The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

A Chronicle of Korea-Japan 'Friendship'

By James Card

For Japan and Korea, 2005 held anniversaries perhaps more fraught than commemorations Japan shared with many other nations last year. Throughout the world, it was the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II, but Japan was not at war with Korea in 1945. Rather, Japan's August 1945 surrender to the Allies ended the nation's harsh colonization of Korea, an occupation that began in 1905 when Japan won protectorate rights over Korea as a war prize for defeating Russia. Recognizing 2005 in centennial tones was not in the cards, however, because the history and legacy of Japan's colonization remain so violently disputed. Rather, Tokyo and Seoul recognized last year as a "Year of Friendship" to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and South Korea. As James Card neatly summarizes, the year devolved daily into bitter acrimony as Koreans responded angrily to Japan's claims to the Takeshima (Dokdo) Islets that it had initially seized in 1905, and South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun called for a review of Korean collaborators under Japanese colonial rule, a call that has immediate repercussions in contemporary politics. Compounding these problems are deep differences between Japan and South Korea on the normalization of Japan and North Korea. Normalization is complicated by the fact that North and South Korea did not exist during the colonial era — only Korea did. This last conundrum reminds us that 2005 was the sixtieth anniversary of Dean Rusk's famous line at the 38th parallel that has divided the Korean peninsula ever since.

While Tokyo and Washington currently disregard the difficulties of untying this knot, delivering hawkish ultimatums, North and South Korea agree that, if nothing else, 2005 celebrated the hundredth anniversary of the beginning of Japan's illegal actions against a unified Korea that both now hope to restore. At a time when Japan and South Korea are at odds on fundamental issues of historical memory and contemporary politics, Japan faces many of the same conflicts with China. The future of a Northeast Asia community will rest on the ability to ease the high tensions in Japan-Korea and Japan-China relations. In a January 5, 2006 news conference, Prime Minister Koizumi blamed China and South Korea for their frozen relations with Japan, insisting that both had blown his Yasukuni Shrine visits out of proportion. This article makes clear the range and depth of divisions over historical issues that include such unresolved questions as compensation for slave laborers and the military comfort women, the loss of pensions for Korean soldiers in the Japanese army, and coming to terms with the entire legacy of colonial rule. But in exploring the cultural interactions between the people of the two nations, it suggests alternative possibilities and more hopeful futures. Alexis Dudden

SEOUL - Korea-Japan Friendship Year 2005 didn't turn out to be all that friendly.

It was conceived after the euphoria of co-hosting the successful World Cup of football in 2002. With the catchphrase, "To the future, together to the world", it was supposed to be a year of reconciliation, positive steps and celebration of the 40th anniversary of normalization of diplomatic ties. Cultural, economic and sports and arts exchanges were planned.

Korea Japan Friendship Year

But the year was a chain of events that resulted in ugly diplomacy, raging nationalism and the opening of old wounds.
In January, declassified dossiers relating to the Korea-Japan Normalization Treaty of 1965 opened the first old wound. It was the first disclosure to the Korean public; it revealed that Seoul demanded US$364 million compensation for individuals who died, were injured or used as laborers during Japan's 35-year occupation on the Korean peninsula. Instead, the South Korean government received $800 million, in a combination of grants and low-interest loans, as reparations from Japan.

South Korean dictator Park Chung-hee agreed that after this payment, South Korean citizens would give up their right to make individual claims against the Japanese government. What the declassified documents revealed was that Park only paid out about 2.56 billion won ($251 million) to families killed by the Japanese and 6.6 billion won to owners of destroyed property. None of the thousands of South Koreans conscripted into the Japanese military and labor workforce received compensation.

The remaining money was earmarked for nation-building construction projects. Park's often-criticized vision of linking Seoul and Busan in the south by expressway became a reality. He poured money into developing infrastructure and heavy industry, especially his favored state-owned business, Pohang Iron & Steel, which later became Posco, one of the world's top steelmakers.

The Japanese reparation money, along with American foreign aid, was the gratuitous seed money that bootstrapped the South Korean economy into the industrial nation of today. Arguments in the winter of 2005 revolved around the wartime victims being sacrificed for the greater good of the nation and Park's Japanese philosophy of "poor people, strong state".

Elderly women held protests every Wednesday throughout the cold winter outside the Japanese Embassy. They were the so-called "comfort women", sex slaves forced to service Japanese troops during World War II. The declassified dossier revealed that no compensation was included for the women subjected to sexual slavery. The "comfort women" and their supporters increased their demands for financial retribution and apologies, and more than 2,000 individual families filed suit against the South Korean government for unfair distribution of the compensation money.

