



Tense triangle: Japan, China and South Korea

Asian Waves

By: Ted Galen Carpenter

September, 27th, 2012

Japan, China and the South Korea are easily the three most important local powers in East Asia. The United States has crucial economic ties with all of those countries, and has military alliances with both Japan and South Korea. Worries now surround those linkages, because bilateral tensions have grown along all sides of the regional triangle.

Until the early 1990s, China's relations with South Korea were simple and hostile. Beijing was Communist North Korea's principal ally, and Seoul regarded China as a dangerous adversary. With the end of the Cold War, the relationship changed dramatically. Not only did Beijing recognize the South Korean government for the first time, but trade ties began to surge. By the early years of the 21st century, relations between South Korea and China had warmed to the point that US officials worried about Beijing's growing diplomatic and economic influence in Seoul. On such issues as dealing with North Korea's nuclear program, South Korean policy often seemed closer to China's position than America's.

That Sino-Korean rapprochement experienced a great chill, however, in 2010 when, in the space of eight months, North Korean forces sank the South Korean naval vessel Cheonan and shelled the island of Yeonpyeong. Seoul was furious that Beijing refused to condemn Pyongyang's acts of aggression, much less support substantive sanctions against the rogue regime. Relations have slowly healed, and the vigorous bilateral trade has resumed its trajectory, but South Korean officials as well as the South Korean public continue to view China with some wariness. The chill in the relationship has not entirely dissipated.

But Sino-Korean relations are in excellent shape compared to relations between South Korea and Japan, and especially between China and Japan.

South Koreans still resent their society's humiliating experience as a Japanese colony in the first half of the 20th century, and suspicions about Tokyo's future intentions are never far below the surface. South Korean naval leaders, for example, have ambitions to build a robust submarine

fleet, even though Seoul's only military adversary, North Korea, has negligible naval capabilities. South Korean military leaders privately admit that such a buildup is intended to deter Japan.

For a time following the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents, it appeared that South Korea and Japan might bury their historical animosity and cooperate on mutual security problems, especially North Korea. High level talks on that issue even took place. But a long-standing territorial dispute has flared in recent months and seemingly derailed prospects for such strategic cooperation.

The dispute involves competing claims to uninhabited islets (called Takeshima in Japan and Dokdo in Korea). That controversy has been a source of periodic irritation in relations between Tokyo and Seoul, but tensions became worse when South Korean President Lee Myung Bak made an ostentatious visit to the island chain in mid-August 2012. The Japanese government recalled its ambassador to Seoul indefinitely to protest the visit, and inflammatory rhetoric on both sides has soared. Although an armed clash is unlikely, when nationalist emotions run high, even that possibility cannot be ruled out. A military incident between Japan and South Korea would be a diplomatic nightmare for the United States. Washington has bilateral security alliances with both countries, so whichever side Washington backed, it would greatly damage relations with the other party. And US neutrality announced in the midst of a crisis could well poison relations with both countries.

A similar territorial dispute between China and Japan has even greater potential to cause big trouble. The dispute between China and Japan involves a chain of five uninhabited islets known as the Senkakus in Japan and the Diaoyus in China. The controversy has simmered for decades with periodic flare ups, but matters escalated in April 2012 when firebrand Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara, perhaps the most prominent right-wing Japanese nationalist, proposed that the Tokyo government buy three of the islands from their private landowner to discourage any Chinese moves to implement Beijing's claims.

The situation became even uglier in mid-August when 14 Chinese activists landed on the islets and were then arrested by Japanese authorities. Shortly thereafter, 10 Japanese activists, including 5 Tokyo assembly members, landed on the largest islet. That move produced large, angry demonstrations in several Chinese cities, with vandals overturning and damaging dozens of Japanese-brand automobiles. Another spasm of violent demonstrations erupted in mid-September in response to moves by the Japanese government to implement the purchase. The Chinese government also sent an armada of 1,000 fishing boats and six maritime patrol vessels to the island chain to reinforce China's claim.

Outside observers might wonder why the opposing sides attach so much importance to some uninhabited rocks. But to the parties directly involved, there are important issues at stake. On the purely practical level, both the Senkakus/Diaoyus and Takeshima/Dokdo are surrounded by valuable fishing waters. There are also indications of significant oil and gas reserves. And there are important strategic implications. The island chains are located astride important shipping lanes for both naval and commercial vessels. The Japanese are especially worried about possible Chinese control of the Senkakus. One also should not underestimate the role of emotions and national pride in the dispute.

The Senkaku/Diaoyu quarrel is potentially dangerous to the United States. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated in 2010 that Washington's 1960 defense pact with Japan covers the Senkakus - even as she insisted that the United States did not take a position on the substance of the dispute. State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland reiterated that inherently contradictory stance in September 2012.

Cooler heads among the three East Asian powers need to prevail. Whatever the economic or strategic importance of the two island chains, preserving regional peace and cooperation should be considered more important. China is Japan's largest trading partner, and Japan is China's third-largest export market - behind only the United States and the European Union. Both countries also have important economic ties with South Korea. Given North Korea's chronic troublemaking, East Asia has enough tensions without China, Japan and South Korea engaging in needlessly confrontational behavior.

The United States also needs to exercise greater caution, especially with respect to the Senkaku/Diaoyu feud. The Obama administration's interpretation of the US defense pact with Japan is both dubious and imprudent. Washington's stance could encourage nationalist elements in Japan to push the territorial dispute with China to dangerous levels. It would be wise for US officials to take steps to limit rather than expand their country's risk exposure to issues that have only a tenuous connection to America's own interests.