

A Review of the U.S. Positions Favorable to Japan in Northeast Asia Island Disputes : Based on Gilpin’s Theory of Hegemonic Stability*

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| Abstract |

This paper investigates a significant transformation in U.S. foreign policy: the shift from long-standing strategic ambiguity to a clearer and more explicit partiality toward Japan in managing island disputes in Northeast Asia. Specifically, it addresses the research question: Why has the United States adjusted its stance to increasingly support Japan’s territorial claims over the

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Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, the Southern Kurils, and Dokdo/Takeshima? To answer this, the study adopts Robert Gilpin's theory of hegemonic stability and hegemonic decline as its analytical framework, arguing that the U.S. adjustment reflects a structural response to hegemonic retrenchment in the face of rising counterbalancing powers—namely China and Russia—and growing alliance frictions with South Korea.

The research objectives are twofold: first, to identify and map the evolution of U.S. policy from neutrality to partiality across three key island disputes; second, to explain this shift within the broader context of declining hegemonic capacity and regional power realignment. The paper argues that the clearer U.S. position is not merely rhetorical, but a strategic recalibration designed to consolidate its alliance with Japan and sustain its regional dominance amid mounting geopolitical constraints.

This study contributes to existing literature by linking U.S. policy change to systemic power transitions, rather than bilateral diplomacy or legal ambiguity alone. It also offers a unified analysis of three distinct disputes that are typically treated separately, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the logic behind U.S. strategic alignment in Northeast Asia.

▪ Key words: Northeast Asia; U.S. diplomacy; Island disputes; U.S.-Japan alliance; Hegemonic decline

I .Theory and Analytical Framework

1. Introduction to the Theory of Hegemonic Stability

The theory of hegemonic stability, first formulated in the late 20th century, posits that a stable international order is more likely to emerge under the dominance of a single hegemon. Scholars such as Charles P. Kindleberger, Robert Keohane, and Robert Gilpin have variously contributed

to this theory, highlighting the role of the hegemon in providing public goods such as security, market openness, and monetary stability (Kindleberger, 1973; Keohane, 1984; Gilpin, 2001). Among these theorists, Robert Gilpin provides a structural realist account of international order transformation, anchoring hegemonic decline to the interplay between rising challengers and the internal contradictions of hegemonic power.

According to Gilpin, the international system remains stable when the hegemon retains a preponderance of material capabilities and the legitimacy to lead. However, systemic transformation occurs when this equilibrium is disrupted by the rising economic and military power of challengers, often leading to a redistribution of global authority and the redrawing of spheres of influence (Gilpin, 2007). Within this framework, a hegemon may actively or passively readjust its strategic commitments, including alliance structures, territorial security obligations, and regional engagement levels, in order to reduce costs and preserve its relative influence.

Hegemonic stability theory thus provides a useful lens to interpret the shifts in U.S. strategic posture, especially in maritime East Asia, where territorial disputes are increasingly entangled with great power competition.

2. Gilpin's Theory of Hegemonic Decline

Gilpin's elaboration on hegemonic decline offers a refined mechanism by which hegemonic retrenchment can be explained. In *War and Change in World Politics*, Gilpin (2007, p. 45) identifies four key constraints on hegemonic expansion: (1) the friction of distance; (2) the emergence of counterbalancing coalitions; (3) internal economic and bureaucratic limitations; and (4) domestic societal transformation. As these constraints deepen, the hegemon must recalibrate its strategic boundaries—what Gilpin terms the “imperial boundary”—to balance the costs of expansion with the benefits of strategic dominance.

This retrenchment is not necessarily an admission of defeat but may represent a strategic prioritization, often by reinforcing certain alliances while deprioritizing others. Crucially, as rival powers become increasingly capable, especially in “home-field” regions such as the Western Pacific for China and the Russian Far East for Russia, the hegemon faces rising opportunity costs in sustaining ambiguous or multilateral approaches. This leads to sharper alignments and policy clarifications, as seen in the United States’ evolving positions in island disputes across Northeast Asia.

Gilpin’s insights into the logic of imperial boundary adjustment are particularly pertinent for understanding recent U.S. behavior toward Japan. In a regional environment where China’s maritime power has significantly increased and Russia’s Far Eastern deployments are growing, the U.S. has not only reaffirmed its security commitment to Japan but has also articulated a clearer stance favoring Japan’s territorial claims over disputed islands. This trend is less a product of proactive expansion than of reactive consolidation in the face of relative decline—a core dynamic identified by Gilpin.

3. Literature Review and Research Contributions

Scholarly interest in the United States’ position on territorial disputes in Northeast Asia has increased significantly over the past two decades. Much of the early literature focuses on the legal and diplomatic ambiguity that has historically characterized U.S. policy toward contested islands, particularly the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Dokdo/Takeshima, and the Southern Kurils/Northern Territories. Scholars have generally described the U.S. posture as a form of “strategic ambiguity,” aimed at avoiding direct involvement in sovereignty disputes while maintaining alliance cohesion in the region (Green, 2017; Victoria, 2020).

In the case of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the U.S. has consistently

refrained from taking a formal stance on sovereignty, while affirming that the islands fall under the scope of Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. This “dual approach” has been widely analyzed as a balancing act between deterring Chinese assertiveness and preserving stability with both allies and adversaries (Oliveira, 2022). Regarding Dokdo/Takeshima, existing research shows that the U.S. has attempted to avoid taking sides between Japan and South Korea, instead emphasizing trilateral cooperation and urging restraint (Sheen, 2019). As for the Southern Kurils, the United States has expressed sympathy for Japan’s claims but has generally avoided any security commitment, largely because of the potential risk of confrontation with Russia.

While these studies provide important descriptive accounts of U.S. diplomacy and alliance management, they often treat each dispute in isolation and do not examine the broader strategic trends underlying the apparent shift in U.S. behavior. Moreover, the theoretical basis for the increasing clarity in U.S. support for Japan remains underdeveloped in the literature. Few scholars have addressed the structural conditions that may explain why the U.S. is now departing from its long-held neutrality and moving toward a posture of selective favoritism.

This paper seeks to address these gaps by making two main contributions.

First, it argues that the United States has moved away from traditional strategic ambiguity and now demonstrates a clear bias in favor of Japan in managing island disputes in Northeast Asia. The paper systematically identifies and analyzes the mechanisms of U.S. partiality toward Japan across three major island disputes: the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, the Southern Kurils, and Dokdo/Takeshima. It argues that this favoritism is most visible in the case of the Diaoyu Islands, has gradually intensified in the Southern Kurils dispute with Russia, and is more subtly manifested through the suppression of South Korean claims in the Dokdo dispute. These findings challenge the conventional notion of U.S. neutrality and suggest

that Washington's strategic imperative to maintain hegemonic boundaries is increasingly dictating its posture—even at the cost of straining ties with non-Japanese allies. This unified analysis across multiple disputes represents a departure from the case-specific focus of much of the existing research.