Comfort women demonstrators
With such old grievances in the news and on the minds of South Koreans, the mood to correct historical issues was in the air and it exploded into national consciousness over the sovereignty of two uninhabited islands.

In late February, Shimane prefecture proposed a bill that called for "Takeshima Day". Takeshima is the Japanese name for the Liancourt Rocks. Koreans call the small rocky islets "Dokdo", which means "Lonely Island".

Dokdo
The Liancourt Rocks are composed of two rocky crags and 36 other volcanic rocks located in the body of water known by South Koreans as the "East Sea" and the "Sea of Japan" by Japan and the rest of the world. As with the islands, the name of the body of water is in dispute. Both nations claim the barren rocks as sovereign territory and each has historical and legal arguments to back up their claims. The islets are uninhabited except for a small South Korean coast guard outpost. Besides national pride, fishing zone rights and the possibility of natural gas deposits are at stake.

The well-worn cliche of the year was, "expressing regret", and it seemed as if every other media release contained the words. The South Korean Foreign Ministry "expressed regret" over the bill proposed by Shimane lawmakers, and asked for an immediate repeal. The same day, Japanese Ambassador Takano Toshiyuki told reporters in Seoul, "The Takeshima Islands are historically and lawfully Japanese territory." To the South Koreans, this was an incredible affront and the Foreign Ministry summoned Urabe v, a senior Japanese diplomat, and lodged a formal protest. Urabe defended the statement by saying it was taken out of context.

A day later, civic groups protested outside the Japanese Embassy. Many were bare-chested in the late winter weather but were warmed by burning Japanese flags and photographs of Takano. South Korean scholars trotted out Japanese-drawn maps from 1592 and 1785 that apparently proved Dokdo was historically Korean territory. Another British map from 1951 marked the islands as Korean land. Other historical claims go as far back as 512 AD.

On March 1, South Korea's Independence Movement Day, President Roh Moo-hyun stated that Japan must reflect on its past in order to heal old wounds "otherwise, no matter how strong its economic and military power may be, it will be difficult for Japan to become a leader of the world". He also asked Japan to provide more apologies and compensation. Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro later downplayed the speech as rhetoric to placate South Korea's domestic audience. This comment lead South Korean National Security Council chief Chung Dong-young to retort that it was "unreasonable to regard such an effort as a gesture to appease Koreans".

The day before in the South Korean National Assembly, lawmakers called for the East Sea/Sea of Japan to be renamed the "Sea of Corea". Meanwhile, residents of nearby Ulleung Island sailed to Dokdo and hoisted banners and helium balloons proclaiming it South Korean territory. And the once obscure Dokdo Museum, built in 1997 on Ulleung Island, was flooded with visitors and donations.

In front of the Japanese Embassy on March 14, a 68-year-old mother snipped off her little finger with pruning shears and her 41-year-old son cut off his finger with a butcher knife. They intended to send them to Koizumi to protest the Dokdo issue. Separate rallies spread across Seoul. Some called for the removal of Takano, while others burned Japanese flags.
Police wrangled away a pig (representing Koizumi) that was being readied for slaughter. Former South Korean military commandos demonstrated in front of the Japanese Embassy holding portraits of Korean independence fighters and later tried to infiltrate the embassy but were held back by 800 riot police.

A week later, four South Korean F-5 jetfighters scrambled to thwart a Japanese civilian C-560 Cessna approaching within a mile of Dokdo airspace. The aircraft belonged to the Asahi Shimbun, a Japanese daily newspaper. It previously requested permission to enter the air defense zone to photograph the islands, but was denied. The plane finally turned back after four radio warnings.

By mid-March the situation worsened. Japanese Foreign Minister Machimura Nobutaka rejected Seoul's new demands for compensation to individual South Koreans during the colonial era, citing all claims were resolved after the 1965 treaty. Nor did it help when a parade and a rally were held in Matsue, Japan that celebrated the passage of the "Takeshima Day" bill. On the news of the bill's passage, the Japanese Embassy in Seoul was again surrounded with riot police and protestors.
On March 19, Heo Gyeong-wuk set himself ablaze in front of the Japanese Embassy while waving a protest flag. A few days later, Roh wrote in a letter to the public that Japanese foreign policy has reached an intolerable point and he foresaw a "merciless diplomatic war". The strongly worded letter left South Korean diplomats nonplussed. Grand National Party chairwoman, Park Geun-hye, criticized the president's emboldened war of words.

In early April, Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro labeled Roh's criticism of Japan "a third-rate political technique" meant to garner home popularity. Two days later, Seoul mayor Lee Myung-bak defended Roh with the unimaginative retort, "If our politics are third rate, then Ishihara's must be fourth and fifth rate."

