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Japan-South Korea ties on the rocks

Kosuke Takahashi

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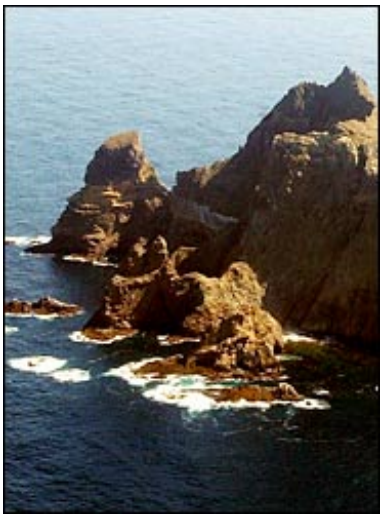
by Kosuke TAKAHASHI

TOKYO -- When are a few sea-swept, uninhabited rocky islets more than a bunch of rocks? When they involve lucrative fisheries and emotional issues that hark back to the days of the Japanese Empire.

The two tiny, rocky islets surrounded by 33 smaller rocks also represent sovereignty and national pride for both Japan and South Korea -- though Seoul controls them now and the lucrative fishing in the area. The disputes over the islands -- called Tokdo by Koreans and Takeshima by Japanese -- threaten the recent rapprochement between the two neighbors and represent a significant political and economic setback. The South Korean public is so incensed that hundreds have poured into the streets to protest and the united front against North Korea's nuclear ambitions is cracking.



The most recent dispute erupted on February 23 when the assembly in Shimane Prefecture, the Japanese territory closest to the island, submitted a bill to set up a symbolic prefectural ordinance establishing February 22 as Takeshima Day, named for the Japanese-claimed island -- and infuriating South Korea. A comment on February 23 by Takano Toshiyuki, the Japanese ambassador to Seoul, saying the islands are part of Japanese territory exacerbated the situation.

This tinderbox was ignored for years, and it has now blown up, metaphorically and politically speaking, with powerful financial, trade and diplomatic repercussions for both nations -- and for Northeast Asia as a whole.

On March 22, Japanese Foreign Minister Machimura Nobutaka said Tokyo would find it difficult to resume stalled talks quickly on signing a free-trade agreement with South Korea this year because of the Takeshima/Tokdo territorial dispute, Kyodo News reported.

A day earlier, South Korea announced that it would set up a parliamentary committee to press Seoul's claims over the contested islets.

The feud over the rocky and remote islets in the Sea of Japan (known in Korea as the East Sea) claimed by both Tokyo and Seoul has already chilled the recent warming of the two countries' relations. South Korea regards the islands as Japan's first step in its colonial aggression and march into Korea, which it occupied from 1910-45. Japan incorporated the islets in 1905. Japanese fishermen and politicians, on the other hand, deeply resent the loss of what they believe is rightfully their territory and livelihood.

The issue has sparked passionate protests in Seoul, where demonstrators claim their sovereignty is being violated. Two Korean demonstrators even cut off their fingers outside the Japanese Embassy in Seoul to show their fury. Activists gathering around the embassy have burned Japan's national flag and photos of Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, while some civil groups and "netizens" have declared a boycott of Japanese goods, according to Japanese and Korean media.

Heo Kyung Wook set himself afire in protest at the March 16 Japanese Embassy in Seoul.

The two countries' relations will likely be further challenged in the coming month, as South Korea is poised to hold crucial by-elections for national legislators on April 30. The ruling Uri Party and the main opposition Grand National Party are both very likely to go along with the hardline stance over this unresolved territorial issue with Tokyo, to demonstrate their nationalist credentials and win majority control of the national assembly.

The row over a controversial Japanese junior-high-school history textbook will also likely add fuel to Seoul's flames of ire, as Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology is expected to announce the results of its screening of the textbook in early April. Although 2005, which will see the 40th anniversary of the restoration of diplomatic ties between Japan and South Korea, has been designated Friendship Year, the by-election and approval of a textbook are both sure to strain relations.

For the Japanese, especially people in Shimane who live closest to the fishing grounds, this dispute is a major fisheries and economic issue not simply a territorial and political dispute. Takeshima is known in Japan as a rich fishing ground that is in effect occupied by South Korea. Japanese fishermen complain that they have been virtually pushed out of the area for many years. Meanwhile, South Koreans strongly believe that Tokdo was the first victim of Japan's colonial invasion of Korean territory and they consider Tokyo's territorial claim an infringement upon their interests and sovereignty. For them, this issue is a microcosm of Japan's brutal colonial occupation.

