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Takeshima/Tokdo - A Plea to Resolve a Worsening Japan-Korea Dispute

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On 16 February 2005, the Shimane Prefectural Assembly passed an ordinance designed to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Japan's assumption of control over Takeshima Island by establishing a "Takeshima Day." This exposed a fundamental problem in the relationship between Japan and South Korea and drew a severe response on the part of the South Korean people and government. On 17 February the South Korean government announced a shift in policy towards Japan in the unprecedented form of a statement from the Permanent Committee of its National Security Council.

The Takeshima/Tokdo problem is not a territorial dispute between sovereign states but a problem rooted in the historical relationship between the two countries. It has become clear that it is not a problem on which we can turn our backs, shelving it because of the recognition that it is contested. Since the problem arose, Japan's newspaper editorialists, major politicians and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have all tried to avoid argumentativeness, restraining themselves from language likely to worsen the confrontation and speaking of maintaining friendship and cooperation. However, the situation has already gone beyond the point where it might be resolved by such an attitude.

The Takeshima/Tokdo problem is different in character from the "Northern Islands" problem between Japan and Russia. As the two expansive empires encroached on the Ainu lands of the Kurile Islands and Sakhalin in the nineteenth century, Russia and Japan struggled with each other to claim as their own territory the areas they controlled. After World War Two, the Soviet Union took the whole of Sakhalin and the Kuriles as its own. Japan said that was going too far and asked to be given a share. There are conflicting interpretations of the justice of each side's claims, but in the simplest terms this is what happened. The final disposition of the islands remains contested and a source of Japan-Soviet conflict, but there is not at present a fundamental confrontation.

By comparison, the Takeshima/Tokdo problem involves a long-standing contest between Japan and Korea over some uninhabited and rocky islands. It was during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, that Japan gave the name Takeshima to the islands, and this became one link in the process of colonization by which all Korea was controlled, turned into a protectorate, and then assimilated. After Japan's wartime defeat and the independence of Korea, a January 1946 edict from US occupation forces commander MacArthur, excluded Takeshima from the area of Japanese sovereignty. This means that Korea became an independent state possessing territory that included Takeshima/Tokdo. The colonization and then the liberation of these rocky outcrops symbolized what had happened to Korea as a whole, north and south.

Consequently, it is difficult for Japan to counter the position stated by South Korean Unification Minister Chung Dong-young that Tokdo is "our land that was forcibly taken from us in the course of Japanese aggression and was returned to us with liberation." The Korean position is that if the Japanese government really means what it says when it expresses regret and apologizes over the harm and pain caused us by its colonial rule, then it has to concede its claim to sovereignty over Tokdo. There is no room for compromise on this.

The Japanese government attitude of clinging to the claim of Takeshima as "intrinsically Japanese," while shelving resolution of the problem for the time being and hoping for resolution by a change in the situation at some point in the future, amounts to averting our eyes from history. In that government attitude there most likely is an element of fear of the rise of nationalism in Japan. However, the more time passes, the more the Korean side's position as set out in the logical structure outlined above hardens, and for Japan to propose its sovereignty becomes ever more inflammatory, provoking an even more outraged response. If Japan were now to recognize South Korea's sovereignty over Tokdo, in a spirit of reflection and apology over its past colonial control, it may be that that would have some slight impact on the Korean people but, the more time passes, the less impact such a Japanese statement is likely to have on Korean opinion. The fact is that, in any event, there is absolutely no possibility of Japan gaining control of these islands either now or in the future.

That being so, we should take clear advantage of this opportunity for thoroughgoing discussions between the Japanese and South Korean governments on how to resolve the Takeshima/Tokdo problem, hold a straightforward discussion and build a consensus among the Japanese people to accept it. On the Korean side, most likely there is a feeling that Tokdo is not something to be discussed with Japan. But if Japan is to be "a partner in the realization of the peace and security of Northeast Asia," is it not necessary to try to persuade the Japanese people that Tokdo must be recognized as Korean territory, for the sake of Japan itself and for the sake of Japan-Korean cooperation?
Discussions at various levels are called for, including especially those of academic specialists. Shimane Prefectural University has a Northeast Asia Research Center, a prefectural think tank for the promotion of regional cooperation. It is an astonishing contradiction for the prefectural assembly to have promoted a resolution showing such ignorance of history and so lacking in diplomatic sensitivity. The truth is, however, that all Japan is caught in this same contradiction. In such a situation, if we go forward by discussion it should still be possible to change the situation.

Needless to say, there is no way that the East Asia Community or the Common House of Northeast Asia can be accomplished while three territorial disputes continue, including with Russia over the "Northern Islands" and with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. I make one final plea. I understand the righteous anger of the Korean people and believe demonstrations expressing it are natural. I also understand that all of this is linked to memories of a painful past under the Japanese flag. However, burning the Japanese flag is something that amounts to rejection of Japan as a whole. I beg you to refrain from this.

Also, according to some reports, the Korean government is taking the position of seeking compensation for three categories of victim not covered by the Japan-ROK Normalization Treaty [of 1965]: "comfort women," Koreans abandoned in Sakhalin in 1945, and Korean atomic bomb victims. Although there is dispute over the "comfort women" problem, the Japanese government has made considerable efforts on behalf of the Koreans abandoned in Sakhalin and the bomb victims. Moreover, these efforts have been recognized by the victims. Therefore, I beg you to give due recognition to the steps taken on these two matters.

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Please refer to the two accompanying Japan Focus articles on Tokdo/Takeshima and Japan-South Korea conflict.

Japan Focus, Takeshima/Tokdo and the Roots of Japan-Korea Conflict

and

Kosuke TAKAHASHI, Japan-South Korea Ties on the Rocks

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