

The Effect of the Rise of Populism in South Korea on Its Government's Diplomatic Relations with Japan

Yuqin Jin^{1,a,*}

¹BASIS International School Nanjing, Nanjing, Jiangsu, 210000, China

a. jack.jin13909-binj@basischina.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: As a former colony of Japan, South Korea's relationship with Japan has always been ambivalent. South Korea did form an alliance with Japan through the alliance with the United States and a geopolitical situation, but tension remained due to historical grievances between the two countries. In recent years, populist South Koreans have demanded the government take a harsher stance towards Japan when addressing historical problems as they look for genuine apologies from Japan, challenging the government's approach when engaging with Japan. This paper, through case analysis, explores how populism shaped the foreign policy of the Korean government. This paper finds that the public's sensitivity towards Japan's historical issues, combined with the political structure of South Korea, played a huge role in shaping their administrations' interactions with Japan and verified existing theories regarding populism's role in foreign policies in the specific case of the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute.

Keywords: populism, foreign policy, Korea-Japan relations, territorial dispute.

1. Introduction

As an ideology, populism claims to represent the interest of the common people and reject any mediation between people and governments, elites, and corporates. The exclusionary nature of the populism results in nationalist sentiments. In the field of diplomacy, populists often oppose any form of diplomacy due to the belief that nationalist interest would be compromised through diplomatic actions. In South Korea, the "386 generation", individuals who matured during the post-Korean War and democracy era, adopted the concept of Minjung, a neo-Marxist perspective that highlighted the populace's battle against the governing authority and colonial history and contemporary issues [1-2]. Regarding the Korean peninsula, the "386 generation" believed that they share an ethnic and national identity with North Korea and advocated against intervention from external powers like the United States and Japan. Additionally, the issue of Liancourt Islands (Dokdo or Takeshima) has heightened the level of nationalism amongst Koreans, as they believe Dokdo is an inseparable part of South Korea. These populist beliefs, accompanied by Korea's democratic political system, have imposed a serious challenge for the Korean government, especially when it came to improving relations with Japan: their courses of action and negotiations are highly dependent on populists' voices, and people are likely to vote the incumbent government out of office if people viewed their negotiations as a compromise of Korea's national interests. This essay seeks to explore the populists' influence on foreign policy by comparing the approaches of Korean presidents (from liberal and conservative

campaigns) toward the Liancourt Rocks (Dokdo/Takeshima Island) Dispute with South Korean citizens' perception of Japan. Seeing that theories about populism and foreign policy, especially theories in the context of South Korea, exist, this article aims to verify and consolidate the theories through the case analysis of the Dokdo Incident.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Populism and Diplomacy

Populism is considered a “thin ideology”: it is heavily reliant on ideas like anti-elitism and centrality of the people, leaving a huge gap for interpretation. Johannes Plagemann and Sandra Destradi contend that populists frequently amalgamate their rhetoric with other substantive ideologies, such as socialism and nationalism. Thick ideology frequently influence a state's diplomatic decisions more directly than populism does [3]. Angelos Chrysogelos, in “Populism in Foreign Policy,” elaborates on this notion by asserting that populists frequently exhibit nationalist tendencies and skepticism towards global institutions [4].

On the issue of alliances, Plagemann and Destradi argue that populists tend to disrupt multilateralism by diversifying their alliances with countries of the Global South. Also, they observed that populist rulers tend to centralize the decision-making process of foreign policies onto themselves in Modi's India, Erdogan's Turkey, and Trump's United States. They contend that the centralization of decision-making processes results in foreign policies that are increasingly unstable and unpredictable [3]. Chrysogelos supported this notion, observing that populists engage with international organizations solely when they appear advantageous to their national interests [4].

Both authors concur that populism will differ across various regions. Chrysogelos has notably identified that populists in European nations predominantly emphasize Euroscepticism and anti-immigration sentiments, whilst populists in Global South countries concentrate on anti-Western imperialism and neoliberal market critiques [4].

2.2. Populism in South Korea

In the case of South Korea, Yihei Zhao argues that populism has a significant influence on the government's diplomatic actions. South Korean youth would urge that their government adopt a stronger position when engaging with countries such as Japan because they are more sensitive to controversial topics involving Japan, particularly those related to Japan's colonial period, and the Dokdo Island dispute. In addition, a huge portion of Korean public mistrust the elites. This skepticism would further constrain the government's foreign policy initiatives, as administrations struggle to pursue realistic diplomatic solutions without incurring public reaction [5].