Second, this paper provides a theoretical explanation for this shift by applying Robert Gilpin's theory of hegemonic retrenchment. It argues that the growing partiality toward Japan reflects a strategic recalibration by a declining hegemon seeking to consolidate its influence in the face of rising counterbalancing powers—namely, China and Russia. By reinforcing Japan's position in territorial disputes, the United States seeks to preserve the integrity of its alliance system, maintain strategic leverage in East Asia, and delay further erosion of its post-war hegemonic order. In doing so, this paper contributes to the underdeveloped theoretical dimension of the field and introduces a new structural lens through which to interpret U.S. behavior in the region.

In sum, this study not only identifies U.S. favoritism toward Japan in island disputes but also provides a robust theoretical explanation for its emergence and intensification—an area underdeveloped in current literature.

4. Analytical Framework of the Study

To clarify the research design, this paper is structured into four main chapters following this introduction.

Chapter One serves as the theoretical foundation and research design. It introduces the theory of hegemonic stability and hegemonic decline, reviews existing literature on U.S. positions in Northeast Asian island disputes, identifies gaps, and presents the innovations of this paper. Chapter Two examines how the U.S. increasingly demonstrates partiality toward Japan across the three island disputes. It focuses on how the U.S. has moved from

ambiguity to clarity in its support for Japan's claims over the Diaoyu Islands, adopted a firmer stance on the Southern Kurils to constrain Russia, and marginalized South Korea's position on Dokdo despite trilateral alliance rhetoric. Chapter Three explores the structural and strategic motivations behind this clearer favoritism. It argues that the shift is driven by hegemonic recalibration in response to rising counterbalancing powers (China and Russia), declining maritime primacy, and the need to extract greater strategic value from Japan. The chapter also discusses the constraints imposed by South Korea's autonomous diplomacy and the implications of intra-alliance management. Chapter Four evaluates the broader regional implications of U.S. favoritism toward Japan. It assesses the impact on Northeast Asian stability, the prospects for conflict escalation, and the risks of deteriorating relations with China, Russia, and South Korea. Finally, it offers policy recommendations for China and South Korea, emphasizing the importance of diplomatic coordination and counterbalancing strategies.

Through this structure, the study aims to demonstrate that the U.S. alignment with Japan is not merely a bilateral phenomenon but a strategic maneuver within a recalibrated imperial boundary necessitated by relative hegemonic decline. Such an approach has broader implications for understanding power transitions and alliance management in contested regions.

II. The Clear U.S. Positions Favorable to Japan in Island Disputes

The U.S. unilaterally dominated the division of surrender zones and drafted the Treaty of Peace with Japan (commonly known as the San Francisco Peace Treaty) after World War II, leading to its interference

with the disputes over sovereignty of islands in Northeast Asia. The Truman administration implemented its overarching strategy to contain China and the Soviet Union. The strategy resulted in the mainstream call for the U.S. partiality toward Japan in several disputes over sovereignty of islands, such as the Southern Kuril Islands, Dokdo, and the Diaoyu Islands, which has left a long-lasting impact on regional tensions even today (Nitze & Drew 1994) . The U.S. Administrations subsequently declared a neutral stance on the sovereignty of the Diaoyu Islands and Dokdo and denied military commitments to the so-called “Northern Territories” of Japan. ¹⁾The action aimed to wind down international controversy and obscure its deliberate interference with the disputes. This changed when the Obama administration shifted its stance in disputes by demonstrating its partiality toward Japan once again in the 21st century, thus making the situation more complicated.

1. Main Threat: Clear Security Commitment on the Diaoyu Islands and Reinforcing Sovereignty Alignment

On November 23, 2013, the Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China established the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). The U.S. subsequently escalated its rhetoric emphasizing that “the Senkaku Islands fall under the scope of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty.” In the 2013 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), it was explicitly stated that “the defense of the Senkaku Islands is covered under Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty”. This supplementary provision represented the first legislative confirmation by the U.S. administration that the treaty applies to the islands. This marked a clear transition in the U.S.

1) Victoria, B. (2020), “The shifting US position over the Senkaku Islands,” <https://eastasiaforum.org/2020/11/13/the-shifting-us-position-over-the-senkaku-islands/>. (accessed on May 14, 2025)

stance from strategic ambiguity to clear commitment regarding the treaty's applicability to the islands. In April 2014, President Obama became the first U.S. president to publicly declare that the Diaoyu Islands issue is subject to the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. Notably, following China's ADIZ declaration, the U.S. deliberately amplified its opposition to "any unilateral actions undermining Japan's administrative control" while weakening its ambiguous stance on the issue. Meanwhile, the U.S. reinforced its support for Japan through enhanced military cooperation in Okinawa, Kyushu, and southern Honshu.²⁾

The Biden administration made a stronger signaling compared to previous administrations and adopted an exceptionally unequivocal stance. On January 28, 2021, during a telephone summit with then-Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, President Biden explicitly affirmed that "the Senkaku Islands fall under the scope of Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, which stipulates American security commitment." He declared that "the United States opposes any unilateral actions that would challenge Japan's

2) From 2010 to March 2014, the White House made eight statements regarding the Diaoyu Islands issue, none of which were personally delivered by President Obama. Most reiterated the U.S. position of "taking no side on sovereignty issues." On November 23, 2013, when China's Ministry of National Defense established the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel immediately expressed "concern." In February 2014, Russel further stated during a congressional hearing that China's actions were a "serious mistake," claiming that "the Diaoyu Islands are under Japan's administrative control... the U.S. does not recognize China's ADIZ and has no intention to adjust its operations in the region." On April 24 - 25, 2014, President Obama emphasized in a press conference and the U.S.-Japan Joint Statement that "the U.S. has deployed military assets to ensure capabilities... including territories under Japan's administration, such as the Diaoyu Islands. The U.S. opposes any unilateral actions to undermine Japan's administrative control." During his April 2015 visit to Japan, Obama reiterated this stance without mentioning the "no position on sovereignty" formulation. The White House (2014), "U.S.-Japan Joint Statement: The United States and Japan: Shaping the Future of the Asia-Pacific," <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/25/us-japan-joint-statement-united-states-and-japan-shaping-future-asia-pac>. (accessed on March 15, 2025)

administrative control,” while pledging to “further strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance.”³⁾ During the April 2024 U.S.-Japan Summit, President Biden inappropriately commented on the Diaoyu Islands’ sovereignty by characterizing Japan’s so-called “peaceful administration” of the islands and declaring opposition to any actions that might alter the current situation.⁴⁾ The U.S. and Japanese leaders subsequently issued a joint statement accusing China of “attempting to unilaterally alter the current situation in the East China Sea by force or coercion” and “attempting to undermine Japan’s longstanding peaceful administration of the Senkaku Islands.” They made further declaration that more U.S.-Japan military forces would be deployed in Japan’s southwest to enhance their “allied deterrence”.⁵⁾ Under the Biden administration, the U.S. has largely adopted Japanese version of naming and declared that the islands are under Japan’s “effective control”. The U.S. policy has showcased stronger positions favourable to Japan in the disputes.

