soderberg (New York: Routledge, 2011), 21-2.

<sup>22</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, “A Fierce Korean Pride in a Lonely Group of Islets,” *The New York Times*, Aug. 28, 2008, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/28/world/asia/28iht-island.2.15713708.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/28/world/asia/28iht-island.2.15713708.html?pagewanted=1&_r=0).

<sup>23</sup> David Kang and Jiun Bang, “Japan-Korea Relations: Reality or Symbolism in the Relationship,” *Comparative Connections*, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, (Sept. 2011), 1.

<sup>24</sup> David Kang and Jiun Bang, “Japan-Korea Relations: Grappling on a Hillside?” *Comparative Connections*, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, (September 2012), 2.

difficult for governments to appear as if they are backing down. The bilateral relationship can rapidly deteriorate in a series of tit-for-tat escalations. Every time one government responds to the other, it creates a “mini-event” that adds fodder to the media frenzy.

Even Korean observers criticized their government’s response to the LDP politicians’ attempted visit for politicizing an issue that should have been dealt with through “quiet diplomacy.” Before the visit, *The Korea Herald* admonished Lee Jae-Oh and GNP chair Hong Joon-Pyo to “calm down from their irritation about Japanese lawmakers’ plan to visit Ulleung-do. ... we should just treat them as some of the numerous Japanese tourists to Korea, no more, no less.”<sup>25</sup> An underlying skepticism remains in *The Korea Herald*’s commentary following the visit: “We are impressed by [Lee Jae-Oh’s] loyalty to the country and to the president, but his devotion of full three days in dealing with the Japanese politicians’ cheap gambit was a little excessive for a cabinet member.”<sup>26</sup> *The Korea Times* and *Chosun Ilbo* echo such criticism of the South Korean government’s handling of the LDP politicians’ attempted visit because it gave the politicians a platform to press their case, and much greater publicity in South Korea than they would have received if the government just let them visit Ulleung.<sup>27</sup>

A zero-sum framing of the dispute in nationalistic media makes it difficult for governments to pursue conciliatory policies because in democracies, Japanese and South Korean policymakers are constrained by what their citizens want, and what the average citizen wants is conditioned by what the media chooses to portray as important.

Dispute management was much more effective in summer 2011 than in summer 2012. On Aug. 2, 2011, *Mainichi Shinbun* reported that neither government wanted to escalate the dispute. High-level Japanese government officials stated that, taking into account the threat from China and North Korea, they wanted to calm the situation down as quickly as possible. The Blue House was also reluctant to escalate the issue any more than necessary (perhaps in recognition that the original decision to stop the visit was a mistake), as evidenced by the cautious response to Hong Jun-Pyo’s proposal to station marines instead of police on the islands.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, President Lee did not mention the Liancourt Rocks in his speech on V-J Day, which Japanese officials greatly appreciated.<sup>29</sup> Despite Lee Jae-Oh escalating the dispute, cooperation was mostly sustained.

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<sup>25</sup> “Editorial: Japan lawmakers’ visit,” *The Korea Herald*, July 26, 2011, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20110726000395>.

<sup>26</sup> “Editorial: A disturbing comedy,” *The Korea Herald*, Aug. 2, 2011, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20110802000023>.

<sup>27</sup> “Japanese lawmakers’ Dokdo mission inspires copycats,” *Chosun Ilbo*, Aug. 4, 2011, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2011/08/04/2011080400255.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/08/04/2011080400255.html). “Experts rightly question Seoul’s handling of Japanese provocations,” *Chosun Ilbo*, Aug. 3, 2011, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2011/08/03/2011080300452.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/08/03/2011080300452.html).

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<sup>28</sup> Katsumi Sawada, “Kaiheitaichuton, Kankoku yotou youkyuu e, seifu wa shinchou shisei (South Korea’s Ruling Party Requests Posting Marines, but Government is Cautious),” *Mainichi Shinbun* Tokyo Evening Edition: 9, Aug. 15, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Inukai Naoyuki and Sawada Katsumi, “Takeshima Monday: Ni-Kann, chinjouka ni hushinn, Kankoku daitouryou ennzetsu wo hyouka (Takeshima Problem: Worsening Japan-Korea relations, but Korean president’s speech welcomed),” *Mainichi Shinbun* Tokyo Morning Edition: 5, Aug. 16, 2011.

