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A new stage in Japan-South Korean relations

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LAST YEAR saw a Korean boom sweeping over Japan. But this year, relations between Japan and South Korea have become extremely tense.

Why did Japan-South Korea relations, which until recently were touted as “the best in the post-war era”, become this way?

When considering this issue, there is something that we must first get out of the way.

As is well known, most of the bilateral “pending issues” between the two countries that are being debated these days have their roots in Japan’s colonial rule over the Korean Peninsula more than half a century ago and also in the process of South Korea emerging from that period of colonisation.

In other words, these issues have existed all along.

But that alone does not explain why they have suddenly now become so magnified.

The dispute between Tokyo and Seoul over the ownership of Takeshima (called Dokdo by the South Koreans) is one very good example.

In order to understand the quarrel over this group of rocky islets, located roughly midway between the two countries, it is necessary to understand the domestic conditions in both Japan and South Korea at present.

First, let us take a look at Japan, where many nationalist movements have been born out of the economic difficulties of the recession in the 1990s.

The Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, a group of revisionist textbook writers, is a good example.

As can be seen from the very small number of schools that have so far adopted the history textbook which the Society produced, the group does not have a major influence in Japan.

But the Society continues to promote its textbook.

Where Japan is concerned, a more important element is that Japan’s central bureaucracy, beginning with the Foreign Ministry, has been embroiled in scandal since the Koizumi administration came into power in April 2001.

This has seriously eroded not only the hitherto strong collaboration between

the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and elite bureaucrats, but also the solidarity within the LDP itself.

This in turn has produced a situation where populism now rules in Japan.

In Shimane Prefecture, a conservative stronghold in western Japan, assemblymen affiliated to the LDP recently passed an ordinance declaring Feb 22 as Takeshima Day, much to the consternation of the South Koreans.

This sort of action by a local chapter of the ruling LDP, opposing foreign policy forged jointly by the LDP and the Foreign Ministry, would never have happened in the past.

The fact that it did shows the desire of local party chapters to become independent of the centre.

Behind this is the struggle between Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and Mr Mikio Aoki, an Upper House lawmaker who hails from Shimane and is the most powerful member of the LDP's Hashimoto faction.

In a situation where populism rules in Japan, it is inevitable that some politicians would want to exploit nationalistic movements for their own purposes.

If doing so allows them to overthrow their political rivals, it would be strange indeed if they did not resort to using the Takeshima card.

The effect of populism has also been keenly felt in South Korea.

The Roh Moo Hyun government, which came into power in early 2003, bills itself as a "reform administration".

It took a very tough stance against existing political, business and bureaucratic forces that had supported previous Korean governments.

On reflection, we can say that the Roh administration is not built upon any existing forces.

What this means is that the Roh administration has constantly to secure the people's support through populist policies.

This problem in South Korea is very serious because it stems from a widespread change in historical perceptions, which is closely linked to the large-scale generational change in the country.

As is well known, South Korea's past economic development depended to a great extent on Japanese capital, markets and technology.

This is why, even though previous administrations, and the social forces that supported them, were dissatisfied with how Japan dealt with the two nation's past history, they took great pains not to allow bilateral ties to be harmed.

They were a generation that was very pragmatic because they knew poverty

and lived through the Korean War.

However, the present generation of young Koreans grew up after democracy was introduced and when the country had gone through a period of high economic growth.

Young Koreans are very confident of themselves and of their own nation.

They do not think that they need to compromise with Japan for the development of their own country.

This new generation of Koreans not only takes a different attitude towards Japan but also towards the United States.

What is important to note is that this new generation of Koreans is not familiar with their nation's complicated past.

Their understanding is not something gleaned from first-hand experience but from what they were taught in school through textbooks.

So it is inevitably an understanding that is not nuanced.

They see history only in terms of black and white, with no shades of grey in between.

As a result, their anti-Japanese agitation is simplistic and at the same time, violent.

However, what we must not forget is that, as is seen in the Takeshima/Dokdo issue, the Koreans go only as far as to make their positions heard in all pending bilateral issues concerning Japan.

What in fact is happening is that both governments, in consideration of bilateral ties and the feelings of both peoples, want to, as far as possible, avoid getting involved in a debate over these issues.

If they do not, these issues could worsen.

However, while shelving these problems can help to ease tensions, it does not lead to their resolution.

In this sense, because the Takeshima/Dokdo issue is serious and difficult to resolve, both sides should sincerely consider how they should tackle it, as the process will serve as a useful model for resolving other equally thorny problems between the two sides.

For example, one important policy choice they can consider is to allow the territorial issue to be globalised and let it be brought before the International Court of Justice.

With this year marking 40 years since Japan and South Korea normalised relations, the world will be watching to see whether the two neighbours are able

to build a mature relationship.

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