



Responses to PacNet #47 – Korea-Japan: Time for Outside Mediation?

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America's two closest allies in Asia are engaged in a heated territorial dispute that threatens to undermine regional stability and long-term US strategic interests. Given the stakes, some call on Washington to take a more direct role in mediating a diplomatic solution between South Korea and Japan over the Takeshima/Dokdo islets. As the "senior ally" and security guarantor of both parties, the US is in a unique position to encourage a positive outcome to the dispute.

But a more prominent US intervention in this crisis poses significant risks that should give pause to the Obama administration before it considers weighing in. The only thing worse than the current state of affairs would be for the United States to become embroiled in a bilateral dispute freighted with emotional domestic politics. However well-intentioned, Washington should resist the urge to intervene in the Takeshima/Dokdo dispute unless a real threat of conflict between South Korea and Japan is imminent—a point that remains a long way off.

The first question when considering US intervention in this case is whether Washington has the ability to mediate a solution between Seoul and Tokyo. The United States has a long history of mediating conflicts but this seems to have become a lost art of late. Take the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, arguably one of America's top diplomatic priorities. Over the course of numerous administrations, the US has tried and failed to reach a breakthrough in the peace talks and, as symbolized by the resignation of George Mitchell as President Obama's special envoy for Middle East peace, appears increasingly stymied by the lack of progress.

Successful mediation requires creativity, patience and, perhaps most of all, consistent top-level attention that is seldom available given the demands of today's presidencies. Would the Takeshima/Dokdo dispute merit this focused attention? At this point, it would have to compete with other pressing issues, from turmoil in the Middle East to the global economic crisis—not to mention an upcoming presidential election. There is little point in intervening in a dispute that Washington is unprepared to fully take on right now.

Another key question is whether the United States could remain an impartial arbiter between South Korea and Japan. Washington could be portrayed as favoring one side despite its best efforts to be seen as neutral. Pressure on one side to make a concession would likely be seen as unfair by the consenting party and could cost the United States its credibility as an honest broker. Even if the US were to take great pains to be seen as neutral, its actions would be susceptible to

misinterpretation by the media as well as emotionally charged constituents in both countries.

The consequences could be dire. Not only could this fan the flames of conflict between South Korea and Japan but it could also lead to significant blowback against the United States and its diplomatic standing. In trying to mediate a conflict between its allies, Washington could push them further apart—or worse, jeopardize the foundations of its alliances by enraging publics in South Korea and/or Japan.

Barring the imminent threat of conflict, these risks are not worth taking. But that does not mean the United States should remain completely on the sidelines of the Takeshima/Dokdo dispute. Washington should continue to quietly encourage both sides to resolve their differences peacefully and diplomatically. All efforts should be made to contain the dispute and keep it from spilling over into other areas of Korea-Japan relations, such as commercial trade and cooperation in multilateral institutions such as APEC and the ASEAN Plus Three.

At the top level, President Obama should make the case to his counterparts in Seoul and Tokyo that the process of reconciliation begins with bold leadership at home, and that it is time for them to move beyond territorial disputes to forge a closer bilateral relationship for the future. In the final analysis, that is the only path out of the current crisis, and one that the United States would be better off treading on lightly, if at all.

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One of the reasons Americans are having trouble figuring out why Korea and Japan are suddenly at each other's throats over relatively obscure historical issues is because the US government does not print school textbooks. Although Washington has exercised a high hand in attempting to influence moral and emotional issues in textbooks, they are still under the authority of states and even local school systems. Money is the means by which Washington attempts to control. But there is no comparison to the direct control and influence that Japanese and Korean governments have on textbook content.

Therefore, Korean and Japanese textbooks reflect 'official' sentiments, attitudes and can be used to foster any given political or social agenda, the Japanese did exactly this during its occupation of Korea with an aim to eradicate Korean culture and eventually ran into conflict with Christian educators in Korea.

Basically, the Koreans are doing the same thing today, only with a different aim. Thus, both Korea and Japan are using official textbooks to advance their view of contentious subjects.

Given the fact that both countries are relatively small in size and population, perhaps such central governmental control is inevitable. However, given the enormous wealth, productivity and technical advancements of both countries, and given the fact the United States is in the middle of it, what would otherwise be tossed off as 'there they go again' fighting over rocks, becomes a big problem. Little things like armies, billions of dollars, trade, etc. are hanging on the emotions of events that are almost a hundred years old. And being cynically used to manipulate a ridiculous resurgence of ancient nationalism that could undo 60 years of progress, I humbly propose one short-term proposal on the comfort women issue and the Dokdo issue, and one long-term proposal on the whole thing

If it is true that Korea agreed in the 1965 treaty of normalization with Japan to accept a flat reparations fee, they should stick with that, because Japan was forced to surrender unconditionally in World War II, with two cities lying in atomic smoke. Japan got a lot, but it also lost a lot; like the empire across Asia they brutally imposed. It lost China, Manchuria, etc. Japan also lost Korea and Dokdo; regardless of the argument whether they had a legal claim to the rocks in the first place. The United States government does not have to take sides. All it has to do is recognize the agreements and arrangements put into place after World War II, Dokdo going to Korea, and the 1965 Normalization Treaty with Japan. The US doesn't have to molly-coddle Japan or Korea. We are acting like parents who are afraid to enforce the well-known laws of the household. That is the short-range solution.

The long-range solution lies with the woman of Japan, Korea, and China. Take a page from America: we have the Daughters of the American Revolution; The Daughters of the Confederacy; The Daughters of the Eastern Star; Catholic Women; Protestant Women of America; The Mayflower Society, Mothers Against Drunk Driving; Mothers of America.; Descendants of Slavery; The NAACP; The Civil Rights Union, etc.; The Slave Descendants of Thomas Jefferson; the ACLU; Planned Parenthood.

Let the private organizations of Japanese Mothers for Asian Reconciliation get started and meet with descendants of Nanking; Korean Mothers for Peace; Chinese Mothers for Mercy, Forgiveness and Justice; Asian Mothers for Hope Prosperity and Reconciliation.

The real test of a democracy is free speech and freedom of religion. As long as the politicians insist on controlling the conversation, manipulating public opinion and punishing those who don't cooperate, the future of East Asia will slow down and possibly get back onto a small path long forgotten, but still there, that could plunge everybody back into a quagmire of violence.

If older Japanese and Koreans and Chinese have forgotten the horror of raging tuberculosis, third degree burns, starvation and shock, I have not. I saw it at age 15. I can never forget. There are no victors in chaos.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.