President Lee's visit and his subsequent message saying the Emperor of Japan would not be welcome in Korea until Japan made sufficient amends for its colonial past were much more damaging to the relationship, even threatening the principle of *seikei bunri* (literally, separation of politics and economics) the traditional foundation of Japan-South Korea relations. The economic relationship – which is usually shielded from downturns in the overall relationship – suffered as Japan and South Korea agreed to let the expanded portion of the currency swap expire at the end of October. The bilateral currency swap decreased from \$70 billion to \$13 billion. Furthermore, in 2012, Japan and South Korea postponed the annual meeting of finance ministers (from August 25 to November 24), and cancelled both the ministerial-level bilateral meetings on the sidelines of ASEAN (August 27-31) and ministerial-level negotiations on energy resources (scheduled for September 19). On a positive note, although bilateral meetings on the sidelines of APEC (September 8-11) were initially scrapped, two meetings *were* eventually held – between Japan and South Korea's foreign ministers and between President Lee and Prime Minister Noda.<sup>30</sup>

While politicians' visits may not have many concrete "effects" in the short-term and cancellation of meetings may be dismissed as mere political theater, they contribute to a steady deterioration of South Koreans' strategic trust in Japan. Roh Moo-Hyun's artificial but persuasive linkage between the Liancourt Rocks and Japan's colonial history on the Korean peninsula means that whenever Japan insists on its claim to the Liancourt Rocks, it raises suspicion in South Korea over Japanese intentions.

South Koreans interpret Japanese territorial claims as originating in and therefore validating Japan's colonial expansion. This interpretation of Japanese actions breeds suspicion about Japanese motivations in South Korea. A July 28, 2011 *Chosun Ilbo* editorial notes, "It is a clear provocation for Japanese lawmakers to come to Korea to highlight their country's highly dubious claim and is tantamount to insulting all Koreans. ... These lawmakers must think the pinnacle of Japan's modern history was when its sword-wielding goons banded together and invaded this country. That type of thinking is not just anachronistic, it shows how ignorant they are of the atrocities their ancestors committed."<sup>31</sup> Similarly, *The Korea Times* editorializes that, "Japan should refrain from making further claims over Dokdo if it really wants to reflect on its past militarism and move toward genuine reconciliation with its neighbors."<sup>32</sup> Though it may be hard to pinpoint negative effects in the short-run, creating more opportunities for this kind of commentary strains relations in the long-run.

The Liancourt Rocks continue to be one of the biggest reasons each country sees the other unfavorably, and is also seen as the biggest obstacle to future improvement in the bilateral relationship. According to an Asan Institute opinion poll conducted in December 2011, for South Koreans the "biggest obstacle to the development of Korea-Japan relations" is the island dispute (>60 percent), which outpolls both the textbook controversy (~30 percent) and compensation for comfort women (<10 percent).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Kang and Bang, "Grappling on a Hillside?"

<sup>31</sup> "Tokyo Should Stop Rightwing Lawmakers from Coming Here," *Chosun Ilbo*, July 28, 2011, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2011/07/28/2011072801160.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/07/28/2011072801160.html).

<sup>32</sup> "Offensive over Dokdo," *Korea Times*, July 19, 2011, [http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2011/07/137\\_91187.html](http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2011/07/137_91187.html).

<sup>33</sup> Alexis Dudden, "Issue Brief No. 19: Japan's Border Disputes: Dokdo at the Center of Bigger Things," *The Asan Institute for Policy Studies*, March 8, 2012.

In a 2013 East Asia Institute-Genron NPO survey conducted from March to April, “Takeshima/Dokdo” was the top-cited obstacle to improved relations; 83.7 percent of Japanese and 94.6 percent of South Korean respondents selected it.<sup>34</sup> But thankfully, the importance of the Liancourt Rocks issue seems to be declining. The second survey conducted by East Asia Institute-Genron NPO in May and July 2014 found that the importance of the issue in the relationship had significantly dropped to 68.9 percent of respondents in Japan and slightly decreased to 92.2 percent of respondents in South Korea (see Appendix II for relevant tables and charts).<sup>35</sup>

Politicization of the island disputes is detrimental to the Japan-South Korea relationship because it creates opportunities for the media to frame the relationship as a zero-sum relationship. As Kudo Yasushi, president of Genron NPO, noted, many Japanese and South Koreans depend on the media for knowledge of the other, and “therefore, the understanding of the two countries’ peoples is not properly engaged with each other, even as regards the same news. Then, public opinion tends to be formed in a manner that fuels criticism and opposition.”<sup>36</sup> Such zero-sum mentality hinders cooperation. Management of this dispute is important to overcoming such simplistic framing of the Japan-South Korea relationship.

