

Instrumental Nationalism? The Dokdo Problem Through the Lens of North Korean Propaganda and Diplomacy

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The article examines North Korea's standpoint on the Dokdo question from the perspective of North Korean propaganda and diplomacy. It describes Pyongyang's historical and legal arguments in favor of Korean ownership, summarizes the successive phases of North Korea's Dokdo policy, and analyzes factors that induced North Korean leaders to alternately highlight or de-emphasize the dispute. It concludes that Pyongyang's attitude toward the Dokdo issue has not been shaped solely by the factor of nationalism, but rather by varying combinations of North Korean-Japanese, South Korean-Japanese, and inter-Korean relations. Finally, it seeks to explain the fluctuations in Pyongyang's Dokdo policy by placing it into the theoretical framework of ethnic nationalism versus state-centered nationalism.

Keywords: Dokdo, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, territorial dispute, state-centric nationalism

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Introduction

The territorial dispute between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan over the island of Dokdo (known as Takeshima in Japanese and as Liancourt Rocks in English) has attracted considerable scholarly attention ever since its eruption in 1952. Relevant publications extensively investigated the historical, diplomatic, political, legal, and economic aspects of the dispute, both from a South Korean and from a Japanese perspective. Some scholars also examined the attitude the United States adopted toward the Dokdo problem, from preparations for the San Francisco Peace Treaty to current American efforts to ensure Japanese-South Korean cooperation in the face of North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

Despite the broad scale of scholarly literature on Dokdo, some aspects of the dispute remain more or less underresearched. One such topic is the attitude that North Korea (by its official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK) adopted toward Dokdo, and the relative significance of this issue in North Korean diplomatic strategies and tactics. In Korean, the most comprehensive and

sophisticated analysis of this subject is an article written by Bae Jin-su and Yang Ju, which skillfully placed North Korea's press comments on the Dokdo issue into the context of Japan's respective relations with North Korea and South Korea.¹ In English-language publications, only a handful of authors pointed out that the DPRK regarded Dokdo as inherent Korean territory just like the ROK, and they did so only passingly.² On the one hand, publications with a focus on the dispute made few, if any, references to Pyongyang's standpoint, but concentrated on the primary actors South Korea and Japan. On the other hand, studies on North Korean diplomacy in general, and Japanese-North Korea relations in particular, paid little or no attention to the question of Dokdo. Even such a comprehensive analysis of North Korean nationalist propaganda as *The Cleanest Race* by Brian Myers did not mention Dokdo, though it carefully examined North Korean images of Japan and South Korea.³

This research gap reflects the fact that North Korea is neither a possessor nor a claimant in the Dokdo dispute, and therefore its direct impact on the conflict has been fairly negligible. Actually, neither of the

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¹ Bae Jin-su and Yang Ju, "Bukhan *Nodong sinmun* eui Dokdo gisa (1948-2008 nyeon) hyeonhwang bunseok: Buk-il gwangye mit Han-Il gwangye ganggwanseong eul jungsim euro" [Content Analysis of News Articles (1948-2008) of the North Korean Newspaper, *Rodong sinmun*, on the Dokdo Issue: In the Context of DPRK-Japan and ROK-Japan Relations], *Tongil jeongchaek yeongu* 18, no. 1 (2009): 119-149.

² Daniel Gomà Pinilla, "Border Disputes Between China and North Korea," *China Perspectives* 52, no. March-April (2004): 7; Hideki Kajimura, "The Question of Takeshima/Tokdo," *Korea Observer* 28, no. 3 (1997): 427-429; David C. Kang, "Japan-Korea Relations: History Impedes the Future," *Comparative Connections* 7, no. 1 (2005): 127; and Heon-ik Kwon, "For the Desirable Resolution of the Dokdo Issue," *Dokdo Research Journal* 11 (2010): 37-38.

³ Brian R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2010), 131, 152-155.

two parties has shown any inclination to invite Pyongyang to join the fray. Yet, the North Koreans were by no means silent or passive as far as Dokdo was concerned. On the contrary, in certain periods, North Korean propaganda launched vituperative attacks on Japan's territorial claims and extensively covered South Korean protests. The extent of North Korean interest in Dokdo may be gauged from the fact that between 1997 and 2012 the state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) mentioned this subject in over 500 articles, of which 121 were published in 2005 alone. For this reason, it appears worth investigating the evolution of Pyongyang's attitude toward the problem of Dokdo, all the more so because North Korea's related statements provide considerable insight into the dynamics of Japanese-North Korean and inter-Korean relations.

At the same time, it also deserves attention that North Korea's coverage of the Dokdo issue has undergone perceptible fluctuations, a phenomenon correctly highlighted by Bae and Yang.⁴ For instance, the dramatic increase of KCNA references to Dokdo in 2005 and in 2012 (121 and 88, respectively) stood in marked contrast with the extremely low number of Dokdo-related articles in 1997 and in 2003 (2 and 1, respectively). In other words, North Korea's interest in Dokdo was neither of a static nature nor did it show exponential growth. This phenomenon suggests that Pyongyang's attitude toward the dispute has not been shaped solely by the force of ethnic nationalism, although ethnic nationalism did constitute an integral element of the regime's official ideology. Instead, it seems possible that specific diplomatic considerations also influenced the shifting attitude of North Korean leaders, who may have alternately decided to raise or downplay the Dokdo issue for "instrumental purposes" (a term coined by Yanan He with regard to Chinese Communist propaganda⁵), that is, to achieve

⁴ Bae and Yang, "Bukhan *Nodong sinmun* eui Dokdo gisa (1948-2008 nyeon) hyeonhwang bunseok": 123-124.

⁵ Yanan He, "Remembering and Forgetting the War: Elite Mythmaking, Mass Reaction, and Sino-

certain diplomatic aims.

This article seeks to fill the aforementioned research gap by examining North Korea's standpoint on the Dokdo question. Specifically, it enumerates the arguments Pyongyang made to refute Japan's claims to the island, summarizes the successive phases of North Korea's Dokdo policy, and analyzes factors that induced leaders of the ruling Korean Workers' Party (KWP) to alternately highlight or de-emphasize the dispute. Finally, it attempts to explain the contradictions in Pyongyang's attitude by placing the latter into a theoretical framework of ethnic nationalism versus state-centric nationalism.⁶

The Case for Korean Ownership of Dokdo: Pyongyang's Arguments

Since North Korea's legal standpoint on Dokdo, unlike the intensity of its attention, has remained largely unchanged in the recent decades, it appears practical to start this analysis with the theoretical basis of Pyongyang's Dokdo policy. At first sight, the DPRK's historical and legal arguments look quite similar to those of the ROK. For instance, an article published in *Rodong sinmun* (the daily newspaper of the Korean Workers' Party) summarized North Korea's views as follows: "The islet is part of the Korean territory in view of the principles of discovery, possession, and use, which are internationally recognized irrefutable evidence of legal possession of no-man's island and in view of a legislative step of a state to possess it."⁷

Japanese Relations," in *Inherited Responsibility and Historical Reconciliation in East Asia*, ed. Jun-Hyeok Kwak and Melissa Nobles (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 101.

⁶ To highlight the significance of state-centric nationalism, this article extensively refers to the two Korean states by their official name, rather than merely as North Korea and South Korea.

⁷ "Tok Islet is Inseparable from Korean Territory," Korean Central News Agency, October 13, 1998 (accessed on March 4, 2013). All KCNA statements cited in this article were accessed in English at <http://www.nk-news.net/index.php>

Indeed, historical sources cited by North Korean authors were usually identical with those South Korean scholars relied on in their research. Of the pre-modern Korean sources enumerated in KCNA articles, *Samguk sagi* [History of the Three Kingdoms, 1145], *Sejong sillok jiriji* [Geographical Annex to the Annals of King Sejong, 1432], *Goryeosa* [History of Goryeo, 1451], *Sinjung Dongguk yeoji seungnam* [Augmented Geographical Survey of the Eastern Nation, 1481], *Paldo chongdo* [Map of the Eight Provinces, 1531], *Sukjong sillok* [The Annals of King Sukjong, 1728], *Jeongjo sillok* [The Annals of King Jeongjo, 1776-1800], *Mangi yoram* [Handbook of State Affairs, 1808], and others are mentioned. Similarly, both North Korean and South Korean authors cited those pre-modern and more recent Japanese records and maps which appeared to be compatible with their views, such as Hayashi Shihei's *Sangoku tsūran zusetsu* [Illustrated Description of Three Countries, 1785].⁸

In several cases, overlaps between North Korean and South Korean statements resulted from careful monitoring of the South Korean media by North Korean authorities, which allowed them to quickly publicize any new discovery made abroad that could boost their position on Dokdo. For instance, in December 2008, KCNA reported that three days before the South Korean scholar Kim Mun-gil had announced his discovery of documents about a Japanese fisherman executed in 1838 by Japanese authorities “for violating the ‘ordinance banning sailing’ to Juk Islet and Song Islet (Tok Islet).”⁹ Nor did Pyongyang ignore non-Korean scholars who adopted a pro-Korean standpoint in the Dokdo dispute. Among others, KCNA referred to the International Dokdo Symposium held in Washington, D.C., in May 2009 and the presentation that Jon M.

⁸ For an overview, see “Tok Islet, Inalienable Territory of Korea,” KCNA, May 14, 2004 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

⁹ “Japan’s Document on Tok Islet Discovered,” KCNA, December 4, 2008 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

Van Dyke delivered there.¹⁰

Based on the aforementioned sources, KCNA sought to trace the Korean ownership of Dokdo back to the sixth century by using the principle of contiguity, that is, Dokdo's relative proximity to Ulleungdo, albeit without mentioning the term as such:

Early in the 6th century, there existed on Ullung Island a state called Usan that was built by Korean immigrants, and Tok Islet was under its control.¹¹

As Usan State comprising Usan Islet (Tok Islet) and Ullung Islet was attached to Silla, Korea put the ownerless islet under its control in 512 according to one of the basic principles of territorial acquisition stipulated in international law.¹²

This historical argument is fully in accordance with Seoul's standpoint. Similarly, both Koreas laid strong emphasis on the "An Yong-bok incidents" (1693-1699). As KCNA put it, "Japan's historical data compiled in the 17th century contain the facts that Tsushima and the Tokugawa shogunate governments formally recognized before and after the An Ryong Bok case that the island and the islets were part of the inviolable territory of Korea."¹³

North Korean and South Korean views were also identical as far as Japan's incorporation of Dokdo on February 22, 1905, was concerned. That is, both sides accurately pointed out that this act took place in a period when the Japanese government was gradually extending its

¹⁰ "Tok Islets are Inalienable Territory of Korea," KCNA, March 1, 2013 (accessed on August 5, 2013).

¹¹ "Japan's Claim to Tok Islet Flailed," KCNA, August 2, 2001 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

¹² "Japan's Claim to Tok Islet Slammed," KCNA, March 28, 2005 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

¹³ "Japan's Claim to Tok Islets Termed Nonsensical," KCNA, May 29, 2012 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

political and military control over the whole of Korea, treating the latter as a subordinate entity rather than a state of equal sovereignty. In January 2004, the North Korean Lawyers' Society questioned the legitimacy of the incorporation on the grounds that the Shimane Prefectural Notice had not been made public in an official newspaper of the Japanese government, nor did Tokyo notify Korea or other countries at the time of this act.¹⁴

Still, in several respects, Pyongyang's arguments appeared somewhat different from those advanced by Seoul. For instance, KCNA extensively referred to such Japanese sources that suggested the Japanese authorities had regarded Dokdo as Korean territory until the late nineteenth century, but it made less effort to describe the arguments the Japanese government raised in 1904 and 1905 and afterwards to justify its claims over the island. To mention but one example, in 2012, the Department of History at Kim Il Sung University released a report dismissing Japan's claims as "brigandish sophism devoid of any legal and historical propriety."¹⁵ Paradoxically, this dismissive rather than analytical approach seems to have caused North Korean authors to pay little attention to certain inconsistencies in the official Japanese standpoint which were eagerly exploited by critical South Korean and Japanese scholars. Among others, KCNA did not mention that as late as 1904 Japanese officials were still divided over the issue of whether Japan should incorporate Dokdo or not, and whether such an act would be sufficiently legitimate. As the Japanese historian Hori Kazuo pointed out, bureaucrats of the Ministry of Home Affairs, unlike the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, continued to oppose incorporation of the island.¹⁶

¹⁴ "Japan's Claim to Tok Islet Assailed," KCNA, January 29, 2004 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

¹⁵ "Japan's Claim to Tok Islets Termed Nonsensical," KCNA, May 29, 2012 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

¹⁶ Kazuo Hori, "Japan's Incorporation of Takeshima into Its Territory in 1905," *Korea Observer* 28, no. 3 (1997): 517-518.

