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By Michael Weinstein

Through mid-April and into May, the already tense relations between Seoul and Tokyo moved closer to the breaking point when Japan began to implement its plan to conduct a maritime survey around the islets of Dokdo/Takeshima, which are controlled by South Korea and are claimed as sovereign territory by both states.

In response to the dispatch of Japanese research vessels, Seoul sent twenty gunboats to Dokdo/Takeshima in order to prevent the survey. As the two sides edged toward confrontation, rhetoric escalated and nationalist public opinion was mobilized, particularly in South Korea. A round of diplomacy resulted in a temporary stand-down, but the patchwork agreement was followed by a hardening of positions that does not bode well for a permanent solution to the dispute.

A Japanese photograph of the islets

The conflict between Seoul and Tokyo over Dokdo/Takeshima is a textbook case of a modern territorial dispute between two nation-states. The islets -- called Dokdo by the South Koreans and Takeshima by the Japanese -- lie between the two countries in the Sea of Japan (the East Sea for the Koreans), closer to South Korea. Both sides present elaborate legal-historical arguments to support their claims to the islets and value the waters and seabed around them for their rich fisheries and potential reserves of natural gas and minerals. For both sides, the dispute has been inflated by and entangled in nationalist sentiments and ideology, which are exploited by politicians and pose obstacles to compromise.

The familiar modern mix of historical, geoeconomic and ideological elements in the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute points to the failure of the Northeast Asian states to achieve effective regional integration. Analysts note that Northeast Asia has enjoyed relative stability since the Korean War by virtue of the U.S. military presence, which has balanced Beijing and Pyongyang, and has muted conflict between

Seoul and Tokyo in deference to their protector.

As Washington's influence has been eroded by doubts about its effectiveness and commitment, Seoul and Tokyo both feel the need to assert their interests more independently, resulting in appeals to underlying nationalism. Lacking regional institutions that might mediate conflict, the Northeast Asian states face each other starkly and are constrained to manage contingencies bilaterally. Most importantly, Tokyo and Beijing have not forged the kind of combine that Paris and Berlin have formed to promote stability in post-World War II Europe. The two major Northeast Asian players are competitors in a traditional balance-of-power game.

It is in the perceived interests of both Seoul and Tokyo to restore their relations and certainly not to damage them further. Within the complex web of interdependent and competitive relations that characterize Northeast Asia's power configuration, Seoul and Tokyo cooperate to maintain their economic relationship, contain and roll back Pyongyang's nuclear threat, and resist Beijing's bid for regional hegemony. Those shared interests work to override temptations to escalate the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute, yet there are countervailing factors that keep the tensions in play.

The near confrontation over the maritime survey and its acrimonious aftermath have revealed suspicions in Seoul that Tokyo has its own expansionist ambitions, and sentiment in Tokyo that Japan needs to be a more assertive player in the region. As the Seoul-Tokyo rift opened up, the possibility appeared -- still with a low probability -- that Seoul might choose to back away from Tokyo and forge closer relations with Beijing and Pyongyang, and that Tokyo would decide not to make the concessions required to prevent such a reorientation.

Dimensions of the Dokdo/Takeshima Dispute

A chain of small volcanic outcroppings, Dokdo-Takeshima is uninhabited, except for a South Korean fisherman and his wife who moved to one of the islets recently in support of Seoul's claim to the territory. The waters surrounding the islets have been fishing grounds exploited by Koreans and Japanese for centuries, leading to periodic confrontations. In the present flare-up, Korean nationalists have noted with pride how Korean fisherman Ahn Yong-Bok repelled Japanese competitors in 1693.

The proximate cause of the current dispute is the failure of the U.S. drafters of the peace settlement ending World War II in the Pacific to award sovereignty over the islets to either South Korea or Japan. In 1954, Seoul took control of Dokdo/Takeshima and has stationed coast guard patrols there ever since. Tokyo has never accepted that fait accompli and has repeatedly stated its desire to have sovereignty determined by an international court, which Seoul has determinedly resisted. Due to a common strategic interest in satisfying Washington, Seoul and Tokyo let the dispute lie relatively dormant until 2005, when Tokyo allowed Japanese claims to surface, setting off a chain of responses and counter-responses that have led to the present impasse.

