

Japan-Korea Relations and Seoul's Presidential Politics

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For

Newsweek Japan

August 2012

Again Tokyo and Seoul are engaged in an escalating verbal and diplomatic duel over who owns Tokto or Takeshima Island, two tiny piles of rocks mid-point between Japan and Korea. These clashes have been going on for at least half a century without benefit to either side. If anything, they have only disrupted impressive record of progress of cooperation since the two nations normalized relations in 1965. If so, then why repeat such unproductive conduct? Both sides share responsibility for this situation, but here we focus Seoul.

The immediate cause for this latest clash is South Korean President Lee Myung-bak's August 10, 2012 visit to what all Koreans, north and south of the de-militarized zone, consider sovereign Korean territory which they call Tokto Island (Takeshima in Japan). The visit was unprecedented for a Korean president and recalled Russian President Medvedev's earlier visit to the Russian administered islands north of Japan's Hokkaido Island which Japan has long claimed as the "Northern Territories." Republic of Korea cabinet ministers and National Assembly members have previously visited the island and last year a Japanese Diet delegation attempted to do so, but was denied access to the island.

Japanese Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko immediately and strongly protested Lee's visit. He declared it "unacceptable," reiterated Japan's claim to the island and recalled Japanese Ambassador Muto from Seoul. Tensions have flared since. Noda sent Lee a letter asking that the Republic of Korea join Japan in taking the issue of sovereignty to the International Court, but Lee refused to accept the letter. Seoul declared Japan's claim "unjust." Noda fired back that he harbored "indomitable resolve to protect" Japan's sovereignty over the island and added that South Korea was "illegally occupying" it. Lee further irritated the Japanese by demanding that Emperor Akihito, prior to any visit to South Korea, apologize for Japan's colonization of Korea in the early 20th Century. Prime Minister Noda promptly demanded an apology.

What motivated Lee Myung-bak to risk the significant progress he has made in improving relations with Japan during his first four and one half years of his five year tenure? After all, Lee promised at his 2008 inauguration to erase his predecessor Roh Moo-hun's negative record regarding relations with Japan and to institute a "new era" of bilateral cooperation. Lee initially did so which included South Korea's participation in a trilateral diplomatic and economic forum with Japan and China.

But abruptly in July 2012, President Lee reversed course and took steps clearly designed to displease Japan. A primary motivation appears to be Lee's effort to deflect intense domestic political criticism away from his administration by exciting Koreans' anti-Japanese sentiment. This can best be understood by reviewing the political mess Lee has created for himself and his administration. The longer Lee has been in office, the less impressive has been his and his administration's accomplishments. Many South Korea's blamed his confrontational attitude toward North Korea for Pyongyang's March 2010 sinking of a South Korean warship and November 2010 bombardment of a tiny South Korean occupied island on the edge of North Korea's territorial waters in the Yellow Sea. Lee's political party narrowly escaped defeat in the April 2011 National Assembly elections, but many members of his party broke with him to form a new political party in preparation of the 2012 presidential election (Korea's constitution does not allow him to seek re-election).

A string of corruption scandals followed kicked off in March 2012 by revelations that the Prime Minister's Office had been conducting illegal surveillance of politicians, businessmen and journalists since Lee took office. Those being watched included prominent members of civic and business organizations, and the presidents of the nation's leading broadcasting companies. In April the National Assembly speaker, a member of Lee's political party, accepted responsibility for the corrupt practice of paying National Assemblymen to elect him as speaker. At the end of June, the Lee Administration attempted to rush through the National Assembly a new treaty with Japan that would facilitate the exchange of intelligence about North Korea. The effort outraged opposition party National Assembly members who quickly labeled President Lee "pro-Japanese," one of the worst titles a Korean politician could acquire. Lee immediately asked Tokyo to postpone the accord's signing which had already been scheduled prior to consultations with the National Assembly. Hoping to distance himself from the clamor, Lee a week later fired the presidential assistant that he had authorized to negotiate the accord.

But the clamor only intensified when on July 3 the Korean mass media reported that the president's older brother and former ruling party National Assemblyman was under investigation for having received about \$600,000 in exchange for trying to help troubled bankers win favorable treatment from the government. The new investigation also reopened the earlier investigation of both Lee and his brother conducted during the 2007 presidential campaign regarding allegations that they had previously attempted to bribe government regulators in an alleged scheme to save preferred banks from closure. Whether Lee's brother will be indicted remains to be seen. Nevertheless, four prominent members of President Lee's administration (Korea Communications Commission Director, Technology Economy Vice Minister, Vice Minister of Culture and former presidential spokesperson) have been arrested, indicted and some convicted of corruption. By late July, Lee appeared on national television and said, "But whom can I blame now? It's all because of my negligence. I bow before the people in apology." Lee's apology rendered hallow his earlier claim of heading "morally perfect" administration.