Nor did KCNA directly juxtapose the original Japanese justification of Dokdo's incorporation ("no evidence can be found of this uninhabited island being under the possession of any foreign country") with Tokyo's post-1953 arguments. To be sure, North Korean authors rebuffed the claim the island had been *terra nullius* until 1905 just as emphatically as they denied that Japan had established its sovereignty over Dokdo as early as the seventeenth century. Still, they did not highlight the fact that Tokyo had not made a claim about its historical title to the island at the time of incorporation, but only 50 years later. In contrast, South Korean authors laid strong emphasis on such contradictions. As a publication of the Northeast Asian History Foundation ironically noted, "The inconsistency in Tokyo's position raises a seemingly unanswerable question of how Japan could 'add' to its territory an island that had already been its territory since 'olden times.'"¹⁷

Interestingly enough, North Korea, despite its inclination to criticize the United States for "keeping mum" about the Dokdo problem, did not comprehensively investigate the shifting role Washington played in the initial stage of the dispute, that is, during the preparations for the San Francisco Peace Treaty with Japan.¹⁸ KCNA did mention that Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers Instruction (SCAPIN) No. 677 excluded Dokdo from the area of Japanese administration.¹⁹ However, it did not describe how initial drafts of the San Francisco Peace Treaty by the United States up to November 2, 1949, had intended to compel Japan to renounce its claims on Dokdo, and how American political, security, and other considerations finally induced Washington to set conditions more advantageous to Tokyo, and omit the clause

¹⁷ *Dokdo: Korean Territory Since the 6th Century* (Seoul: Northeast Asian History Foundation, 2006), 28.

¹⁸ "US. Intervention in Tok Islet Issue under Fire," KCNA, April 1, 2005 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

¹⁹ "Japan's Claim to Tok Islet Flaied," KCNA, August 2, 2001 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

delineating Japan's territorial limits. Notably, these events were carefully examined by Japanese and South Korean scholars such as Kimie Hara, Jung Byeong-yun, and Nam Kijeong.²⁰ Instead, KCNA, averse as it was to any sort of ambiguity in the dispute, made the following categorical, but inaccurate statement: "International conventions including the Cairo Declaration (December 1, 1943) and the Potsdam Declaration (July 26, 1945), which called for settling the issue of Japan's territory after the war, defined Tok Islet as an object Japan should abandon and stipulated that the islet shall belong to Korea."²¹

Nevertheless, these differences between North Korean and South Korean statements were only of a tactical nature; they reflected, above all, the impact of heavy-handed state control over research in North Korea. Since KCNA repeatedly cited various northern scholars, including Ho Jong-ho (President, DPRK History Society) and Kim Un-taek (Professor, Kim Il Sung University), the deficiencies of these KCNA articles may have been at least partly indicative of North Korean scholarship on Dokdo.²²

The point where Pyongyang's arguments did considerably diverge from those of Seoul was the question of post-1952 South Korean state control over Dokdo. In the legal dispute over the island, Seoul's position has been buttressed by the principle of effective possession, that is, the physical occupation of Dokdo by South Korea during the past sixty years. The origin of this occupation can be traced back to Seoul's

²⁰ Hiroshi Hara, "Impact of the USSR's 200 Mile Fishery Zone on the Japanese-Soviet Fishery Negotiations" (Master of Arts Thesis, University of Rhode Island, 1979), 25-47; Byungjoon Jung, "Korea's Post-Liberation View on Dokdo and Dokdo Policies (1945-1951)," *Journal of Northeast Asian History* 5, no. 2 (December 2008): 5-53; Ki-Jeong Nam, "The Origin of Dokdo Issue: Having Another Look at the San Francisco Peace Treaty," *Dokdo Research Journal* 11 (2010): 32-36.

²¹ "Japan's Claim to Tok Islet Slammed," KCNA, March 28, 2005 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

²² "Tok Islet Belongs to Korea," KCNA, January 27, 2000 (accessed on March 4, 2013); "Tok Islets, Inviolable Territory of Korea," KCNA, August 26, 2002 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

response to the San Francisco Peace Treaty. Shortly before the treaty came into force on April 28, 1952, President Syngman Rhee (1948-1960) issued the Declaration of Sovereignty over Adjacent Seas on January 18, 1952, and established the euphemistic “Peace Line” (commonly known as the “Rhee Line”) which included Dokdo within the territorial waters of the ROK.²³ Since 1956, the South Korean police have been responsible for the defense of the area. From 1996 onward, South Korean authorities demonstrated their effective control over Dokdo in increasingly spectacular ways, culminating in a visit by President Lee Myung-bak in August 2012.

In the sphere of legal theory, Pyongyang shared Seoul’s standpoint. As KCNA put it, “The Tok Islets are part of the inalienable territory of Korea in the light of the principle of the prior occupation, the requirement of international law for putting land under one’s jurisdiction, as well as in the light of the principle of effective domination and management of it.”²⁴ In practice, however, North Korean authors did not highlight this aspect of South Korea’s position. From 1997 to 2012, KCNA made no reference to the “Peace Line” and Rhee’s subsequent conflict with Japan. Its articles on Dokdo did not cover the years of 1952 and 1953 at all, and the single one that mentioned both Rhee and Dokdo failed to describe his actual role in the dispute. On the contrary, it drew a flawed picture of Rhee by portraying him as a pro-Japanese figure:

The Liberal Party of traitor Syngman Rhee, the Democratic Republican Party of the Yushin dictator, the Democratic Justice Party of the fifth republic, the Democratic Liberal Party of the sixth republic and the New Korea Party of traitor Kim Young Sam, which are the GNP’s

²³ P. Allan Dionisopoulos, “Japanese-Korean Relations: A Dilemma in the Anti-Communist World,” *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 1, no. 1 (May 1957): 61-72.

²⁴ “Tok Islets are Part of Inviolable Territory of Korea,” KCNA, April 4, 2011 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

predecessors, *were characterized by their inveterate pro-Japanese treachery* [emphases added].²⁵

These words reveal that Pyongyang's attitude toward the Dokdo problem could not remain unaffected by the long political rivalry between the two Korean states. From the perspective of the KWP leaders, rejecting Tokyo's claims to Dokdo was one thing, but to endorse Seoul's Dokdo policy was quite another. While they harbored no doubts about Korea's historical entitlement to Dokdo, they were far less ready to regard the ROK as a legitimate representative of Korean statehood. Under such conditions, they must have felt that their approval of the South Korean government's actions in such a major national issue would grant national legitimacy to the very state they frequently depicted as a puppet regime devoid of real sovereignty. Therefore, Pyongyang's actual policies toward the Dokdo problem have been strongly influenced not only by the dynamics of Japanese-North Korean relations,²⁶ but also by the twists and turns of inter-Korean relations. While inter-Korean rapprochement could (and did) facilitate the emergence of a North-South consensus on Dokdo, hostile relations between Pyongyang and Seoul greatly hindered such a process.

The First Phase of North Korea's Dokdo Policy: A Low-Key Approach

While the DPRK could not directly influence the Japan-ROK dispute over Dokdo, at certain times North Korean propaganda did make considerable efforts to take advantage of the conflict. Significantly, on

²⁵ "DPRK History Society Indicts Japan and GNP," KCNA, June 23, 2005 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

²⁶ A factor highlighted by Bae and Yang, "Bukhan *Nodong sinmun* eui Dokdo gisa (1948-2008 nyeon) hyeonhwang bunseok": 149.

many occasions, Pyongyang's criticism was not directed solely against Japanese claims to Dokdo but also against certain South Korean leaders who allegedly "abandoned dominium over Tok Islet."²⁷ Yet, the KWP leaders would also repeatedly, but temporarily tone down their propaganda about Dokdo, and instead stress their readiness to achieve rapprochement with Japan. These controversial features of North Korean conduct indicate that Pyongyang's diplomatic aims, as far as Dokdo was concerned, were not confined to the defense of Korea's historical entitlement to the island.

To explain these shifts in North Korea's attitude toward Dokdo, it is advisable to enumerate the main milestones of the dispute in chronological order, and examine how the DPRK reacted to the successive events. Since KCNA's electronic archives are accessible only from December 1996 onward, alternative sources were consulted to reconstruct North Korea's earlier views, such as declassified reports of the Hungarian embassy in Pyongyang, various publications that cited *Rodong sinmun*, broadcasts of Radio Pyongyang, and, in a few cases, articles from the Soviet newspaper *Pravda*. Unlike post-1953 Soviet Union-DPRK relations, Soviet control over North Korea from 1948 to 1953 was strong enough to prevent any major divergence between Soviet and North Korean public statements. For this reason, one may consider *Pravda's* pre-1953 comments on Dokdo and Japan-ROK relations to be largely similar to that of the North Korean media, all the more so because the Soviet articles repeatedly cited KCNA and various North Korean newspapers as sources.

Interestingly enough, *Pravda* published an article related to Dokdo as early as June 17, 1948. On the basis of KCNA and the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS), the article summarized a recent

²⁷ Among others, see "DPRF Spokesman on South Korean Authorities' Treason," KCNA, October 2, 1998 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

announcement made by the “South Korean political authority” as follows: “On June 9th, approx. 9 four-engine airplanes with American identification markings bombed Korean fishing boats in the Sea of Japan, 48 kilometers south of the 38th parallel, in the area of Dokto (*sic*) island.” The article, focused as it was on the human and material losses caused by the American bombing exercise, did not raise the question of whether this area was Korean or Japanese territory. It noted only that the aircraft involved in the incident did not belong to forces controlled by the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK), but came from bases located in Japan.²⁸

Still, *Pravda*’s use of the name “Dokdo” deserves attention, all the more so because no alternative names (that is, Takeshima or Liancourt Rocks) were mentioned in brackets or otherwise. This fact in itself cannot be considered a sign of Soviet support for the South Korean standpoint on Dokdo, but the article did not challenge South Korea’s narrative of the incident in any way. On the contrary, *Pravda*’s underlying aim seems to have been to portray Koreans as victims of America’s reckless actions. This approach must have been shared by the North Korean leadership. Indeed, the effect the incident produced on South Korean public opinion was certainly advantageous from Pyongyang’s perspective. As South Korean historian Jung Byungjoon pointed out, “The Dokdo bombing incident fanned the flames of public resentment toward USAMGIK and Japan, taking USAMGIK aback. A USAMGIK report said that all political parties and social organizations condemned the incident as a barbarous act.”²⁹

In contrast with this manifestation of Soviet (and presumably North Korean) interest in the Dokdo bombing incident, the re-emergence of the

²⁸ “Bombardirovna koreiskikh rybachikh lodok v Iaponskom more” [Bombing of Korean Fishing Boats in the Sea of Japan], *Pravda* No. 10.910, June 17, 1948, p. 4.