2.3. The dilemma of public opinion

The existing literature have analyzed responses from different South Korean presidents to people's nationalistic sentiments. Rozman and Lee contend that Roh Moo-hyun has leveraged South Korean nationalist feelings by portraying himself as a formidable adversary to Japan. In doing so, he aimed to galvanize South Koreans to endorse him [1].

Torkunov and Dyachkov found that although Lee Myung-bak, a conservative president, have been actively engaging with Japan during his presidency, remaining historical disputes have still paralyzed the relations between South Korea and Japan, especially when South Korea recalled its ambassador from Japan in 2008 after Japan promoted textbooks that claim Dokdo/Takeshima as a part of theirs. Torkunov and Dyachkov also argued that popular discontent with Japan has escalated this situation as Lee Myung-Bak failed to reach an intelligence sharing agreement with Japan in 2012 and strained

relationship between South Korea and Japan further by visiting a Dokdo. Lee's actions demonstrate that public sentiment may significantly influence the government's foreign policy. In summary, populism has influenced Lee's foreign policy [6].

However, Yoon Suk-Yeol's foreign policy showed that he attempted to overcome populism's influence in foreign policies. Kim's analysis into Yoon's presidency shows that Yoon has rather ignored the public discontent when engaging with Japan. He attempted to drastically improve Korea's relations with Japan through resolving historical issues and strengthening cooperation between South Korea, Japan, and the United States. Certain Pro-Japan measures do not accurately represent public resentment towards Japan. Kim proposed that Yoon's party could see a backlash in the 2024 parliamentary election due to the public perceiving him as uninformed of historical concerns [7].

2.4. Implication for Dokdo/Takeshima

The nationalistic behavior is more vividly illustrated by *Chung-in Moon and Chun-fu Li's* explanation about reactive nationalism—nationalistic sentiments that are stimulated by external actions. They stated that South Koreans are more likely to have a stronger reaction towards external stimuli if the stimuli strike at core nationalist sentiments like political and territorial integrity and the stimuli relate to another incident that is more recent. This reactive nationalist sentiment could be stronger if perceptions of the public and the leadership converge. Last, this sentiment could be further intensified by an unsatisfactory response from the actor giving the stimuli. For instance, the designation of “Takeshima Day” on February 22 by Shimane prefecture of Japan in 2005 triggered an emotional response from South Korean public since Japan has annexed Dokdo and integrated it into Shimane prefecture. Japan did not compromise on the exact day 100 years ago. Instead, its ministry of Education and Science approved history textbooks which claimed Dokdo/Takeshima as a part of Japan and downplayed Japan's legacies in China and South Korea. President Roh's message to the Japanese populace has intensified nationalist sentiments among Koreans, who were already discontented with Japan's reactions [8]. Bukh added on to this narrative in his research on civic activism. He observed that South Koreans would create organizations like Dokdo Headquarters, which arranges public campaigns and monthly studies to raise awareness on Dokdo. Such organization not only criticizes Japan's obsession towards Dokdo, but also South Korean governments' inability to protect sovereignty. These organizations elevated the status of Dokdo from a mere territorial dispute to a national crisis requiring resolution [1].

3. Case Analysis

To analyze the role which populism in Korea played in shaping the government's diplomatic actions with Japan, this paper will be specifically investigate how three presidents of South Korea, from liberal or conservative parties, approach to Dokdo/Takeshima Island dispute. The study will analyze the policies, actions, and legal measures that those presidents took, then comparing with South Korean's perception towards Japan during their presidency to decide whether their actions correspond with public perception towards Japan.

