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Koizumi's Obstacity Could Isolate Japan: Yasukuni and Asia

By Kwan Weng Kin

[Before your eyes glaze over at the thought of yet another article on Yasukuni visits, please note that the issue is metastasizing in the Japanese press and the country's foreign relations. Notable, for one thing, is the fact that this article by Kwan Weng Kin ran in the Singapore Straits Times, not in the People's Daily or the Korea Times. Moreover, as Kwan points out, Koizumi is coming under fire from much of Japan's media and large swathes of the foreign-policy and economic elite for his obstacity.]

Indeed, virtually everyone knows that Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni cause friction with neighbouring countries. What is less well-understood in Japan is that "neighbouring countries" does not only mean China and South Korea. This is because Koizumi and other prominent government figures - such as Foreign Minister Aso Taro - have been able, at least until recently, to get away with pretending that only China and Korea oppose the Yasukuni visits. They seek to exploit discontent with China and Korea as well as to suggest that the political and economic costs of the Yasukuni visits are minimal.

But Koizumi's Yasukuni pilgrimages continue to be opposed by plenty of governments and groups outside of China and Korea. The criticism goes back to Koizumi's first visit on August 13 2001. Not only China and South Korea reacted. The Vietnamese and Filipino governments also issued statements expressing concern and regret. There was also criticism from Filipino comfort women, Australian veterans and others. And major newspapers throughout Asia, the US and Europe have openly criticized each visit.

The visits are clearly costing Japan money. The January 2 New York Times noted that Asia's youth - and especially China's - see Korea as the region's hip, modern country and buy its cultural exports. Japan's sales and "soft power" have been blunted by the history that Yasukuni so powerfully symbolizes. Recent articles and editorials in the Asahi and other vernacular newspapers have also begun to draw attention to the economic costs of Yasukuni.

Kwan notes that another result of the Koizumi regime's diplomacy is that the Americans worry that Japan is isolating itself. Look at it from the perspective of the Bush regime. As Cornell University's Peter J Katzenstein argues in his 2005 book "A World of Regions," Asia and Europe are essential parts of an "American Imperium" that relies on Japan and Germany to stabilize their respective regions. But under Koizumi, Japan is creating problems. After all, the Yasukuni visits are only the most visible of serious frictions that include Japan's territorial disputes and with China, Korea and Russia as well as resource competition with China. The Americans have their hands full in Iraq and elsewhere and don't want to be distracted by what they see as senselessly provocative Japanese actions in Asia.

Indeed, buried in the middle of a November 17 Nikkei article on Bush's talks the previous day with Koizumi in Kyoto were a few paragraphs noting that Bush indirectly raised the Yasukuni issue. According to the Nikkei, this was because the US national security elite were concerned that worsening regional tensions over historical issues would render the US-Japan alliance ineffective in dealing with the rise of China. And as Kwan points out in this article, the comments are becoming more direct. AD]

TOKYO - IT TAKES courage for a leader to start the year on a sour note against his country's two most important neighbours, even granted that relations with them are currently at their worst.

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi did precisely that last Wednesday when he defiantly said at a New Year press conference that he could not understand why Beijing and Seoul would 'meddle with spiritual matters and turn them into diplomatic issues'.

He was referring, of course, to his annual visits to the Yasukuni war shrine, which have upset Beijing and Seoul and chilled their relations with Tokyo. The shrine, seen as a symbol of Japanese military aggression by Asian nations, honours 14 Class A war criminals among 2.5 million war dead. But it is Mr Koizumi himself who defies comprehension, even among his compatriots.

'Has a person with such a lack of understanding carried on as Prime Minister of Japan?' asked the influential Asahi Shimbun daily.

At his press conference, Mr Koizumi had also said he failed to understand why Japanese opinion-leaders and intellectuals disagreed with him over Yasukuni as well.

Said the Asahi: 'Most newspapers want him to stop going to Yasukuni. Instead of pouting and saying he doesn't understand, he would do well to listen to the opinions of others.'

Ex-prime ministers, such as Mr Kiichi Miyazawa and Mr Yasuhiro Nakasone, have counselled Mr Koizumi to stay away from Yasukuni, but their efforts are in vain.

Scholars and foreign policy experts also do not back him on Yasukuni. In the latest issue of Gaiko Forum, a monthly magazine on diplomatic issues, a former Japanese ambassador to Washington, Mr Takakazu Kuriyama, wrote that Mr Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni Shrine gave the impression that he shared the shrine's contentious view of Japan's last war.

