



YASUKUNI CONTROVERSY FOR JAPAN: ABE'S VISIT A REPLY TO THE CHINESE ADIZ?

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Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine on 26 December 2013, first anniversary of his taking office has infuriated China and South Korea once again. The visit comes on the heels of already strong tensions between China and Japan on the Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in East China Sea declared by China on 23 November this year. Adding further unease for the neighbors is Abe's agenda of revising the Article 8 in the Japanese Constitution. Abe, who had visited previously when he was not prime minister, had expressed extreme regret over his decision not to visit Yasukuni during an earlier one-year term in office in 2006-2007. "I prayed to pay respect for the war dead who sacrificed their precious lives and hoped that they rest in peace," he told waiting reporters immediately afterward his visit. He also said that "unfortunately, a Yasukuni visit has largely turned into a political and diplomatic issue," and further added "I have no intention to neglect the feelings of the people in China and South Korea.ⁱ" However China did not delay in denouncing the visit saying it is "absolutely unacceptable to the Chinese people". Japan "must bear the consequences arising from this", said Chinese foreign ministry official Luo Zhaohuiⁱⁱ.

Previous visit by a large group of Japanese officials comprising of more than 150 members of the Diet during the Annual Autumn Festival (or Shuki Reitaisai) celebrated from 17-20 October at the Yasukuni Shrine had created an international controversy for Japan. At that time Prime Minister Shinzo Abe though continuing his restraint from visiting Yasukuni since his election to office in December 2012, had sent a ritual offering of a sacred

tree branch in a private capacity. Yasukuni controversy is bound to rise every year on 15 August and also the Annual Spring and Autumn Festivals in April and October respectively when a large group of Japanese officials visits the Shinto shrine eliciting strong condemnation from its neighbors. China and Korea view the Yasukuni Shrine as disregarding the various war crimes Japan committed against them during World War II due to the enshrinement of multiple war criminals at the site. Japan on its part considers Yasukuni shrine as a domestic matter of paying respects to its war dead, not justified of any outside concerns.

The Shinto shrine has been at the centre of international controversy since 1978 when 14 Class A war criminals were enshrined there such as Hideki Tojo, Prime Minister for much of World War II period and responsible for pushing ahead with invasion of China, Kenji Doihara who masterminded the Mukden Incident, Iwane Matsui and Akira Mutou responsible for the rape of Nanking, Kuniaki Koiso who was Commander-in-Chief in Korea etcⁱⁱⁱ. Founded in 1869 by Emperor Meiji, the Yasukuni Shrine located in Chiyoda in central Tokyo commemorates about 2.5 million war dead who died on behalf of Japan in wars from 1867-1951. The shrine houses not just government and military officials but also civilians who lost their lives during the course of these wars. Following separation of State Shinto and Japanese government in 1945, Yasukuni shrine is strictly a religious affair housing the souls of the dead spirits or *kami* with the government having no say in who is enshrined. However the Izokukai, a trust foundation that manages the shrine has given nationalistic overtones to the shrine with its reference to the spirits enshrined as *eirei* or hero spirits. Furthermore the Izokukai has strong relations with the LDP (which is de facto Japanese Government) as numerous LDP members have served as chairmen and part of the board of trustees. Former Liberal Democratic Party Secretary General Makoto Koga was the chairman until having stepped down after a decade in 2012^{iv}.

Yasukuni visits by senior Japanese officials have been under constitutional debate since Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone visited the shrine on 15 August in 1985 and made an offering of flowers purchased with public funds. Article 20 of the Japanese Constitution forbids the state from participating in religious activity with Article 89 forbidding public support for religious institutions. However the state reverts back saying the very separation of state and religion under Article 20 guarantees freedom of religion and does not allow for anyone to be prohibited from visiting and praying at the shrine^v. During the 1990s, the Yasukuni controversy subsided, to be only revived by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi who visited the shrine annually during his tenure from 2001-2006. Koizumi began his visits to Yasukuni at the behest of the Izokukai which was a major backer of his ruling Liberal Democratic Party^{vi}. He became the second PM after Nakasone to visit Yasukuni Shrine on the anniversary of the surrender by Japan in 2006. During Koizumi's tenure relations between Japan and its primary neighbors deteriorated to the point that there were no mutual visits between Chinese and Japanese leaders from October 2001, and between South Korean and Japanese leaders from June 2005. The standstill ended when the next Prime Minister Abe visited China and South Korea in October 2006.