²⁹ Jung Byungjoon, “Korea’s Post-Liberation View on Dokdo and Dokdo Policies (1945-1951),” *Journal of Northeast Asian History* 5, no. 2 (December 2008): 37.

Dokdo issue between 1951 and 1953 did not elicit similar reactions from *Pravda* and the KWP leaders. While both Moscow and Pyongyang vigorously condemned the San Francisco Peace Treaty, at first they seem not to have paid any particular attention to the treaty's implications for Dokdo. Since the text of the treaty did not delineate Japan's territorial limits, the question of Korean versus Japanese ownership of Dokdo was left unanswered, rather than highlighted. This is probably why the statement that North Korean Foreign Minister Bak Heon-yeong made on September 15, 1951, did not mention Dokdo, albeit Bak did enumerate several islands of disputed status: Taiwan, the Penghu Islands (Pescadores), and the Paracel Islands. However, these islands were claimed by China, rather than Korea. In general, Bak's declaration mainly emphasized the exclusion of Korea and China from the treaty as well as the threat the US naval and air bases in Japan posed to North Korea and China.³⁰

The limited interest the DPRK displayed in Dokdo in 1951 had much in common with the contemporaneous attitude of the South Korean government. Jung Byeong-jun's observations about Seoul's temporary priorities appear to be at least partly valid for Pyongyang, too:

Amid the turmoil of the Korean War, the country's priority was staving off the Communists, with preparations for the conference in San Francisco understandably taking a backseat. And even at the San Francisco Conference, obtaining the status of an Allied Power and becoming one of the signatories to the treaty were placed at the top of the agenda. Second on the agenda was getting compensation from Japan and taking punitive measures against war criminals. Such issues as the designation of fishing zones and territorial boundaries were relegated to

³⁰ "Po povodu podpisanii nezakonno 'mirmovo dogovora' s Japoniei" [On the Signing of the Illegal "Peace Treaty" with Japan], *Pravda* No. 12.097 (September 17, 1951): 3.

third priority.³¹

In 1952 and 1953, however, North Korean and South Korean public attitudes toward the Dokdo question began to show increasing divergence. In the one-year period that followed Rhee's Declaration of Sovereignty over Adjacent Seas, *Pravda* made virtually no reference to the establishment of the "Rhee Line," the dispute over Dokdo, or other manifestations of Japanese-South Korean friction. The absence of related articles was particularly conspicuous if one takes into consideration that throughout 1952 *Pravda* covered the Korean War on a daily basis in a regular column titled "Events in Korea." Nevertheless, these articles were focused on other subjects, such as America's alleged use of bacteriological weapons and the prolonged armistice negotiations.

The aforementioned omissions were probably of a deliberate nature, because whenever *Pravda* raised the issue of Japanese-South Korean relations, it stressed the elements of cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo (which it invariably condemned), and downplayed or fully ignored the occurrence of conflicts. Citing a letter written by the pro-North Korean United Democratic Front of Koreans in Japan on November 4, 1952, *Pravda* accused the Japanese government of interning a number of ethnic Korean residents with the purpose of "sending them to South Korea to be shot."³² This tendency appeared in a particularly clear form in a *Pravda* article that bore the following telltale title: "Collusion in Tokyo" (January 10, 1953). This article, almost exceptionally, contained an indirect reference to the Dokdo dispute, but

³¹ Jung, "Korea's Post-Liberation View on Dokdo and Dokdo Policies (1945-1951)": 52-53.

³² "Японское правительво создаёт концентратсионные лагеря для корейцев, проживающих в Японии" [The Japanese government establishes concentration camps for the Koreans living in Japan], *Pravda* No. 12.511, November 4, 1952, p. 4. In reality, however, the Rhee government refused to accept such deportees, "arguing that they had legal status in Japan and were not subject to forced repatriation." See Dionisopoulos, "Japanese-Korean Relations: A Dilemma in the Anti-Communist World": 63.

in a very brief way. Describing Rhee's meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru (1948-1954), the author (a certain N. Khokhlov) did mention the existence of disagreements between the two sides over such issues as Japanese demands for financial compensation and "fishing rights in Korea's coastal waters" (*sic*), but concluded that these problems "were pushed to the background" during the talks. Citing KCNA and *Minju Joseon* (the newspaper of the North Korean government) as sources, he claimed that Japan-ROK collaboration was assuming an increasingly military character. In any case, Khokhlov devoted only a single sentence of his three-column article to the subject of Japanese-South Korean friction.³³

The motives behind this flawed depiction of Japan-ROK relations may be revealed if one examines the first sentence of Khokhlov's article: "The traitor of the Korean people, South Korean 'President' Syngman Rhee recently visited Japan." That is, *Pravda*, reflecting Pyongyang's views, did not regard the political administration headed by Rhee as a legitimate representative of the Korean nation, and flatly rejected the ROK's self-definition as a sovereign state. This North Korean view had been formed as early as 1948 and the outbreak of the Korean War fully precluded any kind of consensus between the two antagonistic regimes. Under such conditions, the KWP leaders were most unwilling to acknowledge that any action of the southern government might serve Korean national interests. This situation was especially true for Japanese-South Korean relations. In 1949-1950, North Korea condemned the economic and political negotiations between Seoul and Tokyo with particular harshness. For instance, in the fall and winter of 1949, broadcasts of Radio Pyongyang repeatedly attacked South Korean plans to export rice to Japan in exchange for machinery.³⁴ In January 1950,

³³ "Sgovor v Tokio" [Collusion in Tokyo], *Pravda* No. 12.578 (January 10, 1953): 4.

³⁴ *Joint Weeka, 1948-1959*, vol. 3, 1949-1951 (Seoul: Yongjin-sa, 1993), 87, 160, 176. *Joint Weeka* was a collection of joint weekly analyses – which included monitoring of the North Korean press

shortly before Rhee visited Japan, Kim Il Sung likened Rhee to the national traitor Lee Wan-yong, who had aided the Japanese annexation.³⁵

Actually, North Korea's interpretation of why Rhee established the "Peace Line" made Pyongyang even more reluctant than usual to acknowledge the national implications of his act. Namely, Rhee's conflict with Japan erupted in the same year as when he forcefully modified the South Korean constitution and won the manipulated presidential elections held on August 5, 1952, which *Pravda* and the North Korean media dismissed as a "puppet show."³⁶ As Kim Ryo-gyun, a middle-ranking official of the North Korean Foreign Ministry, later told a Hungarian diplomat,

Syngman Rhee established the aforesaid maritime line for political reasons: by presenting himself as a "defender of the interests of the Korean people," he wanted to gain popularity among the popular masses who were dissatisfied because of the war. This step was taken before the conclusion [*sic*] of the separate peace treaty with Japan in San Francisco, at which time Japan was not yet able to fight back. In other respects, this issue became grist to the mill of the USA, because after the conclusion of said treaty, the Americans cited precisely this issue to start the remilitarization of Japan, on the pretext of protecting [Japanese] ships.³⁷

During the Korean War, Pyongyang was on equally hostile terms with Seoul and Tokyo, and thus it could not take much advantage of the

and radio – by the United States Embassy in Seoul.

³⁵ *Rodong sinmun*, January 20, 1950. Cited in Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War II: The Roaring of the Cataract 1947-1950* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton, 1990), 458-459.

³⁶ "Komediia `vyborov` na iuge Koreii" ["Electoral" Comedy in Southern Korea], *Pravda* No. 12.420 (August 5, 1952): 3.

³⁷ Embassy of Hungary in the DPRK, Report, March 3, 1961, XIX-J-1-j Korea 1945-64, Top Secret Documents [henceforth KTS], 5. doboz, 5/b, 003637/1961, Magyar Országos Levéltár, MOL [Hungarian National Archives].

Japanese-South Korean conflict over Dokdo. This is probably why *Pravda* preferred to ignore the issue altogether. In the mid-1950s, however, North Korea's attitude toward Dokdo underwent yet another change. In this period, inter-Korean relations were still extremely tense, and save a few empty gestures, Pyongyang made no overtures toward Seoul.³⁸ In contrast, Japanese-North Korean relations, for the first time since 1949, started to show signs of improvement. The significance of this new trend may be gauged if one takes into consideration that Japanese-South Korean friction over Dokdo continued well after 1955.

In response to the initiative of Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama Ichirō (1954-1956), who sought to achieve rapprochement with the Soviet Union and other Communist countries, on February 25, 1955, North Korean Foreign Minister Nam Il issued a statement calling for economic and cultural cooperation with Japan. From May 1955 onward, several Japanese delegations arrived in the DPRK, and in October, Pyongyang signed its first commercial agreements with a few Japanese firms. For the Japanese side, these deals were purely economic ones, whereas North Korea pursued both economic and political aims. On the one hand, North Korean industry badly needed spare parts for the Japanese-made machines which remained in operation after 1945. On the other hand, the KWP leaders sought to obstruct Japanese-South Korean cooperation by offering various economic incentives which, they hoped, would persuade Tokyo to maintain contacts with both Koreas, rather than solely with Seoul.³⁹

From the latter perspective, the Japanese-ROK dispute over Dokdo and the "Rhee Line" turned out to be definitely advantageous to the

³⁸ Balázs Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era: Soviet-DPRK Relations and the Roots of North Korean Despotism, 1953-1964* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2005), 53-54.

³⁹ Bae and Yang, "Bukhan *Nodong sinmun* eui Dokdo gisa (1948-2008 nyeon) hyeonhwang bunseok": 131; Kiwon Chung, "Japanese-North Korean Relations Today," *Asian Survey* 4, no. 4 (April 1964): 791-792; Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, 75.

DPRK. After all, these disagreements lessened the likelihood of a Japanese-South Korean alliance against Pyongyang. A Hungarian diplomatic report written in late 1957 summarized North Korea's attitude toward this situation as follows:

According to the official [North] Korean opinions, the so-called "Korean-Japanese," that is, South Korean-Japanese negotiations have stalled because of the conflicts and contradictions between the two sides. In the view of the competent [officials] of the DPRK, the main question is the so-called "Syngman Rhee maritime line." In our opinion, the DPRK skillfully takes advantage of these contradictions to improve relations between the DPRK and Japan.⁴⁰

Indeed, the obstacles the "Rhee Line" created for Japan induced an increasing number of Japanese fishing enterprises to seek Pyongyang's permission to conduct operations along the coast of the DPRK. Hungarian diplomatic reports contrasted South Korea's confrontational attitude toward Japanese fishermen with North Korea's greater flexibility and efforts to use this issue to gain political advantages. Namely, the KWP leaders proposed that Japanese fishing in North Korean waters be regulated by an intergovernmental agreement, which in turn would necessitate mutual establishment of fishery offices or consulates.⁴¹ While North Korean proposals of this nature were usually turned down by Tokyo, non-governmental economic and cultural cooperation made significant progress between 1955 and 1960. Thereupon, Japan-ROK relations underwent further deterioration, for Seoul sharply protested against Japanese contacts with the North. Under such conditions, KWP leaders, irrespective of their legal standpoint on Dokdo, saw no reason to

⁴⁰ Embassy of Hungary in the DPRK, Report, December 7, 1957, KTS, 5. doboz, 5/bf, 00256/1958.

⁴¹ Embassy of Hungary in the DPRK, Report, December 7, 1957, KTS, 5. doboz, 5/bf, 00256/1958.

confront Tokyo over this issue, let alone seek a consensus with the ROK against Japanese territorial claims. On the contrary, their engagement policies were focused on Japan, the country's former colonial overlord, rather than South Korea.

