



JAPANESE-KOREAN RELATIONS

A FAILURE OF TSUNAMI DIPLOMACY

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After Japan's triple disaster on March 11, South Koreans showed great sympathy towards Japanese victims. In a collective move which had never been seen before, ordinary citizens and NGOs donated millions of dollars and the government sent aid, food and rescue teams to Japan. Many Koreans expected that Korea's civic and unprecedented initiative would open a new era in the controversial relations between the two countries. However, after what many Koreans saw as a cold response, it only took a few weeks to put an end to this movement and for anti-Japanese sentiments to loom large

Korea's Sympathy for Dire Disaster

On March 11, Japan was struck by the most devastating earthquake the country has ever experienced. It was quickly followed by a giant tsunami which swept the coastal villages. As if it was not enough, the flooding of the Fukushima nuclear plant caused one of the most serious nuclear disasters, now rated at the maximum level on the International Nuclear Event Scale.

The majority of South Koreans felt sympathy after they watched the scenes of destruction, as well as the subsequent courage of Japanese victims, even though they have complex feelings about Japan. There are still strong anti-Japanese sentiments which emanate from Japan's colonial rule of Korea between 1910 and 1945. However, altruistic feelings and pride in being able to help an economically superior Japan overcame animosity. A day after the earthquake, South Korea's Red Cross launched a fundraising campaign to support the Japanese people. Donations came from all levels of the society. Pop singers organized concerts or gave money, and the Salvation Army called for charitable donations. Even the "comfort women," who had been demonstrating in front of the Japanese embassy every Wednesday for 19 years, observed a day of mourning and gave money. In three weeks, a total of US\$46 million was collected.

The government also moved quickly to help Japan. While closely following the daily progress of the crisis, it dispatched a five-member rescue team, quickly followed by a 102 member team. It was the earliest action taken by any foreign government. Moreover, it sent 53 tons of boric acid to help to control the nuclear plants and delivered thousands of blankets

and tons of water. For some, the disaster marked a turning point in the relations between the two countries.

Japan's Response

Japan's reaction to its neighbor's assistance was lukewarm, as perceived by the South Koreans. The Japanese government refused the proposed assistance from South Korean nuclear experts but requested similar assistance from the United States and France. Neither did Japan fully cooperate with its neighbor concerning the monitoring of the nuclear crisis, especially when it discharged 11,000 tons of contaminated water into the ocean without informing South Korea.

Post-disaster relations between Japan and South Korea were complicated by the Dokdo issue. The Dokdo Islands are a group of islets located between Korea and Japan. Both countries consider the islands their territory. At the end of March, the annual screening of textbooks by a Japanese government screening panel was presented and, as always, Dokdo Islands was presented as part of the Japanese territory, with four textbooks arguing that South Korea was illegally occupying them. It was quickly followed by a diplomatic report reiterating Japanese sovereignty over the area. Japan first mentioned the Dokdo claims in a diplomatic report in 1963.

Meanwhile, in response to South Korea's protest, the Japanese government claimed that it was not a new decision but that the guidelines by which new Japanese textbooks were written was based on a nationalistic education law drafted by the Shinzo Abe Cabinet in 2006. Even the Prime Minister could not change the administrative procedure.



Anti-Japanese Mood in South Korea

The South Korean sympathy for their neighbors quickly shifted to anger and bitterness. The Japanese government's reluctance to share information on the radiation leak from the nuclear power plant and its unilateral decision to discharge contaminated water into the ocean led to great concerns and criticisms among the public in South Korea. As the country is geographically close to Japan it risked becoming a victim if the radiation leaks spread. Japan's refusal to receive Korean nuclear experts also created a feeling of distrust towards Japan's management of the crisis.

The textbook issue increased anger in South Korea. The South Korean media and the public took a very critical stance toward the Japanese government, arguing that it was deplorable that Japan could not avoid a territorial dispute over the Dokdo Islands amid an unprecedented friendly outreach from South Korea. Seoul expressed protest and deep regret over the Japanese move. The South Korean government has also announced plans to enhance governance of the islets.

On March 31, according to a poll conducted by the South Korean newspaper *Dong-A-Ilbo*, only 17.3 percent (down from 76.4 on March 15) of the respondents believed that Korean assistance for the Japanese earthquake would substantially contribute to promoting the bilateral relationship between the two countries. Extreme behavior was once again witnessed when a South Korean man almost severed his finger off in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul in protest against Japan's claim. Private donations for the Japanese victims dropped off or were withdrawn.

Some Lessons

Analysts have argued that major disasters create an opportunity to improve the often-troubled diplomatic relations. An idea embedded in "disaster diplomacy": improving bilateral relations through supporting disaster relief and humanitarian assistance in disaster-hit countries.

Yet, the consequence of South Korea's disaster diplomacy

toward Japan reveals a different story. South Koreans now feel disappointment as Japan's response fell short of their expectations. Why was South Korea's expectation so big? An argument is that South Korea expected to see a change of Japan's attitude toward its colonial rule in return with helping them. This sense might be rooted in the historical victimized feeling. Arguably, disaster diplomacy would be therefore a good strategy for the historic aggressors to improve their image in the victim countries.

As such, disaster diplomacy itself is actually shaped by people-to-people relations. Much Korean sentiment over the disaster in Japan centered on sympathy and condolence, but there has been also anti-Japanese sentiment. Nevertheless, the low-key coverage may have been based on concerns within the two governments about the possibility of provoking anti-Japanese feelings. As for the South Korean government, it was torn between the public anger and the necessity to keep pragmatic and strategic diplomatic relations with its neighbor.

Furthermore, it is simply not possible for one country to alter the fundamental direction of their bilateral relationship based on disaster diplomacy. By its actions, Japan has shown a lack of will in taking its neighbors into consideration. Some criticized the Japanese government and argued that it should make the process of accepting Korean assistance smoother. On the nuclear crisis, too, Japan's decision to release contaminated water into the sea without telling the Korean government beforehand reflects selfish behavior and a lack of responsibility.

Therefore, South Korea's tsunami diplomacy towards Japan shows that disaster-related activities sometimes have the opposite outcome if they were based on too much expectations and emotional reactions.

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