Into the gap left by the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty, Seoul and Tokyo have rushed in with their competing claims to ownership of Dokdo/Takeshima. Tokyo bases its case on the 1905 annexation of the islets by Shimane Prefecture, which the Japanese claim was done to secure control over fisheries. Seoul counters that its ownership is proximately based on a 1900 edict by Joseon Dynasty Emperor Gojong that asserted control over the territories, and argues that Japan's 1905 annexation was the first step in Tokyo's takeover of Korea as a colony from 1910 through 1945.

Tokyo's case is simple: the islets were unclaimed territory before the 1905 annexation, which

established Japan's right of possession. Seoul's brief is much more elaborate, tracing Korean control over the islets to the sixth century A.D. and noting that the conflict over fisheries in the waters around them in the seventeenth century was resolved in 1696 when Japan recognized Korean control and the Tokugawa Shogunate issued a ban on Japanese fishing in the area.

The strategies of the two sides in advancing their claims are determined by the fact that Seoul controls the islets. As the power that wants to maintain the status quo, South Korea -- until the present impasse -- has resorted to "low-key diplomacy" in an effort to keep the dispute from escalating to the point at which pressures would appear to have it resolved by an international body. Tokyo, in contrast, has nothing to lose and has pressed for a judicial settlement. During the post-war period, bilateral negotiations on Dokdo/Takeshima failed to produce a resolution to the dispute, and it simmered beneath the surface until 2005.

South Korean troops on Dokdo

The dispute flared up when, on March 15, 2005, Shimane Prefecture passed a law declaring February 22 as Takeshima Day. In response, on March 17, Seoul reformulated its doctrine of relations with Tokyo, declaring that the latter's claim to the islets was not simply a standard territorial dispute, but an attempt by Japan to deny its colonial past. On April 6, Seoul followed up by filing an official protest with Tokyo over the description of the islets as Japanese territory in Japanese high school textbooks.

Tensions escalated to a new level on March 29, 2006, when a Japanese Education Ministry report revealed that Tokyo had ordered textbook publishers to describe the islets as Japanese territory in 2005. The revelation was followed on April 14 by Tokyo's announcement of its maritime survey, which triggered the present troubles.

Shimane activists hail Takeshima Day

The classical territorial dispute over Dokdo/Takeshima is complicated by a closely related geoeconomic conflict over the waters and seabed surrounding the islets. Both Tokyo and Seoul claim Exclusive Economic Zones (E.E.Z.) in the Sea of Japan/East Sea that overlap around the islets. An E.E.Z., which extends 200 nautical miles beyond a state's territorial waters, allows its possessor special rights to explore for and exploit maritime resources.

The failure of Tokyo and Seoul to reach an agreement on their E.E.Z.s takes on geoeconomic significance because of the fisheries in the area and the reserves of gas hydrates (partially frozen natural gas) -- estimated at 600 million tons -- in the seabed. A 1999 agreement between Japan and South Korea did not demarcate boundaries, but created a zone around Dokdo/Takeshima in which the Japanese had fishing rights along with Koreans; the question of the seabed was left unresolved.

In a bid to get an edge in control over the seabed, Tokyo, in 1978, registered Japanese names for its features with the International Hydrographic Organization (I.H.O.). As the territorial dispute over the islets heated up, Seoul announced early

in 2006 that it intended to submit a set of Korean names for the seabed features at the I.H.O. conference in June 2006. Tokyo reacted with its planned survey, claiming that it was necessary in order to build its case for retaining the present names. Tokyo noted that Seoul had conducted surveys for three decades and that Japan was within its rights to perform its own.
Seoul has already formulated plans to exploit the seabed, leaving Tokyo at a disadvantage. The Japanese survey ships were reported to have the capability of exploring for minerals, which added to Seoul's resistance to Tokyo's move.