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No emperor has visited Yasukuni shrine since 1978. The General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (GHQ/SCAP) prohibited the Japanese government and its agencies from supporting Shinto and forbade the Emperor from visiting the Yasukuni shrine officially under the "Shinto Directive" announced on 15 December 1945^{vii}. Following the last visit in November 1945 for paying respect to World War II dead, Emperor Hirohito visited the shrine happily after the occupation authorities left in October 1952. This was followed by six more visits, with the last one in November

1975^{viii}. The cause for the abrupt end to visits by the Japanese Emperor came to light in 2007 when the Asahi Newspaper published a section of the 31 July 2001, entry of the chamberlain Ryogo Urabe's diary, who wrote that "the direct cause" was that the emperor was "displeased about the inclusion of Class A war criminals." Hirohito under whose name Japan marched across most of Asia in the first half of the 20th century, died in 1989. His son Akihito who is Japan's current emperor has never made a pilgrimage to Yasukuni^{ix}.

As historical legacies continue on to this day in the region, Japan's continuous reversal of its official apologies for its war crimes and issues such as revision of Japanese history textbooks to downplay its aggression during World War II, Yasukuni shrine serves to only add further fuel to the rising nationalistic sentiments of China, Japan and Korea. The Yasukuni shrine has become a common point for right-wing politics in all three countries as political support is easily rallied by harping on nationalist pride and keeping war memories alive. Summoning of Japanese ambassadors' by China and Korea, media condemnation of the visits, cancellation of high-profile meetings, massive anti-Japanese demonstrations, obstruction of trade and businesses between the countries has been common feature following senior Japanese official visits to the shrine every year. It is international news whether the Prime Minister during his visit signed the visitors' book as *shijin*, private person, or *shusho*, Prime Minister. All Prime Ministers have so far stated that their visit was private irrespective of how they signed the guest book^x.

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There is growing debate over removing the 14 Class A war criminals and enshrining them at a separate site. This proposal has been strongly pushed by China and Korea. However the priesthood at the Yasukuni shrine is adamant that once a *kami* has been housed at the shrine, it cannot be separated as the enshrinement is permanent and

irreversible. Another alternative is constructing a new secular site for the Japanese politicians to go and pay their respects. The Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery, a memorial to the Japanese unidentified war dead within walking distance of Yasukuni has been put forth as an alternative for Japanese politicians to pay their respects to those who died during the war. However the Budokan in central Tokyo, where a national memorial service (attended by the Prime Minister and the Emperor) is held every year on 15 August to mourn the people who died during World War II, is within walking distance of the Yasukuni Shrine. Families who attend the service at Budokan and then make private visits to the Yasukuni shrine to pay respects to their ancestors have persistently stated that they have no desire for an alternative site^{xi}.

As Japan stands at crossroads today, its desire and efforts to become a normal country are being watched by the entire world. Following the debacles of its World War II adventure, Japan has striven to become a responsible and peaceful member of the global community. However being unable to resolve its historical legacies, its past still shadows its future. Commemorating and honoring its war dead is a sovereign right. But Japan needs to accept the Yasukuni issue has gone beyond the purview of the domestic interests of the state. As China rises rapidly and becomes a major player in not just regional affairs but even globally, competition between Japan and China will allow that its wounds from Japanese invasion during the World War II years will never die down. The current tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands have become a flashpoint in the region and though the Yasukuni shrine is over two decades old controversy, its repercussions following the issue of the Chinese ADIZ is yet to be seen.

Endnotes:

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)

ⁱ Japan Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visits controversial Yasukuni Shrine for war dead, Dec 26, 2013; at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/rest-of-world/Japan-Prime-Minister-Shinzo-Abe-visits-controversial-Yasukuni-Shrine-for-war-dead/articleshow/27946781.cms>

ⁱⁱ China enraged after Japan PM Shinzo Abe visits Yasukuni war shrine, Dec 26, 2013; at http://zeenews.india.com/news/world/japan-pm-shinzo-abe-visits-yasukuni-war-shrine-china-calls-it-brazen_899437.html

ⁱⁱⁱ The 14 Class A War Criminals enshrined at Yasukuni at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/135371.htm>

- iv Controversies surrounding Yasukuni Shrine, at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Controversies_surrounding_Yasukuni_Shrine
- v ibid
- vi Yew Mang Lai, *Nationalism and Power Politics in Japan's Relations with China: A Neo-Classical Realist Interpretation* (Routledge, 2013)
- vii Northeast Asian History Foundation, Postwar Compensation by Japan at <http://www.historyfoundation.or.kr/?sidx=208&styp=2#chapter03>
- viii Concerning the Yasukuni Shrine Problem, An Address to the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan on August 13, 2001 at http://www.sdh-fact.com/CL02_1/19_S4.pdf
- ix Hirohito quit Yasukuni Shrine visits over concerns about war criminals, April 26, 2007 at http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/26/world/asia/26iht-japan.1.5447598.html?_r=0
- x Controversies surrounding Yasukuni Shrine, at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Controversies_surrounding_Yasukuni_Shrine
- xi ibid