This is not the only territorial dispute faced by Japan. To the south, it is engaged in a sovereignty dispute over the Senkaku Islands (known in China as the Diaoyu Islands) and competing development of offshore gas fields in the East China Sea. In the north, it has the thorny issue of the Russian-held Northern Territories, known in Russia as the Southern Kurils.

Unless Japan and South Korea swiftly take steps to stop the current torrent of anti-Japanese feelings and distrust among Koreans, the situation could deteriorate further, delivering a devastating blow to the progress toward better bilateral relations that has been achieved since the two nations co-hosted the 2002 World Cup and, more recently, social and cultural exchanges exemplified by the recent culture boom called Han-Ryu (Korean wave) in Japan.

For the time being, Japanese politicians, especially rightists, should avoid provocative actions and remarks over this territorial dispute and the related textbook row, while the South Korean government and media need to calm down, take a deep breath to control their anger and avoid being swept up in the counterproductive wave of nationalism.

Takeshima is 157 kilometers northwest of Oki Island and 74km from South Korea's nearest island, and it consists of two small islets with a total area of 0.23 square kilometers, plus a scattering of rocks nearby. In size, this is trifling -- less than one-tenth the area of Central Park in New York City and about the same size as Hibiya Park in Tokyo. Takeshima literally means "bamboo island" in Japanese. This is because it is said that this outcropping of volcanic rock used to be more bamboo-shaped, with more rough edges, as seen from a distance. Bamboo, however, cannot grow there. Now the islets look more rounded because of weathering. Meanwhile, in Korean, Tokdo literally means "lonely island" or "independent island".

Historically, both sides have maintained territorial claims and have been at loggerheads over the boundary. The simmering issue, however, flares only occasionally, as it has recently.

Behind this skirmishing are three major points of contention:

· Which country found the islands first and then controlled them effectively.

· The validity of the Japanese cabinet's decision to incorporate Takeshima into its own territory in January 1905, around the time when Japan in effect deprived Korea of its diplomatic power and property rights. On February 22 in the same year, Shimane prefecture declared the island to be part of its territory. South Korea calls the incorporation of Takeshima a century ago null and void, noting that it was in no position at the time to lodge strong protests to Tokyo.

· The final point is the ambiguity of the interpretations of Supreme Commander of Allied Powers Douglas MacArthur's Instruction Note No 677 of January 29, 1946, during the occupation of Japan after World War II. This note excluded the islands from Japan's administrative authority. However, the instruction specifically stated that it was not an "ultimate determination" of the islands' future sovereignty. All other islands listed in the document eventually were returned to Japan. The 1952 Treaty of San Francisco, which settled the sovereignty of most other disputed islands, did not mention Takeshima.

The two sides have opposite views and interpretations of these three points. (For more details, see the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' March 2004 statement claiming Japanese ownership of Takeshima, The Issue of Takeshima [in English] and The South Korean Gyeongsangbuk-do Province's The Island Dokdo [in English.)

Since the end of World War II and Japan's colonial rule in the Korean Peninsula, South Korea has claimed the islands and maintained effective control over them since 1952, when South Korean president Syngman Rhee proclaimed the so-called Rhee Line, declaring the nation's sovereignty over waters adjacent to the Korean Peninsula, including Tokdo.

Since this was the thorniest issue dividing the two countries, they shelved it when they concluded the normalization treaty in 1965. In 1999, they agreed to place the waters around the islands under temporary joint control without sorting out the territorial claims. Both sides agreed not to set an exclusive economic zone around the islands and they clearly spelled out rules on areas where vessels could operate. Still, Japanese fishing boats have been blocked from the area.

According to an Asahi Shimbun report, "From around 1980, Japanese and South Korean fishing vessels have worked within such close range of each other around Takeshima that fishing nets have been damaged. That led Shimane fishermen to ask the prefectural government to take action to prevent further problems."

This led the prefecture's politicians to ask the central government to assert Japan's sovereignty over Takeshima. But central government officials and national politicians have been very reluctant to take any actions, apparently seeking to avoid another row with Seoul. This is the reason critics say Tokyo officials and politicians may have been asleep at the switch. Fueling the feud was Seoul's decision in 2002 to turn the islands into a national park and South Korea's issue of a national stamp in January 2004, which featured Tokdo. Shimane prefectural assembly members were upset by Tokyo's failure to play up the problem. The prefecture has long requested that the central government give the same attention to Takeshima as it does to the Northern Territories, the four islands off Hokkaido that are held by Russia but claimed by Japan.