### **Turning off the spigot – or why governments should not fund propaganda wars against potential allies**

The most concrete way Japanese and South Korean policymakers can manage the dispute is to nip the conflict in the bud by cutting off funding for activities that increase the salience of the Liancourt Rocks in the relationship.

South Korea first set aside 250 million won in 2003, and the budget nearly doubled every two years since. By 2011, it had increased to 2.37 billion won. But the war of words only became truly global in scale after President Lee’s surprise visit. In September 2012, shortly after the incident, the South Korean foreign ministry asked the National Assembly to set aside 5 billion won (\$4.4 million) to promote its claims to the islands, which would have more than doubled the budget from the year before.<sup>37</sup> (A different source puts the 2013 budget for island-related propaganda at 4.2 billion won.<sup>38</sup>)

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<sup>34</sup> “The 1<sup>st</sup> Japan-South Korea joint opinion poll,” *East Asia Institute-Genron NPO*, May 14, 2013, <http://www.genron-npo.net/en/issues/archives/4973.html>. The second most cited reason in Japan was anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea (55.1 percent), and in South Korea it was historical awareness and education in Japan (61.1 percent).

<sup>35</sup> “The 2<sup>nd</sup> Joint Japan-South Korea Public Opinion Poll (2014) Analysis Report on Comparative Data,” *East Asia Institute-Genron NPO*, July 16, 2014, <http://www.genron-npo.net/en/pp/archives/5142.html>. The second most important reason in Japan and South Korea did not change, however, with 46.6 percent of Japanese choosing “Anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea” and 52.2 percent of South Koreans choosing “Historical awareness and education in Japan.”

<sup>36</sup> Yasushi Kudo, “How Should We Interpret Joint Japan-South Korea Opinion Survey Results?” *East Asia Institute-Genron NPO*, July 15, 2014, <http://www.genron-npo.net/en/pp/archives/5140.html>.

<sup>37</sup> “South Korea, Japan set for islands propaganda war,” *South China Morning Post*, Sept. 11, 2012, <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1034011/s-korea-japan-set-islands-propaganda-war>.

<sup>38</sup> “Japan Advertises Dokdo Claims in Newspapers,” *Chosun News*, Sept. 13, 2012, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2012/09/13/2012091300905.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2012/09/13/2012091300905.html).

But the figure has held steady since then, and in July 2014, the ministry asked the National Assembly to allocate a budget of only 4.84 billion won (\$4.7 million) for 2015.<sup>39</sup> The *Wall Street Journal* reported that the South Korean government froze spending at 2014 levels, because as Je Dong-Whan, a South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, stated, “Given the recent escalation of tensions with Japan, we’ve asked for a bigger budget for the islets issue, but the priority of the nation’s overall budget plans for next year is on reviving the economy”<sup>40</sup> Recognizing that other economic priorities should take precedence over propaganda funding is a positive development for Japan-South Korea relations. The fiscal argument against spending money on propaganda wars makes good economic sense even as a stand-alone argument: after all, according to South Korean government data compiled in May 2010, the islands are estimated to be worth 1.09 billion won (or \$920,000), which is a pittance relative to the money being spent on claiming them.<sup>41</sup>

Japan spends even more public funds publicizing its claims – spending 1 billion yen (or almost \$10 million) in 2014, though part of this money is also spent on publicizing claims to the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.<sup>42</sup> Again, Japan’s foreign ministry most dramatically increased its budget for islands-related propaganda after Lee’s visit, when they asked the Diet for 560 million yen (\$7 million) in September 2012.<sup>43</sup> (Other sources put the 2013 budget for island-related propaganda at 810 million yen<sup>44</sup> and 600 million yen.<sup>45</sup>)

When beseeching politicians to stop funding these propaganda wars, it is important to distinguish between mainstream and extremist politicians. Mainstream and extremist politicians operate within roughly the same domestic political context, but we can distinguish between extremist and mainstream politicians by defining extremist politicians as those who are more likely to conclude that the domestic benefits of raising the Liancourt Rocks dispute and appearing “strong” on it outweigh the international costs. Mainstream politicians are more sensitive to international costs and conclude the domestic benefits are not worth it..

