


China to the left, Japan to the right, and a silent Korea

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Recommended Citation

"China to the left, Japan to the right, and a silent Korea", NAPSNet Policy Forum, October 11, 2012, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/china-to-the-left-japan-to-the-right-and-a-silent-korea/>

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Candidates for the next president and prime ministerial elections in South Korea and Japan were determined during the past two weeks (though in South Korea it is still unclear whether Ahn Chul-soo and Moon Jae-in will unify and nominate a single opposition candidate to increase the possibility of defeating Park Geun-hye of the ruling New Frontier Party). China and the US, arguably the two most influential countries when it comes to relationships in Northeast Asia, will also see leadership changes come November.

Territorial disputes between Japan and its neighboring countries, currently very 'touch-and-go', may affect the election processes in each country. All parties involved have taken to risky measures through things like physical demonstrations, such as the South Korean President's visit to Dok-do, both Chinese and Japanese boats' landing on Diaoyu dao (Senkaku islands) and mutual attacks by water cannon between Japanese and Taiwanese coast guard patrol boats. This dispute moved to the diplomatic stage of the UN this week with words from South Korea of the lack of historical consciousness by Japan after WWII, territorial sovereignty claims by China, and Japan's insistence on taking these issues to the international court. However, as all the parties concerned will experience political power changes in the next few months, present regimes will deal with this issue only temporarily.

In China, such conflicts have served to strengthen anti-Japanese nationalism not only in mainland China but also in Hong Kong and Taiwan, which has also stimulated the revival of Maoism, with increasing complaints about the social problems of rapid growth, focused on mega cities. This may lead to the emergence of more critical challenges faced by upcoming powers as well as those which have already been affected, such as Bo Xilai who was expelled from the Chinese Communist Party.

Japanese political parties have also elected new party leaders in both the DPJ and LDP. Japanese territorial disputes with South Korea, in particular, have pushed both sides quickly towards right wing groups, which are strongly appealing for the revision of constitutional law in regards to Japan's self-defense provisions. Former Prime Minister Abe may be elected as the next party leader and would have a high possibility of becoming prime minister again, since he enjoys the support and cooperation with Mayor Hashimoto of Osaka City. Hashimoto recently showed his strong leadership potential as a symbol of Japanese conservatives and launched the newly-formed Japan Restoration Party (Nippon Ishin no Kai).

Unlike Japan and China, South Korean candidates rarely remark on this hot issue, although the Korean peninsula is directly involved. South Korean candidates are strangely silent in speaking of policy approaches in diplomacy, security, military and foreign affairs, including North Korean policy. On the other hand, the DPRK has been showing signs of possible economic reforms, which would also impact the Northeast Asian region.

China to the left, Japan to the right, and a silent Korea are the impressions left by the next political leaders of each country and their responses to the current Northeast Asian territorial disputes. The fundamental conflict comes from not only the lack of historical recognition but also the absence of a common future design for the region.

- Yi Kiho, NAPSNet Contributor

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