2. Secondary Threat: Support for Japan’s Sovereignty Claims over the Southern Kuril Islands to Constrain Russia’s Military Buildup

On the disputes over sovereignty of the Southern Kuril Islands, the U.S. has maintained its support for Japan’s claim and adopted

3) The White House (2021), “Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga of Japan,” <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/01/27/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-call-with-prime-minister-yoshihide-suga-of-japan/>.(accessed on February 17, 2025)

4) The White House (2024), “Joint Vision Statement from the Leaders of Japan, the Philippines, and the United States,” <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/11/joint-vision-statement-from-the-leaders-of-japan-the-philippines-and-the-united-states/>.(accessed on February 17, 2025)

5) The White House (2024), “United States-Japan Joint Leaders’ Statement,” <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/10/united-states-japan-joint-leaders-statement/>.(accessed on February 17, 2025)

technological constraints on the enhancement of Russian Pacific Fleet. Since Russia could have bought Mistral-class amphibious assault ship from France and deployed them around the islands, the U.S. took actions and successfully impeded the deal. ⁶⁾The Obama administration's constraints on Russia's efforts to enhance its military presence in the Russian Far East revealed that the North Pacific region was inevitably involved in the U.S.-Russia rivalry. The Trump Administration once restarted and strengthened the Quad, which Biden later took the legacy and further developed it. The Southern Kuril Islands issue was part of the security framework. The Biden administration publicly declared its security commitment to Japan for multiple times, including its efforts to safeguard Japan's territorial integrity (Youn 2023) . The U.S. and Japanese leaders and officials also conducted negotiation and coordination over regional security situation including the Southern Kuril Islands issue during several meetings.

Besides, the U.S. support for the conflict between NATO and Russia indirectly indicated the country's support for Japan's sovereignty claim on the Southern Kuril Islands. Following the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Biden administration followed a wedge strategy strengthened its support for Japan in island disputes between Japan and Russia. The strategy aimed to involve Japan in sanction against and strategic containment of Russia, thereby further obstructing Russia-Japan economic cooperation and driving a wedge between China and Russia. This could further contain Russia's security deployment in the Arctic (呂平·甘雨禾 2025, 87). The U.S. has long been interfering with the island disputes between Russia and Japan but rejected to declare security commitment on the Southern Kuril Islands to leave room for easing U.S.-Russia tensions in the Asia-Pacific.

6) France 24 (2014), "France suspends delivery of first Mistral warship to Russia," <https://www.france24.com/en/20140903-france-suspends-plans-deliver-first-mistral-helicopter-carrier-russia>. (accessed on February 17, 2025)

3. Intra-Alliance Tension: Suppression of South Korea's Sovereignty Claim and the Marginalization of the Dokdo Issue

Regarding the Dokdo issue, the U.S. shows its positions favourable to Japan in following aspects. a. The U.S. Board on Geographic Names has revised its classification of Dokdo from being under South Korea's administration to a status of "undesigned sovereignty."⁷⁾ b. The U.S. has refrained from making similar commitments involving the expression "administrative control" regarding Dokdo as it has done with the Diaoyu Islands and explicitly affirmed its defense obligations regarding Dokdo under the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty.⁸⁾ c. The U.S. has deliberately refrained from opposing Japan's provocative actions, such as potential litigation of the dispute before international tribunals and the incorporation of Dokdo into its air defense identification zone.⁹⁾ On February, 27, 2015, Wendy Sherman, then U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, addressed the issue in a policy statement, emphasizing that any changes to Japan's defense policies are highly sensitive, particularly against the backdrop of ongoing disputes with South Korea over issues like textbooks, "comfort women," and maritime nomenclature. ¹⁰⁾All these reveal the

7) In August 2008, President George W. Bush tacitly allowed the U.S. Board on Geographic Names to describe Dokdo as "under South Korean administration" to ensure a successful visit to Seoul. This designation was removed during the Obama administration.

8) On February 13, 2014, during Secretary John Kerry's visit to South Korea, when asked whether Dokdo fell under the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty, Kerry avoided commenting on its status under the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty and did not explicitly endorse Seoul's claim. U.S. Department of State (2014), "Remarks With Republic of Korea Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se," https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5679/view.do?seq=313338. (accessed on February 18, 2025)

9) On October 15, 2012, Deputy Secretary William Burns stated that the U.S. position was "not neutral" but focused on urging dialogue when asked about Japan's plan to bring the Dokdo dispute to the ICJ. The Korea Times (2012), "US 'not neutral' in call for Seoul-Tokyo territorial talks: Burns," https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2012/10/113_122332.html. (accessed on February 18, 2025)

10) The Korea Times (2015), "US takes sides with Japan on history issue," <https://www.kor>

dilemma faced by the U.S. It refuses to constrain Japan's attempts to revise post-war maritime boundaries, but also can not tolerate recurrent ROK-Japan island disputes that disrupts its regional strategic deployments. While the Biden administration actively promoted trilateral U.S.-Japan-ROK cooperation, it seized the opportunity of Yoon Suk-yeol's presidency to broker a Japan-ROK reconciliation and ultimately culminated in South Korea's unilateral concession on the forced labor compensation issue. The Yoon administration's announced a third-party reimbursement as a "solution", which drew strong praise from the U.S. administration. South Korea's appeals regarding Dokdo, however, were conspicuously sidelined. This case showed the Biden administration's positions favorable to Japan on unresolved historical issues.¹¹⁾

Therefore, the U.S. has since then showed clearer partiality toward Japan particularly on disputes involving Japan in recent years. Notably, the U.S. once showed its clear positions favorable to Japan in 1950s by supporting Japan's claims. The subsequent administrations, which upheld the established policies, however, refrained from publicly supporting Japan. They reiterated their neutrality regarding the sovereignty of the Diaoyu Islands and Dokdo (Takeshima) and avoided substantial military deployment in the surrounding areas of the Southern Kuril Islands to worsen the situation. This resulted in the U.S. ambiguous partiality toward Japan as a "normal".¹²⁾ Therefore, it is of significance to find out why the U.S. adjusted its stance to clearly support Japan since it is conducive to deconstructing the U.S. regional strategy in the new era, especially its influence on Northeast Asia.

eatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2015/03/113_174379.html.(accessed on February 19, 2025)

11) Reuters (2023), "Japan and South Korea Top Businesses Push to Leave Behind a Difficult History," <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2023-03-16/japan-south-korea-business-leaders-look-for-reset-after-wartime-labour-strain/>. (accessed on February 19, 2025)

