

Japan-South Korea tensions flare over disputed islands

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The diplomatic row between the Japanese and South Korean governments stepped up another notch yesterday after Tokyo called on Seoul to take the issue of the disputed Dokdo islets, known as Takeshima in Japan, to the International Court of Justice.

South Korean Foreign Minister Kim Sung-Hwan dismissed the proposal, declaring that it was “not worth consideration.” A case cannot proceed before the international court without the agreement of both parties. The dispute will continue to fester as both governments exploit the issue to whip up nationalist sentiment. South Korea rejected similar proposals in 1954 and 1962.

The latest episode in the long-running quarrel erupted after South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak personally visited Dokdo on August 10 to reinforce South Korea claims over the rocky outcrops situated between the two countries. Since the end of World War II, the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands have been under the control of South Korea, which has also claimed an exclusive economic zone in the surrounding waters, that contain important fisheries and possible mineral deposits.

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda told a special cabinet meeting yesterday that President Lee’s visit was “extremely regrettable” and declared: “We must take a firm stance on this. We must consider possible measures that we may take in the future.” Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura told the media that some cabinet ministers—including the trade and economy ministers—would delay meetings with their South Korean counterparts.

Japan’s Finance Minister Jun Azumi has already questioned whether Tokyo would continue with its currency swap agreement with Seoul, due to run out in October. The two countries last year agreed to expand their currency swap arrangement from \$13 billion to \$70 billion in response to the European debt crisis. Japan might also postpone planned purchases of South Korean government debt, unnamed officials said.

South Korean Foreign Minister Kim replied in kind, warning that his government would take unspecified “stern measures” if Japan continued to raise the issue. National Police Commissioner Kim Ki-yong told the media there had been daily drills to “repel any possible Japanese attempt to land on Dokdo.” He said radar monitoring had been stepped up around the islands.

Tensions have worsened also between Japan and China over the disputed Senkaku Islands, known as Diaoyu in China. Last week, Japanese authorities arrested a group of Chinese nationalists, accompanied by journalists, who landed on the Japanese-controlled islands in a highly publicised protest. The protesters were deported last Friday, but the controversy flared again when right-wing Japanese demonstrators made their own landing on the disputed islands.

All three governments are deliberately stirring up nationalist sentiment at home to deflect from mounting social tensions and political opposition. South Korean President Lee recently slumped further in opinion polls following a corruption scandal involving his brother. In Japan, the Noda government hit an all-time low after it pushed through legislation doubling the country’s deeply unpopular sales tax in a bid to rein in public debt that exceeds twice the gross domestic product.

China's regime fears that its economic slowdown will generate mass unemployment and discontent.

South Korea and Japan, as well as China, have been hit by the eurozone crisis and the US economic slump, undermining their export markets. South Korea's trade surplus declined to \$2.76 billion last month, compared to \$4.65 billion in July 2011—a drop of 41 percent. Japan had a 2.3 percent annualised export decline last month, with exports to the EU and China down by 21.3 percent and 7.3 percent respectively.

The Dokdo/Takeshima dispute has widened to include longstanding issues stemming from Japan's colonisation of Korea from 1910 until 1945. The Japanese government took offense at President Lee's recent call for Japanese Emperor Akihito to make a formal apology for Japan's colonial rule if he wished to visit South Korea. In both countries, politicians have exploited the issue of “comfort women”—South Korean women forced to act as sex slaves for Japanese soldiers during World War II—to stir up nationalist resentment.

The Obama administration is clearly concerned that the diplomatic row between its two strategic allies in North Asia is undermining its efforts to counter Chinese influence throughout Asia. While offering tacit US support to Japan in its confrontation with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Washington regards the dispute between South Korea and Japan as an impediment to closer tri-lateral collaboration against China.

US Council of Foreign Relations analyst Scott Snyder dismissed Lee's trip to Dokdo as posturing, because his presidency is due to end this year. He warned, however, that the Lee's “actions could spill over and affect the tone of the relationship” between the two countries after he left office.

Already mutual suspicion has undermined an intelligence-sharing agreement between South Korea and Japan that was promoted by Washington. Lee had been set to sign what would have been the first military accord the two countries since the end of World War II. South Korea postponed the signing after the deal faced domestic criticism.

Bruce Klingner, a research fellow at the right-wing Heritage Foundation in the US, told Agence France Presse that the agreement would have allowed Japan and South Korea to share intelligence on the North Korean and Chinese militaries, and helped the development of a US-sponsored missile shield in North East Asia.

“The flare-up of tensions between Seoul and Tokyo has national security repercussions for both countries as well as impeding US security objectives in Asia,” Klingner stated. He said that the US had to be careful to encourage three-way co-operation, and not take sides between Japan and South Korea.

The marked difference in Washington's approach to the two disputes, both involving islands, underlines the recklessness of the Obama administration's “pivot” to Asia—encouraging a confrontational stance by Japan toward China, while seeking to calm tensions between its two allies.



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