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Takeshima/Tokto, Nationalism and Reconciliation: Who is smiling at the latest row?

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When the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea (South Korea) was concluded in 1965, the two countries shelved their territorial claims to the Takeshima islets, which are called Tokto in South Korea.

But they never got over their differences concerning the rocky outcrops in the Sea of Japan. In fact, the issue continues to bother both sides, as if a bone was stuck in their respective throats.

When negotiations over the treaty got bogged down over their mutual refusal to abandon their territorial claims, the following comment attributed to a high-ranking Japanese Foreign Ministry official appeared on the minutes of negotiations kept by the South Korean side: "We would be better off if we just blow up the islands."

Some people say it was South Korea 's president who made the remark.

The bone is once again tickling the throats of Japan and South Korea .

Earlier this month, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology decided to incorporate the Takeshima issue in a manual accompanying government curriculum guidelines for teachers at junior high schools. In short, the government wants junior high school students to be taught about the Takeshima issue.

Target of criticism

How ironical that the dispute flared anew just as South Korean President Lee Myung Bak and Prime Minister Fukuda Yasuo had started to advance Japan-South Korea relations.

Seoul reacted with outrage at the ministry's decision. It temporarily recalled its ambassador to Japan. Angry protesters threw eggs into the compound of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. South Korean print media carried stories with words like "(Japan is) outwardly smiling while double-crossing (South Korea) behind its back" and "shameless distortion."

North Korean leader Kim Jong Il must be gloating over the situation. Meanwhile, a rift between South Korea and the United States over U.S. beef imports triggered major street demonstrations.

The Lee administration's slogan of strengthening relations with Japan and the United States is falling apart. North Korea didn't even have to lift a finger.

On July 11, a North Korean soldier fatally shot a South Korean tourist who had apparently wandered into a restricted zone in the Kumgangsan mountain resort in North Korea.

Against this background, Japan is desperate to resolve the issue of Japanese nationals abducted by North Korean agents in the 1970s and '80s. Negotiations over North Korea's nuclear program have reached a turning point.

None of these problems can be settled without Japan-South Korea cooperation and unity. What is Tokyo doing?

Three years ago, when Shimane Prefecture stirred controversy by designating Feb. 22 as "Takeshima Day," I wrote about a "dream" in this column. This is what I wrote: "Why not abandon our claim to the islets and hand over complete sovereignty to South Korea? In return, South Korea could name it 'Friendship Island.'" When the story ran, I was accused of being a "traitor." Still, at the risk of inviting more criticism, I wanted to say that if doing so allows two free nations in East Asia to strengthen ties, the gambit would pay off. It all depends on how we think.



Shimane Assembly rises on "Takeshima Day"

That said, I doubt such a thing would happen. But being fully aware of South Korea's passion toward this issue, why provoke it again? Even though the policy to reaffirm Japan 's claim to the islets was decided under the administration of Koizumi Junichiro, I cannot help but question the Fukuda government's insensitivity.



Seoul demonstration in response to "Takehima Day"

But wait. After pondering this state of affairs, it hit me. It just depends on how we think.

To begin with, the Japanese government has consistently stood by the view that "Takehima is an integral part of Japan and is being unlawfully occupied by South Korea." It would be unreasonable to tell schools not to teach the government's view.

Furthermore, after much thought, the government called on schools to touch on "a difference in assertions" between Japan and South Korea over the disputed islets when teaching about Takehima. Instead of just asserting ourselves, it makes us listen to what the other side has to say.

Three years ago, the education ministry called for rewording in a junior high school textbook that carried a passage saying that Japan and South Korea are "at odds" over Takehima. This was changed to "South Korea is unlawfully occupying" the islets when the textbook underwent official screening.

The change this time can be likened to a complete about-face. South Korea should take advantage of it, instead of just criticizing it.

Perhaps the change is far more significant than we think. If textbooks and lessons make reference to South Korea's claim, schools would have no choice but to teach children about Japan's past colonial rule and the feelings of the people who were subjected to colonization.

New way of thinking

As it is, Japanese children grow up having little chance to learn about modern history. If the Takehima controversy serves as a gateway for them to learn about the "past," it would be meaningful. Japan has many good teachers. Depending on how they teach the subject, the possibilities are infinite. Can't we think like that?

Incidentally, whether Takehima is indeed "an integral part of Japan" has long been disputed not only by South Korea but also Japanese scholars.

One of them is Naito Seichu, now professor emeritus at Shimane University. While the Meiji government regarded Takehima as Korean territory, it incorporated it into Shimane Prefecture in 1905 for military and other reasons, Naito argues.

If so, Japan's incorporation of Takehima was indeed a run-up to the annexation of the Korean Peninsula. If that is the case, it stands to reason that South Koreans have special feelings for Tokto, which they regard as having been "snatched" by Japan.

Since this outlook, which is not generally accepted in Japan, is also based on historical documents of the former Interior Ministry, we cannot slight it as ungrounded.

I also read and compared books on the subject in an attempt to find out more. But books that go a long way back even have different names referring to the islets. Historical and legal interpretations are also complicated and difficult to understand. Of course, that is also why researchers are divided.

But the one thing that even I could understand is that the ownership of the islets was very vague in the old days and wasn't a big deal. However, the situation changed in modern times.

These days, whenever territorial issues arise, such words as "uncompromising" and "firm resolve" tend to be used frequently. But what is important is to recall the vagueness of the olden days and develop a flexible attitude for the future.



South Korean coast guard patrols Tokto/Takeshima

I also wish to say the same thing to South Korea. The way South Koreans regard the islets as something special and identify them as a symbol of liberation from Japanese colonial rule is not completely incomprehensible. Still, if South Korea keeps denouncing different views, just like in a religious dispute, the two neighbors cannot move forward.

"I disapprove of what you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it," is a maxim about the principle of liberalism attributed to the French thinker Voltaire (1694-1778). We should engage in debate bearing in mind this spirit of free speech.

I don't want to hear North Korea laugh at us and make fun of freedom of speech and cooperation between democracies.

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