12) Oliveira, A. C. G. de (2022), "Assessing Neutrality: The United States' Role in the Diaoyu Islands Dispute," <https://www.e-ir.info/2022/06/24/assessing-neutrality-the-united-states-role-in-the-diaoyu-islands-dispute/>.(accessed on May 14, 2025)

III. Analysis on Driving Force behind the U.S. Clearer Positions Favorable to Japan

1. Evolving Alliance Obligations in the 1950s Leading to U.S. More Ambiguous Positions Favourable to Japan

Since the Roman Empire, the ability to define clear boundaries of power expansion has been a critical determinant of hegemonic stability. The theory of hegemonic stability holds that the boundaries of the system are defined by the extent to which the dominant state can impose its rules and enforce order. Gilpin (2007, 45) described a country's action to determine its political boundaries as arbitrary to a considerable degree, but also highlighted the connection between political boundaries and geological locations, as he once put it, "historically, international systems have tended to organize themselves around waterways." He identified four fundamental constraints on hegemonic expansion: (1) the friction of distance and the loss-of-strength gradient; (2) the rise of counterbalancing states; (3) the economic, technological, and organizational limits of the hegemon itself; and (4) transformative forces within the hegemon's domestic society. The key for a country to maintain its hegemonic stability is to adopt flexible diplomatic approaches or internally reform to recalibrate the cost-benefit calculus of its expansion, otherwise the hegemon will inevitably decline.

Comparatively, the rise of counterbalancing states poses a greater threat to a hegemon to maintain its hegemonic stability. As an empire seeks to expand its territory but encounters counterbalancing coalition, it faces amounting pressure on maintaining its present hegemonic boundaries, and therefore it may face greater decline. A hegemon may have to make necessary adjustment to its boundaries (in the form of expansion or contraction). The adjusted boundaries is not only proportionate to the sizes

of both states in rivalry, but also serves as a strategic bottom line for the former hegemon to maintain its edge.

Therefore, the consolidated China–Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination and the joined maritime capabilities of China, South Korea, and Russia may not offer an advantage to the Northeast Asia in the face of U.S. overall supremacy. However, the area’s growing “home-field advantage”¹³⁾ and intensified near-sea operations of China and Russia clearly weakens U.S. maritime dominance in the area. Japan’s surrounding sea area is no longer a “backyard” for maritime countries, but “green water” involved in the fierce competition among continental and maritime superpowers.¹⁴⁾ Therefore, the “imperial boundary” should be defined as the geological limits determined by a hegemon based on its basic recognition of power decline and power disparity between itself and the counterbalancing states to protect its freedom of action and defend the expansion of its rivals. These adjusted boundaries, specifically the boundaries of hegemonic sphere of influence and security guarantee boundaries of hegemon-led military alliances, serve to maintain a balanced cost-benefit calculus of expansion.

Following analysis could be made based on former observations and Gilpin’s theory of hegemonic stability. The U.S. clear support for Japan’s sovereignty claims in the 1950s was declared by accepting its territorial demands aimed at strengthening Japan’s role as a linchpin of Asian

13) In international relations, home-field advantage refers to the strategic benefits a state gains when disputes or diplomatic engagements occur within its immediate geographic region or sphere of influence. This advantage may include superior knowledge of the local context, shorter supply lines, stronger domestic legitimacy, and easier coalition-building with neighboring states. In territorial disputes, especially, a regional power may enjoy greater political leverage and framing power, making external actors more cautious in their interventions.

14) “Green water” refers to “maritime zones unsuitable for deploying high-value naval assets, where offensive forces must disperse stealth-capable vessels, while defenders leverage anti-access systems.” Rubel, Robert C. (2010). “Talking About Sea Control.” *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 63, No. 4, p. 46.

defense. Beyond the surrounding sea area of the Southern Kuril Islands, the U.S. regional frontiers witnessed an increasing overlap with the boundaries of Japan's claimed maritime territory through the U.S. support for the Japan's claimed sovereignty of the "Northern Territories" to align the two countries' positions on relevant disputes. As the Eisenhower administration incorporated South Korea into the U.S. alliance framework, the U.S. strategic defense boundaries was expanded to the areas close to Asia's continent, with the Diaoyu Islands, Dokdo (Takeshima) gradually becoming its strategic rear area. However, the U.S. opted for ambiguous positions favourable to Japan and rejected to offer practical solution to the disputes over the "Northern Islands" to manage intra-alliance disputes. Since the turn of the 21st century, the China-Russia strategic cooperation has been strengthened, so have their capabilities in managing near-sea areas (Lo 2008) . South Korea has enhanced its diplomatic autonomy and expressed sustained dissatisfaction with the U.S. positions favourable to Japan. The disputes over the Diaoyu Islands, Dokdo, and the Southern Kuril Islands have underscored the competing interests of Japan and China, South Korea, and Russia. The Obama administration reaffirmed its support for Japan and opposition to China, South Korea, and Russia defending their sovereignty to maintain the U.S. dominance in the region and secure Japan's proactive cooperation in the "rebalance" strategy(Green 2017). The Biden administration's 2022 National Security Strategy and the 2023 Indo-Pacific Strategy explicitly identify China as "the most consequential geopolitical competitor" and underscore the need to "deepen alliances" with countries like Japan to uphold a "free and open Indo-Pacific." In April 2024, President Biden reaffirmed that the Senkaku Islands fall under Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, effectively formalizing a position that had long been left ambiguous (White House, 2024). In parallel, U.S. support for Japan's stance on the Southern Kurils has been increasingly evident in G7 communiqués and NATO outreach,

reinforcing a geostrategic coalition to counterbalance Russian influence in Northeast Asia.

2. Intensifying Island Disputes around Japan Leading to More Pressure on U.S. Alliance Boundaries

The “2010 Senkaku/Diaoyu Boat Collision Incident”¹⁵⁾ and “2012 Nationalization of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands”¹⁶⁾ marked intensifying disputes between China and Japan on the islands, especially the confrontation between maritime law enforcement forces. The U.S. “imperial boundary” in Northeast Asia faced challenges on its southwest side. On the one hand, the direct parties to the dispute changed. The China Coast Guard replaced civilian Diaoyu Islands activists from Hong Kong to become the direct party to the stand off between China and Japan, represented by Japan Coast Guard. Chinese and Japanese military forces also frequently operated in the relevant waters, steadily reinforcing their military presence in Zhejiang’s eastern waters and the Sakishima Islands. China, meanwhile, has

15) The 2010 Senkaku/Diaoyu Boat Collision Incident occurred on September 7, 2010, when a Chinese fishing boat collided with two Japanese Coast Guard ships near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Japan detained the Chinese captain, leading to a sharp diplomatic standoff. China demanded his immediate release and suspended high-level talks and some trade cooperation. The incident highlighted the deep-rooted sovereignty dispute between the two nations and intensified nationalist sentiments on both sides. It is widely seen as a turning point in China - Japan relations, signaling the rise of more assertive maritime postures. The event also tested U.S. alliance dynamics and its strategic ambiguity in East Asia.

