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An Unwinnable Claim, A Strategic Opportunity: Japan, Dokdo, and the China Challenge

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Japan and South Korea share a [difficult history](#) that complicates their bilateral relationship. This is a problem since an effective Japan-Korea alliance would be a bulwark against China's regional ambitions and allow the U.S. to redirect resources to other parts of the world. The long-discussed U.S. pivot to Asia, [announced by the Obama administration](#) nearly 15 years ago, never fully materialized. With American power and attention spread around the globe, Asian powers aligned with the West will have a better chance of containing Chinese ambition if they put aside past differences and cooperate on present challenges. At the heart of this effort are closer ties between Japan and South Korea.

The relationship between these two economic powerhouses is undermined by Japan's [refusal to fully accept](#) responsibility for the atrocities committed during its [35-year occupation](#) of Korea. Japan has never been as clear about its history as Germany has been about its World War II past. Japan's hesitancy to fully adjudicate its past [matters most to older Koreans](#) who lived through the Japanese occupation or grew up with parents who passed along their memories and animosities. Japan's history [matters less to younger South Koreans](#), but lingering issues from the colonial period still exert influence over South Korean policy. Public opinion [trends suggest](#) that the memory of Japan's colonial actions in South Korea will eventually fade enough for the two countries to view each other favorably. It's not clear, however, that either country can afford to wait for this trend to continue instead of taking bold actions to improve their ties.

China is now one of the world's [two most powerful countries](#) and acts in [increasingly aggressive ways](#). On their own, Japan and South Korea will struggle to contain and counter China, but their odds improve if they work together closely. Passively waiting for memories of the colonial era to fade exposes both countries to considerable risks. Both sides stand to benefit from grand gestures that can advance better relations. One of several possible gestures Japan might consider is to relinquish [its claim](#) to what it calls the Takeshima Islands.

Called the Dokdo Islands in Korean, these small and mostly uninhabited islets are [administered by South Korea and claimed by the Japanese](#). The enduring dispute is an irritant to a relationship that would benefit from less tension. The most recent polling found that nearly [70% of Japanese](#) people believe the islands are Japanese territory, making it difficult for the government to relinquish its claim. Japanese leaders could, however, balance the political cost against the security risk created by maintaining a damaged relationship with South Korea.

South Korea claims the islands have been Korean territory for [more than 1,500 years](#). In 1905, at a time when Japanese power and imperial ambitions were increasing, Japan annexed the islands after [describing them as terra nullius](#), or unclaimed land. The U.S could have resolved the issue by including the islands in the 1951 Treaty of San Francisco, the document that ended the post-World War II American occupation of Japan. The treaty, however, [failed to address the islands](#), which preserved ambiguity and allowed Japan to continue claiming sovereignty.

In 1952 South Korean president Syngman Rhee [asserted South Korean control](#) of the islands along with a sizable part of the Sea of Japan. In 1954 the claim was bolstered by the deployment of [a small contingent](#) of coast guard personnel to administer the islands. Despite Rhee's actions, Japan continued to see its 1905 annexation as legitimate and binding and never relinquished its claim. Considering the [current challenge China poses](#) to Japan's security, Japan might benefit from reconsidering its position.

In recent years South Korea and Japan have [improved their relationship](#) in response to Chinese threats, but the countries still do not collaborate closely enough to maximize their power. The U.S. remains the [backbone of missile defense integration](#) and facilitates information sharing that might not occur bilaterally. Japanese and South Korean missile defense systems are not

fully integrated, and their defense related industrial [production is not integrated](#) or aligned. Japanese and South Korean maritime forces have only [recently begun to conduct](#) joint patrols and training, and [contingency planning between the countries](#) is limited. If South Korean and Japanese forces needed to work together in a conflict with China, both would face a steep learning curve about the other's procedures and capabilities. This would put both countries at a disadvantage against China during the most dangerous phase of a crisis.

Neither South Korea nor Japan is obligated by treaty to support the other in the event of a Chinese attack. As long as the U.S. honors its commitment to defend both countries, it's likely that Japan and South Korea would be drawn into a war precipitated by Chinese aggression against either country. With [growing uncertainty](#) about the durability of U.S. security guarantees, the lack of a formal defense agreement between Japan and South Korea increases the likelihood that China calculates it can act against one country without incurring a response from the other.

The more favorable views that younger Japanese and South Koreans hold toward each other can help facilitate closer ties. In the past, Japanese governments might have calculated the domestic political cost of relinquishing their claim to the islands was too high. Younger Japanese are changing this equation, and even if they support the idea that the disputed islands are Japanese, most view South Korea [favorably and embrace](#) South Korean culture. Young Japanese wouldn't necessarily like relinquishing the claims, but they might accept the loss as a distasteful but necessary step toward more normal relations with a country they appreciate. The number of Japanese people willing to prioritize confrontation with South Korea over containment of China is shrinking, which makes any decision by Japan to relinquish its claim more possible than ever before.

Barring a change to the international order so dramatic that it's difficult to imagine, there's little chance Japan ever regains control of the islands. The Japanese are highly unlikely to seize the islands by force or risk damaging their economy by trying to exert economic leverage against South Korea that would be immediately reciprocated. The two economies are deeply integrated and [trade disputes are damaging](#) to the Japanese economy. Unless the South Koreans unexpectedly give them away, taking control of the islands seems nearly impossible.

There's still a way, however, for the islands to be of significant use to Japan.

By relinquishing its unenforceable claim, Japan could build on the momentum of improving ties to further advance its reputation in South Korea. This might improve the general disposition of South Korean voters toward Japan, making it easier for the South Korean government to deepen security cooperation with the Japanese.

Continuing to claim the disputed islands serves no clear economic or military purpose for Japan, while relinquishing its claim might prove a useful step toward deepening ties with South Korea as Chinese power continues to rise. The U.S. remains a powerful partner to both South Korea and Japan, but a stronger bilateral relationship would remove ambiguity and send a powerful message to China about the type of resistance it faces in the region. Increasing the level of resistance China expects to encounter is a useful way to improve Japanese and South Korean security. The unified action this requires depends on further improvements to bilateral ties and the disputed islands are an impediment to progress.

**image credit: DW.*

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