In the first half of the 1960s, the aforesaid trend in North Korean diplomacy became even more pronounced, for various reasons. For one thing, Soviet-DPRK relations underwent increasing friction between 1962 and 1964, resulting in declining Soviet machinery exports to North Korea. In response, Pyongyang gradually built up economic relations with Japan and other non-Communist states. In 1963, the volume of Japanese-North Korean trade rose to seventeen million dollars. By 1964, Japanese-made cars, trucks, and dumpers had become quite numerous in Pyongyang.⁴² Secondly, Pyongyang's friendly gestures toward Tokyo seem to have been strongly influenced by the intention to outcompete Seoul. From October 1961 onward, the new southern administration of Park Chung-hee, 1961-1979) made determined efforts to normalize South Korean-Japanese relations, whereas the KWP leaders were equally determined to resist this trend.⁴³ In December 1962, the DPRK issued a "Statement on the Japan-South Korea Talks," declaring that "hasty attempts to bring about diplomatic relations should not be carried out in principle until after the unification of Korea has been established," and therefore North Korea should also participate in the negotiations.⁴⁴

Since the latter was unlikely to happen, Pyongyang sought to achieve its aims by other means. On the one hand, North Korean propaganda approved and encouraged the resistance the Japanese-South Korean normalization talks generated among South Korean students and

⁴² Kiwon Chung, "Japanese-North Korean Relations Today": 795; Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, 205-206.

⁴³ Shigeru Oda, "The Normalization of Relations Between Japan and the Republic of Korea," *The American Journal of International Law* 61, no. 1 (January 1967): 39-40.

⁴⁴ Chung, "Japanese-North Korean Relations Today": 788.

Park Chung-hee's parliamentary opposition. On the other hand, North Korea, having adopted an openly confrontational attitude toward Park's authoritarian regime from early 1962 continued to pursue a policy of engagement toward Japan so as to dissuade Tokyo from making a separate deal with Seoul.⁴⁵

Again, the latter objective would have been incompatible with a propaganda campaign against Japanese claims over Dokdo. This may be why Tokyo's new attempts to raise the issue of Dokdo in 1962 did not produce an adverse effect on Japanese-DPRK relations. On the contrary, in November 1962, the Japan-North Korea Trade Association finally managed to persuade the Japanese government to allow direct trade between the two countries.⁴⁶ From a North Korean perspective, it may have appeared advantageous to watch the Dokdo dispute from the sidelines, hoping that it might hinder Japanese-South Korean rapprochement. Notably, in April 1962, Japanese Foreign Minister Kosaka Zentarō made a statement before the Diet in which he "assured the Japanese people that relations with South Korea would not be normalized until the question of entitlement to Takeshima has been resolved."⁴⁷

The Second Phase of North Korea's Dokdo Policy: Increasing Attention

Nevertheless, the process of Japanese-South Korean normalization was eventually decoupled from the question of Dokdo. Both Seoul and Tokyo had a strong economic and political stake in achieving reconciliation, and since neither side wanted to yield to the other as far as Dokdo was

⁴⁵ Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, 188-189.

⁴⁶ Soon Sung Cho, "Japan's Two Koreas Policy and the Problems of Korean Unification," *Asian Survey* 7, no. 10 (October 1967): 712.

⁴⁷ Oda, "The Normalization of Relations Between Japan and the Republic of Korea": 54.

concerned, they finally opted for a treaty that sidestepped, rather than solved, this thorny issue. Despite the intense South Korean protests against the talks with Japan between April and June, 1964, the administration of Park Chung-hee managed to retain its control over society, and soon resumed its negotiations with Tokyo. On June 22, 1965, the two governments signed the Japan-ROK Treaty on Basic Relations, which was duly ratified on December 18 the same year.⁴⁸ The prospect of Japanese-South Korean reconciliation posed a new strategic challenge to North Korea, not only because it reinforced Seoul's international position, but because it also lessened Tokyo's interest in maintaining contacts with Pyongyang. Between 1965 and 1966, the government of Prime Minister Satō Eisaku (1964-1972) began to reverse the earlier trend of Japanese-DPRK rapprochement and imposed new restrictions on economic cooperation.⁴⁹

During their conversations with Hungarian colleagues, North Korean officials openly expressed their anxiety over the treaty. For instance, in June 1967, the head of the Youth League's International Liaisons Office informed a Hungarian diplomat as follows:

While previously only the USA was present in South Korea, now Japan has also intruded, and she is playing an increasingly important role. In the final analysis, the three strongest imperialist powers – the USA, Japan, and West Germany – have completely gotten hold of South Korea in a political, economic, and – last but not least – military sense. These conditions make the cause of revolution difficult, and create additional problems for the DPRK.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ For an overview, see Kwan Bong Kim, *The Korea-Japan Treaty Crisis and the Instability of the Korean Political System* (New York: Praeger, 1971).

⁴⁹ Soon Sung Cho, "Japan's Two Koreas Policy and the Problems of Korean Unification": 718-719.

⁵⁰ Embassy of Hungary in the DPRK, Report, July 22, 1967, KTS, 1967, 61. doboz, 200, 001202/3/1967.

Under these circumstances, the post-1955 policy of engaging Japan and isolating South Korea – which necessitated a low-key approach toward the issue of Dokdo – must have appeared less and less feasible to the KWP leaders. Consequently, in 1965, a significant change occurred in Pyongyang’s public attitude toward Dokdo.

As the Japanese-South Korean negotiations progressed, North Korean propaganda against the Japanese government took an increasingly shrill tone.⁵¹ In February 1965, the North Korean Foreign Ministry told Hungarian diplomats that the Japan-ROK talks were nearing conclusion.⁵² This may be why it occurred in this period, and not earlier, that *Rodong sinmun* raised the issue of Dokdo for the first time. The KWP leaders seem to have concluded they had nothing to lose. The articles published on February 23-24 and March 5 placed the territorial dispute squarely into the context of the Japanese-South Korean negotiations. On August 5, that is, after the conclusion of the treaty and before its ratification, *Rodong sinmun* carried yet another article about this subject, warning the Korean audience that “Dokdo was not for bargaining.”⁵³

Actually, Dokdo was one of the few issues in which the administration of Park Chung-hee firmly refused to make any concession to the Japanese side. On the basis of a recent conversation with President Park, on June 15, 1965, the United States ambassador in Seoul reported the following:

It is quite clear that the Korean position against any mention of

⁵¹ M. T. Haggard, “North Korea’s International Position,” *Asian Survey* 5, no. 8 (August 1965): 384.

⁵² Embassy of Hungary in the DPRK, Report, February 10, 1965, KTS, 1965, 73. doboz, IV-101, 001825/1965.

⁵³ Bae and Yang, “Bukhan *Nodong sinmun* eui Dokdo gisa (1948-2008 nyeon) hyeonhwang bunseok”: 124-130.

Tokto [*sic*] in the agreement with Japan is adamant. I believe that the government's appraisal of the adverse effect which any mention of this ill-fated subject would have on the prospect for ratification and especially upon the principle of mobilization of indispensable support from the members of the DRP [Democratic Republican Party] is probably accurate.⁵⁴

Still, North Korean propaganda, unwilling as it was to acknowledge that Park's policies might be in accordance with Korean national interests, preferred to present the treaty as an implicit threat to Korea's control over Dokdo. While this interpretation was supported by the fact that the treaty failed to force Japan to abandon its territorial claims, North Korea's charges about Park's alleged treacherous intentions revealed that Pyongyang's objective was not only to create friction in Japanese-South Korean relations, but also to discredit the South Korean government.

From 1965 to 1969, Japan-DPRK relations underwent a downward trend, all the more so because the United States President Richard Nixon's "Guam Doctrine" encouraged Japan to play a more active role in East Asia, while the first Nixon-Satō communiqué (November 21, 1969) explicitly linked Japan's security with the defense of South Korea.⁵⁵ Predictably, *Rodong sinmun* continued to publish articles about Dokdo and the Japan-ROK maritime boundary between 1967 and 1969, clearly expressing Pyongyang's dissatisfaction with both South Korean and Japanese foreign policies.⁵⁶

In 1971, however, the Japanese government, inspired as it was by

⁵⁴ Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, No. 0600Z, June 15, 1965, in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Vol. 29, Part 1, Korea, pp. 793-794.

⁵⁵ Victor D. Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The United States-Korea-Japan Security Triangle* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 75-99.

⁵⁶ Bae and Yang, "Bukhan *Nodong sinmun* eui Dokdo gisa (1948-2008 nyeon) hyeonhwang bunseok": 123.

Nixon's declaration to visit China, expressed its readiness to improve its relations with Beijing and Pyongyang, no matter whether Seoul liked it or not. Unnerved by Tokyo's conciliatory statements on North Korea, and by the fact that the Nixon-Satō communiqué of January 1972 no longer included a "Korea clause," South Korea adopted an increasingly critical attitude toward Japan between 1971 and 1972.⁵⁷

From a North Korean perspective, these new developments appeared quite advantageous, all the more so because they were accompanied by a rapid growth of Japan-DPRK trade, from \$58 million in 1971 to \$360 million by 1974. In 1974, Japan became Pyongyang's second largest commercial partner after the Soviet Union.⁵⁸ Encouraged by this new trend, in April 1972, Deputy Premier Bak Seong-cheol told the following to the Hungarian ambassador:

Park Chung Hee is becoming increasingly isolated in the field of *foreign policy*, too. [...] Nor is Japan the same as it was before. Satō has already grown old. The Japanese progressive forces, who are becoming stronger day by day, might dismiss Satō from his post, [or] Satō might even die, and Park Chung Hee can hardly expect any kind of effective Japanese support if Satō is no longer present [emphasis in the original].⁵⁹

To be sure, the KWP leaders were soon compelled to realize that Tokyo was hardly, if at all, interested in establishing diplomatic relations with Pyongyang in the same way as it had done with Beijing.⁶⁰ Still, they

⁵⁷ Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism*, 115-122.

⁵⁸ Seung K. Ko, "North Korea's Relations with Japan Since Detente," *Pacific Affairs* 50, no. 1 (April 1977): 37-40.

⁵⁹ Embassy of Hungary in the DPRK, Report, April 19, 1972, KTS, 1972, 59. doboz, 81-130, 00808/45/1972.

⁶⁰ Embassy of Hungary in the DPRK, Report, October 16, 1972, KTS, 1972, 60. doboz, 81-16, 2510/6/1972.

could take advantage of the fact that due to various incidents (such as the abduction of Kim Dae-jung from Tokyo by South Korea's Korean Central Intelligence Agency and Japan's uncooperativeness in the wake of Mun Se-gwang's assassination attempt against Park Chung-hee), "between 1973 and 1974 Japan-South Korean relations regressed to their lowest point in the post-normalization era." What particularly irritated Seoul was that in 1974, Japanese Foreign Minister Kimura Toshio publicly questioned the South Korean thesis that the DPRK posed a threat to the ROK, and declared that he did not consider the latter the sole legitimate government in Korea.⁶¹

In light of this dramatic improvement of Japanese-North Korean relations, it was quite understandable that the DPRK reverted to its low-key approach toward the issue of Dokdo. From 1970 to 1976, *Rodong sinmun* did not carry any articles about Dokdo.⁶² Actually, in this period the combined effect of Sino-Japanese, Sino-North Korean, and Japanese-North Korean rapprochement even induced Pyongyang to make a most unusual gesture of sympathy toward Japan. That is, on a few occasions the North Korean newspapers republished certain Chinese propaganda materials which – reflecting Beijing's intention to create a Sino-Japanese alliance against the Soviet Union – expressed support for Japan's claims to the Soviet-held Kuril Islands.⁶³ Due to the external origin of these articles, their publication in the North Korean press constituted only an indirect form of support to the Japanese standpoint. Still, it deserves attention that North Korea, albeit only sporadically, expressed sympathy for Japan's territorial claims against the Soviet Union.

Apart from such diplomatic considerations, North Korea's renewed

⁶¹ Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism*, 124-130.