16) In September 2012, the Japanese government purchased three of the five Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands from a private Japanese owner, effectively nationalizing them. While Japan claimed the move was aimed at preventing more provocative actions by nationalist groups, China strongly opposed the action, viewing it as a violation of its sovereignty. The decision triggered large-scale protests in China and a sharp deterioration in bilateral relations. In international relations, the incident is seen as a catalyst for escalating maritime tensions and nationalist sentiment. It also marked a shift toward more assertive territorial policies in both countries and intensified debates over U.S. strategic ambiguity and alliance commitments in East Asia.

responded with growing resolve to defend its maritime interests. The 2023 Defense White Paper emphasizes China's "core interests" in the East China Sea and denounces foreign interference in territorial matters. Frequent patrols around the Diaoyu Islands and joint military drills with Russia further signal China's intent to contest what it sees as an encroaching alliance system in its periphery (Ministry of National Defense of China, 2023). Beijing has also criticized the trilateral strengthening of U.S.-Japan-South Korea cooperation as destabilizing to regional order. Japan has reciprocated with a more assertive defense and diplomatic posture. The 2023 National Defense Strategy labels China as an "unprecedented strategic challenge" and outlines increased defense spending and deepened interoperability with U.S. forces. Tokyo has also strengthened ties with NATO and the EU, signaling a shift from regional to inter-regional coalition-building. On the other hand, China's declaration of the East China Sea ADIZ was labeled by the U.S. as a "provocative act" and "serious mistake".¹⁷⁾ For the U.S., the intensifying Diaoyu Islands dispute meant further consolidating its strategic leverage over both China and Japan, but also highlighted more severe challenges from rival powers at the southwestern frontier of its "imperial boundary".

In the wake of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, with stronger cooperation between the U.S. and Japan, the protracted Russia-Japan peace treaty impasse, and Japan's increasingly assertive claims over the "Northern Territories," the Russian Federation has since 2020 significantly augmented its military presence and infrastructural development on the Southern Kuril Islands, thereby reinforcing its strategic deterrence against the U.S.-Japan alliance. In the military domain, the Russian Armed Forces have systematically deployed advanced weapons systems, including the S-300V4 surface-to-air

17) Russel, Daniel (2014), "Maritime Disputes in East Asia - Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific," <https://www.andrewerickson.com/2014/02/full-text-of-assistant-secretary-daniel-russels-testimony-on-maritime-disputes-in-east-asia/>. (accessed on February 19, 2025)

missile system and the “Bal” coastal defense missile system, on Iturup and Kunashir Islands. These deployments have been accompanied by large-scale joint exercises involving air-sea coordination and amphibious landing operations, underscoring Russia’s intention to consolidate operational control over the disputed territories.¹⁸⁾In the political domain, the Russian government formally suspended peace treaty negotiations with Japan in 2022 and revoked the long-standing visa-free travel arrangements for Japanese nationals visiting the disputed islands. This policy shift in the institution indicates a more confrontational posture toward Japan. Furthermore, in 2023, the Russian government announced the decision to construct permanent military facilities and increase investment in public infrastructure on Iturup Island, including expanded social services, which seemingly aimed at solidifying Russia’s de facto sovereignty and diminishing domestic support within Japan for territorial restitution.¹⁹⁾In the diplomatic domain, Russia has expanded strategic coordination with the China concerning Northeast Asian affairs. The two states have jointly issued multiple statements opposing perceived external interference and have engaged in regular joint air patrols over the Sea of Japan since 2021. These operations have effectively constituted a form of strategic encirclement aimed at counterbalancing the U.S.-Japan security partnership. Concurrently, Japan has undertaken measures to reassert its claims and counterbalance Russian pressure. Notably, in 2022, the Japanese government officially stated in its Diplomatic Bluebook that “the Northern Territories are inherent territory of Japan,” trying to reverse its disadvantaged position in the dispute. Moreover, Japan has strengthened defense collaboration with NATO member states and regional partners such

18) Russian Ministry of Defence (2022), “Russia’s International Military-Technical Forum ARMY 2022 Kicks Off,” <https://www.defensehere.com/en/russias-international-defense-industry-fair-army-2022-kicks-off>. (accessed on February 20, 2025)

19) TASS (2022), “Russia terminates peace treaty talks with Japan – Foreign Ministry,” <https://tass.com/politics/1425283>. (accessed on February 20, 2025)

as Australia to diversify its strategic options. ²⁰From a U.S. strategic perspective, although the primary theater of concern remains centered on Eastern Europe and the rise of China, Russia's military assertiveness in the Russian Far East—particularly in concert with China—has introduced latent constraints on the reallocation of allied military assets toward the Southwest Pacific. This evolving dynamic has contributed to an increasingly complex security architecture in Northeast Asia.²¹

Since the end of the Cold War, the transformation of international dynamics in Northeast Asia has significantly improved South Korea's geopolitical standing. The elevation of its diplomatic relations with China and Russia has enabled South Korea to evolve from being a mere “extension” of Japan's security architecture into a pivotal intermediary facilitating regional land-sea cooperation. This shift has substantially reversed its previously passive reliance on U.S. security guarantees during the Cold War era. In stark contrast, relations between South Korea and Japan have persistently remained stagnant, with the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute repeatedly exacerbating tensions and undermining trilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan, and South Korea. These tensions have hindered the formation of a unified strategic front to address the rise of China. In 2007, the United States Board on Geographic Names reclassified Dokdo from “South Korean-administered” to “undesignated sovereignty,” provoking strong protests from the South Korean government and temporarily jeopardizing President George W. Bush's scheduled visit to Seoul. In 2011, President Lee Myung-bak became the first South Korean head of state to visit Dokdo, an unprecedented move that precipitated a rapid deterioration in South Korea - Japan relations. Subsequent U.S.-brokered efforts to promote intelligence-sharing and logistics support agreements

20) Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2022), “Diplomatic Bluebook 2022,” <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2022.html>. (accessed on February 20, 2025)

21) CSIS (2023), “Global Forecast 2024,” <https://www.csis.org/analysis/global-forecast-2024>. (accessed on February 20, 2025)

between the two countries were suspended. Meanwhile, Japan's Defense White Paper continued to assert that Dokdo falls within Japan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), further intensifying the dispute.