Whereas Seoul is aggrieved by Tokyo's challenge to its control over Dokdo/Takeshima, Tokyo is aggrieved by Seoul's challenge to the current denomination of the seabed features. Nonetheless, there would be a genuine possibility for compromise were it not for the injection of nationalism into the dispute.
In a pair of prescient reports in 2005, PINR senior analyst Erich Marquardt argued that Tokyo's assertiveness on Dokdo/Takeshima and similar disputes with Beijing and Moscow was grounded in a decision by Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (L.D.P.) administration to move toward remilitarization in the face of doubts about the reliability of Washington's military protection, and the rising power of Beijing. In order to gain popular support for the contemplated reorientation, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's government fanned nationalist sentiment, including irredentist appeals. Marquardt warned that Tokyo risked severe tensions with Seoul if it pressed its claims too aggressively, which is just what has happened. [See: "The Importance of Strong Relations Between Japan and South Korea" (http://www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view_report&report_id=286) and "Japan's Nationalism Risks its Power Position in East Asia" (http://www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view_report&report_id=289)]

The dispatch of the survey vessels set off a firestorm of nationalist anger in South Korea that forced the government of President Roh Moo-hyun to link the territorial and geoeconomic dimensions of the dispute to deep resentments against and fears of Japan that are widespread in South Korea's public. The essence of the South Korean reaction was captured by South Korea's Secretary for Public Information Lee Baek-man: "Exactly 100 years after its occupation of Korea, Japan is again attempting to rob us of our history. The key to the Dokdo issue is the liquidation of the war of the Japanese imperialists' aggression. In that sense, Dokdo stands at the center of our efforts to rectify a history distorted by a war of aggression."

Activists support South Korean claims to Dokdo

Although it is clear that Roh and his administration played a part in fomenting the nationalist reaction, its severity can only be explained by deep-rooted sentiments, which -- once they were released -- have taken on a life of their own, pushing Roh toward an uncompromising hard line, centering on the demands that Japan atone for its imperial past and surrender unequivocally all claims to its former colonial territories.

In a rare show of unity, South Korea's National Assembly voted 241-0 in support of a hard line on Dokdo-Takeshima, linking the dispute to visits by Japanese political leaders to the Yasukuni Shrine, where some World War II war criminals are buried, and to new Japanese textbooks that deny Japanese war guilt in

addition to describing Dokdo/Takeshima as Japanese territory.

Linkage of the dispute to the "historical issue" is shared by South Korea's political class and its general public, and has made any compromise difficult to achieve in the short term. Roh has stated that there is no basis for cultural and economic exchanges between South Korea and Japan until the latter repents for its colonial past, and has called Tokyo a greater threat to regional stability than Beijing and Pyongyang.
Popular manifestations of anti-Japanese sentiment range from demonstrations by nationalist groups through a "Save Dokdo" video game, in which players repel a Japanese invasion of the islets, to acts of political theater, such as a beekeeper releasing 180,000 bees as he stomped on a Japanese flag and was stung 200 times.

Nothing approaching the same intensity has occurred in Japan, where some opposition politicians and segments of the public have criticized the Koizumi administration for imprudence, and the government's line has been that South Korea should get over the past, move on and be "forward looking."

It is too early to tell whether the L.D.P.'s nationalist tactics will backfire, but it is clear that they have placed Tokyo on the defensive and have rendered its strategy of making Dokdo/Takeshima simply a territorial dispute untenable.

The Conflict Escalates

As the Japanese survey ships moved to Shimane Prefecture and Seoul dispatched its flotilla to interdict them, a confrontation involving coercion became a genuine possibility. South Korea's opposition Grand National Party (G.N.P.) urged a hard line, legislators in Seoul called for scrapping the 1999 fisheries agreement, Pyongyang threatened "catastrophic consequences" if Tokyo conducted its survey and called for a united front with Seoul on Dokdo/Takeshima, and nationalist groups stepped up their demands that the islets remain under South Korea's control "at any cost."

Faced with a nationalist blow up in South Korea, Tokyo was ready to enter a round of diplomacy. Roh's Uri Party administration also was not prepared for a confrontation and the two sides entered negotiations in Seoul on April 21 and 22 that led to a provisional agreement, in which Tokyo agreed to suspend the survey in return for Seoul promising not to submit Korean names for the seabed features at the June I.H.O. meetings. Both sides agreed to meet before May 31 to negotiate the boundaries of their E.E.Z.s.