⁶² Bae and Yang, "Bukhan *Nodong sinmun* eui Dokdo gisa (1948-2008 nyeon) hyeonhwang bunseok": 123.

⁶³ Embassy of Hungary in the DPRK, Telegram, December 10, 1977, KTS, 1977, 78. doboz, 82-1, 004490/1/1977.

silence on the Dokdo question may also have reflected the fact that between 1965 and 1975 was a phase of tranquility in the history of the Dokdo dispute. As the South Korean scholar Byoung-Woo Lyou noted,

There were two reasons for the tranquility. One was that Japanese fishing vessels generally respected the three nautical mile waters of Dokdo as Korean territorial sea. Therefore, fishing vessels of both countries operated peacefully. The other reason was [the] flourishing economic interdependence between Korea and Japan.⁶⁴

Under such conditions, North Korea had little to gain, but very much to lose, from confronting a hitherto cooperative Japan over a largely dormant issue.

From 1977 onward, however, Pyongyang again devoted increasing attention to this problem. To explain this policy shift, it may not be sufficient to investigate only the immediate causes of North Korea's post-1977 behavior. It also appears advisable to examine whether the factors that had initially dissuaded North Korea from raising the Dokdo issue were still in operation after 1977, or whether they also underwent some kind of change.

The Japanese historian Kajimura Hideki regarded a *Rodong sinmun* article dated February 11, 1977, which emphatically called Dokdo an "inherent Korean territory," as a turning point in North Korea's public attitude toward the Dokdo question.⁶⁵ This view seems to be correct, all the more so because at the same time, the Japanese-South Korean dispute over Dokdo also entered a new phase. In fact, Pyongyang's decision to publicly express its standpoint on the Dokdo issue was probably closely

⁶⁴ Byung-Woon Lyou, "A Constructive Proposal to Solve the 'Dokdo' Controversy Between Korea and Japan," Unpublished manuscript, 2010, http://works.bepress.com/byungwoon_lyou/ ACCESSED.

⁶⁵ Kajimura, "The Question of Takeshima/Tokdo": 429.

related to the renewed friction between Tokyo and Seoul. Namely, *Rodong sinmun* published the aforesaid article in response to a declaration that Prime Minister Fukuda Takeo (1976-1978) made on February 5, 1977. Fukuda's statement, which stressed that "Takeshima is Japanese territory beyond all doubt," elicited similar protests from the South Korean government.⁶⁶

The mere fact that Fukuda made such a statement may not have necessarily induced Pyongyang to express its own standpoint, since between 1952 and 1964 Japanese declarations of this kind had not produced a strong effect on North Korea's public attitude. Therefore, the specific context and motivation of Fukuda's declaration also deserves attention. In the previous year, both the United States and the Soviet Union proclaimed Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) stretching 200 nautical miles from their coasts. These regulations greatly reduced the access of Japanese and South Korean fishing vessels to the northwestern Pacific Ocean, and, as a consequence, led to a dramatic increase in competition between the two nations in the East Sea (Sea of Japan).⁶⁷ Predictably, these new challenges induced Japan and the two Koreas to seek to establish their own EEZs.

Since the possession of an island located outside a nation's coastal EEZ can considerably enlarge the country's fishing grounds, the question of whether Dokdo was inherent Korean territory or Japanese territory suddenly acquired new importance. Tokyo sought to apply its new conception of twelve-mile territorial waters to the area around Dokdo, not least because such a change would have further expanded Japan's fishing grounds at South Korea's expense.⁶⁸ These Japanese efforts ran

⁶⁶ Min Gyo Koo, *Island Disputes and Maritime Regime Building in East Asia: Between a Rock and a Hard Place* (New York: Springer, 2010), 78-80.

⁶⁷ Hara, "Impact of the USSR's 200 Mile Fishery Zone on the Japanese-Soviet Fishery Negotiations," 53-54; Koo, *Island Disputes and Maritime Regime Building in East Asia*, 79.

⁶⁸ Koo, *Island Disputes and Maritime Regime Building in East Asia*, 80.

counter to Seoul's analogous plan to extend its own territorial waters to twelve nautical miles, and particularly to South Korea's intentions to populate the hitherto uninhabited Dokdo.⁶⁹ Thus, Min Gyo Koo correctly placed Fukuda's declaration into an economic context: "Behind this provocative and preemptive statement were the fishery problems and the emerging global trend towards a 200 nm EEZ regime."⁷⁰ Notably, in February 1977, Japan conducted fishery negotiations with the Soviet Union, too, during which the Japanese refused to agree to Soviet fishing jurisdiction over the two hundred-mile zone around the disputed Kuril Islands.⁷¹

North Korea, a country sharing the East Sea with South Korea and Japan, could not remain indifferent to this trend. As early as January 30, 1974, when Tokyo and Seoul concluded an agreement on the continental shelf boundary and the creation of a joint development zone, Pyongyang summarily declared the agreement to be invalid.⁷² In 1977, the DPRK again issued a protest against the renewed Japanese-South Korean maritime border talks.⁷³ These protests were at least partly motivated by North Korea's own economic interests. In the summer of 1977, Pyongyang's interests directly clashed with that of Japan, for the two states declared their EEZs nearly simultaneously, North Korea on June 21 and Japan in July.⁷⁴ By the end of the year, only an informal

⁶⁹ Sungjoo Han, "South Korea 1977: Preparing for Self-Reliance," *Asian Survey* 18, no. 1 (January 1978): 51.

⁷⁰ Koo, *Island Disputes and Maritime Regime Building in East Asia*, 80.

⁷¹ Hara, "Impact of the USSR's 200 Mile Fishery Zone on the Japanese-Soviet Fishery Negotiations," 36.

⁷² Embassy of Hungary in the DPRK, Telegram, February 20, 1974, KTS, 1974, 65. doboz, 81-10, 00650/5/1974.

⁷³ Embassy of Hungary in the DPRK, Telegram, July 11, 1978, MOL, XIX-J-1-j South Korea, Top Secret Documents, 1978, 81. doboz, 82-5, 004404/1978.

⁷⁴ Kim, *The Korea-Japan Treaty Crisis and the Instability of the Korean Political System*, 89; Jon M. Van Dyke, "The Republic of Korea's Maritime Boundaries," *The International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law* 18, no. 4 (December 2003): 509-540.

agreement was reached “whereby North Korea gave its provisional permission to Japanese fishermen to fish within North Korea’s economic zone outside the military boundary.”⁷⁵ In light of these events, it seems likely that Pyongyang’s unusual reaction to Fukuda’s statement was inspired by North Korea’s awareness of the economic motives behind this declaration. The KWP leaders decided to respond to Fukuda’s words because they felt that not only South Korea’s national interests but also their own concrete interests were at stake. From their perspective, the declaration probably appeared as but one manifestation of Japan’s new maritime expansionism.

The post-1974 process of Japan-ROK rapprochement, combined as it was with a simultaneous deterioration of Japan-DPRK relations, may also have influenced Pyongyang’s statement on Dokdo. To North Korea’s chagrin, Japan’s Prime Minister Miki Takeo (1974-1976) began to reverse the trend that had dominated Japan’s relations with the two Koreas during Tanaka Kakuei’s years in office (1972-1974). In practice, Miki abandoned the equidistance policy in favor of a tilt toward the ROK, and “reaffirmed the Korea clause in 1975 along with his commitment regarding bases in Okinawa for the defense of South Korea.”⁷⁶ This unfavorable change in Tokyo’s political stance probably further lessened the KWP leadership’s readiness to take Japanese “sensitivities” into consideration. Significantly, in December 1977, the Hungarian embassy in Pyongyang reported that the North Korean press no longer published such Chinese materials supporting Japanese claims to the Kuril Islands.⁷⁷

Finally, it appears likely that the specific state of Japan-ROK and

⁷⁵ B. C. Koh, “North Korea in 1977: Year of ‘Readjustment’,” *Asian Survey* 18, no. 1 (January 1978): 43.

⁷⁶ Koo, *Island Disputes and Maritime Regime Building in East Asia*, 79.

⁷⁷ Embassy of Hungary in the DPRK, Telegram, December 10, 1977, KTS, 1977, 78. doboz, 82-1, 004490/1/1977.

inter-Korean relations also influenced Pyongyang's reactions. In 1973, inter-Korean relations, having briefly improved between 1971 and 1972, underwent a new and prolonged decline, whereas Japan-DPRK relations reached this stage by 1975. This means that between 1975 and 1977, North Korea was on increasingly hostile terms with both Seoul and Tokyo. From 1952 to 1953, Pyongyang's simultaneous conflict with the two countries compelled the DPRK to adopt a passive stance toward Dokdo, because North Korea, locked in mortal struggle with South Korea, could not afford politically to acknowledge the nationalist character of Rhee's initiative. In 1977, however, the dispute was revived on the initiative of Japan rather than South Korea. Under such circumstances, the KWP leaders did not have to cope with the thorny question of whether they should or should not express agreement with a nationalistic southern initiative. On the contrary, they could (and did) try to use this situation to discredit Park Chung-hee's authoritarian regime. In February 1977, *Rodong sinmun* attacked not only Tokyo but also Seoul. As Kajimura noted, the article "criticized the Park Chung-hee regime's stance on Japan for failing to persuade Japan which was resolutely claiming it [Dokdo] as its own territory."⁷⁸ Since some groups of the South Korean democratic opposition held the same opinion, the KWP leaders may have wanted to tap into these sentiments and make a good impression on South Korea's public opinion.

From mid-1978 onward, additional signs of tension appeared in Japanese-North Korean relations. For one thing, the KWP leaders were dissatisfied with the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship, which brought no concrete benefits for Pyongyang. In a conversation with the Czechoslovak ambassador, Deputy Defense Minister Bak Chung-guk complained, "Now Japan already completely ignores North Korea, because it has settled everything with China. Japan will criticize

⁷⁸ Kajimura, "The Question of Takeshima/Tokdo": 429.

and attack North Korea more boldly than before, for it knows that China will not take a stand against Japan, whereas South Korea will receive more attention and support from Japan.”⁷⁹ Secondly, the Japanese-South Korean friction in 1977 turned out to be quite ephemeral, followed by a long period of economic and political cooperation. The dispute over Dokdo started to abate as early as the spring of 1978, for the establishment of South Korea’s twelve-mile territorial waters around Dokdo (April 30, 1978) was implemented in a way that informally granted Japanese fishing vessels a certain access to the area within the twelve-mile limit.⁸⁰

These circumstances probably played a role in that on September 8, 1978, after the conclusion of the Sino-Japanese Treaty (August 12) and before its ratification (October 18), *Rodong sinmun* published another article about the South Korean-Japanese maritime border and the Dokdo question.⁸¹ The significance of this date is underlined by the fact that the very next day, on September 9, Kim Il Sung also made a public speech in which he lashed out not only at America and the Park Chung-hee regime, but also at Japan.⁸² Kim’s public attack on Tokyo indicated a shift in North Korean foreign policies, for a few months earlier, during the visit of Chinese Communist Party Chairman Hua Guofeng to the DPRK (May 5-10, 1978), the KWP leaders had scrupulously refrained from criticizing Japan.⁸³

⁷⁹ Balázs Szalontai, “Hub or Backwater? North Korea Between Alternative Conceptions of Northeast Asian Regional Economic Cooperation,” *Korea Review* 2, no. 2 (2012): 87.

⁸⁰ Koo, *Island Disputes and Maritime Regime Building in East Asia*, 80-81.

⁸¹ Bae and Yang, “Bukhan *Nodong sinmun* eui Dokdo gisa (1948-2008 nyeon) hyeonhwang bunseok”: 138.

