

The Territorial Sovereignty and Revise Distorting History:

Japan Must Appropriately Act
And Gain Trust from the International Community
As a Peace-Loving Nation

Now the government cannot but squarely address the matter. We can no longer sit-idle and watch Japan's intention to carry on with its domination by rationalizing its history of invasion and colonization of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia," said President Roh Moo-hyun. Declaring a virtual war of diplomacy at a statement to the people on March 23, President Roh criticized Japan for attempting to justify its 1910-45 colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula and claim territorial sovereignty over Dokdo islets in the East Sea.

He said that the government will take all diplomatic steps to tackle the matter and the "core of such measures will be urging the Japanese government to backtrack." "Although there is concern that the Japanese government will fail to come up with a sincere response to our request, we will persistently call for it," Roh said at the strongly-worded statement written by himself.

Regarding Japan's misdeeds, Roh cited Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to a shrine dedicated to those killed while fighting in World War II, the declaration of Takeshima Day by a Japanese local council, and the distortion of history in school textbooks.

"Such behaviors nullify all the remorse and apologies of the past. We cannot but judge that such acts were committed with the consent of the Japanese central government. They were not done by only a certain prefecture and some chauvinists," said Roh.

President Roh's statement is expected to trigger a stir in relations between Seoul and Tokyo. It is the first time for Roh to make a stand on the recent thorny issues, although he earlier instructed the Cabinet to set up an independent organization to tackle them. Until now, Roh had remained low-key on Korea-Japan relations despite public anger over Japan's plans to issue a new textbook and renewed claims to the Korean Dokdo.

Roh noted that Koizumi's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine greatly undermined the authenticity of the apologies made by former Japanese leaders. He vowed to make efforts to persuade the international community concerning the issues. "If Japan attempts to become a dominating nation in Asia, it needs to appropriately act and gain trust from the international community as a peace-loving nation."

"Japan also justified its attack on Korea and denied Korea's liberation by declaring Takeshima Day on the day when Japan forcibly included Dokdo to its territory 100 years ago," he said. His remark was interpreted as renewing of Seoul's opposition to Japan's bid to become a member of the United Nations Security Council. Roh foresees that there may be a war of

diplomacy in the process as it will dwindle exchanges in various sectors like economy and culture, thus bringing about a negative impact upon the nation's economy.

"I believe the people don't have to worry about it too much, as we have already been equipped with enough capability to cope with the matter," he said. Roh called on the people to be patient and refrain from provoking the Japanese people by resorting to emotional responses as "such war will not end in a day." "We will root out such misbehaviors this time so that the people can see a more tangible out-come," Roh added.

The South Korean government will support South Korean demands for compensation from Japan for its actions during World War II," said Unification Minister Chung Dong-young. Minister Chung has warned Japan against challenging South Korea's territorial sovereignty or distorting history, saying such moves are tantamount to "justifying its past invasion of the Korean Peninsula and its past wrongdoings."

"We urge Japan to do everything it can to deal with the victims of its colonial rule," Chung said. "Japan should cope with individual victims who were not covered by the 1965 Korea-Japan Basic Treaty." Those include South Korean atomic bomb victims and women who were forced to serve as sex slaves for Japanese soldiers.

In his press conference right after a standing committee session of the National Security Council (NSC) on March 17, 2005, Minister Chung, concurrently chairman of the NSC standing committee, outlined four principles and five directions for relations between South Korea and Japan. The meeting was convened a day after a provincial council in Japan approved a controversial ordinance in a move to lay claim to the Dokdo Islets.

"Japan's recent behavior led us to believe that Tokyo is trying to take back its past apologies," Chung said. "It is unfortunate that Japan is stepping backward while Seoul is trying to build a future-oriented relationship with Tokyo. Despite Japan's retrogressive attitudes, we don't want to damage the relationship between the two countries," Chung added. "We will continue economic, cultural and personnel exchanges with Japan."

The next day, Minister Chung also called Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi "impolite" and "unreasonable" in a reaction to Japan's demand for a "future-oriented" relationship of the two countries during a meeting with ministry officials. "Japan is the source of retrogression as it is dragging South Korea's drive toward future and peace of Northeast Asia," said Chung.