Over the past decade, the "Indo-Pacific strategy" was unfold and the security environment in Northeast Asia grew more complex. The U.S. has exerted persistent pressure on South Korea and Japan to reconcile their bilateral relationship in order to strengthen the trilateral security framework. Against the backdrop of escalating North Korean nuclear threats and intensifying U.S.-China strategic competition, the vision of a quasi-alliance among the U.S., Japan, and South Korea has reemerged. However, the territorial dispute over Dokdo has remained a recurrent flashpoint undermining bilateral ties. In 2018, the South Korean Ministry of National Defense conducted a regular military drill in the waters surrounding Dokdo, naming the operation explicitly as one intended to "defend Dokdo," prompting strong protest from Japan, which responded by temporarily recalling a senior diplomat stationed in South Korea.²²⁾ In the following year, Japan imposed export controls on critical industrial materials to South Korea, and in response, South Korea announced its intention to terminate the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), citing eroded trust in bilateral security cooperation. Although the termination was suspended under U.S. mediation, the incident revealed the fragility of trilateral strategic trust.²³⁾ Following the inauguration of the Yoon Suk-yeol administration in 2022, South Korea sought to restore high-level security dialogue with Japan within the framework of a renewed alignment with U.S.-led "values diplomacy."

22) Yonhap News Agency (2018), "South Korean military kicks off Dokdo defense drill," https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2018/06/205_250816.html ; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2018), "Protest against the military exercise by the ROK in the area surrounding Takeshima," https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_002053.html. (accessed on February 20, 2025)

23) Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea (2019), "Statement on GSOMIA," https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=319798. (accessed on February 20, 2025)

However, tensions persisted. In 2023, Japan's Defense White Paper once again asserted its sovereignty over "Takeshima" and emphasized its air operations in the overlapping area of the Korea Air Defense Identification Zone (KADIZ), provoking cross-party protests from the South Korean National Assembly.²⁴⁾ Later that year, the South Korean military carried out another large-scale amphibious exercise around Dokdo, underscoring its effective control over the territory.²⁵⁾ Although the Biden administration has repeatedly emphasized in trilateral summits that "historical disputes should not hinder present-day cooperation",²⁶⁾ the deeply rooted sensitivity of the Dokdo issue continues to challenge South Korea-Japan reconciliation. Despite institutional progress in trilateral coordination, longstanding structural divergences—particularly over historical memory, territorial claims, and strategic priorities—remain significant obstacles to building a stable multilateral security system in Northeast Asia. From the U.S. perspective, the efforts South Korea made to safeguard its claim over Dokdo and its pursuit of policy autonomy²⁷⁾ impeded the strategic vision of the U.S. to consolidate resources in the continental periphery and littoral zones and manage intra-alliance contradictions (呂平·秦如月 2024, 62).

Besides, The European Union, while not a military actor in the region,

24) Ministry of Defense of Japan (2023), "Defense of Japan 2023," p. 84, https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/2023.html ; Yonhap News Agency (2023), "S. Korea 'strongly protests' Japan's renewed Dokdo claim in defense white paper," <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230728004551325>. (accessed on February 20, 2025)

25) Yonhap News Agency (2024), "S. Korea holds regular defense drills around Dokdo: source," <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20241217005200315>. (accessed on February 20, 2025)

26) The White House (2023), "The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States," <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states/>.(accessed on February 20, 2025)

27) Guided by the "Indo-Pacific Strategy," the U.S. has strengthened alliances to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative (e.g., restricting Huawei's 5G expansion, reviving QUAD, and forming AUKUS). However, South Korea avoids framing its policy as a "strategy," instead aligning initiatives like the New Southern Policy (NSP) with the U.S. approach. Seoul also resisted a full Huawei ban, permitting limited use of its 5G equipment—a hedging tactic to balance between the U.S. and China.

has aligned more closely with U.S. and Japanese perspectives. The EU's 2021 Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific supports freedom of navigation and rule-based order. In recent G7 and EU-Japan summits, Brussels has joined in expressing concern over "unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force," signaling growing normative and economic coordination with Washington and Tokyo.

It is not hard to spot that the island disputes in Northeast Asia have been intensifier once again at the beginning of the 21st century inevitably because of the intra-regional balance of power and the transformation of international processes. Since Japan raced to break free from the post-war order, the increasing maritime power projection²⁸⁾ from China and Russia would unavoidably intensify the China-Japan and Russia-Japan island disputes. The "imperial boundary" set by the U.S. in the last century therefore had to be confronted with the direct threat posed by counterbalancing states outside the hegemonic system. Even if the U.S. could compel the South Korean government to compromise with Japan on issues such as the "comfort women" resolution and the signing of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), deep-seated public distrust toward Japan persisted among South Korean citizens, showing South Korea's robust diplomatic autonomy. Therefore, Dokdo issue is not only a bottleneck of U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral cooperation, but also an underlying opportunity for South Korea to cooperate with China and Russia. Therefore, the U.S. has to make clear its positions to relevant disputes to the public.

28) Maritime Power Projection : In international relations, maritime power projection refers to a state's ability to use its naval and maritime capabilities to influence events beyond its shores. This includes deploying naval forces, securing sea lanes, demonstrating presence in contested waters, and conducting joint exercises or coercive operations. Maritime power projection enables states to protect national interests, deter rivals, and support allies far from home. It plays a critical role in regional balance of power, particularly in areas like the South and East China Seas, where access and control over strategic waterways are linked to sovereignty, trade, and military advantage.

3. Rising Counterbalancing States Forcing the U.S. to Reiterate its Positions Favourable to Japan in Island Disputes

Different from the 1950s, the U.S. is obviously passive to make clear its new round of policies favourable to Japan, an action to demarcate strategic red lines since continental countries in Northeast Asia have been safeguarding their maritime rights and interests. The U.S., to some extent, did manage to manipulate disputes or seek to interfere with the relations among countries in Northeast Asia. However, the U.S. strategic policy space has been constrained indeed. The informal trilateral alignment among China, the USSR, and North Korea during the Cold War once posed pressure on the U.S. “imperial boundary” in Northeast Asia. However, the U.S. managed to cut its cost on maintaining its regional advantage with its strong maritime supremacy as it relocated its boundary to the juncture of the continental littorals and the maritime peripheries of China, South Korea, and Russia(Olsen 2000, 200). From the perspective of U.S. decision-makers at the time, these disputes constituted an intra-alliance management issue rather than a strategic threat capable of disrupting the U.S. dominance in the region.

