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# COMMENT

Bart Gaens  
Researcher  
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

## **Japan's territorial disputes remain unresolved** > The entangled history of the three distinct island disputes complicates finding a solution to any of them

Japan has failed to achieve progress in resolving its territorial disputes. The historical legacy and the role of the US, local perceptions of Japan's wartime past, and the interrelated and contingent nature of the disputes all serve to compound the problem.

In addition to the East China Sea dispute with China over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands, Japan is also embroiled in territorial disputes with South Korea over Takeshima (Dokdo), and with Russia over the Northern Territories (Southern Kuril Islands).

All three disputes are highly distinct in terms of history, legal implications, and strategic, symbolic, and economic value. In geo-economic terms, for example, the three issues are in very different ways implicated in growing competition over maritime sovereignty and for hydrocarbon resources. Nevertheless, taking into account the correlation between the three issues helps to explain why it is so difficult for Japan to make progress in finding lasting solutions.

Three elements impinge on Japan's current policy and continuing rigid stance on its territorial disputes.

First of all, there is the historical legacy. It is often forgotten that all three disputes are an outcome of what has been called the "San Francisco System". The San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951 was an instrument of US Cold War policy, turning Japan into an anti-communist bulwark and a basis from which to project US power in Asia. The US left the disputes

unresolved, instead opting strategically for deliberate ambiguity. The US returned administrative control over the Senkakus to Japan in 1972, but has since refused to take a position as to territorial sovereignty, even if its security treaty with Japan obliges it to intervene in the event of a conflict.

In the Japan-South Korea dispute, the San Francisco Treaty failed to include Takeshima among the territories that Japan renounced. Since South Korea gained control in 1952, the US has remained neutral as to sovereignty. US ambiguity has prompted China and South Korea to increase their respective claims to sovereignty.

As for the dispute with Russia, Japan gave up the Kuril Islands in the 1951 treaty, but the US remained ambiguous over the question of sovereignty over the islands and whether the four contested islands were part of the Kuril chain. In 1956 the US effectively prevented a compromise over the return of two out of four islands. This resulted in a more rigid stance by the Soviet Union, and a Peace Treaty between Japan and the USSR/Russia was never signed.

Second, public opinion and local, subjective perceptions of wartime history, accountability and reconciliation encroach upon the current policy of all claimant states. Japan

took control of Senkaku in 1895, but after a UN report issued in 1968 indicated the potential presence of substantial natural resources, including oil and gas under the sea, the PRC as well as Taiwan launched their claims.

The dispute re-ignited when the Japanese government purchased the islands in September 2012 from their private owner, resulting in a nationalist outcry in China and gradually strengthening counter-measures. China sees Japan's recent nationalization of the Senkakus as an insult by a former aggressor that has insufficiently addressed its war responsibility. Beijing therefore feels obliged to adopt a strong posture in order to retain local public support. Against the background of China's increased projection of economic, military and diplomatic clout and Japan's relative decline, Tokyo cannot afford to show weakness either, and continues to deny the existence of an issue altogether.

Takeshima became Japanese territory in 1905 ahead of Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910, but South Korea took effective administrative control of the island in 1954. For South Korea, Takeshima is seen as the primary marker of Japanese colonization, and as a symbol of Korean independence after the

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Finnish Institute of  
International Affairs

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Kruunuvuorenkatu 4

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PL 400

---

00161 Helsinki

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Telephone

---

+358 (0)9 432 7000

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Fax

---

+358 (0)9 432 7799

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[www.fiia.fi](http://www.fiia.fi)

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war. For Seoul, this justifies current administrative control of the rocks.

The dispute with Russia concerns four islands that became Japanese territory following a treaty in 1855, until the Soviet Union occupied them at the very end of the Second World War in 1945. For Japan, the Northern Territories issue evokes especially strong emotions domestically because of the islands' "morally wrong" annexation by Russia even after the Japanese surrender.

Third, the fact that the disputes affect each other further complicates finding a solution. Both the Takeshima and Northern Territories disputes flared up in 2012 when South Korean President Lee Myung-bak visited Takeshima, and Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev went to Kunashiri. Lee's visit mimicked Medvedev's. In September 2012 China and South Korea joined hands to confront Japan over the Senkaku and Takeshima issues, and collectively addressed Japan's awareness of its wartime actions.

Looking back a bit further, when in the 1970s Japan displayed a perceived willingness to put the disputes with South Korea and China on the "back burner", the Soviet Union proposed a similar shelving of the Northern Territories issue. In other words, actions by each of the

claimant states have an impact on the stance of others, and taking a softer or harder line in one case has repercussions on other issues.

Therefore it can be concluded that Japan has little leeway to act. For example, in order to solve the Senkaku dispute and find a solution through compromise, Japan would first need to admit that an issue between both countries exists. The possible effect on the disputes with Russia and South Korea decreases the likelihood of that happening. The increasingly important geo-economic dimension of the disputed islands for resource-hungry Japan will likely only increase Tokyo's assertive stance.