"We tried to end the dispute on Japan's past wrongdoings by accepting its insufficient apology. Japan is trying to cover-up, distort and justify its misdeeds committed during the 1910-45 colonial rule. Japan's continuing misbehavior is the reason why we are currently facing this (diplomatic) problem," he said.

Upon Koizumi's interpretation of President Roh Moo-hyun's demands for an apology and compensation from Japan, Chung said, "he misled people about the fact and it's not polite behavior toward a head of state." Roh's remarks came to mark the 86th anniversary of the March 1 Independence Movement of 1919 during the colonial period.

Chung said that Koizumi has a poor grip on the South Korean situation. "President Roh tried to lead the Seoul-Tokyo relations into a more future-oriented one by risking domestic criticism," Chung said. "Given Roh's best efforts, what Koizumi said didn't make sense and was impolite."

The government's "new doctrine" for the Korea-Japan relationship, announced on March 17, reflects only part of the sizzling Korean sentiments over Tokyo's diplomatic challenge. It expressed strong displeasure and determination but fell short of mentioning any immediate governmental action, leaving it dependent on Japan's future moves.

The government's decision to squarely cope with Tokyo on the international diplomatic stage is a move toward the right direction. The four-principle, five-countermeasure doctrine reiterates Seoul's decades-old calls for Japan to genuinely atone for its historical wrongdoings and seek its neighbors' forgiveness. If that were easy, no such diplomatic troubles would have occurred. The government's conclusion that Japan's territorial claim over Dokdo as the second pillage of Korea is salient given Tokyo's efforts to justify its history of aggression. Still, Korea needs to differentiate ordinary, conscientious Japanese from some unrepentant groups and include the former in international efforts for attaining peaceful co-prosperity in East Asia.

Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon said that the intensifying row between Korea and Japan over the sovereignty of the Dokdo islets is grave enough to be given priority over relations between the two countries. "Dokdo is a problem that is related to our territory and sovereignty. It is an issue that takes precedence over the Korea-Japan relations," said Ban.

Seoul-Tokyo relations are at a crucial stage with the two among key negotiators over the North Korean nuclear standoff. "It is undesirable for both countries and our relations to continue to brawl over history," Ban said. Japanese politicians should also refrain from making further controversial comments "instigating" anger among the Koreans by claiming ownership of Dokdo.

"Aside from maintaining the friendly relations between Korea and Japan, (the government) will take measures in order for Japan to have an accurate perspective on sovereignty and past history in regard to Dokdo and history textbooks," government spokesman Joung Soon-kyun quoted Minister Ban.

Ignoring mounting Korean objections, Shimane Prefecture, on March 16, 2005, approved the date "February 22" as "Takeshima Day" to mark the first Japanese claim to Dokdo on Feb. 22, 1905. Against Shimane's controversial designation, tensions are rapidly mounting between Seoul and Tokyo.

"This is what other nations have done to clear their past," said South Korean President. The South Korean government was mapping out specific action plans to counter Japan's repeated claims to the Dokdo islets and redefine relations with the neighboring nation.

The ruling and opposition parties agreed to establish a "special parliamentary committee" in

the coming April parliamentary extra session to cope with Japan's claims to the Dokdo islets and attempts to distort history. Now, it is time for the Korean National Assembly to come up with effective measures, the special law, to clearly confirm the nation's possession over the island.

Designated as the nation's Natural Monument No. 336, Dokdo is a group of volcanic islets located some 87km east of Ullung Island of South Korea and 157km northwest of the Japanese island of Oki, which belongs to Shimane Prefecture.

North Gyeongsang Province, to which Dokdo belongs, severed its sisterhood ties with Shimane Prefecture in protest against the approval of Takeshima Day ordinance. Some civic groups even considered staging a campaign boycotting goods produced in the region.

Until now, only a small number of South Korean nations have been able to visit Dokdo due to its geographical difficulty and the complicated paperwork involved to protect the environment and limited visits for safety concerns. According to government sources, some 6,000 people have visited Dokdo to date. In 2004 alone, more than 1,000 people traveled to the islets.

