

# Tensions between Japan and South Korea heighten over island dispute

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Tensions again flared last month between Japan and South Korea over a disputed group of 30 islets between the two countries known as “Dokdo” in Korea and “Takeshima” in Japan.

Dokdo is located some 87 kilometres east of South Korea’s Ullung Island and about 157 kilometres northwest of Japan’s Oki Islands. South Korea has effectively controlled the group since the end of World War II and has a small police presence stationed there. Japan, however, insists on its ownership of Takeshima, pointing to Japan’s annexation of the group in 1905 and its colonial occupation of the entire Korean Peninsula from 1910 to 1945.

In the post-war period, Japan’s claim, so obviously linked to past colonialism, received little international support. However, in the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, Japan began more forcefully reasserting its strategic and economic interests in North East Asia, including over contested maritime territories. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has waged a particularly provocative campaign in line with his promotion of right-wing nationalism at home.

Seoul and Tokyo conducted several rounds of talks between 1996 to 2000 over Dokdo, which produced only a tentative agreement for a joint-fishing zone surrounding the islets. Japan, however, wants control over the area’s gas reserves. The Korea Gas Corporation has estimated that the seabed near Dokdo has huge methane hydrate deposits, enough to meet South Korea’s demands for gas over the next 30 years. South Korea is planning to start drilling next year.

Japan has also taken a tough stance toward China over gas fields in the East China Sea, near the disputed Senkaku (or Diaoyu) islets north of Taiwan, resulting in armed confrontations. Japanese authorities have formally declared the group to be part of the Okinawa prefecture, registered Japanese “residents” on the uninhabited islets and sent naval ships to harass Taiwanese fishermen in the area.

The tensions over Dokdo erupted last November after South Korea proposed changing maritime names associated with Japan at a conference of the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) to be held in Germany in June. Since the 1980s, Tokyo has registered Japanese names for parts of the seabed near Dokdo. Now Seoul is seeking to register a series of

Korean names, including changing the “Sea of Japan” to the “East Sea”. By implication, the renaming could also justify broader maritime claims.

On March 29, Japan’s ministry of education approved new history textbooks that not only further downplayed Japan’s wartime atrocities, but explicitly stated Japan’s sovereignty over Dokdo and Senkaku. The new texts refer to South Korea’s control of Dokdo as an “illegal occupation”.

Japan announced the dispatch of two ships on April 4 to conduct a maritime survey near Dokdo from April 18 to June 30. Even before Japanese ships approached the area, South Korea sent 20 gunboats as well as patrol aircraft to block them. At the high point of the standoff, South Korean coast guard threatened to use force if the Japanese vessels did not keep away. Japan warned South Korea that any attempt to detain the Japanese ships would be in violation of international law.

The situation was further inflamed on April 21 when 96 Japanese parliamentarians—mostly from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party—visited the controversial Yasukuni Shrine to Japan’s war dead. Two days of vice ministerial level talks between South Korea and Japan teetered on the brink of collapse before a last-minute compromise was reached on April 22. Seoul agreed to delay its plans to rename the maritime areas and Tokyo to postpone its survey until June. Both sides agreed to hold further talks in May to discuss demarcating a boundary between their territorial waters in the Sea of Japan.

Although Tokyo welcomed the outcome as a “cool-headed” response, nothing has been resolved. South Korean negotiator Yu Myung Hwan has made clear that Seoul will still seek to register Korean names at “an appropriate time”. It is also considering making Dokdo the starting point of South Korea’s exclusive economic zone, rather than Ullung Island. A shift to Dokdo would extend South Korea’s maritime area eastwards deep into current Japanese waters.

South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun expressed his government’s hardline stance in a special televised address on April 25. “The Dokdo issue has become a matter that can no longer be managed in a quiet manner. We will react strongly and sternly against any physical provocation [with Japan]. This is a problem that can never be given up or negotiated, no matter at what cost or sacrifice,” he declared.

Tokyo's comments were just as belligerent. On April 26, the Japanese foreign ministry declared that South Korea's control of Takeshima was an "illegal occupation".

