

Korea-Japan: Enough is Enough!

by Ralph A. Cossa

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Enough is enough! Obviously, the political leadership in Tokyo and Seoul never learned the First Rule of Holes: when you find yourself in one, stop digging. Each side seems to be going out of its way to make a bad situation worse, even while providing private assurances that it won't let the situation get too far out of hand.

I wish I could be that confident. It's my perception that significant damage has already been done to public support for Korea-Japan relations in both countries, and it's getting worse by the day.

In all likelihood it is probably impossible to start making significant repairs until after upcoming elections: December in Korea and who knows (but probably sooner rather than later) in Japan. But the least they can do is stop making matters worse before the hole gets too deep.

There is plenty of blame to go around but it's clear that South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak's call for a public apology by the Japanese Emperor and his unprecedented trip last month to Dokdo Island unnecessarily upped the ante between Seoul and Tokyo, which also claims the ROK-occupied islets (which it calls Takeshima). Lee called the isolated rocks "a place worth sacrificing our lives to defend."

Defend against what? While Tokyo periodically restates its claim, it has never threatened to use force to recover Takeshima/Dokdo and has not sent warships into nearby waters or turned a blind eye to (if not encouraged) activists to land there, as China does periodically in the Senkaku/Daiyou islands. At least, not yet!

As Peter Ennis, in his *Toyo Keizai Dispatch notes*, the likelihood of an actual military conflict remains quite remote, despite the publishing of scenarios for "liberating" Takeshima by the sensationalist Japanese magazine *Asahi Geino*, but one fears it's only a matter of time before some activist group tries to "occupy" or plant a Japanese flag on Dokdo (which unlike the Senkakus has an armed garrison at the ready).

Tokyo's official response has been limited to strong statements of protest (including a National Assembly resolution condemning the Lee visit) and an idle threat to take the issue to the International Court of Justice (ICJ); idle because the Court will only take the case if both sides agree to using its dispute resolution services and Seoul has made it clear it will not. (From Seoul's perspective, there is no dispute – and why take the chance of losing something you already possess, regardless of how certain you are of your claim).

Why? Because the dispute, and other "issues left over from history," are increasing tensions to a level that could get out of control and are already damaging South Korea's – and Japan's and even America's – national security interests.

For example, Korean public opinion – inflamed by the media and assisted by the ham-handed approach the Lee government took toward the issue – has forced Seoul to walk away from the recently negotiated General Security of Military Intelligence Agreement (GSOMIA) and the equally sensitive (but sensible) military Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), both fairly routine agreements that would facilitate defense cooperation both with one another and with the United States. The real loser: South Korea, which would rely heavily on Japanese support (and US access to Japanese bases) if it was ever forced to deal with its real enemy, North Korea.

The most sensitive history issues involves the so-called "comfort women" – Korean (and Filipino, Indonesian, Chinese, and other, including even Japanese) women forced to become sexual slaves for the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II. For reasons known only to himself, President Lee tied his visit to Dokdo to this unresolved issue, making both matters worse and even more difficult to resolve.

Koreans complain that Japan has never acknowledged or apologized for this "crime against humanity." In truth, it has, many times. Most importantly, the Statement on the Result of the Study on the Issue of "Comfort Women" issued by Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono in 1993 acknowledged the involvement of the Japanese military in the "establishment and management of the comfort stations and the transfer of comfort women," who were "recruited against their own will" and "lived in misery . . . under a coercive atmosphere."

The Statement included both an acknowledgment of guilt and an apology: "Undeniably, this was an act, with the involvement of the military authorities of the day, that severely injured the honor and dignity of many women. The Government of Japan would like to take this opportunity once again to extend its sincere apologies and remorse to all those, irrespective of place of origin, who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women."

What it did not do was satisfy the South Korean people. Those who recall or acknowledge this statement – and most usually do not until reminded – dismiss it as "insincere." Nor did Tokyo offer official compensation, an action which would have helped counter the "insincerity" charge. (A private Asian Women's Fund was established by the Murayama government in 1995 but has since expired.)

Japanese frustration is growing. Late last week, Foreign Minister Gamba Koichiro said his government was now

“deciding how far we will go in the areas of culture, human exchange, and economy” in reaction to Seoul’s rejection of Tokyo’s ICJ mediation request. Meanwhile, the mainstream media is now joining conservatives in calling for a reassessment or renunciation of the Kono Statement. While Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko has “basically” reaffirmed the Statement, he has been accused (perhaps incorrectly) of feeding the argument that there is no hard evidence of direct Imperial Army or government involvement in the procurement of these women. *Let me be very blunt here: walking away from the Kono Statement will not only do irreparable harm to Japan-Korea relations, it will severely damage Japan’s international reputation and dwindling soft power.* Message to Tokyo: stop digging.

The controversy is also affecting serious debate within both countries. When the well-respected head of a South Korean research institute, Dr. Kim Tae-woo from the Korean Institute of National Unification, opined that South Korea might have to offer Japan some face-saving gesture in order to persuade Tokyo to recognize the ROK’s claim to Dokdo, he was attacked not just by the opposition but by his own prime minister, who insisted he be held accountable. Of course he should. He should be commended for doing what the head of a think tank is supposed to do: think!

Likewise, in Japan, when Defense Minister Morimoto Satoshi tried to downplay Lee’s visit to Dokdo as driven by Korean “internal politics,” he was accused of somehow honoring Seoul’s claim to the island. Calls for his resignation predictably followed. How on earth can we expect to have a sensible discussion between two countries when they can’t even debate the issue sensibly within either country?

There are press reports that Seoul, in keeping with a court ruling last year that the Lee administration’s failure to gain compensation and another apology was somehow “unconstitutional,” is going to suggest third-party mediation as a means of dealing with the comfort women issue, no doubt based on the assumption that Tokyo will reject this idea. But perhaps it’s time for Japan to take “yes” for an answer. The 1965 normalization agreement between Korea and Japan – which provided a significant aid package to the ROK in return for “shelving” the Dokdo/Takeshima debate and ending other wartime compensation claims – also calls for the creation of a mediation panel involving a third party when the two sides cannot resolve a bilateral dispute.

I have argued previously that as an ally and trusted friend of both Japan and South Korea, the United States is well situated to play the mediator role, but I understand Washington’s hesitation to jump into the middle of this mess. But other countries or individuals could credibly step forward if assistance is requested by both sides.

At the end of the day, what’s needed is political leadership in Tokyo that is courageous and forward thinking enough to reissue and without qualification reaffirm the Kono Statement, this time with a huge check attached.

For its part, Seoul must give some credible assurance that any future statement (and offer of compensation) will be accepted and appreciated. History did not end in 1945. Japan has been a great and supportive neighbor since that time and was instrumental in Korea’s rise as a rich and prosperous democratic nation today.

Seoul should also consider taking “yes” for an answer in response to Tokyo’s request for ICJ mediation over Dokdo, in order to settle this dispute once and for all, since it is apparently unwilling to keep it on the shelf and just quietly ignore Japanese periodic claims to the islets.

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