

**Japan's Problem is Not Who Owns  
Takeshima/Tokto Island, but ...  
- Political Commentary**

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Japan has a problem. If it wishes to lead the nations of East Asia into a new age of regional cooperation, it will have to put the past behind it and decide what course will better promote its long term interests: quarreling with its neighbors over ownership of disputed islands (Takeshima/Tokto Island and Senkaku jima/Daoyu) and the content of textbooks, etc. or pursuing a policy of reconciliation designed to promote Japan's leadership and regional cooperation in East Asia, a proclaimed goal of Japanese government.

Once again Japan's relationship with China and the Republic of Korea is "on the rocks" over the content of textbooks and disputed territories. Specifically, the issue is a repeat of Japan's claims in Ministry of Education approved textbooks that the tiny pile of rocks mid-point in the Sea of Japan (which Korea calls the "East Sea") known as Takeshima (or Tokto to Koreans) belongs to Japan. Both the South and North Korean governments energetically claim the island is sovereign Korean territory, claims ardently and emotionally backed by Koreans north and south of the De-militarized Zone. The furor this time erupted in July and continues with both sides filing diplomatic protests and recalling their diplomatic representatives.

Three developments are certain to emerge from this latest clash. First, there will be no durable solution and the status quo will endure with the Republic of Korea continuing to occupy the disputed island. Secondly, an armed clash will be avoided because both nations' national interests are best served by avoiding war and by cooperating as evident from their impressive record of cooperation in numerous areas such as trade, cultural and educational exchanges, and security. Finally, politicians on both sides will benefit by capitalizing on surges in nationalistic sentiment.

Actually, one of the motivations for such outbursts continues to be Japan's vacillating interpretations of its justification or guilt for having conquered its neighbors in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century to build an empire, among other issues. It would be daunting for any to argue that these disputes have promoted the long term foreign policy goals of the participants. If anything, domestic political dynamics appear to serve as a catalyst that intensifies the quarreling nations' political leadership's response to these disputes. One such dynamic appears to be declining popularity. If a political leader's popularity, be it former Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso or current South Korean president Lee Myung-bak, is sagging, a certain method to restore one's popularity is to launch a highly audible, intense and sustained verbal attack on one's neighbor for perceived inappropriate comments and/or claims rooted in the past.

A preliminary review of Japan-Korea relations since 1998 suggests that these disputes are often triggered by value judgments in Japanese textbooks or insensitive remarks uttered by conservative Japanese politicians. In many of these cases, Japan's right wing politicians attempt to exploit the perceived weakness of the prime minister to make comments certain to complicate Japan-Korea relations. In other cases, Japan's prime ministers, such as Abe Shinzo who in 2007 angered Chinese, Filipinos, Taiwanese and Koreans by questioning whether Asian women had been forced to work as "sex slaves" for the Japanese Imperial Army. He, like many of his predecessors, were compelled to apologize when angry neighboring nations recalled Japanese prior pledges. Such apologies date from Japan's Joint Communiqué with the Republic of Korea (1965) and the People's Republic of China in the 1970's. In the Korean communiqué, Japan stated that "past relations are regrettable, and Japan feels deep remorse." To China, Japan stated that it is "keenly conscious of the responsibility for the serious damage that Japan caused in the past to the Chinese people through war and deeply reproaches itself." Apologies for the content of textbooks began with Chief Cabinet Secretary Kiichi Miyazawa's August 26, 1982 apology, and have been repeated since. Similarly, numerous Japanese prime ministers and ministers have apologized for remarks Japan's neighbors consider offensive. The possible relationship between these apologies and a prime ministers' political support at the time merit careful scrutiny, but the general impression is that domestic political concerns were a key motivation for first condoning the missteps that necessitated the apologies.

But South Korea's political leadership is not innocent of similar politically motivated conduct. Since at least 1982, every South Korean president has felt compelled to capitalize on what the Korean public considers inappropriate characterization of Japan's imperial legacy. Usually Korea's political leaders, like their Japanese counterparts, felt compelled to lead the verbal charge against Japan in the hope of aligning themselves with aroused nationalistic sentiment and thus rally popular support to themselves. Most recently President Lee Myung-bak appears to have timed the first visit by a Korean president to Tokdo (Takeshima) Island with this in mind. First, in mid-July, Japan's Ministry of Education set the stage for a new clash over the island by authorizing a new textbook that claims the island for Japan. Lee, whose presidency began with an intense effort to put Korea-Japan relations on a firm track toward reconciliation and cooperation, has reversed himself. Instead of acting to calm the situation, he inflamed Korean nationalism and Japanese anger by visiting the island right after the Korean Olympic soccer team had defeated Japan for the bronze medal at the London Olympiad. The result has been a "perfect storm" for complicating Japan-Korea relations.

