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Island dispute weighs down ties

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SEOUL — South Korean protesters are so angry at Japan these days that some are cutting off their fingers in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul to make a point.

South Korea scrambled F-5 fighters to chase away a Japanese television crew flying a single plane over a 400-mile-wide stretch of open sea that separates the two nations.

In addition, South Korea's National Security Council met yesterday as if it were preparing for war against Japan, with Chung Dong-young, a Cabinet minister, appearing on national television afterward to read a statement:

"The recent series of actions by Japan makes us wonder whether Japan has an intention to coexist with its neighbors as a peaceful force in Northeast Asia," Mr. Chung said.

A somewhat befuddled Japan has responded by urging South Korea to inject a bit of perspective into the dispute.

At stake are two tiny volcanic rock outcroppings about midway between the two nations, but slightly closer to South Korea.

"We should deal with the situation in a forward-looking manner by considering how to develop friendship and overcoming emotional conflicts," Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi told reporters.

"There are issues of history [to deal with], but we should not be mired in the past."

The dispute centers on two tiny islands — known as Tokdo in South Korea and Takeshima in Japan.

The dispute erupted last month at what should have been a sleepy foreign press event in Seoul, hosted by Japanese Ambassador Toshiyuki Takano to mark a yearlong friendship festival between the two historical enemies.

Prompted by a reporter's question, Mr. Takano said the islands are "historically and legally Japan's territory" — a position long maintained by Tokyo.

Economically, the islands — with a total area of 43 acres — are somewhat valuable because of fishing rights under international law in the waters around them.

South Korea backs its claim by stationing policemen on the islands, maintaining a presence that goes back to 1950.

One Korean man lived on one of the islands for about a decade, but there are no permanent civilian residents.

Emotionally, the islands mean much more to North and South Korea — with both still nursing

psychological wounds from Japan's 1910-1945 colonization of the Korean Peninsula — than they do to Japan.

"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. We are not happy with their government's attitude on the issue."

On Monday, 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, vowing to send the flesh to Mr. Koizumi.

On Tuesday, a man wearing a headband and a shirt with "Korea" written on it made a weak attempt to disembowel himself in front of the embassy.

To Westerners, such protests represent an inexplicable display of self-mutilation.

But for Koreans, the moves are indicative of their nationalism and intense rivalry with Japan.

"The Koreans have always, to an extent that they could be, been extremely careful to protect their own [territory] because they are surrounded," said Don Oberdorfer, Korea specialist and author of "The Two Koreas."

"They are extremely sensitive, I think, to any sense of encroachment."

The ante was upped Wednesday when a state government in Japan passed a bill declaring Feb. 22 as "Takeshima Day."

The Japanese government, which justifies its ownership of the islands in a three-page statement on its Foreign Ministry Web site, has said it is powerless to stop the actions of the Shimane prefecture.

The fracas goes hand in hand with the latest of many self-reflective periods for South Korea during its 40 years of diplomatic relations with Japan.

South Korea passed a law late last year to reopen investigations into those who collaborated with the Japanese, a painful purge supported by South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun's administration.

Earlier this year, hundreds of pages of documents were released covering the 1965 treaty that normalized diplomatic relations with Japan.

Under the treaty, South Korea accepted \$800 million in grants and loans with a clause that halted any future claims.

Only a few victims of Japan's atrocities received compensation.

In a hard-wrought decision, then President Park Chung-hee channeled the funds to budding industries that later contributed to South Korea's explosive growth.

In recent times, ties between Korean and Japanese companies have blossomed. Samsung Electronics and Sony Corp. have a joint agreement to produce liquid crystal display screens for flat screen televisions in South Korea.

Although South Korean companies have made gains on Japanese electronic manufacturers, they still import many small components from Japan, resulting in a trade deficit.

Amid history's dirty laundry, South Korean culture never has been more popular in Japan.

South Korean actor Bae Yong-joon, star of a soap opera called "Winter Sonata," is a heartthrob of middle-age Japanese women.

Kimchi, a spicy pickled dish, has its largest export market in Japan.

Japanese tourists flock to Seoul and other South Korean cities to shop and sightsee.

The Japanese government remains silent, although Mr. Takano left for Tokyo since the issue erupted.

South Korea dispatched F-5 fighters to the Tokdo islands last week when a plane with a Japanese television crew requested permission to fly in the nearby air space. The request was denied.

The question remains whether cooling relations with Japan really benefits South Korea. Both countries face an imminent military threat from North Korea, which admitted Feb. 10 to producing nuclear weapons.

While both Seoul and Tokyo remain ready to engage in six-nation nuclear disarmament talks with the North, the island dispute remains a sore spot in a strengthening bilateral relationship.

"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," he said.

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