There is a natural distinction between extremists and mainstream politicians because only those politicians who are naturally allied with conservative, nationalist groups are likely to benefit from appearing stronger than their opponents on territorial issues. Domestic benefits that extremist politicians perceive include winning electoral and political support from their conservative, nationalist base, and making opposition parties look weak on territorial issues. Mainstream politicians need to change this calculation for extremists by reducing the importance that voters attach to the territorial issue. Spending more money on publicizing the dispute is counterproductive because it leads to more voters believing that this should be an important issue to their elected officials. If extremist politicians think that voters care more (and will reward them for taking a stronger, more uncompromising stance on the issue), they are more likely to

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<sup>39</sup> Sarah Kim, “Japan works to find proof to back Dokdo claims,” *Korea Joongang Daily*, July 15, 2014, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2992024>.

<sup>40</sup> In-Soo Nam, “Sorry Dokdo, No More Money for You,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 2014, <http://blogs.wsj.com/korearealtime/2014/07/15/sorry-dokdo-no-more-money-for-you/>.

<sup>41</sup> David Kang and Ji-Young Lee, “Cheonan Incident Overshadows Everything” *Comparative Connections, Center for Strategic and International Studies*, (July 2010), 8.

<sup>42</sup> In-Soo Nam.

<sup>43</sup> “South Korea, Japan set for islands propaganda war.”

<sup>44</sup> Sarah Kim.

<sup>45</sup> “Japan Advertises.”



make provocative gestures. While individual extremist politicians can singlehandedly upset the bilateral relationship by visiting the islands, the majority of mainstream politicians can work together to slash the budget that sustains the issue as a source of controversy in the relationship.

The counterargument to this proposal is that the Liancourt Rocks have strategic and economic value worth fighting over, and therefore should be disputed at the highest level in the most public manner possible. Tae-Ryong Yoon argues that the keeping/reclaiming of the Liancourt Rocks has merit to the disputants in and of itself because territorial sovereignty is a core tenet of Realism, and therefore it is not an issue that either the Japanese or South Korean government should seek to suppress. He argues, “It is illogical to argue that a small state’s effort to realize its core national interest is based on emotionalism while a big state’s effort to protect its core interest is based on rational Realism. Even though the small state’s self-interest is unavoidably small in scale while the big state’s self-interest is big in its scale, they are the same self-interests in their nature.”<sup>46</sup>

Yet if a state is so small that insisting on sovereignty over a *portion* of its territory has the potential to threaten the small state’s ability to protect the *entirety* of its territory, then publicizing the dispute and making it more intractable *is* harmful to the state’s interest. A big state and a small state’s interests are not “the same ... in their nature” but are qualitatively different. This is because a big state can pursue its territorial sovereignty over a disputed area without jeopardizing its ability to defend itself, but a small state’s pursuit of territorial sovereignty over a disputed area *can* have a negative effect on its overall defensive capabilities if it makes it more difficult for the small state to cooperate with potential allies.

Japan and South Korea’s interests lie in the latter category: as small states, keeping/reclaiming the Liancourt Rocks is not nearly as important to their survival as improving security cooperation between themselves as they face an increasingly capable China and unpredictable North Korea. Leaders, such as members of the Japan-Korea Parliamentarians’ Union and the Korea-Japan Parliamentarians’ Union,<sup>47</sup> should encourage their respective governments to stop spending money on publicizing the dispute. Raising awareness of the conflict only makes it more difficult to compromise in the future. Instead of spending money to indoctrinate citizens, the issue should be allowed to fade so that it does not become the focal point of anti-South Korea feelings in Japan or anti-Japan feelings in South Korea.

### **Conclusion: Does the public really want this fight?**

Resolving Japan and South Korea’s dispute over the Liancourt Rocks will require a return to the spirit of 1965 – setting aside the dispute in favor of cooperation on more pressing issues. Conditions for such a tactical compromise are less favorable than they were in the 1960s, when (1) the Soviet Union and China posed a clear and immediate threat to the security of Japan and South Korea, and (2) South Korea was ruled by Park Chung Hee’s dictatorship. Today, Japan and South Korea often diverge over how to handle North Korea, their most pressing mutual threat, and South Korea seems more intent on hedging with China than cooperating with

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<sup>46</sup> Tae Ryong Yoon, *Fragile Cooperation: Net Threat Theory and Japan-Korea-US Relations*, NY: Columbia University Press, (2006), 285-6.

<sup>47</sup> Jiun Bang, “Korean and Japanese Legislators Working Together,” *The National Interest*, April 15, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/korean-japanese-legislators-working-together-10289>.

Japan.<sup>48</sup> South Korea has also fully democratized, meaning that South Korean politicians must be sensitive to the desires of the public if they wish to keep their office and/or maintain enough popularity to accomplish their agenda.