3.1. South Korean's view and Roh Moo-hyun period (2003-2008 Liberal)

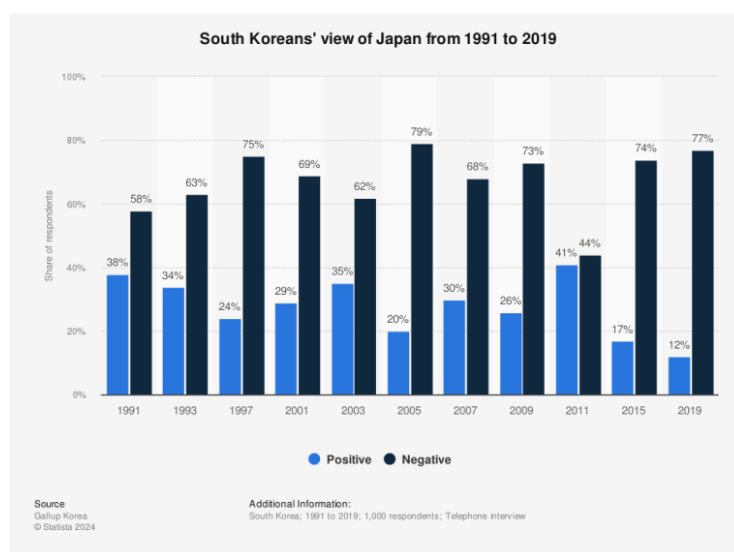


Figure 1: South Koreans' view of Japan from 1991 to 2019 [9]

According to Figure 1, during Roh Moo-hyun's presidency, South Koreans' perception of Japan reached a new low as 79% of people held a negative view towards Japan in 2005. The public has been outraged by Japan's decision in February 2005 to officially set Takeshima Day as February 22—the day which Dokdo was annexed by Japan. 94% of the public urged Roh's administration to take a harsher stance on Japan.

Roh's administration responded in a forceful manner. On March 1 the same year, Roh demanded reparations from Japan. It is the first time since 1965 that a South Korean president did so. In an official statement named "To the Citizens of South Korea," Roh accused Japan of attempting to rationalize its colonization in Korea and deny its independence. His statement has received an approval rating of 89%.

Moreover, Roh's administration had actively confronted their Japanese counterpart on Dokdo on the international stage. Roh and Junichiro Koizumi, the Japanese president, have spent a great deal of time during their own summit meeting in June 2005 and the APEC summit in December 2005. The South Korean government had also protested Japan's effort to claim Dokdo/Takeshima by postponing the visit of foreign minister Ban Ki-Moon and canceling the "shuttle summit" with Japan after Koizumi insisted on visiting the Yasukuni shrine. South Korea had even opposed Japan to secure its UN Security Council membership for the first time that year [10].

3.2. Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013, Conservative)

As a conservative president, Lee Myung-bak has attempted to improve relations with Japan by blaming Roh for harming relations with Japan and the US; normalizing the tension agglomerated during Roh's presidency; holding regular meetings with Japanese officials; and fostering economic cooperation between China, South Korea, and Japan. However, his effort was limited because Japan continued claiming that Dokdo/Takeshima belongs to Japan through amending history textbooks and publishing such statements in the defense whitepapers. These activities incited popular sentiment in Korea: the proportion of individuals perceiving Japan unfavorably increased from 69% in 2007 to 73% in 2009 [8].

Lee's administration was thereby compelled to adopt a hardline position, particularly with Dokdo. The government intends to lure additional residents to Dokdo by enhancing infrastructure, building a

scientific base, and deploying authorities [11]. In 2010, Parliament enacted the Dokdo Protection Law to safeguard the ecological environment of Dokdo [12]. Although this legislation is an environmental protection statute, it nonetheless maintains the notion that Dokdo is an integral component of South Korea. At the conclusion of 2012, the South Korean parliament increased the budget for promoting Dokdo to 6.22 billion won (US\$5.72 million) [13].

In August 2012, Lee Myung-bak independently visited Dokdo, becoming the inaugural South Korean president to do so [12]. This action, which incited significant resentment in Japan leading to the recall of their ambassadors, was mostly driven by public sentiment. In April 2012, Lee's approval rating was approximately 30 percent, indicating a fairly low level of support [14]. Following the visit, a government poll indicates that 80% of respondents endorsed Lee Myung-bak's trip to Dokdo [15]. Since the presidential election is approaching in December, Lee's visit could possibly gain a higher approval rating from the public and a higher possibility for his party's candidate to win the upcoming election.