The government planed to examine follow-up measures including a budget increase to reinforce the defense of Dokdo islet and improve a pier for boat access as many Korean tourists are expected to visit the group of islets. As part of efforts to strengthen its effective dominion over Dokdo, South Korea decided on March 16 to ease the current regulations restricting tourists from entering the rocky, virtually uninhabited islets.

Escalating tensions have already turned friendship, which they have pledged to promote this year in commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties, into enmity. Some protesters called on Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to step down and even threatened to blow up Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine, a memorial to World War II Japanese soldiers which Korea and other Asian countries occupied by Japan during the war detest

because it contains Class A war criminals. Angry protesters outside the Japanese Embassy burned the country's flag, urged a boycott of Japanese goods and called for Koizumi to step down.

Riot police maintained tight security around the embassy in downtown Seoul to keep the now daily demonstrations from getting out of control. Other anti-Japanese protests were staged elsewhere in the country by civic groups angered by the Shimane action.

Forty years have passed since South Korea normalized diplomatic relations with Japan, but many Koreans still harbor deep suspicion and even enmity toward their former colonial ruler as some Japanese leaders have attempted to glorify their imperial past.

South Korea and Japan designated 2005 as the "Year of Korea-Japan Friendship" to mark the 40th anniversary of diplomatic normalization between the two nations. However, the two nations' plans for a better relation-ship faces a big obstacle following Japan's renewed claims to Korea's easternmost islets of Dokdo.

As part of this year's programs, the two nations also named 2005 "Visit Korea-Japan Year" to boost tourism and attract more visitors to both countries. In the past 40 years, the number of Korean and Japanese visitors to each other's country has seen a 400-fold increase from 10,000 to 4 million last year.

Korea and Japan have been witnessing visible improvements in their complicated relationship with cultural exchanges and close cooperation in the Six-Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear issue. However, many issues lie unresolved between Korea and Japan over history. Japan's recent moves such as the possible approval of the new history textbook containing chapters glorifying Japan's colonization of Korea have provoked increasing resentment among the Korean public.

Experts here point out that while various measures at government-level could be taken, these should be devised on a long-term basis after careful analysis on why Japan is making such moves to highlight its prevalent past power. "This history row should be looked at from a long-term point of view. One of the important things is to analyze why Japan is making such claims, which could be interpreted as its effort to consolidate the public after years of economic ailment and social unrest by reviving nationalism," said Prof. Sohn Yul of Chungang University's Graduate School of International Studies.

Nor could Seoul go much further than that and abruptly turn its "quiet diplomacy" into a noisy one, as shown by President Roh Moo-hyun's prolonged silence on the issue. The President is reportedly enraged by what he sees as Japan's betrayal of his generous proposal to bury the past and move toward the future. We just hope that Roh has learned a valuable diplomatic lesson that unilateral goodwill does not always pay. Also, a head of state should be the last - not the first - to speak in diplomacy.

Instead, the Japanese government encouraged the prefecture to have its own way by example, if not explicitly. This was evidenced when its ambassador to Seoul recently renewed Japan's claim to Dokdo in remarks made in the Korean capital. That was not becoming of the top Japanese diplomat, to say the least.

It is not difficult to see through what Japan aims to gain from this kind of maneuver. It apparently wishes to turn the islets legitimately belonging to Korea into those of an international territorial dispute and thus bring the case to the International Court of Justice. By doing so, it has nothing to lose.

Japan's challenge will likely continue, and Korea's policy of inaction carries certain risks. The Japanese can make whatever territorial claims they like in their own country, but Japan's ambassador doing so in the heart of Seoul is a totally different story.

Before anything else, however, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade should never repeat the mistake of preventing a new police chief from inspecting the disputed islets. President Roh Moo-hyun should learn from his gaffe of using the Japanese name of Takeshima in front of the Japanese press.

The disputes should be separated from bilateral relations. "This isn't the last draw for Japan.

This is just one of Japan's first moves to slowly claim Dokdo," an experts said. "That is why the issue should be completely separated so that we'll have more strategies to use and not let this particular issue cause damage on overall relations."