

South Korea- Japan Relations and Washington's Containment of China

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Global Research, March 01, 2013

Region: [Asia](#)

South Korean boycott of Japanese products suggests long-term challenge for US Pivot

As the United States government attempts its "[Pivot to Asia](#)" by strengthening military alliances with democratic and (contrary to the official portrayal of America as a champion of human rights) [undemocratic nations](#) alike, its leaders hope to maintain a united armed front against China. The "pivot" is a [misguided](#) attempt at preventing China from developing credible military parity in the region and is predicated on [further militarizing](#) the already hyper-militarized Asia-Pacific, much to the [glee of military contractors nationwide](#).

A major cog in the plan is for greater cohesion between the United States' two most important allies in the region — South Korea and Japan. But the foundations of the "pivot" are proving inherently weak as, yet again, South Korea and Japan are at odds over the disputed [Dokdo/Takeshima islets](#). This comes after Japan celebrated its annual "[Takeshima Day](#)" in recognition of Japan's claims to the tiny rocks currently in possession of South Korea.

Like in China last year, this dispute threatens to expand from a purely territorial issue to an economic concern. On March 1, a South Korean holiday commemorating the nation's declaration of independence from Japanese colonialism, the Save Local Stores Alliance will begin a boycott of the sale of Japanese products ranging from Asahi beer to, presumably, Hello Kitty accessories. The alliance is a group comprised of over 80 different commercial organizations, 60 local business groups and boasts membership of over 6 million South Koreans.

From South Korean daily [the Hankyoreh](#), quoting an alliance spokesperson:

"Japan is already subject to global censure for its distortion of the historical fact that it was a colonial aggressor," the alliance said. "The country's move to celebrate Takeshima Day cannot be accepted. It is not only an affront to the international community, but it is also derived from an imperialist view of history that shows no signs of contrition for its misdeeds."

The group apparently intends to keep up the boycott until Japan revokes its claims on the small islets. But this isn't likely to happen anytime soon as Japanese politicians become increasingly dependent on vocal nationalist groups for their own political support and are all too willing to grandstand to increase their own popularity at home — just like in South Korea.

It is unclear whether the boycott will have any discernible effect on Japanese business. The

majority of South Koreans are adamant about their rightful claim to the islets, but at the same time Japanese products have become much less popular in the past decade because South Korean cars and electronics — represented by the likes of Hyundai, Samsung and LG — have matched, and in some cases overcome, the quality of Japanese brands. Further, it remains a question whether small business owners' sense of nationalism is stronger than their will to make money to support their families (given time, the later is likely to trump the former).

What this spat does indicate is the very tall order the U.S. has in maintaining a united front against China, especially one that involves South Korea cooperating intimately with Japan. The failed intelligence pact between the two states in June last year, abandoned at the last minute after citizen protest, and the ongoing territorial conflict are scars of the Japanese colonial era that haven't faded after six decades. Rather than representing a sign of degenerative Asian nationalism, this is in large part because, unlike in Germany, Japan was never forced to fully account for its crimes in East Asia after it was occupied by the United States. The US considered Japan a key buffer against the Soviet Union in the Pacific and it was more convenient to integrate former leadership into the post-World War II Japanese government than seek justice.

Looking at this issue in a broader sense, the United States' presence in Asia is often portrayed as the stabilizer in a region beset with raging nationalist tendencies. The myth is that if the US withdrew the region would erupt in war — but this is something even the North Koreans would likely work to avoid (the most obvious reason being the North would [lose a war](#) against South Korea even without the US, and China wouldn't support such instability that would destroy its own economic prosperity).

What really exists in the case of South Korea and Japan are two developed nations with people capable of rational compromise, but only if they are forced to actually deal with their problems. Since they both depend on the United States for security they have never really had any impetus for meaningfully and finally settling their agonizingly drawn out dispute over history.

As Ted Galen Carpenter [recently wrote](#) of America's mythic "indispensability":

"It is a bit bizarre...that Washington should take more responsibility for developments in the Middle East than do such NATO allies as Germany, France, Italy and Turkey. Or that Washington is more concerned about troubles in South and Southeast Asia than are major powers such as India and Indonesia. But other relevant actors have not had to step forward to deal with unpleasant developments that might undermine regional stability, because the self-proclaimed indispensable nation has usually taken on the responsibility. That is not sustainable."

As it is however, Japan and South Korea are divided by a history that will vastly complicate any long-term attempts by the United States to contain China with the unity of its two major bilateral allies East Asia. Many South Koreans don't trust Japan to this day because they believe Japan still harbours secret romanticism for bygone days of imperialist glory. Irrational as this may seem to the outside world, until the two nations are forced to address the problem by themselves, this distrust will continue to exist.

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