

East-Asia

Anti-Japan protests sweep China and South Korea

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Japan's escalating of territorial disputes with China and Korea - and Tokyo's latest attempt to whitewash its wartime atrocities - provoked huge protests in China and South Korea in March.

The protests snowballed in China, culminating in massive actions in many Chinese cities. Similar protests have taken place in more than 40 Chinese cities over recent weeks. As of early April, more than 25 million people have joined the China-hosted internet signature campaign to oppose Japan's bid for a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council.

Plans are underway to launch a new wave of anti-Japan protests in China around May 4. On that day in 1919, there was a mass wave of student-led protest against the Treaty of Versailles provisions that handed Chinese territory to Japan. The May Fourth Movement left a profound legacy on China's subsequent anti-imperialist struggle.

Japan colonised Korea in 1910 and invaded and occupied China on a broad scale from 1931, committing breathtaking atrocities, which included the massacre of an estimated 200,000 people in Nanjing, China, in 1937. On top of mass rapes and killings, many women from these two countries, and other occupied territories in Asia, were forced into sex slavery for Japanese soldiers. Men, especially from China and Korea, were forced into slave labour for Japan. Japan also conducted chemical and biological experiments on Chinese prisoners of war.

On March 3 this year, Japan's foreign minister Nobutaka Machimura took the extraordinary act of informing its parliament of his government's plan to demand China tone down its Japan-critical history lessons for its students such that Chinese citizens wouldn't be so "anti-Japan".

Tokyo has often attempted to whitewash its atrocities. The latest attempt, however, has sparked a much bigger response because of Japan's increased bullying role in the region, and its stepped up military presence, in particular its participation in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, a clear violation of its post-1945 "peace constitution".

In December 2004, Japan's "defence guidelines" named China for the first time as a potential threat. On February 19, Japan issued a joint statement with the US to express their "*common strategic goals*". Their ongoing negotiation to upgrade their military collaboration is expected to result in Japan becoming a more active lieutenant in the US empire.

Japan took control of Tokdo/Takeshima (the Korean and Japanese names respectively of islets between the two countries) from Korea when it colonised Korea in 1910. But since Korea's decolonisation, Tokyo has refused to relinquish claims over the islets. The March 10 decision of Japan's Shimane Prefecture to designate February 22 as "Takeshima Day" is widely seen in Korea as

a trick to legitimise Japan's claims.

Japan also took control of Diaoyu/Senkaku (the Chinese and Japanese names respectively of a group of eight islets) when it took Taiwan from Chinese hands in 1895. The US, the occupying power of Japan until 1952, "returned" the islets to Japan in an ambiguous component of the 1972 Okinawa Reversion Treaty. The islets' sovereignty has been in dispute since then by Japan, China and Taiwan. In a clear attempt to escalate tension, Tokyo recently threatened to issue licences to Japanese companies to explore a patch of the East China Sea over which it is disputing with China.

Protest wave

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's February hint that Japan might be included as a member of an enlarged Security Council sparked alarm in both South Korea and China. In both countries, protests opposed Japan being granted a UN Security Council seat, and Tokyo's whitewashing of its wartime atrocities in Japan's school textbooks. In addition, the Chinese protesters asserted China's sovereignty over the Diaoyu islets while its South Korea counterparts defended Korea's right over Tokdo.

Then, on April 5, Japan's Ministry of Education provocatively approved controversial textbook revisions. Anti-Japan protests sprang up the next day in Chungqing, central China, and Guangzhou in the south. On April 9, more than 20,000 people marched for seven hours through Beijing towards the same goal, while more than 10,000 demonstrated in Chengdu in western China. Similar protests also took place that day in Shanghai and Taiyuan in central China.

Some overzealous protesters damaged the property of Japanese establishments, which became the subject of complaint by the Japanese ambassador to China on April 10.

On that day, anti-Japan protests spread to at least 10 more cities in China, gathering at least 10,000 each in Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Haikou (Hainan Island) plus sizeable protests in other cities. There were widespread calls to boycott Japanese goods.

US State Department spokesperson Richard Boucher backed Japan on April 12, telling reporters, *"China does have a responsibility [to prevent violence in demonstrations]...very regrettable that this one ...was not under control."*

There is a growing debate whether such protests are officially instigated. There are signs the authorities were at least supportive of the protesters. Hong Kong's *Singtao Daily* reported on April 10 that rather than urging protesters to stop throwing stones during the April 9 Beijing protest, the police urged them to move along and make way for the protesters further down the march. The paper also reported the authorities had provided dozens of buses to take the protesting students back to the university belt free of charge.

Beijing has had a history of promoting nationalism to divert social discontent from domestic problems. But a mobilised people could sooner or later turn its attention back to domestic issues - which could be a worry for Beijing as the June 4 anniversary of the 1989 massacre of pro-democracy students approaches.

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