3.3. Yoon Suk-yeol (2022-2027, Conservative)

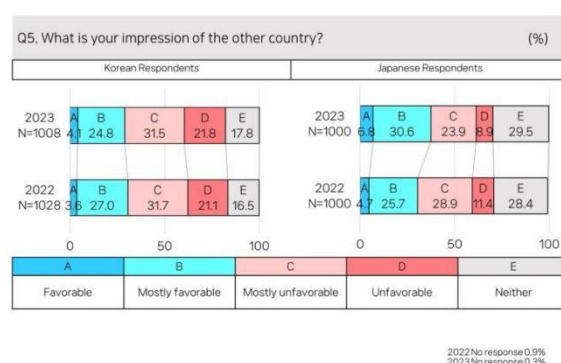


Figure 2: South Koreans and Japanese's perception to the other country, 2022 & 2023 [16]

During Yoon's Presidency, the perception of Japan has relatively improved: in 2023, 28.9% of Koreans held a favorable view to Japan. Still, a majority of 53.3% Koreans held an unfavorable view towards Japan [16]. Yoon has also approached to controversial issues like comfort women in a more moderate position by attempting to reconcile with Japan on historical issues.

Yoon's approach to Dokdo showed similarities and differences with previous South Korean presidents. Yoon's administration has still considered Dokdo as a part of South Korea. When South Korea's Defense Ministry named Dokdo a "disputed territory," Yoon's spokesperson has still called for the Defense Ministry to rectify their stances [17]. However, Yoon's administration has downplayed the importance of Dokdo in his diplomatic actions. When Japan's Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa gave a speech about Dokdo/Takeshima and vice minister in the Cabinet Office Nakano Hideyuki attended an annual ceremony for Dokdo/Takeshima, South Korean Foreign Ministry's Director-General for Asia and Pacific Affairs Seo Min-jung had called in the ambassador of Japan in Seoul for diplomatic protests. When Japan attempted to hold up the idea that Dokdo/Takeshima belongs to Japan, the Office of the President responded that South Korea will not resume importing seafood from Fukushima [18].

4. Discussion

From the cases above, it is conclusive that populism has played an important role in shaping the South Korean government's foreign policy with Japan, as many of the South Korean government's diplomatic actions, especially regarding Dokdo, aimed to address South Koreans' anger and negative

feelings towards Japan. This phenomenon was especially prevalent during Roh and Lee's presidencies, when they attempted to seek people's approval by reprimanding Japan's actions and visiting Dokdo in person. These actions are generally more explicit and attention-grabbing. However, by protesting to the Japanese Ambassador in person and suspending the import of seafood, Yoon's administration has more implicitly addressed controversies surrounding Dokdo and downplayed the role of Dokdo in Japan's diplomacy.

Roh and Lee's diplomatic actions are highly restrained by South Korea's populist ideology and democratic system. As a democracy, South Korea's political system allows people to elect those they favor. And since the South Korean youth are more sensitive towards those historical controversies with Japan, they would be prone to leaders who would take a harsher stance, boosting the place of Korea-Japan relations in their consideration. Therefore, Presidents like Roh and Lee, who are dedicated to remaining their government in power, have to take a harsher stance towards Japan even if their party or themselves are relatively moderate. This is the dilemma which they have been placed in.

Yoon, however, attempts to change this dilemma. He has attempted to alleviate the effect of populism by misaligning the government's tone with the people's voices, as it has been previously stated that governments aligning the position of the people could result in a weaker nationalist reaction. His implicit protests over Dokdo are ways in which the government "misaligns" people's voice through weakening the reaction towards Japan's provocation. Beyond Dokdo, Yoon is trying to downplay the significance of historical issues with Japan so that historical issues become weaker stimuli for South Koreans' rective nationalism. His attempt, however, might fail due to the South Koreans' unfavorable view of his foreign policy.

5. Conclusion

This paper has discovered that populism played a huge role in shaping their administrations' interactions with Japan due to the public's sensitivity towards Japan's historical issues and political structure in South Korea. Through case analysis that compares approaches to the Dokdo/Takeshima Dispute between South Korea and Japan, the study has successfully applied and validated theories regarding to the populism and foreign policy of South Korea and Japan on the specific issue. However, it could be further developed by incorporating and investigating the mechanism of South Korea's foreign policy decision. Incorporating this investigation would improve our theory by investigating how the South Korean government balances between national interest and public opinions, which could at times conflict with each other. This investigation would also bring insights into the political structure of the South Korean government, which could further explain how each branch of the South Korean government would coordinate with each other in response to public opinion. Furthermore, populism's effect on South Korea's policy could be more thoroughly reflected through further investigation in other aspects of South Korea's relations with Japan, like economic and regional security factors, as well as investigating South Korea's relationships with states like China, North Korea, and the United States.

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