

## **Territorial dispute boils again, straining Japan-South Korea ties** **Rivalry returns despite threat of North Korea**

- Jeremy Kirk, Chronicle Foreign Service  
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**Seoul** -- As Japan struggles to assuage angry protesters in China, its relations with South Korea have sunk to a new low after a long-simmering territorial dispute erupted again, threatening to spoil a tenuous rapprochement between the two countries.

The ruckus started, ironically, with an undiplomatic remark earlier this year during a ceremony to mark this year as Korea-Japan Friendship Year.

At what would have been a sleepy press event about the yearlong friendship festival, Japanese Ambassador Toshiyuki Takano asserted that the Tokdo islands -- two small, craggy peaks in the Sea of Japan that are claimed by both countries -- are "historically and legally Japan's territory. "

In response, South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun threatened the possibility of "diplomatic war" in an open letter posted on his Web site if Japan did not atone for the 1910-1945 occupation of Korea and stop claiming the Tokdo islands as its territory.

The animosity over the islands runs so deep that Koreans have staged violent protests outside the Japanese Embassy throughout March and April, burning flags and tussling with riot police. In some of the more gruesome events, a 61-year-old woman and her 43-year-old son each cut off one of their fingers in a bloody tribute to Korea's claim, promising to send the flesh to Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. A few days later, Heo Gyeong Wuk, whose father was forced to serve in Japan's colonial military, set himself on fire in front of the Japanese Embassy, suffering serious burns.

In the West, the protests may seem an inexplicable display of self-mutilation. But for Koreans, they are a measure of the country's ardent nationalism and intense rivalry with Japan.

"The Koreans have always ... been extremely careful to protect their own (territory) because they are surrounded," said Don Oberdorfer, author of "The Two Koreas." "They are extremely sensitive to any sense of encroachment."

Japan has long asserted a claim to what it calls the Takeshima islands. South Korea has occupied them since the 1950s and keeps a small police force stationed there.

Economically, the islands -- comprising a mere 43 acres -- are of value mainly for the fishing rights to the surrounding waters. But emotionally, they mean much more to both North and South Korea. Although 60 years have passed since the Japan ended its colonial rule over Korea, the psychological wounds of that occupation run deep.

Koizumi's expression of remorse over his country's invasion of its neighbors and wartime atrocities, expressed Friday during the Asia-Africa summit in Indonesia, apparently failed to mollify Seoul. South Korean Prime Minister Lee Hae Chan spoke out at the summit against Japan's bid to become a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, saying, "A country that distorts history by glossing over the colonial past and hiding their misdeeds . . . will not be able to free itself from the shackles of the past."

He added that "remorse over the past must be genuine and must be put into action."

Even before the latest uproar, South Korea was reassessing its relations with Japan. At the end of last year, legislators passed a law to reopen investigations of those who collaborated with the Japanese during the occupation, a painful purge supported by Roh's administration. And earlier this year, hundreds of pages of documents covering the 1965 treaty that normalized diplomatic relations with Japan were made public. Under the treaty, which settled all claims regarding the occupation, South Korea agreed to some \$800 million in grants and loans and gave up its right to any future claims.

Those disclosures may have stoked public animosity toward Japan because only a few victims of Japan's occupation received compensation. Instead, former President Park Chung Hee channeled the funds to budding industries that later contributed to South Korea's explosive growth.

The dispute comes at a time when ties between Korean and Japanese companies have blossomed. Samsung Electronics and Sony signed a deal last year to produce liquid crystal display screens for flat screen televisions in Korea and shipped the first flat screens on Monday. Korean culture is also increasingly popular in Japan. Korean actor Bae Yong Joon, star of the soap opera "Winter Sonata," is a heartthrob for middle-age Japanese women, and Japanese tourists flock to Korea for its stylish yet economical shopping.

The two countries also have strategic reasons to remain on good terms. Both are keenly aware of the threat from North Korea, which admitted in February to producing nuclear weapons. North Korea has tried to capitalize on the anti-Japanese feeling raging in South Korea and China; earlier this month, its foreign ministry labeled Japan a "political dwarf" and called for it to withdraw from six-nation disarmament talks with Pyongyang.

Some experts worry that the diplomatic spat will jeopardize Japanese- Korean diplomatic

initiatives.

"To harp on the past and cultivate a sense of national victimhood creates warped perceptions and bad choices," said Aidan Foster-Carter, a Korea research fellow at the University of Leeds in England. "Many young South Koreans dislike Japan and the U.S., but like North Korea and China. Is this wise? That is what happens when gut feeling trumps cool, rational calculation."

But such arguments matter little to South Koreans affronted by Japan's territorial claims. "It makes us more passionate because we had our country taken away by Japan in the past," said Park Song Tae, a 35-year-old resident of Seoul. "It violates our sovereignty when Japan insists it is their land."

Page A - 3

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