Japanese professor Shunji Hiraiwa told the conservative daily *Yomiuri Shimbun* on April 24: "In this agreement, I see that Japan and South Korea had a hard time settling the issue in a way that could satisfy both countries.... The administration of South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun tends to link history [under Japanese colonial rule] with Japan-South Korea relations and avoids realistic solutions to problems."

The crisis in relations between Japan and South Korea—both formal US allies—has prompted concern in Washington. A US State Department official told the South Korean Yonhap news agency on April 19: "The United States' longstanding position is not to intervene between the two disputing countries. However, the two countries should solve this problem peacefully and amicably." In fact, Washington is responsible for inflaming the tensions by encouraging Japan to play more assertive role in North East Asia, particularly against China.

Throughout his term of office, Prime Minister Koizumi has deliberately stirred up nationalist sentiment, both to divert growing social tensions at home and as part of a more aggressive foreign policy in Asia and internationally. His government's promotions of the symbols of pre-war Imperial Japan and its approval of school texts justifying Japan's aggression in Asia have provoked understandable anger and fears in countries like China and Korea that suffered at the hands of Japanese imperialism.

The Chinese and Korean governments have, however, exploited the outrage for their own purposes. Like Tokyo, Beijing and Seoul are whipping up anti-Japanese hostility to distract attention from their own failures to address the deepening social and economic problems in both countries.

Just a year ago, thousands of largely middle-class youth took to the streets of a number of Chinese cities chanting anti-Japanese slogans and attacked innocent Japanese citizens. Similar protests took place in South Korea against new Japanese history textbooks and Japanese efforts to obtain a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. All three brands of nationalism are reactionary. They only serve to divide the working class and heighten the danger of war in North East Asia.

As tensions escalated over Dokdo last month, a group of 30 South Korean protesters burned Japanese flags and attempted to storm the Japanese embassy in Seoul. In front of the hotel where Japan-South Korea negotiations took place, a truck was parked blaring patriotic songs and plastered with signs urging Koreans to boycott Japanese goods.

President Roh has encouraged these nationalist elements. He came to power in 2002 by appealing to the widespread hostility to the ongoing US military presence in South Korea. As his government has implemented IMF demands for labour market "reforms", he has faced growing hostility from the ordinary

working people.

An article in *Newsweek* in January, entitled "A Social 'Time Bomb'", pointed to the vast and widening gulf between rich and poor in South Korea since the 1997 Asian financial crisis. In 1995, the bottom 10 percent of the population earned 41 percent of the average income. By 2003, the figure had fallen to 34 percent. The number of poor (defined as a four-person family earning less than \$1,360 per month) reached a record high of 7 million people, or 15 percent of the population, in 2003.

Meanwhile, the income of the top 10 percent rose from 199 percent of the national average in 1995 to 225 percent in 2003. Labour market reforms have produced large numbers of temporary workers—up from 27 percent of total workforce in 2001 to 37 percent in 2004. These casual workers earn less than 65 percent of the pay of full-time employees and have little or no employer-paid health insurance.

Most of these changes have taken place under Roh and his Uri Party government. Uri Party lawmaker Kim Geun Tae admitted: "Neo-liberalism has made us a winner-take-all economy."

In a televised address on April 25 belligerently denouncing Japan's claim to Dokdo, Roh declared: "This is an act of contending the legitimacy of Japan's criminal history of waging wars of aggression and annihilation, as well as 40 years of exploitation, torture, imprisonment, forced labour, and even military sexual slavery. We cannot tolerate this for anything."

Koizumi is likely to reply in kind before finishing his term of office in September. One scenario mooted in the Japanese media is a visit to the Yasukuni Shrine on August 15—the day of Japan's World War II surrender. Koizumi has previously vowed to make such a visit before leaving office. The implicit message of such a provocative act would be that Japan will no longer kowtow to the terms of its defeat in 1945. Inevitably it would provoke angry protests in South Korea and China.

The continuing dispute over Dokdo highlights the growing dangers of conflict in North East Asia. While South Korea and Japan backed away from an armed clash last month, there is no guarantee that the same will happen in future confrontations.



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