

Dokdo or Takeshima?

Territorial Ambitions and Imperialism in Korean-Japanese Relations

Term Paper Proposal

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The Geography Underlying a Diplomatic Faux Pas

The paper is inspired by an article from the Xinhua News Agency entitled “Japan refuses to accept letter returned by S. Korea.” The Japanese Prime Minister (Yoshihiko Noda) had written a letter to President Lee Myung-bak, protesting his visit to a disputed island in the Sea of Japan and proposing to resolve the territorial dispute peacefully under international law. The article is about the unusual diplomatic response of South Korea which simply returned the letter, an unprecedented act of international diplomacy (Xinhua News Agency, 2012).

From a geographic point of view, however, the most interesting aspect of this story is the territorial dispute over the uninhabited rocky islets that are called Dokdo by the Koreans and Takeshima by the Japanese. The goal of the paper is to explain the historical and geographic factors underlying this territorial dispute.

Origins of the Dispute

To avoid using either Korean or Japanese toponyms, the rocky islets are identified in this paper as the Liancourt Rocks, named after *Le Liancourt*, a French whaling ship which was almost wrecked on the rocks in 1849. The Liancourt Rocks occupy a total of about 18 hectares between Japan and Korea (Barber et al. 2012). Though they were uninhabited until the South Korean government sent a fisherman and his wife to live there in 1991, the Rocks have been hotly contested for many years and the current diplomatic wrangle is only the latest in a long history of competing claims by South Korea and Japan –and China as well (Mackinnon, 2012).

Strategic Importance of Liancourt Rocks

Uninhabited and storm swept though they are, the Liancourt Rocks have a strategic importance out of all proportion to their population and the resource endowment of the rocks themselves

(Prescott, 1986). First, they are surrounded by a rich fishery at a time when such resources are

becoming increasingly scarce. Second, recent indications suggest that the rocks could be the key to marine sources of oil and gas. The territoriality of the Liancourt Rocks will be the key factor which determines who will benefit from the marine resources that surrounding the rocks. Finally, this dispute, like all other bilateral relations between Japan and South Korea must be understood in light of Japan's military occupation and colonial exploitation of Korea from 1905 to 1945.

Conclusion

The paper will conclude with a summary of what the essay has accomplished and observe that maritime territoriality disputes such as these are a current extension of the territorial configuration concepts discussed in the course textbook (Nijman, Muller and de Blij, 2016: 359).

Outline of Paper's Structure

Introduction

Description of News Report and Current Dispute

What happened? When?

Description of Liancourt Rocks

Location and Map (Figure 1)

Resources

Strategic Importance

History of Territorial Disputes between Japan and South Korea

Analysis of Geographic and Historical Factors in Dispute

Regional Economic Geography and Resources

Importance of Marine Resources for Japan and South Korea

Japanese Imports of Fish, Oil and Natural Gas (Table 1)

Current Political and Economic Relations between Japan and South Korea

Historic Political and Economic Relations

Role of World War II and Peace Treaty

UN Conference on Law of the Sea

Significance of Exclusive Economic Zone for resource extraction

Location of Rocks and Relative Strength of the Competing Claims

Comparison of Similar Territorial Disputes over Islands and Marine Resources

Conclusion

How the Dispute Reflects Regional Historic and Geographic Factors

Prospects for Resolving Dispute

Regional Economic and Geographic Factors

Global Economic and Geographic Factors

References

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