

Tensions remain high between South Korea and Japan

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Tensions between South Korea and Japan remain unresolved following Seoul's formal rejection on August 30 of a request by Tokyo for the dispute over the Dokdo islets—known as Takeshima in Japan—to be adjudicated by the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

Seoul insists that the islets were a Korean possession prior to their annexation by Imperial Japan in 1905 before it took control of Korea in 1910. Japan claims that its possession of Takeshima dates back to the 17th century.

Announcing Seoul's formal rejection, Korean foreign ministry spokesman Cho Tai-young stated: "Tokyo's groundless and unjustified claims about Dokdo constitute the violation of our sovereignty, and we sternly urge Tokyo to instantly stop such acts."

The Korean government, he continued, had "verbally reminded" Japan that "Dokdo was the first victim of the Japanese imperialist invasion into the Korean Peninsula but was reclaimed as an inseparable part of South Korea's territory following Japan's unconditional surrender" in 1945.

Japan reacted by suspending a military exchange program with South Korea on September 3. Japanese Foreign Minister Koichiro Gamba provocatively declared that the government would consider unilaterally taking the dispute to the IJC and using the issue to "educate" the public, including schoolchildren, about the country's fight to defend its territory.

As tensions with South Korea have risen, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda has downplayed a separate row with China over the disputed Senkaku

Islands (known as Diaoyu in China) in the East China Sea. Noda also sent a letter to Chinese President Hu Jintao last week emphasising the need for a stable relationship between two countries. Beijing in turn has begun using the police to suppress anti-Japanese protests that it had initially encouraged.

Relations between Korea and Japan soured following a provocative visit by South Korean President Lee Myeong-bak to Dokdo, the first by a South Korean president, on August 10. The two countries immediately began trading barbs and stirring up nationalist sentiment, including over the issue of "comfort women"—females forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military during the occupation of Korea and other Asian countries during World War II.

A few days after his Dokdo visit, Lee further angered Tokyo by demanding that if the Japanese emperor wanted to visit to South Korea, he should first apologise for Japanese colonial rule of Korea prior to 1945. The demand was rejected by Tokyo, which demanded an apology from Seoul for raising the issue.

On August 27, Noda struck back over the "comfort women", telling the Diet that there were "no records confirming that women were taken away by force and there are no accounts [by the Japanese army]..." An estimated 200,000 mostly Korean women were forced into sexual slavery during the war.

A South Korean parliamentary committee on foreign affairs, trade and unification responded to Noda's claims by passing a resolution demanding that Japan shoulder its responsibility for war-time atrocities.

Lee's ruling right-wing Saenuri (New Frontier) Party is using the row over Dokdo as a means of deflecting attention from rising domestic unemployment and falling living standards.

The Lee government faced public criticism in July after it was revealed that it planned to sign a military intelligence sharing agreement with Japan. The deal, which was backed by Washington, only became publicly known a day before it was to be presented to the parliament. Widespread public hostility forced Seoul to suspend the deal.

The Saenuri Party is also under pressure from the main opposition Democratic Unity Party (DUP) and its "left" partners, such as trade union-based Unified Progressive Party, which are exploiting the issue to stir up nationalist sentiment.

Immediately following Lee's Dokdo visit, DUP spokesman Park Yong-jin again commented on the military intelligence pact with Tokyo: "Despite the significance of the first-ever visit by an incumbent president to Dokdo, the president should not try to cover up the public's outrage over the government's attempt to pass the military information pact with Japan with this Dokdo event."

Similar political factors are at work in Japan where Noda's Democratic Party government is deeply unpopular over its decision to double consumption tax, its recent restarting of nuclear reactors, and other issues. Last month, the upper and lower houses of Japan's Diet, with bipartisan support from the opposition Liberal Democratic Party, passed resolutions condemning South Korea's Takeshima claim as "illegal."

The ongoing dispute between South Korea and Japan is a blow to the Obama administration. The derailed military intelligence sharing agreement between Washington's two major Asian allies was designed by the Pentagon to make all three militaries "interoperable", as a central component of the US's strategic encirclement of China.

Washington has carefully avoided taking a side in

relations to the Dokdo/Takishima dispute between South Korea and Japan. By contrast, Washington has tacitly encouraged Japan to take a tougher stand against China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. US State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland angered China on August 28 after she told a reporter that the US-Japan security treaty applied to Senkaku—in other words, the US would defend Japan in any conflict over the islands.

An unnamed senior State Department official told Seoul's Yonhap news agency last week that "the recent spate of tensions between Japan and Korea have caused concerns." He insisted that Washington would "encourage a variety of steps, unofficial dialogues, people-to-people engagements, business endeavors to stand up and speak out on the importance of Japan and South Korea working together as partners in the 21st century."

The US response is animated by its efforts to undermine Chinese influence throughout Asia. However, by urging Japan to play a more prominent diplomatic and military role in North East Asia, Washington is also stirring up war-time memories of the oppressive rule of Japanese imperialism. In turn, the governments in China and South Korea are stirring up anti-Japanese sentiment for their own reactionary political purposes and raising the risk of military conflict.



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