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South Korea: National Security or National Pride Regarding Japan?

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Krista E. Wiegand, recent POSCO Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center, explains that “The South Korean government will not be able to deal with the larger issue of security relations with Japan until disputed issues symbolized by Dokdo/Takeshima are sufficiently resolved—and the likelihood of this happening anytime soon is fairly low.”

South Korean President Park Geun-hye has just completed a successful visit to the United States where she met with US President Barack Obama and addressed a joint session of the US Congress. Of greatest concern to the United States is the longstanding antagonistic relationship between Japan and South Korea—including the highly emotive territorial dispute over the Dokdo/Takeshima Islets that have long strained bilateral relations between the two countries. Last year, the two neighbors came very close to signing the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), a bilateral security agreement designed to facilitate the sharing of military intelligence on mutual security threats: namely North Korea, and, though to a lesser extent, China. However, at the final moment, South Korea withdrew from the accord, primarily as a result of fierce domestic opposition, thus putting a halt to bilateral South Korea-Japan security agreements. This stalemate is particularly concerning to the United States as it prepares to transfer wartime operational control to the South Korean military by December 2015. At face value, it would appear not only logical, but also strategically crucial, that both the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan develop closer ties within the realm of shared security concerns, and extend this to deeper trilateral US-ROK-Japan cooperation. Indeed, GSOMIA was intended to be the first small step in that very direction. As former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted at the 2012 APEC Summit, promoting trilateral security cooperation between the United States and its two closest Asian allies is a major US security goal.

Numerous issues continue to strain the ROK-Japan relationship. Debate continues in Korea to this day regarding Japanese actions towards the Korean population during Japanese occupation and colonization of the Korean peninsula from 1905-1945, including the very contentious subject of “comfort women” or “sex slaves.” Other more contemporary issues concern Japanese politicians who continue to visit the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo where several Japanese war criminals are interred. Likewise, Japanese textbooks that gloss over the actions of the Japanese Imperial Army in Korea cause further resentment amongst the Korean population toward their neighbor. Finally, Japan’s ongoing territorial claim to the Dokdo/Takeshima islets continues to elevate levels of nationalism in South Korea, and former South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak’s visit in August 2012 to the islets only exasperated relations further.

The Dokdo/Takeshima dispute is a very prominent and emotive issue for many South Koreans. The two small rocky islets in the East Sea/Sea of Japan have been occupied by South Korea, but also claimed by Japan, since the early 1950s. There is speculation of untapped natural gas and oil reserves in the waters around the islets, though no actual



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exploratory missions have been conducted to verify these claims. The only tangible value that could be attributed to the islets is the access to surrounding waters for significant fishing and natural marine resources. Yet there is tremendous intangible value through territorial nationalism; it is an understatement to say that Dokdo/Takeshima “strikes a nerve” with many South Koreans. The islets act as a tangible symbol of South Korea’s collective dissatisfaction with what many consider to be Japan’s refusal to address historical abuses committed by Imperial Japan against the Korean population. As a result of such strong territorial nationalism embedded throughout Korean society, South Korean politicians have been unable or unwilling to oppose domestic public opinion regarding security relations with Japan, even to the point that Japan’s willingness to provide intelligence about North Korea is rejected. If South Korea and Japan are going to achieve effective bilateral and trilateral security arrangements with Japan and the United States respectively, South Korean politicians are going to need to seriously consider the role of domestic public opinion on issues related to Japan, particularly regarding this dispute.

The first official state function of newly inaugurated President Park Geun-hye was a ceremony on March 1 commemorating Independence Movement Day—celebrating Korean resistance in 1919 to Japanese occupation—where she appealed: “It is incumbent on Japan to have a correct understanding of history and take on an attitude of responsibility in order to partner with us in playing a leading role in East Asia in the 21st century.” Her speech outlined a hard line stance regarding ROK-Japan relations. It also did not help that at the end of March, the Korean Foreign Ministry summoned a high ranking Japanese official in Seoul to strongly protest the inclusion of the islets as being called Takeshima in newly released Japanese school books. Japanese cabinet members then went to Yasukuni Shrine in April which further exasperated matters, resulting in South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se cancelling a proposed visit to Japan.

If Park wants to maintain high approval ratings and not lose credibility regarding her tough position towards Japan, she will have to take into account domestic public opinion on any future security plans with Japan, even under US pressure. Yet, taking this tough approach causes unconstructive tensions in the ROK-Japan-US security relationship, and at a time of recent unprecedented heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, Korea’s role as an increasingly important actor in regional security indicates that Japan and South Korea will have to cooperate more in the future. They are both democracies, have shared values and interests, and each looks to the United States as the preferred security partner. Park will have to balance Korea’s security interests with domestic opposition to closer ties with Japan, an extremely difficult challenge under current circumstances.

Even if Korean officials are not as supportive of the GSOMIA as their counterparts in Japan and the United States, moving forward on security relations with Japan is critical. Yet, domestic opposition to issues related to Japan has effectively prevented such cooperation. The South Korean government will not be able to deal with the larger issue of security relations with Japan until disputed issues symbolized by Dokdo/Takeshima are sufficiently resolved—and the likelihood of this happening anytime soon is fairly low. The United States has encouraged better bilateral relations between its two closest allies in East Asia, yet at the same time, the US government has been hesitant to take sides in a dispute that the United States itself inadvertently created as a result of its ambiguity in its role as mediator of the 1951 San Francisco Treaty. President Park and future Korean presidents will have a tough time successfully pursuing any plans of security engagement with Japan as long as the Dokdo/Takeshima dispute and related issues flare up. The United States is in a unique position to influence both Korea and Japan and it should continue to pressure both states to work toward reconciliation.

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