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On the Rocks: Korea and Japan Divided over the Dokdo Issue

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No serious observer of postwar relations between South Korea and Japan doubts that there is a bilateral issue between the two nations that is more persistent and volatile than their feud over the sovereign status of the two minuscule islets of Dokdo. This commentary examines the history of disputes over Dokdo, and attempts to argue that the starting point for a solution lies in the pragmatic and prudent approach, not in assertive diplomacy based on nationalistic sentiments.

Since the end of World War II, Dokdo has been under the effective administrative control of the South Korean government. The Japanese government has protested at various official levels since then, arguing that the islets, which it calls Takeshima, belong to Japan in accordance with historical evidence and international law.

The diplomatic feud over the territory did not flare up during the Cold War, because both countries involved in the controversy made security cooperation against the communist threat in Northeast Asia their top priority. It was only after concerns over the external regional security environment were lifted with the end of the Cold War that Japan began to fortify its claims to Dokdo in a far more assertive and diversified manner. South Korea responded to this change by making periodic departures from its traditional line of defense of “quiet diplomacy”—that is, taking the view that because its sovereignty over the islets is indisputable and its control over them remains complete, South Korea has no strateg-

ic interests in aggressively and emotionally reacting to Japan’s escalatory territorial policy. To do so would only reinforce Japan’s claim that there does exist an unresolved territorial issue between the two countries and the sovereign status of Dokdo is undetermined, when in fact South Korea’s position is the opposite.

The remarkable persistence of the Dokdo issue past the mark of a new century flies in the face of optimistic projections that the days of the dispute are numbered and that the two countries will eventually resolve their differences on the sovereignty of Dokdo because of growing pressure from economic interdependence, globalization, and fading memories of the colonial past. The reality could not be more different from such popular expectations. From the mid-1990s on, South Korea and Japan experienced and barely contained two major blow-ups. In 1996-97, negotiations for revising the 1965 bilateral fishery accord were almost derailed as both sides insisted upon their respective positions on Dokdo. A few years after the Kim Dae Jung government of Korea and the Keizo Obuchi administration of Japan agreed to sign a new fishery accord in 1998 that would leave the sovereign status of Dokdo outside the purview of the accord, both countries again collided over Dokdo. The showdown between Japan and South Korea came in March 2005, when the Shimane Prefecture in Japan passed a bill to declare February 22 as “Takeshima Day.” In response, the Roh Moo Hyun government of South Korea announced its “New Doctrine” in a joint to

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statement issued by the Blue House and the National Security Council Standing Committee (NSCSC).

The residual effect of these past show-downs between South Korea and Japan continues to undercut the current leadership in both countries, especially the Lee Myung-bak government, which has repeatedly promised to elevate South Korea and Japan's bilateral relations to a “mature” stage. Looking back at the past two and a half years of the Lee Myung-bak presidency, probably the most forgotten and underappreciated truth is how actively South Korea has attempted to restore and upgrade its relationship with Japan. One may recall that, immediately upon his victory in the 2007 presidential election, President Lee initiated a series of important moves, trying to patch up the bilateral relations between South Korea and Japan that had been greatly strained under his predecessor, President Roh Moo Hyun, whose Japan policy had been largely reflective of an anti-imperialist understanding of history. Under the slogan of “*Koo dong chon yi* (求同存異)” or “Pursuing Mutual Interests Despite Existing Differences,” President Lee made it clear that his government would cultivate cooperation with Japan as an indispensable regional partner without being preoccupied with winning an official apology or demanding deeper introspection for colonial misdeeds from Japan, to the point of derailing the pragmatic pursuit of mutual interests. It was not missed by the observers of ROK-Japan relations and other East Asian affairs that the Lee government invited to the presidential inauguration ceremony not just then-prime minister of Japan Yasuo Fukuda but also former-prime ministers Yoshiro Mori and Yasuhiro Nakasone.

However, the Lee government's effort to

elevate the level of cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo has been seriously challenged. In July 2008, it was reported by the Korean news media that the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN) had recently decided to change the designation of Dokdo to that of an area of undesigned sovereignty, putting it in a new category of “UU.” The South Korean government quickly responded to its reversal through numerous diplomatic channels, including a direct approach to President George W. Bush. Only three days after the initial report of the BGN's decision, the categorization of Dokdo was restored to its original form.

In addition to this BGN incident in the United States, South Koreans were angered by the Fukuda government's decision to allow the Dokdo issue to be specifically mentioned in the new middle school curriculum guidelines for social studies, despite the South Korean government's request that the Japanese government not mention the islands at all. The guidelines, which will take effect in the fiscal year of 2012, were the first referral to the disagreement in the history of the curriculum.

At first glance, this series of recent events appears to vindicate the view that pragmatic approaches or “quiet” diplomacy cannot be effective for the Dokdo issue. Such a view may have a strong appeal to people who want to define the Dokdo problem by spectacular actions leading to decisive results. In the domestic politics of a democracy where public opinion matters in the conduct of foreign policy, there is always political pressure that “something must be done.”