Nevertheless, during the early 21st century, both maritime supremacy and the economic strength of allies, two pillars underpinning U.S. balanced cost-benefit calculus of sustaining its boundary, demonstrated measurable decline. On the one hand, China and Russia continued to expand their strategic presence in medium-range maritime domains with growing strength of their navies, and therefore took more proactive measures to defend sovereignty over disputed islands and reefs. From this perspective, the U.S. did not possess much power as before to maintain its “interests” along the continental margins of China, South Korea, and Russia. On the other hand, China’s rapid economic development changed the existing power configuration in Northeast Asia. As of 2024, the Chinese Navy holds a

significant quantitative advantage in naval assets, particularly in frigates and submarines, vastly outnumbering the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF).²⁹⁾The U.S. attempted to defend against the pressure from China and Russia based on the maritime supremacy of its allies, but that could be hard to achieve with the existing power configuration in the area. Under such circumstances, the Biden administration had to take on more security commitment to maintain U.S. “imperial boundary”. From this perspective, the U.S. sharp rhetoric against China and Russia over these disputes precisely reveals its fear of losing regional dominance. Moreover, with the growing economic strength of South Korea and improving geopolitical environment, the U.S. ability to mediate intra-alliance frictions has correspondingly diminished. Since Japan plays an irreplaceable role in containing Chinese and Russian maritime expansion in key strategic waters, the U.S. has no choice but to make clear its positions favourable to Japan in the disputes. This further highlights how passive the U.S. has been since the subsequent fluctuation in its relations with China, Russia, and South Korea was the strategic cost it had to take in order to maintain its dominance in the region.

From this perspective, the key factor driving the U.S. to change its “clear” positions to “ambiguous” positions favourable to Japan in island disputes in 1950s was its evaluation on the loss of hegemonic sphere, an active adjustment to its “imperial boundary” based on the cost-benefit calculus of its expansion. However, the reverse of its positions was a “defensive action” to form closer relations with Japan when the U.S. hegemonic primacy was in decline relatively. From the perspective of other counterbalancing states, their emergence may further obstruct the U.S., and therefore increase the political costs the U.S. should bear to maintain its positions favourable to Japan.

29) As of 2024, the China-Japan naval ratio stands at 2.3:1 in total tonnage, 1.06:1 in destroyers, 3.3:1 in frigates, and 2.9:1 .NetEase News (2024), “720K vs 2.23M Tons: How Large Is the Gap Between Chinese and Japanese Navies?,” <https://www.163.com/dy/article/J6ENPFEV0552YE2K.html>. (accessed on February 21, 2025)

IV. Impacts and Prospects of the U.S. Adjustment to its Positions Favourable to Japan

The U.S. demonstrated clearer positions favourable to Japan in relevant island disputes because the U.S. itself faced the rise of counterbalancing states in Northeast Asia and increasing demands for cooperation with Japan. The global power center has been moving eastward rapidly. China and South Korea witnessed fast-growing strength of themselves. Russia has been steadily intensifying its strategic engagement in the Russian Far East. All these have led to a shrink in the U.S. advantage as a sea power and disruption in the existing delicate “balance” state of the island disputes. Meanwhile, Japan has sought to “ride on the coattails of the U.S.-Japan alliance”³⁰⁾ to reinforce its territorial claims over the disputed islands controlled by Russia and South Korea, while consolidating its “effective control” over the Diaoyu Islands, thereby escalating tensions in Japan-Russia, Japan-South Korea, and Japan-China relations.

1. Influence of U.S. Positions Favourable to Japan in Island Disputes in Northeast Asia in the New Era

The tensions in island disputes in the Rimland, the coastal zones of

30) ride on the coattails of the U.S.-Japan alliance : Is commonly used to describe Japan's reliance on the United States' military power and international influence in matters of security and diplomacy. By leveraging U.S. support, Japan pursues its own strategic goals and seeks to expand its regional influence. Much like the metaphor of “borrowing a ship to sail,” Japan utilizes the strength of the U.S. – its “ship” of military capability and global reach – to achieve objectives it could not accomplish alone. In the context of international relations, this reflects Japan's strategy of enhancing its security and regional presence by depending on the U.S. within the alliance framework.

Eurasia, have threatened the “stability” in the U.S. “imperial boundary”. The U.S. has therefore been forced to reaffirm its support for Japan’s sovereignty claims or show its “kindness” of different degrees to Japan, further complicating the situation. The influence is mainly as follows.

First, the comprehensive cooperation between the U.S. and Japan has been consolidated, further underscoring the alliance’s role as the cornerstone of the U.S. dominance in Northeast Asia. “Strength” and “willingness” are two basic factors that influence the countries’ policy adjustment. As China and Russia has possessed stronger maritime capabilities while the U.S. power has been on decline, the U.S. urgently needs to enhance Japan’s alignment with its “Indo-Pacific Strategy” to jointly focus their strategic priorities on the southwest. The U.S. “clear” support for Japan’s sovereignty claim is beneficial for Japan to alleviate the pressure from west and north and therefore strengthen its presence in the dispute over the Diaoyu Islands with China. Building on their intensive cooperation in the Ryukyu Islands, U.S. military operations in the East China Sea and South China Sea have become increasingly active, providing robust support for the U.S. to implement its “Indo-Pacific Strategy.” Meanwhile, the Japanese archipelago’s strategic ripple effects across Northeast and Southeast Asia have become increasingly pronounced. The alignment between the U.S. and Japan’s positions on disputes islands provides common grounds for both sides to optimize the allocation of their strategic resources and deepen political and military cooperation.

Second, the U.S. has been deeply engaged in regional disputes again while strengthening its leadership in shaping international processes in the region. The security dynamics of Northeast Asia, compared with other regions, lie in the complexities of different conflict during the World War II, the Cold War, and the post Cold War era, with different countries focusing on different security issues. Different administrations of South Korea, for example, focused on different issues. The administrations of Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Moon Jae-in removed the designation of North Korea as

the “main enemy” and strengthened naval capabilities to consolidate effective control over Dokdo. In contrast, the administrations of Lee Myung-bak, Park Geun-hye, and Yoon Suk-yeol prioritized balanced security approaches in both the Sea of Japan and the Yellow Sea. The U.S., while making clear its support for Japan, responded to relevant disputes differently. It amplified the Diaoyu Islands issue to draw attention and attempted to associate it with the South China Sea issue. In contrast, the U.S. downplayed the disputes over Dokdo and the Southern Kuril Islands to deliberately link “the rise of China” to “the intensifying territorial disputes in East Asia”.

Last, the U.S. positions favourable to Japan has led to frequent disputes with China, South Korea, and Russia. From a historical perspective, the essence of Northeast Asia’s island disputes lies in the struggle between regional states’ efforts to reckon with Japan’s colonial legacy and Japan’s attempts to revise postwar maritime boundaries. The U.S., avoiding its responsibility as a victorious power, has indulged Japan’s sovereignty claims, undermining China and Russia’s trust in its ambiguous stance and prompting both countries to intensify maritime pressure against the U.S.-Japan alliance. Despite closer cooperation between the U.S. and South Korea, South Korea has still paid close attention to the U.S. attitude towards Dokdo through the U.S. official websites such as the Board on Geographic Names. The two countries have still been faced with persistent disputes. The clearer U.S. positions favourable to Japan has undermined the mutual trust between the U.S. and China, South Korea, and China. In the long run, this will further put pressure on the U.S. to deal with security disputes between itself and its partners and allies.

