



Responses to PacNet #56 – Korea-Japan: Enough is Enough!

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I read “Korea-Japan: Enough is Enough!” (*PacNet* # 56, Sept. 4, 2012) with interest and some apprehension about the remarks on two issues; Takeshima Islands and the “so-called comfort women.” Let me help you better understand these issues as well as Japanese reactions to a series of provocations to Japan and our Emperor by President Lee Myung-bak and his government.

It is right to observe that a series of provocative rhetoric and deeds by President Lee has stirred Japanese anger and created unprecedented anti-ROK sentiments which your article has rightly described with an expression “Enough is Enough!” But it is not only the Japanese public but the entire Japanese government, including the otherwise appeasing Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and almost all political parties have been angered by the recent anti-Japan posture of the ROK.

On Aug. 24 and 29, the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors, respectively, issued formal resolutions strongly condemning President Lee’s remarks and deeds concerning the Takeshima Islands and the Emperor. The resolutions protested continued illegal and historically unjustifiable occupation by the ROK of the Takeshima Islands and condemned Lee’s provocative landing on them on Aug. 10. They demanded immediate cessation of the illegal occupation as well as an apology and revocation by Lee of rude remarks to the Emperor which he made Aug. 14. They urged the government of Japan to adopt a resolute attitude and take effective actions. While both resolutions stressed the ROK’s importance as a neighbor in terms of security and economy, they urged President Lee and his government to take wise and cool-headed measures. The resolutions of the Diet, the highest organ of the state, represent the Japanese people’s opinion and sentiment.

Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko echoed that thinking and Foreign Minister Genba Koichiro declared that “now is the time to change Japan’s long-practicing stance of treating the ROK with special considerations.” This means that the Japanese government will no more take an appeasing and low-profile posture, hitherto practiced in spite of ROK’s unfriendly, even aggressive, acts against Japan. Japan’s finance minister hinted that Japan may not renew the Foreign Currency Swap Arrangement with the ROK after it expires Oct. 31. (In this agreement, Japan agreed to grant the ROK, in case of a monetary crisis, the right to exchange Won with foreign currencies in Japanese reserves in an amount up to \$30 billion so that the ROK could resist a sharp devaluation of the Won as occurred during the Asian Financial Crises in 1997.)

It is no exaggeration to say that all of Japan is outraged. Anger and anti-ROK sentiments are evident among almost all Japanese across the political spectrum including intellectuals, incumbent and former diplomats as well as the media.

This strong reaction has been nurtured not only by President Lee’s provocative landing on the Takeshima Islands, but especially by the demand for an apology from our Emperor. Lee demanded that the Emperor visit each family of “victims” who fought against the Japanese occupation to present an apology if the Emperor “wants” to visit ROK. But it was President Lee himself who had invited the Emperor to visit the ROK in a face-to-face meeting during his visit to Japan in April 2008.

The Emperor has expressed deep regret and sorrow to a visiting ROK president. The fact is that although successive ROK presidents expressed their hope to realize the Emperor’s visit to the ROK, neither the government of Japan nor the Emperor has expressed an intention to have an imperial visit to the ROK. That would not be productive under current atmosphere in the ROK. Such a visit might produce unexpected adverse reactions from the Korean public, which in turn will engender strong anti-ROK feelings in Japan.

In the ROK, the Emperor is normally called the Japanese “King,” not the Emperor. Koreans want to downgrade the Japanese head of state and the symbol of Japan. All other countries refer to him as “Emperor,” including China. The Emperor made a successful official visit to China in 1992 after repeated requests from China and received a warm and due welcome. In the ROK, stones or eggs might be thrown at the Emperor, as occurred during the Emperor Showa’s visit to the UK and the Netherlands in 1971.

The average understanding of the “so-called comfort women” issue in the US is, in my view and that of most Japanese, misguided by Korean propaganda, which has been intensified by the actions of Korean Americans on US soil, although the issue has nothing to do with the US. Successive Japanese governments, while firmly insisting that the issue was finally and completely settled from a legal point of view with the conclusion of the Japan-ROK Treaty of 1965, expressed not only regrets but apologies to the former “comfort women.”

