President Lee Myung-bak’s diplomatic leadership challenge

The NAPSNet Policy Forum provides expert analysis of contemporary peace and security issues in Northeast Asia. As always, we invite your responses to this report and hope you will take the opportunity to participate in discussion of the analysis.

Recommended Citation

"President Lee Myung-bak’s diplomatic leadership challenge", NAPSNet Policy Forum, August 23, 2012, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/president-lee-myung-baks-diplmatic-leadership-challenge/

Nautilus Peace and Security Weekly Report Contributor’s blog entry for Governance and Civil Society

Go to the Weekly Report for 23 August 2012

South Korea President Lee Myung-bak made an unprecedented visit to Dokdo (Takeshima in Japan) abruptly on the afternoon of August 10, just before the Olympic bronze medal soccer match between Korea and Japan in London. President Lee’s visit may have influenced the carrying of a signboard reading ‘Dokdo is our territory’ by a Korean soccer player after the match and its ensuing punishment from the IOC, as it was regarded as a political act.

The true significance lies in the fact that this was a visit by a sitting South Korean president during a busy political season with an upcoming presidential election in December. Japanese media explained such a surprising visit by reporting it was done in an attempt to counteract President Lee’s current lame-duck status. On August 13, Lee explained his motives behind the visit, stating that Japan has shown a negative attitude towards the ‘comfort women’ issue (wartime sexual slavery) for reasons of domestic politics.

His visit to Dokdo and his words, however, do not seem to actually solve or address wartime slavery issues; rather, it serves to worsen ROK-Japan relations by invoking feelings of nationalism. First, Lee’s actions sparked criticism from the Japanese domestic media towards the Noda Administration for showing weak diplomatic power and legitimized the conservative wings’ insistence on changing the constitution to include amendments to military power. Actually, while both the DPJ and LDP are losing their popularity and facing a crisis of political leadership, right-wing Osaka mayor Hashimoto,

leader of the Osaka Ishin no Kai group, succeeded in transforming his group into a third political party to participate in the next general election. Further, following Lee's visit to the islets, two Japanese cabinet ministers visited Yaskuni shrine on the anniversary of both the surrender of Japan in World War II and the liberation of Korea on August 15.

Second, his sudden visit to Dokdo does not contribute in any way to developing cooperative relationships or a new regional design in Northeast Asia, where most countries will set up a new government by early next year. During the last week, while this dispute between Japan and Korea became deeper, Pyongyang sent a delegation to Beijing to discuss the joint development of two trade zones, despite the majority of cooperative relationships between North and South Korea being shut down for the past five years. Even Pyongyang tried to communicate with Japan positively by suggesting Red Cross talks, enabling the two governments to talk after four years of deadlock. Also for the first time, Japan, the US and Russia agreed to launch a security cooperation framework between government and civil society in East Asia.

Finally, the wartime slave issue is more a universal human rights issue than a national issue. However, mentioning the wartime slave issue after visiting Dokdo (which is a territorial issue) served only to stimulate nationalism on both sides. If Lee really wanted to solve the human rights issue of wartime slavery, he could have taken another approach.

- Yi Kiho, NAPSNet Contributor

---

*The **Nautilus Peace and Security Weekly Report** presents articles and full length reports each week in six categories: Austral security, nuclear deterrence, energy security, climate change adaptation, the DPRK, and governance and civil society**.** Our team of contributors carefully select items that highlight the links between these themes and the three regions in which our offices are found—North America, Northeast Asia, and the Austral-Asia region. Each week, one of our authors also provides a short blog that explores these inter-relationships.*

View this online at: https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/president-lee-myung-baks-diplomatic-leadership-challenge/

Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email: nautilus@nautilus.org