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Takeshima

- Touchstone for a Maturing Japan-South Korea Relationship -

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The Shimane Prefectural Assembly's decision to legally instate "Takeshima Day" is sending ripples throughout South Korea. And it has been nothing but a shock to see Koreans cut off their little finger and commit self-immolation in front of the Japanese Embassy. Pressed by an adamant public, the Roh Moo-hyun administration has revised its policy on Japan, stating its intention of vigorously pursuing historical issues "including Takeshima." This marks a shift to a hard-line approach, of casting doubt at Japan's historical perception in its entirety instead of addressing individual issues such as history textbooks, and of seeking a renewed apology from Japan.

The current situation in South Korea may seem somewhat odd. If a "new" history textbook had become an issue, it is understandable that such a "new" development may well lead to "new" protests. However, sovereignty over Takeshima has always been Japan's official view, and the Shimane Prefectural Assembly and the Japanese government are merely repeating this established position. Why then has South Korea reacted so strongly to this issue?

There are a few things we must understand to fathom the situation. First of all, we must understand the significance Takeshima holds for South Korea. Unlike Japan, which faces issues concerning the Northern Territories and the Senkaku Islands, Takeshima is virtually the only territorial dispute facing South Korea. Furthermore, Takeshima was incorporated into Japanese territory in 1905, the same year Korea was made a Japanese protectorate, and is accorded an important place in the "historical" issue. Resurgence of the Takeshima issue must surely lead to justification of colonial rule and another invasion by Japan – combined with a victim's mentality view of Japan based on the bitter experiences of the past, some Koreans feel threatened by a serious sense of crisis that is beyond our imagination. Even so, this alone will not explain the vigorous momentum of current public opinion in South Korea.

After all, the Takeshima issue has existed for over half a century, and its significance has not changed. More significant is the fact that South Korea is at a major turning point today in terms of generational change and historical perception. For example, in January the government disclosed diplomatic documents concerning negotiations on normalizing relations with Japan that took place in the 1960's. And the focal point was the fact that during the meetings, the South Korean government not only abandoned its right of claim with regard to Japan's colonial rule at the government level, but to all relevant rights including the individual right of claim of the victims. The public received this revelation with astonishment and shock.

However, it is implausible to suppose the South Korean government had been ignorant of this fact over the years. While the documents were disclosed to the public for the first time, they were available for the eyes of government officials. One thing is clear, that successive South Korean governments overseeing relations with Japan had not been providing sufficient explanation to the

people. And this is what caused such bewilderment and surge of renewed anger among South Koreans confronted with the truth.

When the issue is so complex, we intentionally avoid serious discussion precisely for that reason, and treat it as if it did not exist. As the years go by, circumstances surrounding the issue are forgotten, and a new, unknowing generation emerges. One day, they are suddenly confronted by an issue the older generation chose to neglect, and are forced to accept it with fresh surprise and indignation. Thus the Roh Moo-hyun administration is currently engaged in the substantial task of “settling the historical score.”

Takeshima is typical of such issues. Despite its obvious importance to Koreans, the people of South Korea had been treating the undeniable fact that Japan still lays claim on the island as though that were not the case. That is why Koreans are viewing the latest move by the Shimane Prefectural Assembly with fresh surprise and anger. It is inappropriate to criticize the move as having “awoken a sleeping tiger.” No matter how close the Japan-South Korea relationship becomes – as symbolized by Japan’s current “Korea-craze” phenomenon – many loose ends remain to be tied. That does not render exchange meaningless. We simply should not place excessive hopes on such exchange. While it may contribute to solving the issues, exchange in itself is not the solution.

As we grow older, we are faced with the cold reality that Santa Claus does not really exist. Forty years have passed since Japan and South Korea normalized relations. We are approaching that period when we must grow out of fantasies and face up to reality. Engaging in heated debate is far better than turning away from problems. If both countries are truly confident in their claims, now may be the time to actively involve the international community as one possibility for resolving the dispute. Takeshima is a difficult issue to resolve, and as such should serve as an important touchstone for judging whether the Japan-South Korea relationship has indeed reached the point of “adulthood.”