Back in the 1960s, when state survival was at stake, focusing on international incentives (reconciling with former enemies to combat a third-party threat) rather than domestic incentives (pandering to nationalists to win or keep elected office) was an easier case to make. That argument has less traction now.

Although the international system today may appear relatively benign compared to the Cold War, it is undergoing a period of rapid and profound change as China's economy grows and its military modernizes. Japanese and South Korean politicians must find a way to make the Liancourt Rocks' issue salience "fade" so they can better promote their states' security. Such far-sighted political leaders would need to consciously place a premium on international over domestic concerns. Mainstream politicians, those who are not tightly aligned with conservative, nationalist groups, should focus on the future by (1) dissuading fellow extremist politicians from attempting visits, and (2) discontinuing funding for activities that increase the issue salience of the Liancourt Rocks and sow the seeds for extremist politicians to reap the harvest from.

The media and citizens in both Japan and South Korea also need to acknowledge the nuances of the issue and complexity of the relationship to change the incentives extremist politicians perceive. Again, coverage of meetings and conferences may not be nearly as exciting or attention grabbing, but they are more reflective of the drab reality of everyday coexistence. Japan and South Korea are both vibrant democracies, and media freedom should be used to challenge the countervailing narrative that the other is a threat. The media also needs to zero in on other institutions, such as the military, which value bilateral cooperation, and force them to explain publicly why the relationship is important and how citizens continue to benefit from sustained and positive engagement with each other.

It is impossible to predict where these rare and precious individuals will come from in media and civil society – perhaps from a class of citizens who have travel experience and can see the issue from a global perspective, or someone from the business world that values economic cooperation. They would be part of the group that Kudo calls "intellectuals," who travel frequently between the two countries and have friends in Japan and South Korea.<sup>49</sup> Such media figures and civil society leaders will educate the public about the importance of the bilateral relationship and shape voter preferences. Then voters can change politicians' incentive structure by rewarding political behavior that promotes bilateral cooperation in the long-term.

In South Korea, voters want to see Japan give up its claims to the islands so that they can finally "regain their full sovereignty," and in Japan, voters want to see Japan be proud of its history. Or at least that is what politicians think. However, another notable finding of the 2014 East Asia Institute-Genron NPO joint study is that most Japanese (61.2 percent) and South

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<sup>48</sup> E.g., Kim Dae Jung's pursuit of "Sunshine Policy" vis-à-vis North Korea while Japan wanted to push a hard line on the Japanese abductees issue. For more on South Korea's hedging with China, see Victor Cha, "Inside Seoul's Balancing Act," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, Aug. 18, 2014, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2993618>.

<sup>49</sup> Kudo.

Koreans (69.7 percent) want the relationship to improve.<sup>50</sup> So are the Liancourt Rocks really that important to citizens? As Jiun Bang suggests, interparliamentary groups should fund a joint commission to study “whether appeals to nationalism even work as a way of getting votes. ... If politicians can be liberated from thinking that their fates as office-holders are tightly coupled to a public that is ‘hawkish,’ their roles as diplomats will be that much more effective.”<sup>51</sup>

Two LDP politicians, Hirasawa Katsuei and Shimomura Hakubun, pledged to visit Ulleung Island in September 2011. Yet they never carried out their promise,<sup>52</sup> most likely because the domestic benefits were not as great as expected, since news coverage of Takeshima in Japan hardly increased after Shindo, Inada and Sato’s attempt. Though the Liancourt Rocks are a politically animating issue, more so in South Korea than in Japan, future research should focus on whether there really is political capital to be gained in fighting over it. The two states’ publics might just be smart enough to know that the international costs are no longer worth it.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Bang.

<sup>52</sup> “Japanese Lawmakers’ Dokdo Mission Inspires Copycats.”

## Appendix I. Results of Google Trends Analysis

**Table 1. News Headlines using “Dokdo” (Source: Google Trends)**

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
2011	7	7	15	21	10	8	<b>11</b>	<b>30</b>	14	13	9	8
2012	9	10	13	16	12	13	<b>11</b>	<b>100</b>	39	42	22	17

**Table 2. News Headlines using Dokdo in Korean (Source: Google Trends)**

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
2011	10	6	16	24	14	10	<b>9</b>	<b>30</b>	14	17	15	9
2012	11	63	33	53	20	22	<b>21</b>	<b>100</b>	46	48	30	16