According to a Mainichi Shimbun report, a fishery cooperative in Oki Island, the closest island to Takeshima, has fishing rights within a 500-meter radius of Takeshima. But the cooperative's vessels cannot go near the disputed islands without being arrested by South Korean authorities. Seoul has a small military garrison on one of the islets. Fish catches off Oki in 2003 totaled 70,000 tons, less than half of 1993.

Frustrated by Tokyo's inaction on Takeshima, Shimane prefecture has taken a first step toward declaring its ownership of Takeshima. Seoul reacted with fury. South Korea postponed a scheduled visit by Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon. The governor of Kyongsangbuk-do province said he was severing all sister-city ties with Shimane prefecture and recalled all staff from Shimane. Many cultural and sports exchanges and sister-city programs involving the two countries' local governments, including Iwate, Nagano, Aomori and Saitama prefectures on Japan's side, have been canceled because of concerns over intensifying anti-Japanese feelings in South Korea. Some of those cancellations were reportedly requested by their Korean counterparts.

Further, last Friday Masan city council in South Kyongsang province in South Korea passed a bill declaring its territorial jurisdiction over Japan's Tsushima Island. Although Seoul called on the council to withdraw the bill, the local body rejected the central government's appeal, stressing the council's independent authority to enact relevant legislation.

Moreover, last Wednesday, South Korea's Cultural Heritage Administration announced that Seoul would lift restrictions on visiting the disputed islets to reaffirm its actual control over the territory by opening access to them. The government currently restricts the number of visitors to 70 people a day, citing environmental and security reasons, and prohibits reporters from visiting the islands. Every visitor is required to get permission from the governor of North Kyongsang province, which has jurisdiction over the islets. But the central administration will hold discussions with the local government on raising the quota to about 141 visitors a day, while dropping the current system requiring official approval. The South Korean authorities will also lift prohibitions of on-site media coverage, Japanese and Korean media have reported.

Most important, the Tokdo/Takeshima issue has spilled over into the presidential office in Seoul. Last Thursday South Korea suddenly changed its policy stance toward Tokyo. It announced a set of principles, including a demand that Tokyo apologize for its past World War II aggression and compensate Koreans victimized during the war. Until recently, South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun had indicated that his administration would not raise the history issue in bilateral relations between Japan and South Korea. Now that has changed.

The new set of principles also included the approval of a junior-high-school history textbook about Japan's role in Korea, China and other Asian countries that China and South Korea say distorts history. In addition, the new principles call for compensation to South Koreans forced to work as "comfort women" during World War II, as well as those who were in Hiroshima or Nagasaki when the United States dropped atomic bombs on those cities in the waning days of the war.

Prime Minister Koizumi told reporters later last Friday that the two nations should look toward the future. "Overcoming emotional confrontation, we should take measures that are forward-looking and which consider ways of developing friendship into the future," Koizumi said, playing down Roh's new stance in dealing with Tokyo. "Rather than only be concerned about the past, it is important for both sides to promote friendship through a future-oriented way of thinking."

The tension between Japan and South Korea appears not to be allayed by the fact they are important trading nations. Japan is South Korea's third-largest trading partner after China and the United States, while South Korea is Japan's third-largest trading partner after China and the US.

Japan and South Korea are negotiating a free-trade agreement (FTA) to strengthen economic ties. The two sides originally aimed to strike the agreement within this year, but the territorial dispute has clouded Japan-Korea economic relations as well. Because of the public fury in Seoul, Korean officials have been unable to return to the negotiating table, although Koizumi and Roh had agreed to resume the negotiations at their summit meeting in Kagoshima prefecture last December. (The FTA talks already had been strained largely by the issue of reduction of tariff rates on farm and marine products.)

In the whirlwind of international politics, domestic politics does matter. The issue of the rocky, marine-life-rich islets is a manifestation of both countries' mounting domestic and local difficulties. Politicians everywhere, especially populists, like to seize the mood of the moment and jump on the bandwagon, acceding to domestic and local public criticism to win points. But they need to avoid riding the wave of nationalist sentiment, especially when preserving and stabilizing endangered regional security is so much more important.

***Kosuke Takahashi**, a former staff writer at the Asahi Shimbun, is a freelance correspondent based in Tokyo. He graduated from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism and the School of International and Public Affairs as a dual master's degree student. He can be contacted at letters@kosuke.net His website is www.kosuke.net*

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Please refer to the accompanying articles on Takeshima/Tokdo and Japan-South Korea conflict:

Japan Focus, Takeshima/Tokdo and the Roots of Japan-Korea Conflict

and

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

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