⁸² Kim Il Sung, “Let Us Step Up Socialist Construction under the Banner of the Juche Idea. Report at the National Celebration of the 30th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, September 9, 1978,” http://www.uk-songun.com/index.php?p=1_163_LET-US-STEP-UP-SOCIALIST-CONSTRUCTION-UNDER-THE-BANNER-OF-THE-JUCHE-IDEA

⁸³ Embassy of Hungary in the USSR, Telegram, May 12, 1978, CTS, 1978, 77. doboz, 78-1,

In the next decade, Japan-ROK cooperation became particularly extensive, culminating in the state visits of Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone (1982-1987) and President Chun Doo-hwan (1980-1987) in January 1983 and September 1984, respectively.⁸⁴ Determined to achieve Chun's downfall by one means or another, the North Korean leaders must have regarded the dramatic growth of Japanese economic and political support to his authoritarian regime as an unfavorable trend. Apparently this is why *Rodong sinmun* published yet another article on Dokdo on March 4, 1983, not long after Nakasone's visit to South Korea.⁸⁵ North Korea seems to have raised this issue to discredit the "unpatriotic" Chun regime and hinder cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo. Notably, in 1983, South Korean authorities briefly banned the popular Korean pop song "Dokdo neun uri ttang" [Dokdo is Our Land], lest it create friction in Japanese-South Korean relations.⁸⁶ It also deserves attention that in 1984, *Rodong sinmun* repeatedly castigated Japan's claims to the Kuril Islands, indicating Pyongyang's increasingly critical attitude toward Tokyo.⁸⁷

The Third Phase of North Korea's Dokdo Policy: Opening the Floodgates

In 1987, South Korea's transition from military-dominated authoritarian

002378/8/1978; Embassy of Hungary in the DPRK, Telegram, May 15, 1978, CTS, 1978, 77. doboz, 78-1, 002378/5/1978; Hungarian Foreign Ministry, Memorandum, May 23, 1978, CTS, 1978, 77. doboz, 78-1, 002378/7/1978.

⁸⁴ Hong N. Kim, "Japanese-Korean Relations in the 1980s," *Asian Survey* 27, no. 5 (May 1, 1987): 503-508.

⁸⁵ Bae and Yang, "Bukhan *Nodong sinmun* eui Dokdo gisa (1948-2008 nyeon) hyeonhwang bunseok": 139.

⁸⁶ Sung-jae Choi, "The Politics of the Dokdo Issue," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 5, no. 3 (September 2005): 469.

⁸⁷ Embassy of Hungary in the DPRK, Report, October 16, 1984, KTS, 1984, 86. doboz, 81-13, 005440/1984.

rule to democracy created new conditions both for the Dokdo dispute and inter-Korean relations. For one thing, the end of censorship and other forms of authoritarian control allowed South Korean civil society more opportunities to express critical views about various aspects of past and present Japanese policies (including Japanese claims to Dokdo) than before. While the authoritarian regimes of Park and Chun did stand up to Tokyo on several occasions, they usually preferred to exclude civil society from these disputes, lest the conflicts spiral out of control. As Doowon Suh and Andrew K. Linkhart stressed, “The military government regularly silenced anti-Japanese sentiment through censorship and oppression.”⁸⁸ Thanks to democratization, South Korean civil society became an active and increasingly influential participant in the Dokdo dispute. From the mid-1990s, a wide range of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) emerged aiming to draw attention to the Dokdo problem and protesting against Tokyo’s territorial claims.⁸⁹

Secondly, South Korea’s democratization potentially facilitated the improvement of inter-Korean relations. Since authoritarian regimes frequently justified their repressive policies by citing the “northern threat,” and presented North Korea in the worst possible light, the transition to democracy led to a critical re-examination of these theses, and to calls for broader contacts with the DPRK. Indeed, many activists of the democratic opposition movement felt that inter-Korean reconciliation would provide an additional guarantee against a reversal to authoritarian rule.⁹⁰ In any case, South Korea’s perceptions of the North

⁸⁸ Doowon Suh and Andrew K. Linkhart, “Korean NGOs in Historicizing Foreign Affairs and Democratizing Foreign Policies: Agenda Setting and Discourse Framing in the Dokdo/Takeshima Conflict Between Korea and Japan, 2005-2008,” *Journal of International Politics* 16, no. 2 (2011): 178.

⁸⁹ Choi, “The Politics of the Dokdo Issue,” 470-472; Suh and Linkhart, “Korean NGOs in Historicizing Foreign Affairs and Democratizing Foreign Policies,” 179-184.

⁹⁰ Chien-peng Chung, “Democratization in South Korea and Inter-Korean Relations,” *Pacific Affairs* 76, no. 1 (April 2003): 10-11.

as a hostile and alien entity were alleviated by South Korea's growing economic and military superiority over North Korea, the inter-Korean agreement on reconciliation (December 1991), and the North Korean famine of 1995-1998.

The combined effect of these two trends seems to have provided a stimulus to North Korean propaganda to highlight the Dokdo issue, and utilize the dispute in its efforts to influence South Korean public opinion. Thanks to democratization, the relative improvement of inter-Korean relations, and the explosive growth of electronic communication, Pyongyang's messages could reach the South Korean audience easier than before, and the chances of reaching inter-Korean consensus on certain issues of national interest were growing. All these factors created favorable conditions and incentives for a growth of North Korean interest in Dokdo.

Yet, it should not be assumed that under these new circumstances, North Korean propaganda consistently laid a strong emphasis on the Dokdo question. On the contrary, ebbs and flows in North Korean interest in Dokdo were still perceptible, but these did not necessarily coincide with the dynamism of the Japanese-South Korean dispute. A case of particular interest was Pyongyang's attitude toward Japan in 1997 and the first half of 1998, at which time the Dokdo dispute entered yet another explosive phase. In 1994, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) authorized states to claim Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) within 200 nautical miles around their sovereign territory. This new situation enhanced the economic significance of Dokdo for both South Korea and Japan, and induced the two countries to revive the dispute. In early 1996, the ROK started to build a wharf facility on Dokdo, whereupon the Japanese Foreign Minister reaffirmed that "Takeshima is a part of Japanese territory." By mid-1997, under Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryūtarō (1996-1998), the conflict escalated to such an extent that the Japanese side started seizing South Korean fishing boats within its unilaterally declared EEZ, an act

that generated massive protests in the ROK.⁹¹

Peculiarly enough, this time North Korea was by no means eager to join the fray. From March 1997 to September 1998, KCNA published only a single article that made any kind of reference to Dokdo. In the light of the ongoing Japanese-South Korean quarrel over the island, it appeared fairly ironic that this article covered a definitely non-political subject: an endangered bird species, the black-faced spoonbill (*Platalea minor*), which used Dokdo as a breeding ground.⁹²

The reason of Pyongyang's low-key attitude may be understood if one takes into consideration that in these years, North Korea actively pursued a policy of rapprochement toward Japan. In November 1997, *Rodong sinmun* carried an article titled "The Normalization of DPRK-Japan Ties is an Urgent Requirement of the Two Peoples and the Times":

A series of positive changes, including an agreement on the resumption of talks between the governments of the DPRK and Japan, have recently been witnessed in the relationship between the two countries. [...] If Japan sincerely shows remorse for the past and refrains from pursuing the policy hostile towards the DPRK and from obstructing the reunification of Korea, the Korean people will treat Japan with friendly feelings. [...] The Japanese authorities had better be mindful of the old diplomatic saying that there are neither eternal friends nor eternal enemies.⁹³

Just like from 1955 to 1964 and from 1971 to 1974, economic factors must have strongly influenced North Korea's flexible policy toward

⁹¹ Koo, *Island Disputes and Maritime Regime Building in East Asia*, 85-89; Mark J. Valencia, "Domestic Politics Fuels Northeast Asian Maritime Disputes," *AsiaPacific Issues* 43 (2000): 3.

⁹² "Rare Blackfaced Spoonbill," KCNA, August 1, 1997 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

⁹³ "Rodong Sinmun on Questions in Improving DPRK-Japan Relations," KCNA, November 6, 1997 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

Japan. In October 1997, Japanese Foreign Minister Obuchi Keizō announced that Tokyo would provide \$27 million in food aid to Pyongyang.⁹⁴ Japan's economic significance to the DPRK may be gauged from the following data: From 1994 to 2001, North Korea's exports to Japan consistently surpassed its exports to the ROK, and its imports from South Korea did not exceed imports from Japan until 1999.⁹⁵

Another factor that probably influenced Pyongyang's attitude to the dispute over Dokdo was the deterioration of inter-Korean relations during the administration of Kim Young-sam (1993-1998), a process starting with Seoul's protest against the United States-DPRK Agreed Framework in October 1994.⁹⁶ The KWP leaders presumably concluded that the Kim Young-sam administration sought to isolate their country, for in February 1997, *Rodong sinmun* denounced "the South Korean puppets for trying to keep Japan from normalizing the relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea." It deserves particular attention that this article raised the Dokdo issue, but used it to attack Seoul rather than Tokyo. That is, *Rodong sinmun* castigated the "sycophantic treachery" of South Korean leaders who wanted to subordinate Japanese-North Korean rapprochement to the progress of inter-Korean relations, "while turning their face away from the Tok Islet problem."⁹⁷ Once again, the DPRK found it easier to come to terms with Japan than with the ROK. Since Kim Young-sam tried to use the territorial issue to boost his waning popularity in 1997, the KWP leaders must have been

⁹⁴ Christopher W. Hughes, *Japan's Economic Power and Security: Japan and North Korea* (London: Routledge, 1999), 100.

⁹⁵ Dick K. Nanto and Emma Chanlett-Avery, *The North Korean Economy: Overview and Policy Analysis*, Congressional Research Service Report, (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, April 18, 2007), 14.

⁹⁶ Chung, "Democratization in South Korea and Inter-Korean Relations": 24-27.

⁹⁷ "Rodong Sinmun on Sycophantic Treachery," KCNA, February 11, 1997 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

particularly unwilling to acknowledge that the foreign policies of their southern opponent might represent Korean national interests.⁹⁸

In contrast with the low-key attitude displayed from March 1997 to September 1998, KCNA abruptly started to pay great attention to Dokdo in October 1998. North Korea's suddenly increased interest seems to have been triggered by the first official visit of President Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) to Japan, during which he and Prime Minister Obuchi Keizō (1998-2000) made a joint declaration of a new ROK-Japan partnership (October 8, 1998). The declaration called for extensive economic, security, and cultural cooperation between Tokyo and Seoul, signaling a de-escalation of the Dokdo dispute.⁹⁹ Notably, North Korea began to express its displeasure with this process of rapprochement as early as October 1, 1998, when Pyongyang denounced the South Korean authorities as follows:

It has been reported that a "fishing agreement" was recently concluded between the South Korean authorities and the Japanese reactionaries. [...] The "agreement" is a treacherous one that abandons the dominium over Tok Islet, part of the inviolable territory of Korea, and sells territorial waters to outside forces. [...] We do not recognize the treacherous and aggressive "South Korea-Japan fishing agreement" and declare the "waters under joint control" of 135 degrees and 30 minutes east longitude null and void.¹⁰⁰

Actually, the Japanese-South Korean Agreement on Fisheries was signed as late as November 28, 1998, entering into force in January 1999. Still, it did establish a compromise joint-use zone around Dokdo, instead of

⁹⁸ Koo, *Island Disputes and Maritime Regime Building in East Asia*, 89.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

¹⁰⁰ "DPRF Spokesman on South Korean Authorities' Treason," KCNA, October 2, 1998 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

insisting on the exclusive sovereignty of one side or another.¹⁰¹ Presenting this ambiguity as outright treachery, from October 1998 to February 1999, KCNA criticized the agreement in twenty-five articles, accusing Kim Dae-jung of selling Dokdo to Japan.