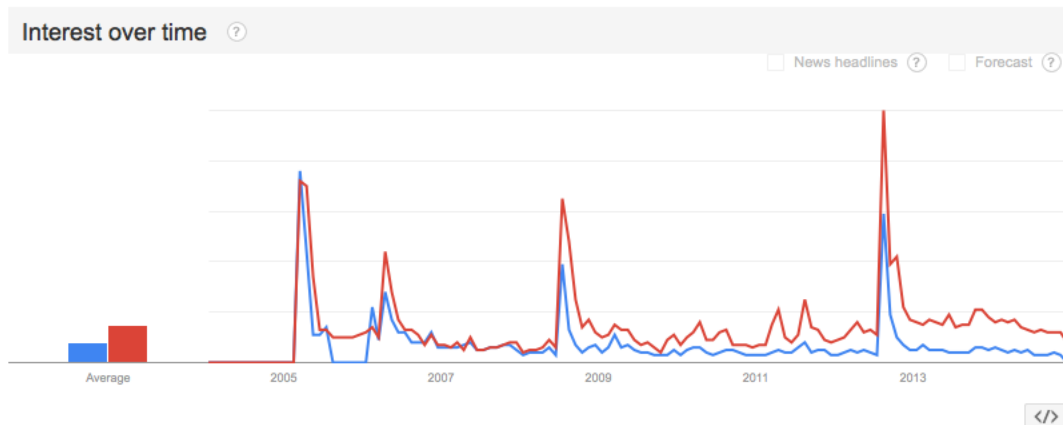
**Table 3. News Headlines using “Takeshima” (Source: Google Trends)**

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
2011	4	4	5	7	6	5	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>	5	6	7	4
2012	4	5	6	5	6	5	<b>4</b>	<b>77</b>	25	14	9	7

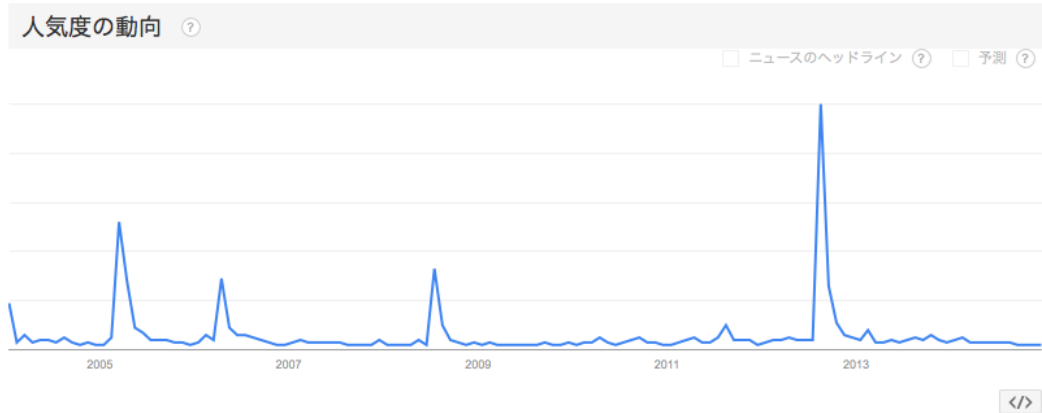
**Table 4. News Headlines using Takeshima in Japanese (Source: Google Trends)**

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
2011	2	3	4	5	3	3	<b>5</b>	<b>10</b>	4	4	4	2
2012	3	4	4	5	4	4	<b>4</b>	<b>100</b>	26	11	6	5

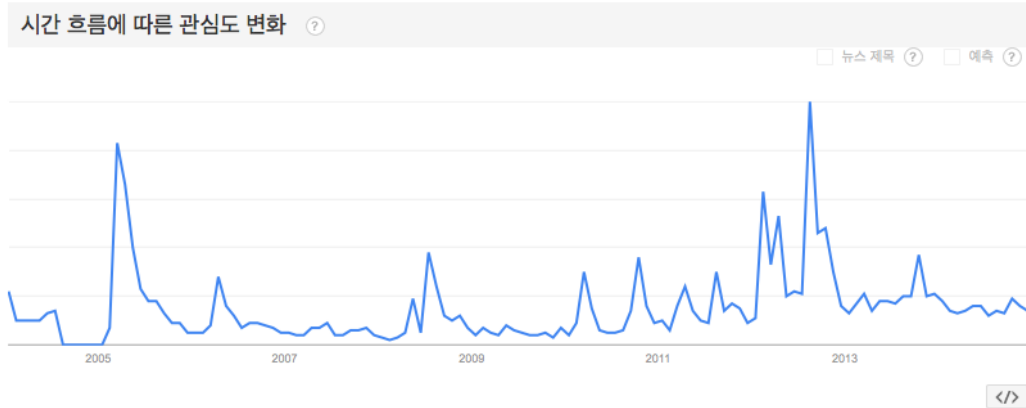
**Graph 1. The Red line represents news headlines containing “Dokdo” and Blue contains “Takeshima”**