Yasukuni not only enshrines the people who had directed Japan's war against its neighbours; the texts at the shrine's museum also approve of Japanese militarism by still referring to the Great East Asia War, the very term used by Japan's war-time Cabinet.

Although Mr Koizumi says Yasukuni should not be turned into a diplomatic issue, he conveniently forgets that it was he himself who had made it such, by

pledging in 2001 to visit the shrine every Aug 15 - the day of Japan's surrender in World War II and a sensitive date for Asian nations.

While Japan's frigid political ties with China have yet to impact on economic relations between the two countries, Mr Koizumi has Japanese business leaders worried.

In his New Year session with the press, Mr Hiroshi Okuda, head of the powerful Nippon Keidanren business lobby, said: 'If this situation continues, we are afraid it may develop into something serious.'

Critics say Mr Koizumi makes up for his lack of diplomatic finesse by his deftness at substituting real issues with those of his own creation.

He insists that his decision to visit Yasukuni is a 'matter of the heart' and that it is natural for a prime minister to express gratitude to his country's war dead.

But China and South Korea are not complaining about him praying for the souls of his countrymen who fell in battle, or pledging not to go to war again. The problem is that Mr Koizumi insists on doing both at the infamous shrine. Mr Koizumi, it seems, fails to understand this. Or perhaps he has never tried to do so.

As a young man and even after becoming a politician, he had not displayed the slightest interest in Yasukuni. It was only when he ran in the 2001 presidential elections of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) that he pledged to make annual visits to the shrine in order to win the votes of members of the Association of War Bereaved Families, a powerful backer of the party. Many Japanese believe that Mr Koizumi continues to visit the shrine because he makes a virtue of carrying through with his promises, no matter what negative implications they may hold.

Given the obstinate streak in Mr Koizumi's character, the protests from China and South Korea only make it more difficult for him to back down.

Reports also suggest that he had resolved to continue Yasukuni visits as a way to spite Beijing, after a tumultuous encounter with then Chinese leader Jiang Zemin in October 2002 on the fringes of an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Los Cabos, Mexico, during which Mr Jiang reportedly berated him over Yasukuni for most of their 45-minute meeting.

Weekly news magazines and commentators on cable television current affairs talk shows have recently taken to describing Mr Koizumi's stance on Yasukuni as 'childish'. By pursuing his own personal interests, they believe, Mr Koizumi has hurt Japan.

The Yasukuni issue, for instance, gave Beijing a convenient excuse last year to oppose Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

The danger is that Mr Koizumi's theatrics - for example, when talking about Yasukuni at the New Year press conference, his eyes glazed over - may mislead the Japanese people.

His performance was doubtless aimed at his domestic audience, and calculated to drum up popular support.

For there are many Japanese, especially among the younger generation, who do not understand the fuss over Yasukuni but will readily agree that Mr Koizumi is right not to buckle under pressure from China and South Korea.

It appears that the stubborn Mr Koizumi will stick to his stance on Yasukuni until he steps down as Prime Minister in September, when his term as LDP leader runs out.

The problem is that the stand-off over Yasukuni may continue after he goes. Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe, the current front runner in the succession stakes based on his overwhelming popularity with voters, regretfully shows much the same naivety as Mr Koizumi, who is his diplomatic model. Asian nations are clearly perturbed that Mr Koizumi's exit may not end the spat with China and South Korea.

According to Jiji Press, Singapore's Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong told visiting Japanese politician Taku Yamasaki in Singapore on Tuesday that he hopes Japan's next prime minister will refrain from visiting Yasukuni.

The United States has also expressed concern over Japan's inability to counter China's apparent use of war issues, including Yasukuni, to isolate Japan in East Asia.

In a recent interview with the Mainichi Shimbun, former White House security official Michael Green pointed to Japan's lack of a strategy against the Chinese.

'One solution is for PM Koizumi to stop going to Yasukuni. But that is for him to decide,' Mr Green told the Mainichi.

American scholar Kent Calder of Johns Hopkins University reportedly said at a closed-door meeting here recently that the US feared a worst-case scenario in which countries in the region decided to go ahead and form an East Asian Community without Japan.

Mr Koizumi, who claims he is 'always open' to dialogue, would have his people believe that the ball is now in the court of Beijing and Seoul.

Clearly, it is not.

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