Book Review

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One of the most contentious issues that continue to strain Japan-Korea relations involves a group of tiny islets in the East Sea referred to as Dokdo in Korea and Takeshima in Japan. Both nations argue that the islets, located 87.4 kilometers (km) from the Korean island of Ulleungdo and 157 km from the Oki Islands of Japan, belong to them. Since the end of Japanese colonialism in Korea in 1945, both Japan and Korea have made claims of sovereignty over Dokdo (Takeshima) taking various actions to buttress their claims. The dispute has been particularly bitter, as both countries have made regular public statements asserting their sovereignty over the islets while denouncing the claims of the other. The row between the two nations over Dokdo, which Korean currently occupies, has escalated recently with Japan’s attempt to bring the matter before the International Court of Justice in response to Korean President Lee Myung-bak’s visit to the islets in 2012.

As characteristic of many contentious territorial conflicts that occur between nations, the issues that animate the dispute involve a complex interaction of historical, legal, political, economic, and geographic factors that, when taken together, do not lend themselves to a simple or quick resolution. Indeed, when viewed in light of the rhetoric from Korea, the Dokdo issue is more than just an international legal matter. It is an issue that is part and parcel of the history of Japanese militarism in the 20th century and the loss of Korean sovereignty when Korea was annexed by Japan. It is in that context that Dr. Pilkyu Kim, who was Director and Professor of Politics and Government at the University of Maryland, offers his insights and analysis on the Dokdo issue in *Claims to Territory between Japan and Korea in International Law.*

Dr. Kim’s manuscript, as stated in the preface, “seeks to offer a balanced examination on the major historical and legal arguments on both sides of the Dokdo conflict from the perspective of international law.” (p. 11) In his
attempt to do so, he presents his assessment and analysis of the Dokdo issue in five chapters beginning in Chapter 1 with an “Introduction to the Problem”; Chapter 2 looks at the “Value of Dokdo”; Chapter 3 is an examination of the “Sovereignty of Dokdo: Historical Background”; Chapter 4 provides his “Legal Analysis of Dokdo”; and finally in Chapter 5, Dr. Kim offers his “Summary and Conclusion” with the assistance of his daughter, Dr. Bonnie Sue Kim who brought the manuscript to its completion after Dr. Kim’s death in December 2010. His efforts have resulted in the composition of a comprehensive general survey of the international legal issues regarding Dokdo from a Korean perspective.

Given Dr. Kim’s express purpose to look at the Dokdo issue from the perspective of international law, the focus of this review will center on Chapters 3 and 4, the bulk of the manuscript that specifically examines the history of Dokdo in relation to Japan and Korea and the legal arguments posited by both countries. In Chapter 3, Dr. Kim goes about demonstrating Korea’s historical connection to Dokdo. Moving chronologically through Japanese and Korean history, Dr. Kim explains the general attitude and policies of the respective governments towards Dokdo through the ancient and modern period. He traces the earliest recorded reference of Dokdo in Korean history to 512 AD when a Silla general conquered the kingdom of Usan which had possession of both Ulleundo and Dokdo. From that point, Dr. Kim highlights official government records of successive Korean kingdoms such as the Sejong sillok chiriji (official records of King Sejong; treatise on geography) that make references to Dokdo along with map evidence from both Japan and Korea that indicate Korea’s sovereignty over the islets.

As Japan undertook its modernization efforts prompted by the Meiji Restoration in the late 19th century, Japan’s relationship to Korea and Dokdo changed. Dr. Kim notes that in 1904, Japan forced Korea to become a protectorate of Japan which led to the eventual annexation of Korea in 1910. During that time, Dr. Kim explains that Japan incorporated Dokdo into Japan through “the well-programmed internal and external curtailment of Korean sovereignty.” (p. 73) Once Korean independence was achieved with Japan’s defeat in World War II, Dr. Kim observes that the “mid-century phase” of the dispute over Dokdo began with President Syngman Rhee’s Proclamation of Sovereignty over the Adjacent Seas with eventual clashes between the two countries which included shots being fired on different occasions due to Japanese incursions. He ends this historical account with the events surrounding Japan’s protest in 1974 over the Korean Coast Guard’s investigation of a Japanese fishing vessel in waters near Dokdo and concludes the chapter noting that both countries have been firm in their respective positions.