

China Russia Japan: Japan Meets Its Match in Territorial Disputes

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Japan refers to the four islands of the southern Kuril archipelago as the “Northern Territories.” The Japanese government designated Feb. 7 as “Northern Territories Day” to mark its claimed ownership of the islands. This is different from “Takeshima Day,” which was designated by only one Japanese province to mark Japan’s claim to Korea’s Dokdo islets.

But the four southernmost Kuril Islands are under Russian control, unlike the Senkaku Islands, which are under Japanese jurisdiction and which China calls Diaoyutai. Japan has taken a noisy approach in its dispute over the Kuril Islands and a silent approach in dealing with the Senkaku Islands.

Tokyo’s strategy has been to present areas under foreign control as being disputed and areas under its control unquestionably so. In dealing with Dokdo, it has taken the clever approach of annoying Korea so that it protests loudly against Tokyo’s claim. The approach did not stem from a belief that Dokdo and Kuril Islands are different. It merely places lower priority on Dokdo because of Korea’s strong alliance with the U.S, which also plays a key role in Japan’s national security.

Tokyo applies one principle to all of these territories — that there are no historical problems that could undermine its territorial claims. In other words, it claims it never controlled those territories against the will of other countries during the colonial period. But China and Russia see the territorial disputes as historical issues. China says Japan occupied the Senkaku Islands in the late 19th century when China was in turmoil, while Russia believes it merely won back the four islands in its World War II victory.

Dokdo cannot be seen from the same perspective, but the common factor is Japan’s persistent denials of history. It writes off anti-Japanese protests in China as internal disputes stemming from a widening income gap, high unemployment among the young and political chaos, almost as if it is chiding China for being politically underdeveloped. There is no soul-searching whatsoever among Japanese officials asking themselves why there is anti-Japanese sentiment among the Chinese.

The same goes for Korea. When anti-Japanese sentiment flared in Korea after Tokyo identified Dokdo as part of its own territory in school texts in 2008, Japanese officials and experts wrote it off as a ploy by the Korean government to unite a public divided over beef imports. And when the global financial crisis erupted, a Japanese newspaper even featured a column saying Korea will most likely end up begging Japan for money.

On Monday, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev visited the Kuril Islands, rubbing salt on a highly sensitive spot for Japan as its territorial dispute with China rages on over the Senkaku Islands. Now it is Japan that is accusing its regional neighbors of reigniting imperialism. It says China and Russia, which have grown economically powerful, are flexing their muscle. But if China and Russia are guilty of imperialism, Japan is equally guilty of denying its imperialist past. This is clearly demonstrated in the anti-Japanese sentiments flaring up among the Chinese and Russian public, which are fueling China and Russia's territorial challenges against Japan.

China and Russia are no longer former communist countries lagging behind in economic power. The more Japan denies its history, the greater the challenge it will face, and this will hurt stability in Northeast Asia. Japan has finally met its match.

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