2. Prospects of U.S. Positions Favourable to Japan in Relevant Island Disputes

Overall, the U.S. may maintain its positions favourable to Japan in relevant island disputes but focus on different aspects. The U.S. positions

may be least favourable to Japan on the Dokdo dispute because it needs to manage intra-alliance disagreements among Japan and South Korea as its allies to counterbalance China and Russia. As China and Russia grow with the expansion of military buildup in the Indo-Pacific region, the U.S. will further consolidate its positions on the Diaoyu Islands and the Southern Kuril Islands (呂平·甘雨禾 2025, 재인용). As Japan's island disputes with surrounding countries intensify during the second Trump administration, the U.S. positions favourable to Japan may face prospects below.

First, the Trump administration may continue its positions favourable to Japan on island disputes in Northeast Asia. As countries outside the U.S. alliance framework are on the rise, the U.S. will face stronger demands on cooperation with Japan and have no choice but to show its partiality toward Japan in territorial disputes. China and Russia are strengthening their deterrence against U.S. forward deployments in Northeast Asia. The U.S. still seeks to maintain its regional primacy. As long as these two structural factors exist, the Trump administration will struggle to deviate from its partiality toward Japan inherited from the post Cold War era. However, the U.S. will hardly demonstrate its partiality toward South Korea considering the difference in the national strength of Japan and Korea and how they recognize their allies .

Second, the Trump administration will take more differentiated positions favourable to Japan in the disputes over three islands in Northeast Asia. The Biden administration strengthened the U.S. presence in the Diaoyu Islands and Southern Kuril Islands disputes and downplayed its participation in Dokdo to avoid intensifying all disputes at the same time and concentrate the allocation of strategic resources from both the U.S. and Japan. Therefore, the U.S. took more differentiated positions on different disputes while maintaining its clear partiality toward Japan. Considering the mild attitude the Trump administration has held toward Russia and its reaction to the Russia-Ukraine crisis, the U.S. is very likely to downplay

its presence in the Southern Kuril Islands dispute and escalate the Diaoyu Islands dispute to align with Japan and targets on China on the rise.

Third, the Trump administration may still be ambiguous about its positions favourable to Japan to some extent. The ambiguous positions originates from the U.S. policies during the Cold War to shrink its responsibility to manage intra-alliance tensions. Therefore, the Trump administration may still be refrained from demonstrating a clearer position on the Dokdo issue. It is also not in line with the U.S. national interests to take security commitments on Japan's "Northern Territories" and complicate the tensions over the Southern Kuril Islands issue. The Trump administration takes a differentiated position favourable to Japan compared with former administrations even on the Diaoyu Island issue. Considering how the first Trump administration responded to the island disputes involving Japan, the second administration may still be ambiguous to some extent.³¹⁾ Such an approach would not only help contain the impact of island disputes on U.S. tensions with China, Russia, and South Korea but also enhance the U.S. bargaining leverage over Japan, thereby stabilizing the "U.S. leadership-Japan followership" structure.

V. Conclusion

This paper has examined the evolving U.S. positions in Northeast Asia's island disputes, arguing that the shift from strategic ambiguity to a clearer partiality toward Japan reflects a hegemonic recalibration in response to growing regional pressures. Drawing on Gilpin's theory of hegemonic

31) For example, during a 2017 joint press conference with Abe, Trump only reiterated U.S. obligations to territories under Japan's administration without explicitly naming the Diaoyu Islands. The White House (2017), "Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Abe of Japan in Joint Press Conference," <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-prime-minister-abe-japan-joint-press-conference/>. (accessed on February 21, 2025)

decline, the study highlights how rising counterbalancing powers—particularly China and Russia—and increasing intra-alliance tensions with South Korea have compelled the United States to solidify its alliance with Japan through clearer support for Japan’s territorial claims.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding of how hegemonic powers redefine their strategic boundaries under systemic stress. It refines hegemonic stability theory by showing that partiality in alliance management may emerge not from expansionist ambition but from defensive adaptation. By treating island disputes not as isolated cases but as indicators of broader hegemonic adjustment, the paper offers a structural realist interpretation of U.S. behavior in Northeast Asia.

From a policy perspective, the paper underscores the growing risks of asymmetry within U.S.-led alliance structures. While the U.S. prioritizes strategic coordination with Japan, the resulting marginalization of South Korea and the increasing friction with China and Russia threaten to undermine regional stability. For South Korea, this necessitates a more autonomous and balanced diplomatic strategy that safeguards its territorial claims while avoiding entrapment in great power rivalry. For China, the findings reinforce the urgency of maintaining strategic clarity and engaging in multilateral efforts to counter selective interpretations of international norms. As two key regional actors with overlapping security concerns and economic interdependence, China and South Korea have the potential to promote more balanced, multilateral dialogue mechanisms aimed at de-escalating tensions and defending inclusive regional norms.

Rather than allowing unilateral positions to dominate the discourse, Northeast Asia’s long-term stability depends on proactive engagement and normative leadership from middle powers. This paper concludes that enhanced China-South Korea coordination—grounded in respect for sovereignty and peaceful dispute resolution—can serve as a constructive counterbalance and contribute to a more stable regional order.

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| 국문초록 |

미국의 동북아 영유권 분쟁에서의 대일 편향적 입장 : 헤게모니 쇠퇴론적 접근

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본 논문은 미국 외교정책의 중요한 변화를 다룬다. 오랜 전략적 모호성에서 벗어나 동북아 섬 분쟁에서 일본에 대한 명확한 편향으로 전환한 것이다. 연구 문제는 다음과 같다. 왜 미국은 센카쿠/다오위다오, 남쿠릴, 독도/다케시마 영유권 분쟁에서 일본 편을 점점 더 명확히 지지하게 되었는가? 이를 설명하기 위해 로버트 길핀의 패권 안정론과 패권 쇠퇴 이론을 분석 틀로 삼아, 중국과 러시아 등 부상하는 세력과 한국과의 동맹 내 갈등에 대응하는 구조적 조정임을 주장한다. 연구 목표는 두 가지이다. 첫째, 미국이 세 개의 주요 섬 분쟁에서 중립에서 편향으로 정책을 어떻게 변화시켰는지 확인하는 것이다. 둘째, 이러한 변화가 쇠퇴하는 패권 능력과 지역 권력 재편 속에서 발생했음을 밝히는 것이다. 미국의 명확한 입장은 단순한 수사가 아니라 일본과의 동맹 강화와 지역 지배력 유지를 위한 전략적 재조정이다. 이 연구는 미국 정책 변화를 양자외교나 법적 모호성에서 벗어나 국제 체제 내 권력 이동과 연결해 설명한다. 또한, 세 분쟁을 통합 분석하여 미국의 전략적 정렬 논리를 폭넓게 이해하는 틀을 제공한다.

▪ 주제어: 동북아시아; 미국 외교; 영유권 분쟁; 미일 동맹; 패권 쇠퇴