**Graph 2. The Blue line represents news headlines containing “竹島”**



**Graph 3. The Blue line represents headlines containing “독도”**



**Appendix II. Results of East Asia Institute-Genron NPO Joint Survey**

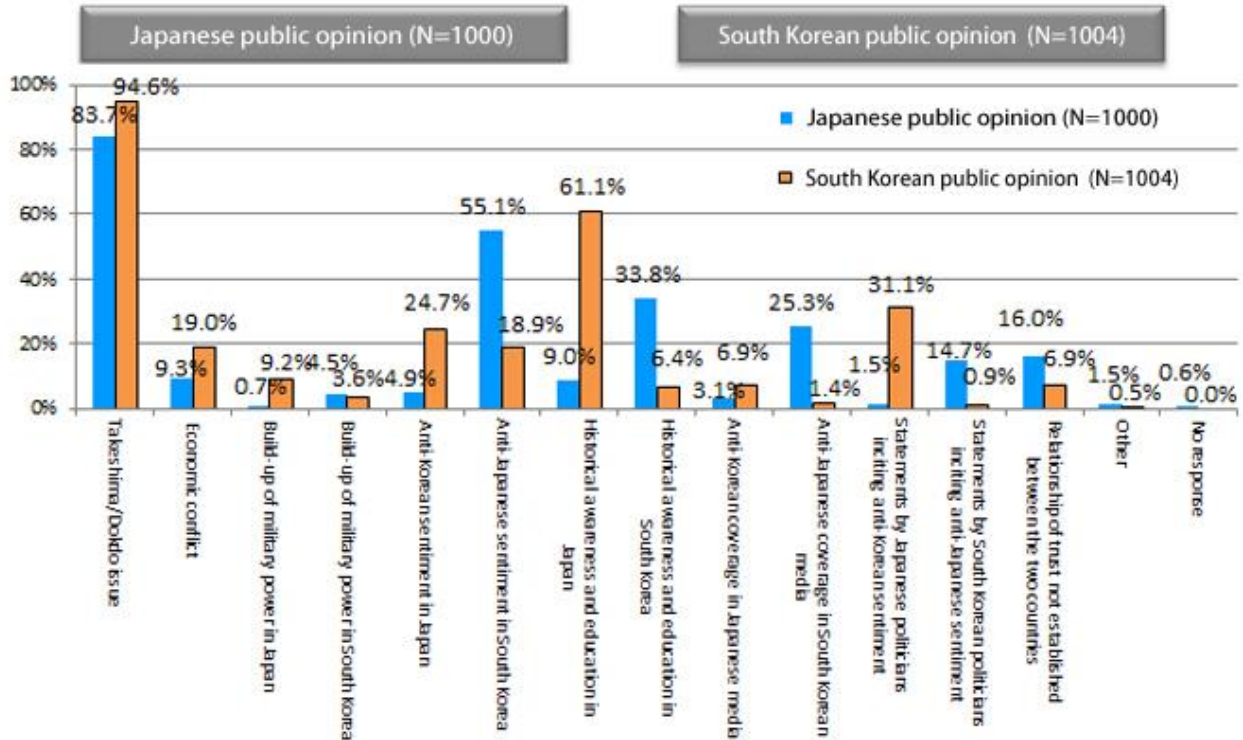
**Table 5. Reason why you have a Negative Impression of the Other Country**

Survey Dates	“Takeshima” conflict in Japan	“Dokdo” conflict in South Korea
March-April, 2013	50.1%	84.5%
May-July, 2014	41.9%	71.6%