I served as Chief Cabinet Councilor for External Affairs (now called the Assistant Chief Cabinet Secretary) to Prime Minister Murayama Tomoichi and Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro; that position is a sort of foreign policy advisor and coordinator in the Cabinet Secretariat.

While taking the stand that the Japan-ROK Fundamental Treaty of 1965 settled all the legal issues once and for all, the GOJ worked hard to deal with the issue of “so-called comfort women” issue from both a moral and humanitarian stand

point. The Murayama administration established in 1995 the “Asian Women’s Fund” to address these concerns and the Fund collected monetary contributions from the public. I was one of the spearheads of the campaign. The subsequent Hashimoto administration decided to send to each “former comfort woman” 2 million yen as atonement payment and Prime Minister Hashimoto’s own letter with his words of sympathy and apology.

Former “comfort women” in the Philippines received atonement money and the PM’s letter and both governments decided to put the issue behind us. The Indonesian government declined to distribute money to the women concerned and, instead, asked Japan to help with the construction of social centers for senior women, a request that Japan honored. The Chinese government never raised the issue of “comfort women.”

In the ROK, tens of women accepted atonement money and the PM’s letter through the assistance of NGOs. However, they were afraid of possible criticism and aggression by radical elements in the ROK, and decided to keep silent, a request that the government of Japan and the Fund honored.

A minority of former “comfort women” in ROK, however, have continued radical protests not only against the government of Japan, but also the Fund. Every Wednesday, they gather and chant anti-Japanese slogans in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. This year they finally constructed a statue of a young “comfort woman” in a small public space in front of the Embassy. Far from preventing this act – which is against the spirit of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations – the ROK government allowed it in spite of official Japanese protests. These Koreans who have disturbed the normal functions of the Embassy want to humiliate Japanese. But it may backfire against Koreans who may be viewed as violating international rules.

If this was Japan, most Japanese, who highly value a sense of honor and dignity, would hate to be reminded openly and repeatedly by compatriots that some of our grandmothers were treated in that way. During the US occupation of Japan after WWII, many Japanese women volunteered to be “pan-pan” (prostitutes), in silence of course, to protect the chastity and dignity of other young Japanese women from becoming de facto “comfort women” for American GIs.

(By the way, the term “sexual slaves” that you use was invented by some Koreans and echoed in some international fora to dramatize and sensationalize the issue. The term is emotionally appealing and impresses some people. Government officials, scholars, and researchers are expected not to indulge in the use of this journalistically invented word which was never used until the late ‘90s.)

I was Chief Cabinet Councilor in the Murayama and Hashimoto administrations from mid-1995 to 1997. The so-called statement of Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei was made public before my assignment to the Cabinet. I worked hard to realize the objectives of the Asian Women’s Fund. I was also one of the officials assigned to explain and clarify the government’s stand. On several occasions, I appeared in Japanese Diet sessions. For example, during an interpellation session of the Budget Committee of the House of Councillors

in March, 1997, I responded, based on careful preparations with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Cabinet Secretariat, that the “so-called comfort women” was not a system legally established and that official Japanese inquiries into the matter failed to turn up any document that would prove coercive abduction of girls by the military or authorities. And yet I endorsed previous statements by government officials that elements of coercive acts were mentioned by women concerned during hearings. I added, however, that additional research had not been conducted to verify such testimony.

Mr. Cossa suggested that “a strong political leader in Tokyo that is courageous and forward thinking enough to reissue and without qualification reaffirm the Kono Statement...with a huge check attached in return for Seoul’s credible assurance that any future statement (and offer of compensation) will be accepted and appreciated.” This will not be feasible. First, no one in Japan will listen, and probably no one in the ROK, either. Second, the major objective of the surviving “comfort women” and their radical supporters is not just money but a legal settlement, which Japan considers complete in the Treaty of 1965. They stick to their demand for legal acknowledgement of forceful abduction by the military and legal compensation by the Japan’s government; their target is neither moral nor humanitarian compensation.

