Chapter VIII

An American Assessment of South Korea’s Policy Options Towards Its Claim to Dokdo and Its Relations with Japan

Larry A. Niksch*

I. Introduction

Korean-Japanese relations are receiving a higher level of attention in Washington these days, at least in the U.S. House of Representatives, among Washington “think tanks,” and in the U.S. media. That is primarily because of the comfort women issue and the importance of Korean women in the Japanese military’s comfort women system during World War II. The reactions of these U.S. institutions to efforts in the Japanese Diet to revise the Japanese government’s official position on the issue appear to have shocked many Japanese. Prior to 2007, the predominant view in Japan seems to have been that the issue of how Japan deals with its history was of interest only to South Korea and China. That view should be dispelled by now.

However, the Japanese history issue is only one of the contentious issues between South Korea and Japan. The dispute over the islets called Dokdo by Koreans and Takeshima by Japanese is one of these. The Washington institutions cited above are paying little attention to these, and the Bush administration tries to stay non-involved and neutral. Still, the Korean-Japanese relationship is very important to U.S. security interests in the vital Western Pacific. The emotional breakout of the comfort women issue in 2007 ought to demonstrate to Americans that an American policy of non-involvement may not serve U.S. interests best, because when either South Korea or Japan cross certain “red lines” in these disputes, the United States simply cannot stay non-involved. More fundamentally, these disputes pose continuing threats to a basic objective

* Senior Adviser for East Asia with the PRS (Political Risk Services). He also is a consultant to Radio Free Asia and the Voice of America and is a specialist on East Asia with the Congressional Research Service. His views are his own and do not represent the views of any U.S. government agency.
of U.S. security policy in the Western Pacific – to create constructive partnerships with both South Korea and Japan in order to advance military security, stability, and democracy in the region.

II. Thoughts on the Dokdo-Takeshima Claims

A reading of the historic claims to Dokdo or Takeshima reveals that South Korea has the stronger claim. The history of Korean and Japanese involvement with the islets prior to the beginning of the Meiji era in Japan in 1868 gives little indication that either Korea or Japan made a substantive claim of ownership involving establishing a permanent or semi-permanent presence on the islets. However, between 1868 and 1905, there seems to have been a number of Japanese references to the islets belonging to Korea and Japan not claiming them. Japan seems to have made no formal claim to the islets prior to 1905.1

In 1904, the Japanese Ministry of Home Affairs rejected annexation of the islets “which might be territory of Korea,” only to be overruled by the Foreign Ministry, which by then was directing Japan’s establishment of a protectorate over Korea.2 Japan annexed Takeshima in January 1905 without even a consultation with the Korean government. It ignored Korea because it already was in the process of compelling Korea to accept the status as a protectorate under Japan. Japanese troops were in Seoul by February 1904, and Japan forced the Korean monarchy to sign the first of the two agreements on August 22, 1904, that placed Korea under Japanese suzerainty. The annexation of Takeshima cannot be separated from that process.

Japan’s annexation of Takeshima in 1905 was not itself an illegal act in the context of the time when territorial annexations were common in wartime, including the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. Its annexation was not illegitimate even in the context of Japan’s takeover of Korea in 1904–1905. However, it seems to me that the compelling issue for an American is that, with these events of 1904–1905, including the annexation, Japan began its course of aggression in East Asia – its road to Pearl Harbor. The annexation of Takeshima may have been only a minute part of this bigger context, but it was a part. Allied declarations during World War II, at Cairo and Potsdam, made

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2 Seichu, supra note 1, at 40–41.