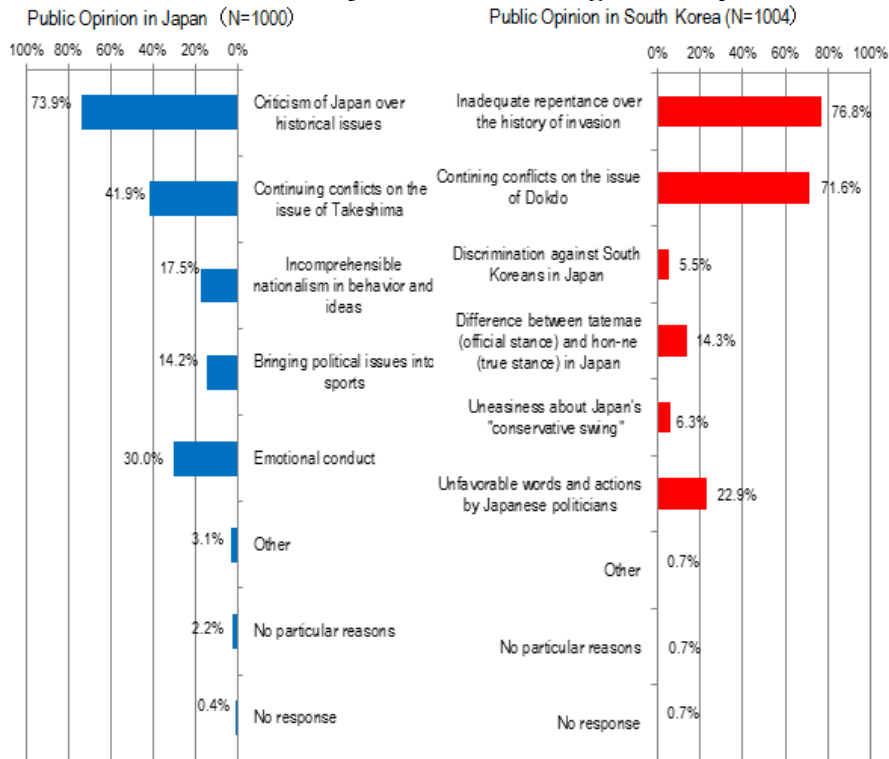
**Chart 1. 2013 Survey: Reasons for Negative Impression**



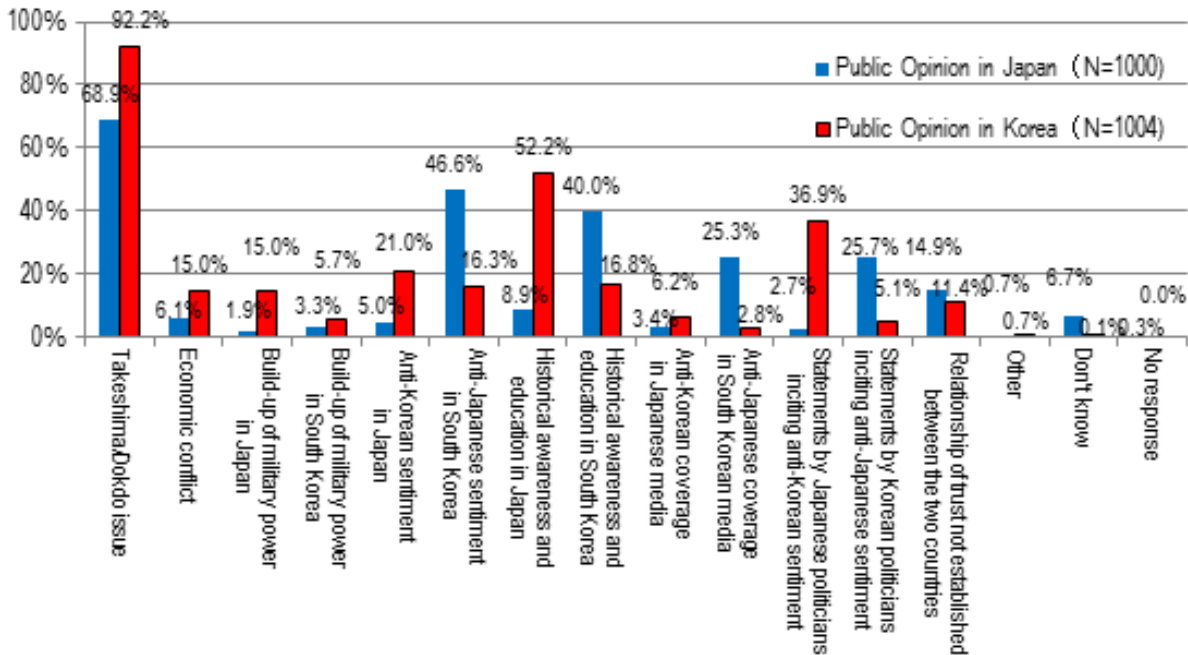
**Chart 2. 2013 Survey: Barriers to Bilateral Relations**



**Chart 3. 2014 Survey: Reasons for Negative Impression**



**Chart 4. 2014 Survey: Barriers to Bilateral Relations**



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