Over the years, many Japanese, including important politicians, Liberal Democrats, Democrats and others, and academics, have called for the revocation of the “Kono Statement” claiming that it is neither based on solid research nor facts. This voice has become stronger and attracts an increasing number of supporters among Japanese, in parallel with increased propaganda from Koreans and some foreigners.

In conclusion, I regret to say that we will have to wait a very long time to return to normalcy in our relationship with the ROK. Japanese have concluded that special considerations for and an appeasing posture toward the ROK have produced only more aggressive demands and deeds. Japanese have come to think, like Koreans and Americans, that Japan too has to protect its honor and dignity and that the country should not bend to unreasonable claims and demands.

Although President Lee allegedly said, on the sideline of APEC summit in Vladivostok, that his remarks about the Emperor had been “misquoted,” it impressed little in Japan. Unless and until Lee apologizes for his rude remarks about the Emperor, and remedies his deeds on the Takeshima Islands (which he cannot do given the emotional atmosphere in the ROK), the general feeling among Japanese, including government circles, will continue to be, that “enough is enough” and that “Japan may suffer from this, but the ROK will suffer more.” I sincerely hope, but without much optimism, that the new Korean administration would take our relationship more seriously into consideration.

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Republic of Korea President Lee Myung-bak’s trip to the Dokdo islets on Aug. 20 has triggered criticism from scholars

in Korea, Japan, the US, and beyond. From the Korean perspective, it should not be “news” that a Korean (and a Korean president) visited a territory that Koreans rightly claim as their own. Japan’s government and rightwing conservatives (believed to make up about 10 percent of the conservatives in the Japanese population) have used this opportunity to boost their low approval ratings in anticipation of forthcoming elections. Political scientists would view the harsh Japanese reaction as a move to normalize and reinforce its military. The United States is frustrated by the breakdown of relations between two of its key allies in the Asia-Pacific, resulting in a major setback to its strategy to rebalance to Asia and its strategic objective to contain China. [Editor’s note: This reflects the author’s opinion of US strategic objectives; containment of China is not a professed objective.]

Amidst the dispute over the Dokdo Islands, Japan is also being pushed into a corner by China over the dispute over Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands in the East China Sea and by Russia over the Kuril Islands/Northern Territories. As for the dispute over the Diaoyutai Islands, Taiwan has suggested taking the dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), a diplomatic strategy that Japan has repeatedly threatened to use against Korea. Caught with its own trick, Japan’s diplomatic isolation from its closest neighbors has prompted some in Washington to intervene and mediate the disputes by taking a stance on ownership of the islands.

The US faces a dilemma: it needs to be a moral and military stabilizer in the Asia-Pacific and a faithful ally to its closest partner, Japan – the United Kingdom to the US in Asia – which the US cannot neglect in the face of a rapidly expanding Chinese presence and influence. Yet Koreans have a historical trauma over the US-Japan conspiracy of the Taft-Katsura agreement in which tacit US support for Japan resulted in the 35-year colonization of the Korean Peninsula, the main source of Korea-Japan historical animosity.

Turning to the historical disputes between the ROK and Japan, the Japanese government has repeatedly claimed that official apologies have been sent via the Kono Statement in 1993, which acknowledged its crimes in the forceful mobilization of Korean women as sex slaves for Japanese soldiers, and the Murayama statement in 1995 in which Japan apologized for the invasion and colonization of the Korean Peninsula. The Koreans, however, are still frustrated by Japan’s words and actions evident in the Japan’s continuing claim over Dokdo, Japanese officials paying tributes to war criminals at Yasukuni Shrine, distortion of Japan’s past imperialism in history textbooks, and so forth. As a result, despite virtually all past Korean presidents’ inauguration pledge to open a cooperative and future-oriented Korea-Japan relationship, bilateral relations repeatedly face setbacks. Despite the Japanese government’s claims to have made official apologies, spontaneous and sporadic actions continue to frustrate the ROK and raise doubts as to the sincerity of Japanese apologies.

