

Japan-South Korea tension heightens over disputed islets

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4 August 2008

After an attempted rapprochement earlier this year, relations between South Korea and Japan have deteriorated since the Japanese government's decision on July 14 to include its claim over the tiny Dokdo islets (known as Takeshima in Japan) into teaching guidelines for middle school teachers. The South Korean government of President Lee Myung-bak immediately reacted by stirring up Korean nationalism as a means of diverting attention from widespread opposition to his administration.

Prime Minister Han Seung-soo landed on the islets last week, the first South Korean leader to do so, in order to re-assert Seoul's sovereignty over the islets, which have been occupied by Korean coast guards since 1954. Located 215 kilometres from Korea's eastern coast, the Dokdo (shown as the Liancourt Rocks in some international atlases) consists of two rocky islets about 200 square metres in area and 33 smaller rocks. While Seoul traces its claim over the Dokdo to 521 AD, Tokyo points to the incorporation of the islands into the Japanese Empire in 1905, as part of its colonisation of Korea.

The day after the prime minister's visit, Seoul held a military drill near Dokdo—the largest since such exercises began in 1995. The forces involved new F-15K fighters, six warships, P-3C patrol aircraft and Lynx anti-submarine helicopters. Another exercise will be held in November. A South Korean navy spokesman declared: "This exercise will be conducted under a scenario that an imaginary enemy force infiltrates the territorial waters of Dokdo." The joint navy, maritime police and air force drill, "will collect intelligence, identify foes and dispel the enemy".

Lee has been trying to improve ties with Tokyo, after years of strained relations over Japan's claim to the islets, as well as its denials of wartime crimes. During a summit in April—the first in three years—Lee and Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda called for a "future-oriented" friendship, to put aside past controversies. In less than three months, that diplomatic opening has collapsed.

The teaching guidelines issued by the Japanese education ministry show that Fukuda is just as aggressive as former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in advancing Japan's interests in North East Asia. Although Japanese textbooks have previously mentioned Takeshima—along with the Russian-occupied Kuril Islands—as part of Japanese territory, this is the first time that the authorities have instructed teachers to positively assert Japan's claim.

Like Lee, Fukuda is also seeking to exploit the contentious territorial issues to whip up patriotism in order to divert growing social tensions at home. On July 15, 400,000 fishery workers staged a national strike, the largest in their history, to protest against rising oil prices and declining sales. With rising unemployment, economic slowdown and inflation, the strike is a further sign of rising social discontent.

While Tokyo's action came as somewhat of a surprise, it was a godsend for Lee's embattled government. Seoul's resumption of US beef imports in April triggered massive anti-government protests in June and July. Although there is concern over mad cow disease, the extent of the movement and the social demands it raised pointed to the widespread dissatisfaction among workers and youth over surging inflation, lack of jobs and deepening social inequality.

Lee and sections of the Korean media seized upon Japan's "provocation" to call for "national unity". Seoul recalled its ambassador to Japan in protest and high-level meetings with Japanese officials were cancelled.

Lee himself came under pressure after the Japanese daily, *Yomuri Shimbun*, reported that he had been ambiguous about the status of Dokdo during his meeting with Fukuda at the recent G8 summit in Hokkaido. When Fukuda reportedly told Lee about his government's intention to lay claim over the islets, Lee simply asked him to wait. Lee was thus portrayed as prostrate before Fukuda. Both governments have denied the report.

The chairman of Korea's main opposition Democratic Party (DP), Chung Sye-kyun, argued that even if the *Yomuri* report were not true, Lee "should acknowledge his faults if he did anything wrong". The DP is desperate to make up lost ground. After two decades in government, the "democrats" have been widely discredited because of the social impact of their economic restructuring policies and support for the US-led war in Iraq. They lost the presidential election in February to Lee from the right-wing Grand National Party (GNP) and made no gains during the recent anti-government mass protests.

Lee's administration responded to the criticism by announcing on July 24 that it would hold the major military exercises near Dokdo and establish a task force to protect the islets. An official explained that the purpose of the measures was "to prepare for a possible armed clash" with Japan. Seoul is also planning to build shelters and a water supply to make the rocky islets habitable for permanent residents. However, Defence Minister Lee Sang-hee dismissed calls to deploy troops to Dokdo, saying it could lead to a military confrontation with Japan.

Tokyo has so far responded with relative calm. Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobutaka Machimura told reporters: "Increasing military tensions would do no good in the goal of strengthening bilateral relations." He called for "cool-headed" solution.

The geopolitical significance of Dokdo

The status of Dokdo was a major factor hindering the normalisation of relations between South Korea and Japan until 1965, when Japan tacitly accepted Korean possession of the islets. Japan's reassertion of its claims over former colonial possessions is bound up with the

growing rivalry among the major powers for energy resources and geopolitical influence, particularly since the end of Cold War in the early 1990s.

Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) first raised the claim over Dokdo in the 1996 general election. In 1998, Tokyo unilaterally scrapped a fishing agreement with Seoul that covered the area. In 2000, the Japanese foreign ministry formally listed the islets as part of its territories. The tension was especially sharp under Koizumi, who publicly declared in 2004: "Takeshima belongs to Japan". With his encouragement, right-wing activists attempted to land on the islets. In 2006, Koizumi ordered a hydrological survey near Dokdo, which almost led to naval clashes with South Korea.

The conflict over Dokdo reflects changing relations in North East Asia. With South Korea currently the world's 13th largest economy, its ruling elite is seeking to secure energy supplies and a greater role in East Asian affairs. For this purpose, Seoul is building a "blue water" navy, with destroyers, submarines and helicopter carriers.

Underwater fields near Dokdo hold an estimated 600 million tonnes of gas hydrate, or "burning ice", which is created when natural gas meets cold water under high pressure. Seoul has calculated that this new source of energy would meet South Korea's gas demands for 30 years. Japan, which is the world's second largest economy but is poor in natural resources, is aggressively seeking to claim seabed energy reserves in North East Asia, causing territorial disputes not only with Korea, but China and Taiwan.

In June, a Japanese patrol ship rammed and sank a Taiwanese fishing boat near the disputed Diaoyutai islands (known as Senkaku in Japan). Taipei threatened to send warships to the area to protest but backed off at the last minute. China also claims the islands.

For Japan, the issue goes far beyond a few islets; it is about restoring the country's status as a major sea power, as it was before World War II, and asserting a dominant role in North East Asia. Last July, the Japanese parliament almost unanimously passed a Basic Act on Ocean Policy, aimed at advancing Japan's maritime interests. Fukuda has established an ocean policy office, which he heads.

Seiji Maehara, a former leader of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), recently declared at a meeting on the first anniversary of the Basic Act on Ocean Policy that China had emerged as a major rival to Japan. He warned that Chinese warships and submarines "have thoroughly studied the depth, temperatures and tidal streams of all the seas and channels around Japan, and in every season". Such research had serious military implications, he said. "There is a danger that China and Taiwan could form an anti-Japan alliance over their common territorial claim over the Senkaku Islands."

Japan's aggressive maritime policy also stems directly from the Bush administration's strategy to strengthen the US-Japan alliance, in order to contain China. However, one of the unintended consequences could be to push Seoul closer to Beijing.

For decades, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan were US allies against the former Soviet Union, China and North Korea. China's rapid economic rise since the 1990s has profoundly altered the situation, leading to stronger links with Taiwan and South Korea. The Kuomintang (KMT) returned to office in Taiwan this year on a platform of forming a "common market" with the mainland. Since 2004, China has replaced the US as South Korea's largest trading partner.

Sections of the South Korean establishment are also looking for close ties with China. The previous Democratic Party administrations, especially after Kim Dae-jung, saw their hopes of opening up North

Korea as a cheap labour platform repeatedly dashed by Washington's belligerent policy toward Pyongyang. China, meanwhile, played a major role in defusing the tensions on the Korean Peninsula by hosting six-party talks over North Korea's nuclear programs.

Amid the South Korea-Japan row, a US government geographical agency changed the Dokdo's status from South Korean territory to "undesignated sovereignty," causing an uproar in South Korea. Although President Bush last week ordered the restoration of Seoul's claim to Dokdo, he declared that the US would remain neutral. Washington's position has been interpreted in South Korea as demonstrating that Japan is a far more important ally for the US than Seoul. The July 29 *Korea Times* editorial stated: "It's like when your friend who has sided, however tacitly, with you on an issue, suddenly declares neutrality, you can't help but feel betrayed."

Even the conservative *Chosun Ilbo* warned that Dokdo could further damage US-Korea relations after the US beef imports furore. A diplomatic source told the newspaper that during Bush's planned visit to Korea on August 6, the chances of Washington siding with Seoul against Tokyo in any territorial disputes were "slim". The *Ilbo* warned: "There is also a danger of massive anti-US protests over the beef and Dokdo issues during Bush's visit, which could overshadow attempts to mend the alliance".

On July 23, China's official *People's Daily* expressed support for South Korea: "The US has expressed a neutral stance [toward Dokdo]. But China has showed its utmost concern over the double standards the Japanese side has repeatedly applied to its territorial disputes." Fearing the implications of a closer US-Japan alliance, Beijing is keen to exploit the issue to strengthen relations with South Korea and weaken the US strategic encirclement against China.

The sharp tensions over the small rocky islets only highlight the broader great power rivalry that is intensifying in North East Asia.



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