Anti-Japanese sentiment and Dokdo fever swept the country. Several anti-Japan rallies held throughout Seoul welcomed Koizumi when he met Roh in mid-June. They talked for two hours and nothing was resolved.

South Koreans also protested with their spending habits, and many vowed not to buy Japanese goods. Civic groups called on consumers not to buy Mitsubishi, Kawasaki and Isuzu vehicles - a pointless gesture since hardly any Japanese autos can be seen on South Korean roads.

In Busan, an Accord was set ablaze at a Honda dealership with the message, "Be ready to pay the price if you buy a Japanese car." The Busan Women's Coalition issued a statement to boycott all Japanese goods, and Internet message boards abounded with hate toward products made in Japan.

Also a handful of Koreans volunteered to move to Dokdo, while other families registered their family households to be based on Dokdo as a symbolic gesture. Japanese did the same, and currently the count is about 900 South Koreans and 2,000 Japanese living imaginary lives on the two barren rocks. In a bizarre gesture, the city council in Masan, a city in Gyeongnam province, passed the "Daemado Day" bill, commemorating June 19 as the day when 15th-century general, Lee Jong-mu, led forces to take over the Japanese island known as Tsushima, an island fully recognized as Japanese territory.

Beyond politics and boycotts, the anger spilled over into other spheres of life. The Lakehills Country Club, an operator of two golf resorts, banned Japanese guests from entry. Other sports exchanges were cancelled, along with scheduled university matches between the two countries. Japanese expatriates living in South Korea kept their heads down with most of them bewildered about the outrage over two barren rocks. The Japanese Embassy sent out warnings urging caution.

South Korean marketers got into the action with blatant ads that appealed to nationalism.

A maker of MP3 players, Reigncom, asked South Koreans not to buy Apple's iPod because it was unpatriotic. KTF broadcast a commercial claiming its mobile phone service even reaches the far-off Dokdo. In a clever scheme, Daegu Bank created a "Dokdo branch bank" that only existed in cyberspace and quickly garnered $100,000 in deposits. A commercial by Daelim apartments depicted a cartoon where a giant South Korean robot-warrior rises out of the sea to thwart a Dokdo invasion by Japanese marauders portrayed as half-naked, buck-toothed goblins. Makers of computer games invented Dokdo battles; another was a crusade to conquer Tsushima Island that is controlled by the "Monkey Chief", a character that resembled Koizumi.

The United States military even got sucked into the issue though its position is neutral on Dokdo. Jang Sung-min, a former lawmaker, reasoned that the US recognized Dokdo as South Korean territory because Operation Foal Eagle, the annual US-South Korea joint military exercise, took place near Dokdo waters.

Another historical issue was renewed over Japanese textbooks, a long-standing argument between South Korea and Japan. The main flare-up was related to the Dokdo issue when a new edition for middle schools stated that the Dokdo islets are Japanese territory under international law whereas the previous edition stated Japan merely had historical claims to the islets. Another contentious issue was the lack of reference to "comfort women" and forced laborers.

Japanese students may be kept intentionally ignorant of their forefathers' wartime atrocities, but South Korean educators fanned the embers of old grievances.

In South Korean classrooms, all levels were taught in special classes about South Korea's sovereign rights over Dokdo with lesson plans supplied by the Korea Federation of Teachers' Associations. The Gyeonggi English Program in Korea, modeled after the Japan Exchange and Teaching program, lectured foreign English teachers about South Korea's rights to Dokdo, regardless of their apathy on the issue.

The most disturbing images of the year were drawings on exhibit at Gyulhyeon Station on the Incheon subway line. The crayon sketches from the students of Gyeyang Middle School depicted the Japanese islands either awash in flames or getting bombed, stabbed or stomped.

Warlike South Korean stickmen attacked bloodied Japanese stickmen; skulls and crossbones and burning flags were prominent motifs, along with the words "Kill! Die!" as well as some foul language. Photos of the exhibit were taken by a Canadian expatriate and posted online. The photos drew thousands of hits and much commentary. Shortly after the buzz on the web, the pictures were removed from the public eye.

In mid-April, former special forces commandos protested at the Japanese Embassy, and then later at the Ministry of Culture and Tourism where they fought police with pickaxes and hammers while lobbing firebombs. The leader brandished a hunting rifle, but it, along with two explosive devices, were confiscated by police. About midnight at Takano's residence, they set fire to a coffin and launched flaming arrows at his home. Lacking the backbone to enforce the law, the police did not charge the former soldiers with any crimes because they did not want to upset the ongoing wave of anti-Japanese sentiment.