What is a South Korean president to do when the credibility and morality of his administration is a shambles, and he is a "lame duck" with less than a year in office. Lee did as his predecessors have done – he moved to deflect criticism away from himself by arousing anti-Japanese sentiment. In mid-July tensions between Japan and Korea flared up after publication of Japan's new defense ministry white paper which repeated once again Japan's claim of

sovereignty over disputed Takeshima/Tokdo Island. Tensions seemed destined to subside until Lee made his trip to the island. Japan-Korea relations have yet to normalize.

The trajectory of Lee Myung-bak's presidency has significant parallels with those of his predecessors. Since South Korea's democratization in 1992 when Korea's elected their first civilian president, each five year term has followed a similar track. Inauguration brings promises of great accomplishments and high standards of morality and virtue. After a settling in period, some accomplishments are declared in years two and three. But beginning in year four problems appear. Allegations of corruption multiply and by year five, the president leaves the Blue House, Korea's presidential residence, either in shame or soon to be shamed. Conviction of cabinet and National Assembly members has become nearly a routine recurrence. Even more embarrassing to the president, and severely tarnishing his image, are the conviction of close relatives who sought personal gain by accepting large sums of money in exchange for promising favors to wealthy persons in need of presidential favors. The sons of President Kim Yong-sam (1993-98) and Kim Dae-jung (1999-2003) were convicted and imprisoned for accepting bribes in exchange for promises to gain preferential treatment from the government. The wife of President Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) was similarly accused but before the investigation was completed, Roh committed suicide. Now President Lee Myung-bak is experiencing similar allegations because of his brother's alleged misconduct.

As a group, South Korea's presidents have never fared well at the end of their term. The first president Rhee Syng-man departed Korea in shame after being expelled from office by the 1960 "Student Revolution." His successor Chang Myon had barely formed his presidential administration when a military coup replaced him with a junta lead by Korea's next president, Park Chung-hee. Park, a graduate of Japan's Imperial Army Academy and a Korean War veteran, normalized relations with Japan in 1965 and oversaw Korea's emergence as a newly industrialized nation. But in the end, his director of intelligence shot him to death in 1979. After another brief civilian interlude, General Chun Doo-hwan seized power and ruled with an iron fist until being forced from office in 1987 by massive nationwide demonstrations. Chun's colleague in arms Noh Dae-woo was elected to the presidency and oversaw the highly successful 1988 Seoul Olympiad. He also achieved impressive reconciliation with North Korea. But after leaving office, he and Chun were imprisoned for their roles in the 1980 Kwangju massacre of pro-democracy civilian protesters. Also, Chun's younger brother was imprisoned after being convicted for multiple charges of corruption.

Each Korean president, when facing increasing criticism toward the end of their term, has attempted to deflect attention away from themselves by shifting the public's attention elsewhere. For Rhee and Park, their preferred target was communists and North Korea. But since Kim Yong-sam, Korean presidents have favored arousing anti-Japanese sentiment as the preferred way to deflect public criticism. In Lee Myung-bak's case, he first tried using North Korea but when this proved less effective than he had hoped, he shifted to Japan.

Within each five year presidential term there also appears to be an apparent "cycle of corruption." The presidential term begins with presidential pledges to minimize corruption. But each president enters office with political debts to pay in the form of appointments to office. Those who fail to receive an appointment or believe they are being replaced prematurely initially

internalize their frustration. But as the president's term approaches its end, the frustrated politicians begin to talk to investigators and the mass media about alleged corruption within the administration. Investigations and occasional convictions follow, tarnishing the president's image and diminishing his authority. The clamor of criticism subsequently increases prospects that the president will intensify rather than restrain anti-Japanese sentiment. The result is that each five year term ends with the Korean public's increasing disappointment with their elected national leader and emotionally charged anti-Japanese sentiment.

South Koreans merit admiration for their commitment to building a democratic society and for having accomplished this despite formidable impediments within a relatively short period of time. But their democracy has yet to mature fully. Only time and continuing effort can further the process. Vital for success is national prosperity equally shared by all Koreans. Lacking natural resources, South Korea's prosperity can be sustained and enhanced only if the nation maintains harmonious relations with its diplomatic allies and trading partners. For South Korea, Japan is a crucial diplomatic friend and trading partner. Using Japan as a political scapegoat for South Korea's domestic political shortcomings is counter to the Korean people's long term interests, something South Korea's politicians may recognize in their rhetoric but are faltering to match with their deeds.

Japan similarly would do well to recognize South Korea's impressive political and economic accomplishments, but at the same time understand that South Korea's democracy is still not fully developed. Japanese politicians would also do well to recognize this fact. Once understood, they should be more willing to work to temper rather than to match South Korea's occasional nationalistic outbursts and understand the domestic political dynamics behind them. After all, Japan's future security and prosperity are likewise tightly linked to developments on the Korean Peninsula.

(Note: Materials for this essay were gathered from the *New York Times*, *BBC World News*, *Columbia Encyclopedia*, official statements of the Japanese and South Korea Foreign Ministries, and the *Daily Yomiuri* and *Korea Herald* newspapers.)