

Leif-Eric Easley, "The Challenge of Partisan Nationalism: Convincing Publics that International Cooperation is Patriotic," *JoongAng Daily* (with *International Herald Tribune*), July 15, 2008, page 11.

Governments have historically used nationalism to rally populations against foreign challengers, motivate rapid development, and maintain the legitimacy of otherwise unpopular leaders. Recent cooperation in East Asia owes to government restraint on playing these nationalism cards. Meetings between representatives of Beijing and Taipei have yielded regular cross-Strait flights and promises of further economic integration. North Korea's regime is visibly disabling its Yongbyon nuclear reactor and expanding external contacts. China and Japan are building mutual trust through resumed summits, military exchanges, and joint development of gas reserves in the East China Sea.

Despite this international cooperation, identity-based conflicts in East Asia are becoming more complicated. Foreign policy is increasingly subject to public debate in South Korea, Taiwan and even China. This is a positive trend for government accountability and political freedom, but comes with the risk that opposition groups will use nationalism as a weapon against the ruling party.

Political tragedy ensues when international cooperation that would be a win for both countries is postponed or prevented, not by domestic interest groups with legitimate concerns, but by government critics using nationalism to score partisan points. Such partisan nationalism was at work in South Korea concerning U.S. beef, in Taiwan regarding the Senkaku Islands, and in China over receiving earthquake aid via Japanese military planes.

In the first case, President Lee Myung-bak decided to lift the import ban on American beef to improve bilateral relations and provide momentum for ratifying the Korea-U.S. free trade agreement. Unfortunately, President Lee applied his business pragmatism without doing his political homework. Lee's administration failed to convince Koreans how U.S. beef is scientifically safe from mad-cow disease and would significantly lower food costs.

However, public health workers and South Korean cattle ranchers did not incite the recent demonstrations in Seoul. The sometimes-violent mass street parties were organized over the internet by labor unions angry about plans for privatization and market liberalization, students upset with proposed educational reforms, and various progressive groups willing to resort to street democracy after losing at the ballot box. With beef, opposition parties found an umbrella issue for attacking the leadership style and agenda of the new president and his legislative majority.

The Lee administration shuffled many appointed posts and secured temporary agreement from Washington for only importing beef under 30 months old. Street protests are diminishing, but not before public support for Lee hit rock bottom, global businesses started to rethink investment in Korea, and partisan nationalism strained relations with the United States.

In a separate case, a Taiwan fishing boat sank near the disputed Senkaku Islands after colliding with a Japanese coast guard vessel. All members of the ship were rescued, and administration officials in Tokyo and Taipei were keen to quietly manage the incident. But domestic pressure on President Ma Ying-jeou demanded a harsher response. Taipei dispatched patrol boats to the islands it claims as Diaoyutai, and recalled Taiwan's representative from Tokyo.

Taiwanese fishermen value access to those waters, and potential gas resources in the area are of interest to Taiwan. However, Taipei's response appeared driven by politicians focused on relations with Beijing. Detractors within Ma's own party wanted to raise their popularity and know anti-Japan sentiments might help warm ties with China. The Democratic Progressive Party, opposed to Ma's engagement of the Mainland but much weakened after recent elections, was desperate for any leverage against the president.

Political opponents found in the Senkaku incident an emotional sovereignty issue with which to attack President Ma. Apologies and financial compensation were eventually worked out between Tokyo and Taipei, but not before partisan nationalism embarrassed Ma, disrupted crisis management, and unsettled Taiwan-Japan relations.

In a third case, Japanese and Chinese officials planned for Japan Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) C-130s to deliver earthquake aid supplies to Sichuan province. The message of friendship would have been poignant: the first Japanese military flights to China since World War II would transport soldiers carrying tents and blankets rather than guns and bombs. Unfortunately, the C-130s never left the ground. Word of the plan spread over the Internet before leaders explained or demonstrated the benefits of cooperation.

The political climate in China was already very nationalistic in response to international protests that followed the Olympic torch. Some Chinese decried their government for not being tougher on Tibet and foreign critics. After the earthquake, public outrage focused on corruption behind poorly constructed schools that collapsed on the children inside. Chinese leaders became increasingly sensitive about the danger of partisan nationalism and feared that historical resentment of Japan could be used against the Communist Party.

Thus, once Chinese websites railed against the ASDF mission, Beijing politely refused help from the Japanese military. Emergency supplies were eventually delivered on chartered planes rather than military aircraft, but a key opportunity to help victims quickly and advance historical reconciliation was missed.

Partisan nationalism is a powerful tool because it channels various public grievances, directing collective outrage against political opponents. The danger is that policies in the common interest, with few or no real losers, can become political lightning rods. This can short-circuit cooperation with traditional allies and rivals alike, making international relations more volatile.

Since partisan nationalism puts short-term political gains ahead of long-term strategic interests, even the best international agreements may take more work to realize. Leaders need to coordinate implementation strategies, doing the domestic political groundwork of presenting citizens with concrete benefits. Nationalist detractors can be out maneuvered if international cooperation is convincingly packaged as patriotic, as serving the greater good of the nation.

Perhaps most difficult is accomplishing this without demonizing the other side. Governments deserve credit for forgoing nationalism to advance cooperation, but the region needs more than handshakes across old Cold War divides. East Asia needs leaders who can trump partisan nationalism by convincing their populations that their neighbors are worth embracing.

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