During its campaign against the agreement, North Korea, ironically, found itself on the same side as South Korea's conservative Grand National Party (GNP), which in January 1999 called for "defending Dokdo" and "nullifying and renegotiating the Korea-Japan fisheries agreement."¹⁰² Under usual circumstances, North Korean propaganda was habitually inclined to castigate the GNP for its alleged anti-national stance, but in this particular case, KCNA approved the party's complaints about the agreement.¹⁰³

Judging from the fact that in 1997, Pyongyang had refrained from making any comment on Japan's claims to Dokdo, it is doubtful that this sudden attack on Kim Dae-jung was motivated solely by North Korea's concerns about Tokyo's territorial ambitions. It appears more likely that the KWP leaders considered the process of Japanese-South Korean rapprochement, whose security and cultural aspects they similarly condemned, a threat to their own interests, and wanted to hinder it by raising such a contentious issue as the Dokdo question. Paradoxically, Kim's reconciliation-oriented Sunshine Policy could hardly lessen Pyongyang's dissatisfaction with his simultaneous readiness to cultivate friendly relations with Japan, not least because in September 1998, the earlier trend of Japan-DPRK rapprochement had ground to a halt due to North Korea's missile test.¹⁰⁴ Facing this double challenge, the North

¹⁰¹ Jon M. Van Dyke, "Legal Issues Related to Sovereignty over Dokdo and Its Maritime Boundary," *Ocean Development & International Law* 38, no. 1-2 (January 31, 2007): 193.

¹⁰² Choi, "The Politics of the Dokdo Issue": 471.

¹⁰³ "'Fisheries Accord' between South Korea and Japan Effectuated," KCNA, January 26, 1999 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

¹⁰⁴ Hughes, *Japan's Economic Power and Security*, 101.

Korean leaders seem to have used the issue of Dokdo to lash out at both South Korea and Japan.

In early 2000, however, Pyongyang's propaganda about Dokdo underwent yet another shift. As the Sunshine Policy started taking effect, KCNA in March ceased carrying articles directly accusing Kim Dae-jung of having sold Dokdo to Japan. True, an example of indirect (South Korean) criticism appeared as late as June 10, a few days before the historic North-South summit. Still, from mid-2000 to mid-2004, most of KCNA's Dokdo-related articles, save for a few cases of indirect criticism, solely targeted Japan. The shifting focus of North Korean propaganda was probably not only a consequence of inter-Korean rapprochement, but actually an integral element of North-South interactions. Namely, the DPRK sought to create a sort of inter-Korean consensus on the basis of the two sides' shared commitment to Dokdo. The latter idea was clearly expressed in June 2001 when the Dokdo Museum opened a North Korea-South Korea joint exhibition of historical materials.¹⁰⁵ In August of the same year, a festival for national reunification took place in Pyongyang, ending with a North-South joint statement:

They agreed to continue having various forms of joint events to lay bare the Japanese imperialists' occupation of Korea and their thrice-cursed crimes against the Korean nation and get an apology and compensation for them and to strengthen a joint action of non-governmental organizations to firmly protect the dominium over Tok Islet and have an academic symposium in this regard as an immediate task.¹⁰⁶

This kind of consensus on Dokdo was an entirely new phenomenon, since up to 1998 both Seoul and Pyongyang had usually found it easier to

¹⁰⁵ "South-North Joint Exhibition of Materials Held," KCNA, June 9, 2001 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

¹⁰⁶ "Joint Press Statement Released," KCNA, August 21, 2001 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

reach a *modus vivendi* with Tokyo than with each other. Only inter-Korean rapprochement could enable the two sides to synchronize their public attitudes toward the Dokdo issue. Yet, as will be seen below, this synchronization remained more or less imbalanced, because North Korea's attention was focused on South Korean non-governmental organizations and socio-political movements, rather than the South Korean state.

North Korea's efforts to seek consensus with the South on Dokdo implied that Pyongyang intended to dissuade Seoul from cooperating with Tokyo. Indeed, the visits of Prime Minister Mori Yoshirō (2000-2001) and Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō (2001-2006) to South Korea invariably elicited negative comments from KCNA. On both occasions, KCNA pointed out that the Dokdo Research Society and other South Korean non-governmental organizations sharply protested against the visits.¹⁰⁷

At the same time, however, North Korea was also pursuing its own policy of rapprochement with Japan. As early as mid-2001, Pyongyang sent feelers for the resumption of negotiations.¹⁰⁸ Initially, the campaign for inter-Korean consensus on Dokdo continued unabated. Between January and May 2002, KCNA still carried nine articles criticizing Japanese claims to Dokdo. Nevertheless, only one article of this kind was published during the remainder of 2002, to be followed by an even longer period of silence next year. Throughout 2003, KCNA mentioned Dokdo only in a single article on *Rodong sinmun*'s analogous attitude.¹⁰⁹ Pyongyang's peculiar silence, which stood in a marked contrast with its

¹⁰⁷ "Mori's Junket to South Korea Rejected," KCNA, October 20, 2000 (accessed on March 4, 2013); "Koizumi's Remarks Assailed in South Korea," KCNA, October 21, 2001 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

¹⁰⁸ Hong Nack Kim, *The Koizumi Government and the Politics of Normalizing Japanese-North Korean Relations*, Working Paper (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2006), 4.

¹⁰⁹ See Bae and Yang, "Bukhan *Nodong sinmun* eui Dokdo gisa (1948-2008 nyeon) hyeonhwang bunseok": 129.

pronounced interest in Dokdo from 1999 to 2001 and early 2002, seems to have reflected the combined effect of two external factors: the short-lived Japanese-North Korean rapprochement from August to October 2002 and the temporary de-escalation of the Dokdo dispute.

On the one hand, Koizumi's unprecedented visit to Pyongyang in September 2002, during which Kim Jong Il went so far as to apologize for the earlier abduction of Japanese citizens, raised hopes that Japanese-North Korean relations might be finally normalized after all. Since "it was not until late August 2002 that significant progress was made for the resumption of the suspended Japanese-North Korean normalization talks," it was probably not a coincidence that KCNA's last attack on Japan's territorial claims occurred on August 26.¹¹⁰ Significantly, KCNA's use of such pejorative terms as "Japanese militarism" and "Japanese reactionaries" also dropped to an unusually low level from September to December 2002. On the other hand, it deserves attention that in the winter of 2002 and 2003, Japan-DPRK relations once again took a turn for the worse, this time because of Pyongyang's nuclear program, yet North Korean propaganda continued to ignore Dokdo. One may attribute this phenomenon to the fact that in 2003, Japan-ROK relations were largely free of tension. During his trip to Tokyo in June, President Rho Moo-hyun (2003-2008) was the first "South Korean leader visiting Japan [who] did not bring up the history issue, let alone ask for an apology."¹¹¹ Thus the opportunities for reigniting the dispute looked unfavorable, all the more so because in the midst of the nuclear crisis, Pyongyang could ill afford to alienate the still-friendly Roh administration by attacking its Japan policy.

But if KCNA's references to Dokdo showed a dramatic decline in

¹¹⁰ Kim, *The Koizumi Government and the Politics of Normalizing Japanese-North Korean Relations*, 5.

¹¹¹ Seongho Sheen, *Japan-South Korea Relations: Slowly Lifting the Burden of History?* Occasional Paper (Honolulu: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2003), 1-2.

2002 and 2003, they underwent an explosive growth in 2005. While the Japanese-South Korean dispute also entered a particularly intense phase in 2005, North Korean propaganda seems not to have been a mere reflection of the former. Interestingly enough, the start of North Korea's Dokdo campaign actually preceded the eruption of the Japanese-South Korean crisis. In South Korea, the triggering factor was Shimane Prefecture's promotion of a bill in support of "Takeshima Day," which occurred in late February. In contrast, *Rodong sinmun* had raised the issue of Dokdo as early as February 7 by launching a direct attack on the South Korean government officials who had dissuaded the head of the National Police Agency from visiting Dokdo: "The south Korean authorities say quite often that Tok Islet belongs to Korea but, in actuality, commit an act contrary to this as in the aforementioned case. This disclosed their pro-Japanese toadyism."¹¹²

The nature of this charge revealed Pyongyang's dissatisfaction with the process of Japan-ROK rapprochement, which was still in motion in January 2005.¹¹³ Actually, the two countries were planning to sign a free trade agreement (FTA) within that year. In contrast, North Korea's renewed attempts to reach reconciliation with Japan did not yield the expected results. Following Koizumi's second visit to Pyongyang on May 22, 2004, KCNA, which had published over twenty Dokdo-related articles between January 17 and May 15, again dropped the subject, and mentioned Dokdo only once during the rest of the year. However, in the winter of 2004 and 2005, the process of Japan-DPRK rapprochement stalled one more time because of a new dispute about the abducted Japanese citizens.¹¹⁴ Under such circumstances, Pyongyang had

¹¹² "South Korean Authorities Hit for Pro-Japanese Toadyism," KCNA, February 7, 2005 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

¹¹³ Kang, "Japan-Korea Relations": 125-126.

¹¹⁴ Kim, *The Koizumi Government and the Politics of Normalizing Japanese-North Korean Relations*, 24-29.

sufficient incentive to reignite the issue of Dokdo, all the more so because the territorial dispute, coupled with the two Koreas' shared opposition to Japan's bid for a permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council, created an opportunity to revive the North-South consensus.

In early 2005, Pyongyang then opened the floodgates of its Dokdo propaganda to an unprecedented and, to date, unparalleled extent. Throughout the year, KCNA published a total of 121 Dokdo-related articles. In May 2005, the DPRK also issued stamps depicting Dokdo, which South Korea had done years earlier, and curtly rebuffed Japanese complaints against this act.¹¹⁵ The unusual intensity of North Korean attention certainly mirrored the massive scale of the protest movements in the ROK. Indeed, KCNA covered these movements with far greater interest and approval than the steps taken by the South Korean government. As late as mid-March after President Roh Moo-hyun and Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon had already made some sharply critical comments on Japan, *Rodong sinmun* still found it necessary to castigate South Korean authorities for their earlier decision to designate 2005 as "Japan-Korea Friendship Year."¹¹⁶ On March 22, however, KCNA finally reported that the South Korean government, the ruling Uri Party, and the opposition parties issued a joint protest against the "Takeshima Day ordinance."¹¹⁷ In April, the DPRK repeatedly called for a North-South consensus against Japan's territorial claims: "The prevailing situation requires all Koreans in the north and the south to shatter the Japanese militarists' moves for reinvasion through national cooperation."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Choi, "The Politics of the Dokdo Issue": 468; "Japan's Fax Message on its Claim to Tok Islet Sent Back," KCNA, May 25, 2005 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

¹¹⁶ "Claim to Ownership of Land of Ancestors in South Korea Flaied," KCNA, March 12, 2005 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

¹¹⁷ "Japan's Ambition to Grab Tok Islet Denounced in South Korea," KCNA, March 22, 2005 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

¹¹⁸ "Japanese Reactionaries' Moves to Grab Tok Islet Flaied," KCNA, April 22, 2005 (accessed on

During the North-South Ministerial Talks held in June 2005, the head of the northern delegation called upon his southern counterpart to “jointly cope with Japan’s moves to invade Tok Islet,” but the latter gave only an evasive reply.¹¹⁹

Probably this is why various South Korean non-governmental organizations such as the Dokdo Society, the National Alliance for the Protection of Dokdo, the Council for Promotion of Compensation to the Victims of the Pacific War, and the Bereaved Families of the Pacific War, and some minor leftist parties like the Democratic Labor Party, rather than the South Korean government, continued to receive the limelight in KCNA’s reports. In the first stage of the protests, the civic groups were certainly more eager to confront Japan than the state authorities and thus the stance of non-governmental organizations seemed more attractive to Pyongyang than the more cautious attitude of the Roh Moo-hyun administration.¹²⁰ The KWP leaders were obviously unnerved by any sign of Japan-ROK cooperation against their nuclear program: in May 2005, KCNA denounced Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon “who sang duet with the Japanese foreign minister calling for taking the nuclear issue of the DPRK to the UN Security Council.”¹²¹ For this reason, they must have welcomed those tendencies that aggravated, rather than defused, the Japanese-South Korean conflict over Dokdo. In any case, non-governmental organizations could be presented as representatives of South Korean society and by extension, the Korean nation, whereas KCNA continued to suggest doubts about the national legitimacy of

March 4, 2013).

