



Northeast Asia: Nationalism, Football and the Koguryo Kingdom

August 06, 2004

Summary

As China prepares to host the Asian Cup football final in Beijing, South Korea has lodged a strong protest urging Beijing to stop laying claim to the ancient Koguryo kingdom. Like the games themselves, this argument over geographic heritage exemplifies the nationalism that is such a force in Northeast Asia, one that continues to shape relations in the region.

Analysis

South Korea lodged a strong protest with China on Aug. 6, urging Beijing to stop laying claim to the ancient Koguryo kingdom, which was comprised of much of what is now South Korea, all of what is now North Korea and a slice of northeastern China from 37 B.C. to A.D. 668. This diplomatic row comes as more than 6,000 Chinese police and soldiers prepare to deploy near the Workers' Stadium in Beijing to ensure public order during the Asian Cup football final between China and Japan.

Nationalism runs deep in North Korea and remains a powerful political force that can often cause diplomatic spats and undermine bilateral initiatives. This latest dispute began months ago, when Beijing asserted that the Koguryo kingdom was a Chinese entity. The assertion appalled both North and South Koreans, who see the ancient kingdom as an integral part of their own histories.

The People's Daily in China quoted a Chinese scholar July 2, who described Koguryo as "a regime established by ethnic groups in northern China some 2,000 years ago, representing an important part of Chinese culture." South Korean scholars say the Chinese are compelled to claim Koguryo because of concerns over losing sovereignty of the eastern part of Manchuria -- where many ethnic Koreans live -- after the Koreans are ultimately unified. Even North Korea chastised its longtime ally; Pyongyang's state-run newspaper, Rodong Sinmun, accused Beijing of "manipulating history for its own interest."

Beijing, probably hoping to put the issue to rest, deleted the description of Korea's ancient history from its Foreign Ministry Web site Aug. 5. However, Korean sensibilities are not so easily appeased. The next day, Park Joon-woo, chief of the South Korean Foreign Ministry's Asia-Pacific Affairs Bureau, lodged a strong protest with Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi and other senior officials in Beijing.

The historical dispute is so profound in South Korea that it is helping to heal deep rifts in domestic politics. The same day Park filed his complaint with Beijing, Rep. Chun Jung-bae, floor leader of the ruling Uri Party, announced the party has joined with its main opposition, the Grand National Party, to organize a parliamentary body that will handle the dispute.

As the Koguryo dispute gathers steam, another confrontation fueled by deep-seated nationalism is about to take place on the football pitch: China and Japan will face off Aug. 7 for the Asian Cup final. Chinese memories of Japan's brutal invasion and occupation in World War II still run deep, and the match is sure to be emotionally charged.

Chinese fans in the southwestern city of Chongqing booed the Japanese team when it took the field

to play Jordan's team Aug. 2. Chinese fans also sat down during Japan's national anthem and threw garbage at Japanese fans, who had to be escorted by police out of the stadium after the game. An angry mob also rushed the Japanese team's bus. Chinese and Japanese fans reportedly will be confined to separate stands during the match in Beijing, and the stadium will be packed with Chinese security forces in case a riot breaks out.

Chinese and Korean sentiments over imperial Japan's militarism in the early 20th century remain an unyielding force, even while their more affluent neighbor remains one of their largest markets and investment sources. Seoul and Beijing lodged bitter protests with Tokyo over Japanese textbooks that gloss over Japanese war crimes, and China and the Koreans voice virulent opposition to Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's annual visit to the [Yasukuni shrine](#), a memorial to Japanese war heroes that contains the remains of several World War II war criminals.

China's sensitivity to Japanese actions was demonstrated in September 2003, when a hotel orgy involving nearly 400 Japanese male tourists and 500 Chinese prostitutes sparked outrage in the country and a diplomatic quarrel between Beijing and Tokyo. The timing of the incident was particularly inopportune, coming as it did two days before the 72nd anniversary of the Japanese army's occupation of Northeast China.

Occasional bursts of nationalism in Northeast Asia do not destroy bilateral ties between nations, but they do color them. For example, the issue of the Koguryo kingdom during upcoming six-party talks over North Korea's nuclear program helped set the tone for cooperation between the two Koreas after relations took a hit from a recent mass defection of [North Koreans](#). At the same time, nationalism has added to the [underlying tensions](#) between China and North Korea.

Patriotic fervor also has contributed to a Sino-Japanese dispute in the South China Sea over the mutually claimed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and nearby [hydrocarbon riches](#) lying under the sea floor.

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