On the cultural front of South Korean-Japanese relations in 2005, BoA, a South Korean bubblegum pop idol created by S M Entertainment, went to the top of Japanese music charts with her fifth K-pop album. Incredibly successful in Japan since 2001, she appeared in numerous commercials and advertisements throughout the country. On the screen, the most popular man was Bae Yong-joon, the foppish South Korean star of the drama Winter Sonata. His appearances drew massive crowds of Japanese housewives and his film, April Snow, was a box-office success this year.

BoA

In South Korea, Japanese novels this year outnumbered local novels on the bestseller list for the first time in Korean history. Murakami Haruki, Ekuni Kaori, Asada Jiro, Murakami Ryu and Yoshimoto Banana were the most popular authors.
Two books, however, inflamed South Korean readers. One was titled, Medicine for Korea's Ills by Ryoma Nakaoka. The satire portrayed South Korean men as twisted stalkers and women as harridans, and mocked South Korea's plastic surgery fetish. The other is a backlash of the popularity of the so-called "Korean Wave" of pop culture. Titled, The Hate-Korea Wave, the comic book by Yamano Sharin sold more than 360,000 copies in Japan. Considered by most as Japanese bigotry, the book delves into the half-

truths and historical distortions of South Korea.

Meanwhile, another major historical hangover haunted South Korean-Japanese relations: the Yasukuni shrine. Located in Tokyo, the shrine holds the Book of Souls, which identifies 2,466,532 Japanese and 21,000 Korean-conscripted soldiers killed in war. For the Japanese, to be enshrined is an honor to a soldier's name and family. It is the house of fallen warriors that fought for the empire, but among those listed are 14 Class A war criminals honored as the "Martyrs of Showa".

For both North and South Korea, China and most of Asia, the shrine represents Japan's refusal to completely acknowledge its aggressive military past, and when Japanese politicians visit the shrine, it is viewed as gross insensitivity. Koizumi made four visits prior to this year, and was condemned for it. He maintained he visited for remembrance, a kind of reminder there would be no further wars involving Japan.

On August 15, he did not make his annual visit to Yasukuni shrine but paid his respects at the Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery. He offered a broad apology for Japan's past wars. The carefully worded statement said Japan accepted that it brought suffering to Asia, expressed heartfelt apologies and affirmed there would be no more war.

On the same day, the 60th anniversary of liberation from Japanese control, North and South Korean delegations issued a joint statement calling for more compensation and a stop to Japan's distorting its militaristic history. Roh said in a televised speech that new legislation was necessary to compensate victims of Japanese colonial rule and the military regimes from the 1960s through 1980s.

In late August, the third round of Korea-Japan Treaty negotiations still ground out historical issues. Seoul maintained the position that despite the 1965 treaty, Japan was still responsible for colonial-era aggressions. A committee concluded that the 1965 treaty payoff was not meant as recompense for damages inflicted during Japan's colonization but simply resolved credit affairs and financial liabilities between the two countries.

In the committee's eyes, the treaty did not cover wartime atrocities such as drafting of "comfort women" as sex slaves, Korean victims of the atomic bombings and displaced laborers on Sakhalin Island. Tokyo still maintains it has no legal responsibility for further compensation to individuals and the 1965 treaty fully absolved Japan of all future claims.

On October 17, Koizumi created another furor when he made his fifth visit to the shrine, claiming it was for private purposes. Seoul called the visit "most regrettable", and cancelled the annual "shuttle summit" scheduled for later in the year, and thereafter - until the Yasukuni visits cease.

On November 9, an annual soccer match between Japanese and South Korean lawmakers was cancelled. The Korean National Assembly said members would attend, but not play against any diet (Japanese parliament) members that visited Yasukuni. The Japanese withdrew their invitation.

At the November Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Busan foreign ministers Ban and Aso Taro found no common ground in a bilateral meeting. Later, Roh met with Koizumi for 30 minutes, with the time spent reiterating old issues.

In early December, despite South Korean and Chinese bitterness toward the Yasukuni visits, Koizumi stated he would continue to go to the Shinto shrine. As a result, the annual three-way summit between South Korea, China, and Japan at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations meeting in Kuala Lumpur was postponed.

Jared Diamond, an American author and biogeographer, once wrote: "Like Arabs and Jews, Koreans and Japanese are joined by blood yet locked in traditional enmity. But enmity is mutually destructive, in East Asia as in the Middle East. As reluctant as Japanese and Koreans are to admit it, they are like twin brothers who shared their formative years. The political future of East Asia depends in large part on their success in rediscovering those ancient bonds between them."

Thus, ends Korea-Japan Friendship Year 2005.

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