

Tensions heighten over Japan's endorsement of nationalist textbook

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The Japanese government of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi formally notified the governments of South Korea and China on July 9 that it had rejected their demands for revisions to a school history textbook that glorifies and sanitises Japan's colonial invasions in the first half of the 20th century.

Koizumi's administration contemptuously declared that it had no power to act. The Japanese Education Ministry stated: "Under the current textbook screening system, it is up to the authors to decide what historical facts to include in their books. We cannot force the inclusions of certain points".

On these grounds, Japanese school children can now be taught from a textbook that reasserts the wartime militarist ideology that Japan's invasions of the Korean peninsula, China and South East Asia were justified acts of self-defence that assisted Asia's liberation from European and American domination. The stated aim of the textbook authors, the History Textbook Reform Society, is to revive patriotism among youth by omitting from history instruction any references to Japanese imperialism's colonial atrocities.

The book downplays the oppression of the Korean and Chinese people and lauds the economic development of regions under Japanese colonial rule. It omits reference to the conscription of women as sex-slaves—or "comfort women"—for military brothels. The true dimensions of the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, where Japanese troops were ordered to murder over 200,000 Chinese soldiers and civilians, are downplayed. The 1942 Japanese conquest of South East Asia is referred to as helping to "cultivate the ideal and dream of independence".

The Japanese government decision has provoked outrage in South Korea, where both the government and civic groups have been conducting a three-month campaign against the approval of the book.

On the day of the announcement, South Korean President Kim Dae-jung refused to meet with the general secretaries of Japan's three governing coalition parties who had been sent to Seoul to report the textbook decision. Hundreds of

demonstrators, including former "comfort women", gathered at the Japanese embassy to deliver over 400,000 petitions addressed to Japanese education boards calling for the text not to be used.

On July 18, the Korean National Assembly voted unanimously to place all diplomatic relations with Japan under review. Certain military exchanges have already been suspended and a complete ban on Japanese popular culture imports into Korea is likely. There are also calls for South Korea to cancel its joint-hosting with Japan of this year's World Cup football series.

In addition, 80 civic groups are campaigning for a consumer boycott of all Japanese goods. Schools, universities and sporting groups have cancelled exchange projects with Japan and written letters of protest to Japanese sister institutions.

The Chinese government also denounced the Japanese decision. A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman declared: "China cannot accept the position. We urge the Japanese government to seriously listen... and to adopt practical steps to ease the tension caused by the textbook issue".

Underlying the reaction in South Korea is a deep popular hostility toward, and fear of, any resurgence of Japanese nationalism. The Korean people suffered 40 years of brutal repression and exploitation at the hands of Japanese colonial regimes from 1905 to 1945.

But there is also a substantial element of short-term political expediency on the part of the South Korean government. By adopting the mantle of defender of Korean dignity against what is perceived to be an affront by Japan, the government is calculating it will be able to both improve its popularity and divert attention away from the consequences of its economic program.

Over the past three years, Kim Dae-jung has sought to push through a far-reaching program of corporate restructuring and austerity, dictated by the International Monetary Fund in exchange for loans. Unemployment is at record levels, social unrest over living standards and layoffs is widespread and the government's support has crumbled.

Over the last year, the administration has unleashed thousands of riot police on a number of occasions to break up protests, strikes and occupations by workers seeking to defend their jobs.

The Korean media has joined with the government in actively stoking nationalist and anti-Japanese sentiment, as have the opposition parties in order to minimise any political gain Kim Dae-jung may make. The *Korea Times* editorialised on July 10 that Korea had to “give a lesson to the self-righteous Japanese”. Joining the demands for diplomatic sanctions and a boycott of Japanese goods, it declared: “The anti-Japanese campaign should be sustained and bolstered regardless of its actual effect, as the campaign itself is important for upholding historical justice and national pride.”

It is significant that the Koizumi administration has refused to back down and has been willing to allow a controversy over a school textbook to undermine relations with two of Japan’s largest trading partners and its closest neighbours.

As in South Korea, there is an element of political diversion. The administration is formulating a sweeping program of banking system reform, restructuring and budget austerity in order to control Japan’s massive public debt and improve the profitability of the country’s major corporations. Considerable opposition is expected to emerge against Koizumi, both from sections of the ruling class adversely affected by his policies, and from the working class, which will confront increased unemployment, cutbacks to welfare and wage reductions.

Koizumi is attempting to cultivate a social base for his agenda, in advance of its implementation, by stirring up rightwing nationalism. The endorsement of the textbook is a political gesture aimed at winning the support for the government through a provocative assertion of Japan’s power. The administration no doubt calculates that for all the protests, China and South Korea will have no choice in the end but to retain their ties with the region’s largest economy.

The promotion of nationalist sentiment reflects more fundamental processes, however. It is bound up with the growing economic and political tensions in Japan and internationally since the end of the Cold War.

Japanese capitalism is now in its 10th year of economic stagnation. Attempts to revive the economy by government deficit spending have failed and sent public debt to unsustainable levels. The industrial development in Asia has seen corporations based in South Korea, Taiwan and China emerge as serious competitors. Conflicts with Russia and China are brewing as both attempt to assert themselves as North East Asian powers. A series of trade and geo-political

antagonisms fester between Japan and its historic rival, the United States.

Sections of the ruling elite are calling for a more aggressive assertion of Japanese interests, particularly in Asia, and the repudiation of the limits placed on Japan’s political and military power following its defeat in World War II. The Koizumi administration was brought to power with the support of this layer, which has generally welcomed his stand on the textbook issue as a means of making clear that Japan will dictate the terms of its relations with China and South Korea.

The conservative *Yomiuri Shimbun* hailed the government for its stance on the textbooks in a July 10 editorial. It declared it “important in that it contributes to creating a more mature friendship with South Korea and China”. A “mature friendship” with other countries—whether on the issue of a textbook, on trade matters, or in geo-political conflicts—is perceived in Tokyo to be one where its will prevails.

Over the coming months, tensions between Japan and its regional neighbours are set to rise over the foreign policy agenda being mapped out by the Koizumi administration.

Koizumi has made clear his desire to remove the pacifist clause of the Japanese constitution—inserted by the United States in 1947 to prevent Japan rebuilding a military capable of offensive operations. Parallel efforts are underway to “reinterpret” the constitution as permitting Japanese troops to play active combat roles in UN operations or alongside US forces in Asia. The administration is also seeking a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and pushing toward revisions in the US-Japan Security alliance that would lead to greater Japanese military activity in the region.

Koizumi’s stated intention of worshipping at the Yasukuni Shrine to Japan’s war dead on August 15 is likely to trigger the next furor among Japan’s neighbours. World War II prime minister Hideki Tojo and other executed war criminals are interred at the shrine. Japanese politicians have avoided official worship in deference to domestic and international opposition to any glorification of Japan’s wartime leaders. Both China and South Korea have threatened diplomatic sanctions if Koizumi ignores their warnings and visits the shrine.



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