¹¹⁹ “15th North-South Ministerial Talks Open,” KCNA, June 22, 2005 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

¹²⁰ Suh and Linkhart, “Korean NGOs in Historicizing Foreign Affairs and Democratizing Foreign Policies”: 181-182.

¹²¹ “Anti-National Behavior of South Korean Minister under Fire,” KCNA, May 13, 2005 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

South Korean state institutions.

Finally, it is worth taking a brief look at the role of the “Dokdo factor” in Pyongyang’s recent attitude toward President Lee Myung-bak (2008-2012). During the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations, North Korea sought to discredit the conservative GNP, which frequently criticized the Sunshine Policy, by accusing its leaders, including Lee Myung-bak, of pro-Japanese sentiments. As early as May 2008, KCNA blamed the new conservative administration for Tokyo’s persistent claims over Dokdo: “This is an inevitable product of traitor Lee Myung Bak’s pro-Japanese humiliating diplomacy.”¹²² Predictably, Lee Myung-bak’s attempt to sign an intelligence accord with Japan inspired particularly harsh charges of treachery.¹²³ Having branded him a “pro-Japanese lackey,” Pyongyang seems to have been taken aback when the president paid a visit to Dokdo in August 2012. Once again, the KWP leaders were unwilling to approve the nationalist act of a conservative South Korean president whom they intensely disliked, and hence they dismissed it as a trick to win popularity. Nevertheless, they probably also felt from their own perspective that Lee Myung-bak’s visit brought certain advantages, since it created serious friction between Tokyo and Seoul. These conflicting aims may explain why North Korean propaganda reacted to his visit in a somewhat peculiar way. The critical comments published by KCNA were made by such unusually selected persons as two professors of Kim Il Sung University and a Korean resident in the United States.¹²⁴ And since December 2012, the agency’s Dokdo-related articles have been directed mostly against Japan, rather

¹²² “Lee Myung Bak’s Humiliating Diplomacy toward Japan Accused,” KCNA, May 28, 2008 (accessed on March 4, 2013).

¹²³ See, among others, “White Paper of DFRK Central Committee Slams South Korea-Japan Military Nexus,” KCNA, August 13, 2012 (accessed on August 5, 2013).

¹²⁴ “Lee Myung Bak’s Tour of Tok Islets under Fire,” KCNA, August 17, 2012 (accessed on August 5, 2013); “Lee Myung Bak’s Sycophancy Censured by Korean in U.S.,” KCNA, August 18, 2012 (accessed on August 5, 2013).

than the South Korean government.

Conclusion

This article is the first stage of a planned long-term research project on North Korea's attitude toward the problem of Dokdo. Certain aspects of the topic, such as Pyongyang's Dokdo policy in the early and mid-1990s, still require additional investigation. Nevertheless, the article's findings seem to confirm its preliminary hypothesis. The abrupt and pronounced shifts that repeatedly occurred in Pyongyang's Dokdo-related propaganda, from a single KCNA article within a seven-month period to over 100 the next year, or vice versa, cannot be easily reconciled with any single-cause explanation, be it focused on ethnic nationalism or some other static ideological tenet. Instead, a multi-factor model of explanation may be more suitable.

The findings of this article seem to be in accordance with the following observations of Bae Jin-su and Yang Ju: "North Korea has thus far been using the Dokdo issue to its political and diplomatic advantage as hindering ROK-US-Japan partnership by instigating anti-Japan sentiment in Korea, blaming South Korean officials for their incompetence and corruption, alienating the Korean government and people, and holding back the cooperation between South Korea and its allies."¹²⁵ Indeed, in a number of cases North Korea did use the force of nationalism for instrumental purposes to obstruct Japanese-South Korean rapprochement, facilitate inter-Korean cooperation, or achieve other diplomatic aims.

Still, this model of explanation, focused as it is on North Korea-Japanese and Japanese-South Korean relations, needs further elaboration.

¹²⁵ Bae and Yang, "Bukhan *Nodong sinmun* eui Dokdo gisa (1948-2008 nyeon) hyeonhwang bunseok": 149.

Efforts to hinder Japan-ROK cooperation did constitute a major and constant element of Pyongyang's Dokdo policy, but the twists and turns of inter-Korean relations, the two governments' competing claims for legitimacy, and the dynamics of the Dokdo dispute, led to periodic shifts in the tactics of the KWP leaders. For instance, in certain periods, such as between 1949 and 1953, North Korean media attacks on Japanese-South Korean collaboration were not accompanied by references to Dokdo. On later occasions, Pyongyang sought to hinder Japanese-South Korean rapprochement by engaging Tokyo, while at other times it tried to achieve the same aim by forging an inter-Korean front against Japan. Therefore, the factor of DPRK-ROK relations seems to have been at least as important as the "Japan factor."

This examination indicates that Pyongyang's attitude toward the Dokdo issue has been shaped by varying combinations of the following external factors: (1) North Korea's relations with Japan (cooperative/hostile); (2) North Korea's relations with South Korea (cooperative/hostile); and (3) South Korea's relations with Japan (cooperative/hostile). While certain combinations such as inter-Korean rapprochement combined with Japanese hostility toward North Korea and/or South Korea, or the simultaneous deterioration of inter-Korean and Japan-DPRK relations in a period of Japan-ROK cooperation, seem to have been conducive to the growth of North Korean interest in the Dokdo question, other combinations, such as Japan-DPRK rapprochement in a period of inter-Korean hostility, or a hard-line South Korean attitude toward both Tokyo and Pyongyang dissuaded the KWP leaders from raising this issue.

One may also place these elements of North Korea's Dokdo policy into a broader theoretical framework by comparing them with Chinese Communist policies. As Yinan He elaborately described, from 1953 to 1981 the Chinese leaders, anxious as they were to achieve rapprochement with Japan, laid far less emphasis on the memory of Japanese war crimes than in the post-1981 period when they frequently used anti-Japanese

nationalism to enhance the domestic legitimacy of the Communist regime.¹²⁶

In both China and North Korea, the persistence of *de facto* one-party rule enabled the political elites to shape the course of public discourse on the nation's past and present relations with Japan. To be sure, the manipulative capabilities of the Chinese state were partly curtailed by the country's post-1978 reform process, which facilitated the emergence of spontaneous nationalist sentiments.¹²⁷ In North Korea however, society and intellectual life is still under extensive state control. Therefore, the DPRK's public discourse on Dokdo reflected, *ipso facto*, the objectives and priorities of the political leadership rather than the views and aspirations of civil society. In contrast with post-1987 South Korea, North Korean leadership's policy shifts were triggered primarily by external factors, that is, the actions of powerful neighboring states, rather than the pressure of non-governmental organizations or other domestic actors. Devoid of a diplomatic relationship with Japan, Pyongyang's bargaining position vis-à-vis Tokyo has been considerably weaker than that of Seoul or Beijing. Under such conditions, the KWP leaders often found it necessary to show more flexibility toward Japan than their South Korean or Chinese counterparts, provided that they considered rapprochement a feasible option at that time.¹²⁸

In light of the intense nationalism of the KWP leaders, which induced them to pursue a course independent from other Communist states, it might appear inexplicable that the DPRK repeatedly found it easier to reach a *modus vivendi* with Japan, Korea's former colonial overlord, than with the ROK.¹²⁹ After all, the self-defined national legitimacy of the North Korean state was explicitly based on the tradition

¹²⁶ He, "Remembering and Forgetting the War," 100-111.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 111-115.

¹²⁸ Kiwon Chung, "Japanese-North Korean Relations Today": 789-791.

¹²⁹ On North Korean nationalism, see Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era*, 229-248.

of anti-Japanese resistance, and Kim Il Sung's (real and alleged) guerrilla activities constituted a central element of his personality cult.¹³⁰

Still, the KWP leaders were not captives of their own nationalist ideology. On the contrary, they were both able and willing to tone down their anti-Japanese propaganda whenever they thought a rapprochement with Tokyo was both feasible and advantageous to North Korea. If they opted to do so, they proved capable of ignoring the Dokdo dispute not only in periods of de-escalation, but also in such periods of escalation as the crises of 1952 to 1953 and 1997 to 1998. And if they did raise the Dokdo issue, on some occasions, such as in February 1997, they were more interested in discrediting the South Korean government than in criticizing Japan.

To explain these contradictory phenomena, one should make a distinction between the partly overlapping but not necessarily identical concepts of ethnic and state-centric nationalism in Korea. On the basis of ethnic and historical identity, North Korea was as closely connected to the island as South Korea; but from the perspective of state-centric nationalism, Pyongyang found it difficult to harmonize its standpoint on Dokdo with that of Seoul. Ever since the establishment of the DPRK and the ROK, each of the two competing states has been prone to consider itself the sole legitimate government on the peninsula. Consequently, they regarded each other not simply as foreign states, but as non-state entities devoid of national legitimacy, a situation having much in common with the antagonistic relationship between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China on Taiwan. Under such conditions, political elites of both the DPRK and the ROK were strongly motivated to depict their rival regime as being unable and unwilling to defend Korean national interests vis-à-vis foreign powers. In other words, their attitude toward one or another specific national issue was

¹³⁰ Myers, *The Cleanest Race*, 96-102.

shaped not only by the need to uphold their own national legitimacy, but also by the intention to question the legitimacy of the other Korean state.

Concerning the unilateral proclamation of the Republic of Korea in 1948, its political elites were still considerably divided over the question of ethnic versus state-centric nationalism. Namely, certain political groups, like the “South-North Negotiation faction,” were of the opinion that national unification should precede the establishment of a formal state structure.¹³¹ However, as far as Dokdo was concerned, the South Korean conceptions of ethnic and state-centric nationalism could be easily reconciled with each other. Since Seoul’s legal and political position was based not only on Korea’s historical entitlement to Dokdo, but also on its effective administrative control over the island, the South Korean government faced no ideological dilemma.

In contrast, the DPRK was neither possessor nor claimant in the Dokdo dispute. While Japanese claims over Dokdo did clash with North Korean ethnic nationalism, they did not constitute a direct challenge to North Korean state authority in the same way as they questioned the legitimacy of South Korean administrative control over the island. This ambivalent situation influenced North Korea’s attitude toward the Dokdo issue in various ways. On the one hand, it increased Pyongyang’s room for maneuver, for the North’s government, unlike its southern counterpart, could afford to temporarily disregard Japan’s territorial claims, and pursue a policy of rapprochement with Tokyo in periods of Japanese-South Korean friction. On the other hand, the highly nationalist KWP leaders, reluctant as they were to acknowledge the national legitimacy of the South Korean government, felt compelled to react to any major Japan-ROK agreement which, implicitly or explicitly, affected Korea as a whole, including the agreements related to fishing, maritime

¹³¹ On statist and ethnic nationalist ideologies in the early years of the ROK, see Chong-Myong Im, “The Making of the Republic of Korea as a Modern Nation-State, August 1948 - May 1950” (Doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 2004), 29-31.

boundaries, and other aspects of the Dokdo dispute. The net result of these conflicting factors was that if North Korea did raise the Dokdo issue, it usually, though not invariably, combined its attacks on Japan with critical comments on the South Korean government. For this reason, a North-South consensus over the question of Dokdo will probably remain an elusive aim unless a long-term normalization of inter-Korean relations is achieved.

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