However, the Dokdo issue is too complex to be primarily regarded as a matter of victory or defeat and its policy judged from an absolute stance. Assertive and belligerent actions taken in the past by the South Korean gov-

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ernment, which hoped to defend its sovereign claims over the islets in “fundamental ways,” actually hurt Seoul’s position vis-à-vis Japan.

One example is the open and hardline response by the Roh government during the 2005 controversy, which undermined Seoul’s claim that it was Japan who had been “unreasonable” and “confrontational.” The joint statement issued by the NSCSC criticized the Japanese attempts to bolster its own claims as “acts that reject the history of liberation and justify its deeds during the colonial past” and said that South Korea would deal with them “by all possible measures” and try to resolve the issue “based upon human values and common sense.” The international audience, which was not familiar with the historical background, regarded this as a sign that there was a case of territorial dispute between South Korea and Japan, considering that the Korean government itself defined the incident as a grave threat to national security. In addition, international observers found it very confusing that the Korean authorities invoked universal principles of humankind and international justice in defense of its position on Dokdo, but at the same time resisted taking the case to the International Court of Justice to be settled objectively in a court of law.

Another example of assertive diplomacy that backfired is the BGN’s decision to change the designation of Dokdo to an area of undesignated sovereignty. Why did the BGN leave untouched the fifty-eight other cases with similar status such as Senkaku soto and the Kuril Islands? The BGN’s nomination of Dokdo as an area of undesignated sovereignty can be interpreted in two ways. First, it was merely a “technical” decision to update the database of the world’s geographic names that had been long overdue. After all, the Korean govern-

ment itself had justified its diplomatic campaigns for the dual use of the Sea of Japan and the East Sea as a politically innocuous act; it just proposed that mainstream international standards and practice be followed. But it is also possible to interpret the BGN’s action as a strategic consideration. From this perspective, the BGN’s decision was meant to further clarify the official position of the United States concerning the East Asian island disputes that first, the United States has no authority to make any decisions on sovereign claims to the islands put forth by various parties, and second, American forces will not be used in the event of conflict near the islands. Having observed Japan’s assertive territorial policy and Korea’s strong reactions to it since the mid-1990s when both sides collided over revising the original 1965 fishery accord in line with the new international maritime regime created by the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the U.S. government may have identified Dokdo as a “hotspot,” an area where the danger that U.S. armed forces might be drawn into a conflict is high, and thus stating America’s neutrality was regarded as more urgently necessary than for other island issues in East Asia.

At the end of the day, the Dokdo policy of South Korea and Japan will be fundamentally judged by whether it makes their respective claims over the islets stronger or weaker. The policy will be more effective when it helps create an audience more sympathetic to each country’s cause rather than isolating the country. In that regard, the recent trends in Japan to increasingly refer to the Dokdo issue in public education and domestic politics are likely to continue. Neither the current Democratic Party of Japan coalition government nor the conservative Liberal Democratic Party is

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in a position to produce top leaders who command sufficient political capital to reject pandering to nationalist sentiment and populism in Japanese society.

A good example illustrating this is Prime Minister Naoto Kan’s statement that was delivered on 10 August 2010 to apologize for Japan’s colonialization of South Korea. Kan’s statement is so carefully worded so as to avoid specifically acknowledging the legality of the atrocities committed by the Japanese government during the colonial period. No mention was made of North Korea because the Japanese government was afraid of losing bargaining leverages with regards to the abductees’ issue. The statement also failed to mention Koreans who were forced into manual labor and sexual slavery. As a result, the Kan statement was noted as another positive measured gesture, but not concrete evidence that Japan has finally come around to dealing with its past on Korea in a wise and sincere manner.

In addition, Japan lacks flexibility in its negotiations with South Korea because of the two other island disputes it has with Russia and China. Any slight change of position by Japan with regard to the Dokdo issue will directly affect its bargaining power in the other disputes. Lastly, Japan’s approach to Dokdo is inextricably tied to its preoccupation with the Kuril Islands. References of Japan’s “lost” sovereignty in Dokdo are largely made in attempts to reflect the deep-seated sense of injustice and victimhood that Japan has been carrying since the end of the Pacific War. Without any groundbreaking progress in Russo-Japanese negotiations over the Kuriles, Japan is unable to move away from its current line of policy toward Korea.

The festering status quo between South Korea and Japan is obviously frustrating to everyone. Yet given the complexity of the issue, the status quo may be seen in a more positive light and pragmatic approaches welcomed. In December 2008, the Hatoyama government decided to make no reference to the Dokdo islets in a new instruction manual containing high school curriculum guidelines on geography A and geography B that are set to come into effect in the 2013 academic year. However small this decision may appear, it should be considered an important political gesture, considering both countries are coming up to the centennial anniversary of the annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910. Defusing the volatile Dokdo issue begins with both leaderships reciprocating in pragmatic diplomacy and thereby building favorable conditions to upgrade their interest-based bilateral relationship to a trust-based one in the future. ■

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