Japanese official statements of apologies and its promises to create cooperative future partnerships with Korea, China, and other victims of Japanese past imperialistic crimes must accordingly be 1) tested “over time” and 2) “accepted” by neighbors. Only when these two prerequisites are reflected in

its policies, can Japan, like Germany, successfully win the respect as a great power that it rightly deserves.

In this respect, President Lee’s trip to the Dokdo Islands will be a test case for whether the two key US allies can take their relations to a new level. As with the case of GSOMIA, the two countries cannot oppose the trend of tighter alignment. Lee’s visit to Dokdo is an opportunity to extract sources of potential conflict deeply rooted in bilateral relations, and to carve out a better relationship. In this respect, the Dokdo case can be a pivotal chance, rather than a crisis, for the three countries – Korea, Japan, and the United States – to enter a new trilateral alignment, or even an alliance. Korea-Japan relations have at times been underrated and at times overrated. Now is the time to test where the boundaries of Korea-Japan relations really are.

The ROK should also make sure that the bilateral relationship with Japan does not enter a path of no return. As major thriving democracies and dynamic economies, the two countries are capable of greater cooperation to contribute to peace and prosperity on a regional and global level. Koreans also should abandon their “pride of being the victim” and work to see Japan as it is, and continuously communicate with the Japanese by delivering Korean thoughts and feelings. The Japanese public, especially nongovernmental civil society groups, can also work to create public support for Japanese acknowledgements of historical atrocities.

Ralph Cossa (Ralph@pacforum.org) responds:

We are reprinting Hirabayashi-san’s response not because I am particularly sympathetic with his arguments and accusations – I most assuredly am not – but because they underscore the extent of Japanese frustration over Korea-Japan relations and reflect just how emotional and sensitive and seemingly intractable this issue has become on both sides.

I would agree that President Lee’s comments regarding the Japanese Emperor went too far and have made things worse. So too did the Diet resolutions. In both cases, they made a bad situation even worse. It was obvious to me during my just-concluded visit to Seoul that most Koreans (over 80 percent in a recent poll), including many who genuinely dislike President Lee, supported his Dokdo visit. But when his remarks about the Japanese Emperor are brought up, even his supporters privately cringe and recognize that his comments were ill-advised. They were not premeditated but in response to a press question; a question that would have been better left unanswered. But clearly the damage has been done.

But Japan risks doing more damage, not only to Japan-ROK relations but to its own image, if it continues its revisionist thinking regarding the comfort women issue. By the way, *Wikipedia* defines comfort women as “girls and women who were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military during World War II.” Secretary of State Hillary Clinton says she prefers the term “enforced sex slaves.” I will stand by my description and prescription.

If most Japanese “highly value a sense of honor and dignity” as he claims – and I believe most do – then they need to drop the legal arguments and disingenuous claims about a lack of evidence in the face of so many eye witnesses, and

find a more creative humanitarian approach to dealing with this issue. There are Japanese alive who participated in the process. These voices need to speak up if real healing is to ever begin.

As I acknowledged in my article, it is probably not realistic to expect the current leadership in either country to take the necessary steps to make the situation better – the well has been too poisoned and the issue has become too personalized – but it is long past time that both sides stopped making matters worse and for cooler heads to prevail. Young June Chung’s remarks provide a useful Korean counter-perspective and end with some positive forward-thinking comments, making me hopeful that the next generation of Koreans and Japanese will be more capable of moving beyond the past than is the current generation.

The good news is that things appear to be settling down. President Lee and Prime Minister Noda met informally along the sidelines of the APEC forum in Vladivostok, as did their foreign ministers, and all agree on the need to develop “future-oriented” relations. President Lee has also tried to step back from his comments about the Japanese Emperor, saying that his remarks were “distorted” and that what he really meant was that “a decision as bold as a visit by the emperor would be necessary to resolve pending issues in one go.” These are steps in the right direction. Let’s hope that future actions on both sides match these positive gestures.

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