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A Third Party Gloats While Japan and South Korea Quarrel Over Takeshima

By WATANABE Akio

Since co-hosting the World Cup soccer tournament with South Korea, Japan has been gripped by a craze over things Korean. The Japanese people had been quite contented with the amicable atmosphere that had developed between the two countries. This year, however, many a Japanese has been thrown into confusion at seeing black clouds suddenly gather over the horizon, causing choppy waves over the Sea of Japan.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of normalization of diplomatic ties between Japan and South Korea. From the Korean perspective, however, it also marks the 60th anniversary of liberation from Japanese colonial rule and the centenary of the Second Japan-Korea Agreement, which made Korea virtually a Japanese protectorate. Experts were thus secretly concerned that "historical issues" will inevitably come to the fore. On the other hand, there were also hopes that improvements in bilateral relations over the past few years may offer an opportunity to develop the seeds of a more "futuristic" approach that were being sowed. In that sense, the deterioration in bilateral relations over the past two to three months has been most disappointing.

There is a deep-set stereotype in the minds of Koreans, and seen from that perspective, every single word and action on the part of the Japanese apparently constitute a coldly calculated strategy for promoting Japanese interests at the expense of the Koreans. Comments made by the Japanese Ambassador during a press conference in Seoul, the establishment of a "Takeshima Day" by the Shimane Prefectural Assembly, and the Science and Education Minister's comments in parliament, that he had ordered the inclusion of a clear statement defining Takeshima as Japanese territory in the next revision of the curriculum guidelines – all of these are considered evidence that the current Japanese government has "Imperialistic" intentions of justifying Japan's illegitimate placement of "Tokdo" – a Korean territory – under its sovereignty back in 1905.

According to the Chinese government, which has attempted in the past to deny Japanese sovereignty over Okinotorishima based on its unusual claim that it was not an island but only a rock, Takeshima might also be a mere rock. In any case, the popular line of argument among Koreans leaves absolutely no doubt that this small "island" belongs to Korea and that any opinion claiming otherwise is rooted in evil intentions.

It wouldn't be surprising if Japan on its part felt just the opposite, that its claim of sovereignty was completely justified. However, Koreans tell us they cannot bear to even imagine Japan entertaining such an idea. Should that be so?

Instead of starting with what transpired 100 years ago, we should base our argument on the Japan-ROK Basic Agreement signed 40 years ago. At the time, Japan and the Republic of Korea exchanged notes confirming that unless otherwise agreed upon, bilateral conflicts should be resolved primarily through diplomatic channels, and should that fail, be resolved through mediation based on procedures agreed upon by the two governments. In other words, by doing so, the two countries expressed mutual recognition that the issue of territorial rights over Takeshima remained unresolved.

There is no room here for any interpretation where claims of sovereignty are only "just" for South Korea while "illegitimate" for Japan to make. Nevertheless, instead of seeking diplomatic negotiations or international mediation, the Koreans forcibly occupied the island and shut out Japanese fishermen. It is difficult to understand why the Japanese government and the Shimane Prefectural Assembly should be branded "Imperialists" when all they have done is protest verbally.

The Japanese side is seeking to cool things down and to discuss the issue calmly. Who ultimately benefits from the act of shutting out Japanese fishermen by force? Is there any point in a quarrel between Japan and South Korea against the greater cause of creating a non-nuclear Korean Peninsula? Isn't there a third party gloating over the current state of our relationship?

(This is the text of an article originally posted by Dr. WATANABE Akio, President of The Research Institute for Peace and Security in the "JITOW (Japan in Their Own Words)" column of the English-Speaking Union of Japan on April 18, 2005.)