What did Korea and Lee gain from his unprecedented visit? Obviously it did not further Korea's national interests which are better served by bilateral cooperation with Japan such as signing a bilateral agreement to facilitate the exchange of intelligence about their mutual adversary North Korea. Korea has now postponed the signing. The trip will do nothing to improve the balance of trade between Tokyo and Seoul, which has long favored Tokyo. Nor did Lee's trip promote trilateral cooperation, a project China, Japan and South Korea have been forging during the past decade. Possibly motivating Lee were two much less important considerations: restoring his bona fides as a Korean patriot after having worked to improve relations with Japan and at the same time rallying popular support for his "lame duck" administration during his final months in office in the hope of ensuring himself a positive legacy

in Korean history. This suggests that the visit to the island was a publicity stunt similar to Russian President Medvedev's visit to the disputed Northern Territories.

President Lee's predecessors beginning with President Chun Doo-hwan (tenure 1980-87) have similarly pursued policies toward Japan that have altered between cooperation and condemnation. At the beginning of Chun's administration, he was despised for his authoritarian rule and harsh treatment of any and all critics. His criticism of Japanese textbooks in 1982 garnered him political support which deflected attention away from his authoritarian methods. He then moved to promote reconciliation with Japan by hosting the first ever modern Japanese prime minister's state visit to Seoul by Nakasone Yasuhiro. Ever since, Korean presidents have pursued policies toward Japan that vacillate, just like in Japan, between cooperation and confrontation. Whether the reasons for this are domestic political considerations still needs to be determined through systematic research. However, the impression, like that regarding Japan's approach to Korea, appears linked to domestic politics as much as any other possible factors.

These preliminary impressions suggest that at least Tokyo and Seoul, if not also China, are caught in a cycle of cooperation and confrontation defined by each nation's domestic politics. Politicians, regardless of whether they are Japanese or Korean, make comments to spark or seize on bilateral disputes over Japan's imperial legacy to further their own political fortunes by aligning themselves with the subsequent nationalistic outbursts. After each side has vented a verbal *tsunami* of emotionally charged nationalistic rhetoric, diplomats, at the behest of their political superiors, are called upon to calm the situation and to resume bilateral cooperation.

Given Japan's aspirations to play a leading role in forging regional cooperation in East Asia, its interests would appear to be best served by breaking this unproductive cycle. Obviously neither Japan nor its neighbors benefit from these outbursts of nationalism. Given Japan's potential, and stated policy of forging regional cooperation in East Asia, the government in Tokyo needs to formulate a consistent policy aimed at promoting regional cooperation. Frankly stated, Japan does not have such a policy. Rather, it has altered between repeated official apologies to its neighbors which are eventually undercut by "unofficial" contradictory words and deeds. For example, the Japanese government officially refuses to compensate claimants filing claims against it because of alleged ill treatment during Japan's imperial period. The government's official explanation is that all claims were settled by the 1952 Treaty of Peace. Yet the government has provided compensation when Japanese courts have ordered it to do so. This is but one example of perceived duplicity in Japan's official policy, a perception that greatly complicates Japan's efforts to put its imperial legacy behind it. It also convinces Japan's neighbors that official apologies are insincere, a particularly grievous allegation within the context of East Asian cultural values.

A number of apparent reasons suggest why Japan has been unable to forge a consistent policy of reconciliation with its neighbors. Japanese politicians are deeply divided into right and left wing camps. Those on the right believe that Japan was justified in building an empire and thus has nothing to apologize for while the left argues the contrary. This dueling erodes political party cohesion which contributes to either or both the political inability and reluctance of political leaders to take decisive steps toward forging a consistent policy of reconciliation similar to that achieved by Germany after World War II. If anything, Germany's misconduct under

Hitler was just as bad, possibly even worse than that of imperial Japan. But Germany, unlike Japan, early after the end of World War II determined to move forward into the future. This involved recognizing the former political leadership's misdeeds and consistently implementing a policy of reconciliation that ranged from official apologies to monetary compensation. Consequently, Germany today plays a leading role in the European Union.

In other words, Japan would do well to rise above the relatively petty arguments over disputed islands, relinquish its role in editing textbooks, a responsibility that has even deeply offended the people of Okinawa not to mention China and Korea, and stop attempting to rationalize prior misconduct. It also needs to revisit the issue of whether official visits to Yasekuni Shrine promote the Japanese people's welfare. If the emperor's and prime ministers' apologies about imperial Japan's legacy have been sincere, and there is every reason to believe that they are since, then the Japanese government's policies and deeds should be consistent with these apologies. Perceptions outside Japan are that there are major discrepancies between Japan's official words and its deeds.

This perception among Japan's neighbors is seriously impeding acceptance of Japan by its neighbors as a nation worthy of following into a new era of regional cooperation. Only after Japan has effectively erased this perception will prospects improve for Japan playing a leading regional role in East Asia. Otherwise, China, possibly with South Korea's active support, will seize the opportunity and move to become the leader of a regional organization.

For the Japanese people, the question is what will better serve their nation's future – clinging to the past or leading East Asia into a new era of regional cooperation? Only the Japanese people can answer this question.

Note: The historical material for this commentary was gathered from BBC News reports ([www.news.bbc.co.uk](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk)), the Columbia University encyclopedia ([www.answers.com](http://www.answers.com)), and the official web sites for the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs ([www.mofa.go.jp](http://www.mofa.go.jp)) and Republic of Korea ([www.mofat.ko.go](http://www.mofat.ko.go)).