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NATIONALISM, POPULISM, REALISM AND THE INTENSIFICATION OF EAST ASIA'S MARITIME DISPUTES

Abstract:

The neo-realist paradigm in international relations scholarship holds that sovereign states are rational, unitary, value-maximizing actors capable of understanding and rank-ordering their tangible national interests while distinguishing between short- and long-term goals. In the neo-realist view, territorial conflicts, unless involving central security concerns, will be subordinated to larger foreign policy objectives. Neo-liberals, on the other hand, argue that the growth of trade and economic interdependence is conducive to cooperation. "Trade dependency" on a state with which there is a territorial conflict will lead to sublimation, sidelining or delayed resolution of the dispute without the threat or use of force. This paper analyzes three of East Asia's high-profile maritime disputes, those over the Southern Kuriles/Northern Territories (Russia and Japan), Dokdo/Takeshima (South Korea/Japan), and Diaoyu/Senkaku (China/Japan). The paper demonstrates that, to an increasing degree, nationalist and populist sentiment – rather than neo-realist or neo-liberal calculation – has been the prime mover in each of these conflicts. The four regional players – China, Japan, South Korea and Russia – have politically invested far more in these islands than an objective analysis would seem to warrant, leading to intensified diplomatic conflict, hampered cooperation, emotion-driven domestic populism, and the possibility of future military action. The paper rejects the reasoning of some recent scholarship on the resolution of maritime disputes. It argues that the increasing salience of populist nationalism as a force hampering the resolution of maritime conflict is part of a global trend in the second decade of the 21st century.

Keywords:

maritime conflict; conflict resolution; nationalism; populism; neo-realism; neo-liberalism; constructivism; social identity theory; Asia-Pacific

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