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Takeshima/Tokdo and the Roots of Japan-Korea Conflict

by Japan Focus

In spring 2004, members of an obscure right-wing group in southwestern Japan set sail for two islets contested between Japan and Korea in a small Boston whaler covered with Rising Sun flags. Their mission, not the first of its kind, was to reclaim what Japanese call Takeshima (Bamboo Island) and Koreans Tokdo (Lonesome Island) as Japan's sovereign territory. Upon learning of the craft's departure from a port in Shimane prefecture, the South Korean government promised military retaliation should it approach or invade the islets that Seoul has held since independence in 1945. The Japanese government, preoccupied with the return of the abductees' children from North Korea and growing protests against Japanese troops in Iraq, quickly acquiesced, and the Japanese Coast Guard guided the boat back to Japanese shores.

But because control over the islets has a long and fraught history, feelings on both sides did not simply melt away. On January 16, 2005, the South Korean government issued a Tokdo nature stamp that quickly sold out. The same day, the Shimane prefectural assembly passed a bill proclaiming February 22 as "Takeshima Day".

This time, perhaps because the current round of tensions coincided with the upcoming publication of a new round of Japanese school textbooks that critics contend once again "whitewash" Japan's history of colonialism and aggression in Asia, the Korean government and people responded to Japanese claims to Takeshima with statements and mass rallies. The ROK government, facing by-elections in April, demanded Japanese apology and remuneration for Korean victims of its colonial rule, such as the military comfort women and slave laborers, and a halt to Japan's aggressive and insensitive behavior. As the National Security Council put it in a March 17 statement, this was "land that was forcefully taken from us in the course of the colonial invasion and was restored to us with national liberation. This is not simply a territorial issue. It is nothing short of a denial of the history of our national liberation as well as a justification of aggression." NSC Chairman Chung Dong-young in a press conference on the same day described Japan's actions as "a second dispossession of the Korean Peninsula that denies the history of Korea's liberation."

Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro sought to downplay the conflict. "Overcoming emotional confrontation . . . it is important for both sides to promote friendship through a future-oriented way of thinking." But on the eve of the one hundredth anniversary of Japan's seizure of the islands, and the sixtieth anniversary of Korea's independence and recovery of the islands, anodyne statements that failed to clarify Japan's position on the islands merely fanned the flames of Korean patriotism.

The "Japan-Korea Year of Friendship," heralding the 40th anniversary of normalization of relations, a year in which both sides have indicated their intention to seal a free trade agreement to strengthen their flourishing economic relations, has begun with a crisis that has brought Japan-ROK always fragile relations to their lowest point in recent years.

The issues are one important manifestation of deepening conflicts involving Japan with each of its neighbors: with China and Taiwan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands; and with Russia over the Northern Islands, four islands of the Kuriles that Russia controls and Japan claims. The issues surface, moreover, at a time when various initiatives are being floated to create a zone of peace and commerce in East Asia that could involve China, Japan, Korea and the ASEAN nations. But they surface, too, when Japan's ruling Party has dispatched SDF forces to Iraq, has issued new defense guidelines, and is exploring an expanded Japanese military role within the framework of the U.S.-Japan alliance.

Japan Focus introduces two articles illuminating the conflict and possible paths for looking beyond the antagonisms of a century of colonial rule and the present conflict over Tokdo/Takeshima toward a more peaceful and cooperative Northeast Asia.

1. Kosuke TAKAHASHI, Japan-South Korea Ties on the Rocks

2. Wada Haruki, Takeshima/Tokdo - A Plea to Resolve a Worsening Dispute

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