Although it prevented an immediate confrontation, the April 22 agreement was not received favorably in South Korea where it was perceived as a concession to Japan. Under heavy pressure from the public and substantial sectors of the political class, Roh repositioned Seoul's policy toward Japan in a major speech on April 25, in which he abandoned "quiet diplomacy" and "the policy of neglect," and charged Tokyo with denying South Korea's "full liberation and independence." Adopting the hard line rhetoric of the nationalist groups, Roh promised to keep Dokdo/Takeshima under South Korean control "at any expense or sacrifice" and demanded atonement from Japan for its colonial past.

Roh's declaration of a new assertive stance was followed up by a series of concrete measures by the South Korean government, most notably the formation of an inter-agency task force on May 3 that was charged with pursuing an international diplomatic offensive to advance Seoul's claims, proceeding with submission of Korean names for the seabed features, and drawing up a plan for exploitation of maritime resources. On May 4, Seoul announced that it was allocating US$36.54 million for developing the seabed resources and on May 5 it reaffirmed its intention to register Korean names for the seabed as "an indisputable

right that cannot be put up for negotiation."

In response to Roh's speech and anticipating implementation of Seoul's new assertive policy, Japan's foreign ministry announced on April 6 that Tokyo would not accept South Korea's "actual control" of Dokdo/Takeshima, declaring it an "illegal occupation." Tokyo, which had previously been urging negotiations -- including a resumption of summit meetings between Roh and Koizumi, which Seoul had canceled in 2005 -- had now opted for its own hard line, leaving the adversaries further apart than they had been before Tokyo's survey initiative.

It is too early to tell whether or not the rhetoric will cool down and the adversaries will be willing and able to diffuse their tensions. What is clear is that their dispute has escalated and that the Koizumi administration's resort to the nationalist card has awakened a severe nationalist reaction in South Korea that has placed Tokyo at a disadvantage, as PINR predicted.

Conclusion

The escalation of the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute reveals the erosion of U.S. influence in Northeast Asia. Washington's basic policy in the region is to collaborate with South Korea and Japan to balance China's rising power and to roll back or at least contain North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Faced with deepening tensions between its two allies, both of those aims are in jeopardy.

During the ongoing crisis, Washington has remained neutral, urging both sides to reach an amicable resolution to their dispute. That position is thrust upon Washington because a tilt toward Tokyo would drive Seoul closer to the arms of Beijing and Pyongyang, and a tilt toward Seoul would impel Tokyo to assert its independence more forthrightly.

Washington's impotence results from the simple fact that it is over-extended globally and is no longer perceived as a credible protector. In Northeast Asia, more than in any other region, the fraying of the U.S. "security blanket" heightens instability; the major regional powers have not forged a cooperative combine and there is no institutional structure to mediate conflicts. In similar situations in modern history, economic interdependence has not always been sufficient to prevent violent conflict, in which clashing interests are inflamed by nationalist sentiment.

The danger of hegemony is that when it weakens, suppressed interests are left to confront one another and achieve a balance of power on their own, often through a painful and sometimes violent process. That is not to say that a Northeast Asian war is imminent, but only that the seeds for one have been sown and that there are signs that they are germinating.

Analysts have noted that if Tokyo backs off from Dokdo/Takeshima, it will lose traction in its disputes with Beijing and Moscow, jeopardizing its overall regional position and its military ambitions. At present, with the nationalist genie out of the bottle and caught among the Chinese and Japanese behemoths, Seoul is in no position to compromise. North Korea and China welcome the conflict between Japan and South Korea, which can only work to erode U.S. influence further and to advance their respective regional interests by splitting the (former) allies.

As would-be U.S. hegemony cedes to regionalism and nationalism, underlying conflicts surface and the pattern of interdependent and competitive relations becomes more complex and fraught with instability. "Contingency management" -- as the Japanese call it -- becomes an overriding imperative, but it is ever more difficult to achieve.

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