South Korea protests against Japanese shrine visits

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Visits by 168 Japanese lawmakers and three cabinet officials on April 20–21 to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine have exacerbated tensions, not only with China, but also South Korea. The shrine, dedicated to Japan's war dead, including 14 "Class-A" war criminals, is seen as a glorification of Japan's wartime imperialist expansion. Although Prime Minister Shinzo Abe did not personally attend the event, he made a symbolic offering as the head of the government.

South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se reacted by cancelling a planned visit to Japan. President Park Geun-hye declared: "It is unlikely for there to be a forward-looking relationship between South Korea and Japan as long as Japan does not rectify its historical understanding."

Despite these protests, Japanese Prime Minister Abe further inflamed tensions by declaring in parliament on April 23 that references to the Japanese "invasion" of other countries, including China and much of South East Asia, prior to and during World War II must be reconsidered. Japan brutally ruled Korea as a colony from the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 to the end of World War II in 1945.

Last Thursday, Seoul summoned the Japanese ambassador, Koro Bessho, and lodged a formal protest over Abe's remarks, as well as the shrine visits. South Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kyou-hyun told Bessho: "We do not understand why Japanese society, while it so greatly cherishes honesty and trust internally, shuts its eyes and plugs its ears to the country's history of invasion and colonial rule."

By blaming "Japanese society" as a whole, the South Korean government is deliberately encouraging anti-Japanese racism. Both Park and her predecessor, Lee Myung-bak, have used Korean-Japanese territorial disputes over the Dokdo (Takeshima in Japan) islets in the Sea of Japan for the same purpose.

The South Korean government is promoting anti-Japanese chauvinism for the same reason as Abe is pushing Japanese nationalism and militarism—to channel public attention away from declining economic and social conditions and toward a foreign "aggressor."

The Korean media, taking its cue from the government, portrays the entire Japanese nation as a growing militarist threat, intent on again plundering Asia. The conservative *Chosun Ilbo* condemned the Japanese people in a recent article entitled, "Most Japanese want Abe to visit militarist shrine," calling it "a significant swing to the right."

The so-called liberal media, like the *Kyunghyang Shinmun* newspaper, have played a particularly insidious role in promoting racist conceptions of the Japanese people as culturally fascistic. The *Kyunghyang Shinmun* wrote recently that "Japanese culture shows trends resembling Nazi Germany's racism," and claimed that Japan was moving toward "Nazification."

In fact, there are strong anti-war traditions in the Japanese working class. The militarist regime in Japan could only wage aggression abroad in the 1930s and 1940s by crushing any organised opposition by workers and peasants, who suffered no less than the subjugated peoples of Asia. Today, the Japanese government faces considerable popular resistance to moves to revise the so-called pacifist clause of the post-World War II constitution. In 2003, there were large protests against the deployment of Japanese forces to assist the US-led occupation of Iraq.

Behind the growing tensions between Japan and South Korea are not just disputes over past history, but mounting conflicts involving the economic and geo-political interests of the two countries.

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Both Korea and Japan rely heavily on imports to meet their industrial needs for energy and raw materials. South Korea is the second largest importer of liquefied natural gas in the world, surpassed only by Japan, and the fifth-largest importer of oil. One of the key strategic considerations behind the dispute over the Dokdo islets is that the surrounding waters could hold significant undersea energy reserves. Despite mediation by Washington, Japan insisted on its claim over the islands in last year's defence white paper, provoking strong protests from South Korea.

The two countries directly compete in seven out of ten of their largest exports, especially electronics, automotives and ships. During the past decade, South Korean conglomerates such as Samsung and Hyundai have risen to rival and even surpass Japanese companies in world markets. Samsung dominates the electronics sector, once controlled by Japan's Sony, Panasonic and Sharp. Last year, the combined market value of the three Japanese companies came to only one-fifth of Samsung's.

The Hyundai Motor Group, once regarded as an inferior brand, has moved from the world's eleventh largest carmaker in 1999 to fifth largest today. It has become one of Toyota's fiercest competitors and has surpassed Japanese giants like Honda in sales.

However, the currency battle now underway between the Korean won and the Japanese yen has caused a sharp decline in Korean exports. In the first quarter of this year, Hyundai's profits dropped 15 percent in part due to the yen's depreciation against the won by about 25 percent over the past year.

This is a direct result of the Japanese government's aggressive policy of "quantitative easing" to devalue the yen in order to boost the competitiveness of Japanese exports. South Korean Finance Minister Hyun Oh-seok declared at the recent G20 meeting that Japan was more of a threat to the South Korean economy than North Korea's nuclear crisis.

By protesting against Japan's "right turn," the South Korean media is also camouflaging the fact that the Abe government's military assertiveness has been encouraged by Washington, and that Seoul is also collaborating with Obama's aggressive plans directed against China.

South Korea has closely aligned itself with the US in carrying out provocative war games in recent years, such as large-scale naval drills in the Yellow Sea. Nominally aimed at North Korea, these joint exercises are pointed preparations for a potential war with China.

The South Korean army has been equipped with increasingly advanced weaponry. Its latest K-2 tanks are being ordered by the Turkish army as the next generation of battle tanks and its latest Aegis destroyer is more advanced than Japan's equivalent.

This has produced unintended consequences. Japan does not welcome a sophisticated South Korean military, while South Korea is concerned about US encouragement of Japan to rearm. While the Obama administration is seeking closer ties between South Korea and Japan—against China—the rivalry and rancour between the two countries has produced significant difficulties.

Last year, Seoul and Tokyo, with backing from Washington, came close to signing a military intelligence agreement, prepared behind closed doors. However, President Lee Myung-bak postponed the deal after it was made public and provoked nationalist opposition. For its part, Tokyo expressed concern over the Obama administration's approval of South Korea's extension of its ballistic missile range to 800 kilometres, covering all of North Korea, but also parts of Japan.

The growing tension between South Korea and Japan is another result of Washington's "pivot" to Asia, which combined with the deepening global economic crisis, is fuelling the re-emergence of reactionary nationalism and militarism in North East Asia.

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