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Yasukuni Shrine, Nationalism and Japan's International Relations

By Yomiuri Shimbun and Asahi Shimbun

[*For twenty years, Prime Ministerial visits to Yasukuni Shrine, have provided a flash point for Japan-China and Japan-South Korea clashes, together with conflicts over territorial and textbook issues. Yasukuni, Japan's war memorial, is a facility with close association with the Emperor. It preserves the remains of Japan's military war dead, enshrined as gods. It also includes the remains, among those of other leaders, of fourteen Class-A War Criminals convicted at the Tokyo Tribunal. With China's emergence in the last year as Japan's leading trade partner, the Yasukuni issue continues to poison the atmosphere between the two nations as well as those with South Korea. The issues are central both to rising Japanese nationalism and to diplomatic relations throughout East Asia. Pressure is building within Japan to resolve the Yasukuni issue. One sign of this is the recent statement by Lower House Speaker Kono Yohei and five former prime ministers urging caution in visiting the shrine to avoid further deterioration of Japan's ties with neighboring countries. The five former prime ministers are Kaifu Toshiki, Miyazawa Kiichi, Murayama Tomiichi, Hashimoto Ryutaro and Mori Yoshiro. Recent editorials from the Yomiuri Shimbun and Asahi Shimbun highlight important parameters of the debate.*]

"Private Citizen" Koizumi's Visits to Yasukuni Shrine and Japanese Diplomacy: A Call for a new nonreligious war memorial

By The Yomiuri Shimbun

With what view of history has Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro visited Yasukuni Shrine in the past?

Koizumi said Thursday at the House of Representatives that he understood the Class-A war criminals -- those found guilty at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, also known as the Tokyo Tribunal -- were war criminals.

The prime minister was speaking in response to a question asked by Okada Katsuya, leader of the Democratic Party of Japan, at a session of the lower house's Budget Committee.

If this is the case, then Koizumi should not visit Yasukuni Shrine, which enshrines Class-A war criminals along with other war dead.

Criminality disputed

Critics both at home and abroad have cast doubts as to whether the Tokyo Tribunal, held on the basis of a court regulation stipulated by the Occupation authorities' GHQ, was justifiable in light of international law.

The case in point is the "Pal ruling," whereby Judge Radhabinod Pal, who represented India at the tribunal, acquitted all the defendants, saying that given the history of their own imperialistic adventures, the United States and European countries were not entitled to try Japan.

Moreover, following the 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty, the death of Class-A war criminals by public execution has been treated as "death in the course of public duty."

Shigemitsu Mamoru, who was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment as a Class-A war criminal, became a deputy prime minister and foreign minister under the administration of then Prime Minister Ichiro Hatoyama in 1954.

Kaya Okinori, who was given a life term as a Class-A war criminal, served as justice minister under the administration of Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato.

As a result, a "criminal" became a guardian of the law.

Yet there were no particular objections made by other countries when these former "Class-A war criminals" had their lost honor restored by becoming cabinet members.

From such a historical context, many have argued strongly that the so-called Class-A war criminals are not "criminals," although they have to shoulder the guilt of recklessly dragging their country into a war.

It was in 1978 when these Class-A war criminals were enshrined, together with the war dead, at Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine.

Although the enshrinement became public knowledge in 1979, then Prime Minister Ohira Masayoshi and Suzuki Zenko, Ohira's successor, visited the shrine as their predecessors did.

Ohira said, "I think that the judgment on Class-A war criminals or on the Greater East Asia War will be made by history," thus declining to express his own opinion on whether they were criminals.

In response to Okada's question Thursday, Koizumi also said, "I'm not visiting the shrine as a duty of prime minister. I'm visiting due to my own beliefs," making clear that he is visiting the shrine as a private individual.

If his visits to the shrine are made as a private citizen, he should think of a better way to worship there. It is questionable for him to step into the holiest Shinto shrine and enter his name with his title of "prime minister" when making a private visit.

The issue of distinguishing between a visit to the shrine in a private or official capacity gained public attention after then Prime Minister Miki Takeo, on his visit to the shrine in 1975, said he went there as a "private individual."

Yet succeeding prime ministers visited the shrine without specifying whether their visits were in an official or private capacity.

Suzuki followed a policy of not answering questions as to whether his visit was in a private or official capacity.

Yet it is a different story when a prime minister clearly distinguishes his visit to the shrine, as when Koizumi says he is not visiting the shrine as part of his duties as prime minister.

Constitutional hurdles

One solution proposed to the problem of the prime minister's visits is to have the Class-A war criminals disenshrined and enshrined elsewhere.

But Yasukuni Shrine is a religious organization. If political leaders pressure the shrine to enshrine Class-A war criminals separately, they would be violating the principle of the separation of state and religion under the Constitution.

It is up to the shrine as a religious entity to interpret the contents of its rites, including whether it should enshrine the war criminals separately.

As there are various religions and sects in Japan, there are also many who oppose the prime minister's visits to the shrine due to religious reasons.

If it is difficult for Yasukuni Shrine to enshrine Class-A war criminals separately in light of Shinto doctrine, the only way to solve the problem lies in building a national memorial that is nonreligious.

In 2001, when the Koizumi Cabinet was inaugurated, a private panel to then Chief Cabinet Secretary Fukuda Yasuo discussed ways to mourn the war dead. It came up with a proposal the following year that a nonreligious national facility be built to commemorate the war dead and pray for peace.

The report lacked concrete ideas as to what sort of facility should be built or how to mourn the war dead. The government should put the finishing touches to the proposal as soon as possible and start building a new memorial facility.

At Arlington National Cemetery in the United States, there are tombstones for unknown soldiers as a central memorial, at which visiting heads of foreign states often lay a wreath of flowers.

A new national memorial can be built as an outdoor facility. One idea raised is for a monument to be established at Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden in central Tokyo. This is worth discussing.

The government-sponsored memorial service for the war dead, held every Aug. 15, could still be held at Nippon Budokan hall in Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo.

China ties unlikely to improve

Yet even if Koizumi stops his visits to Yasukuni Shrine, it will not necessarily improve Japan's bilateral relations with China anytime soon.

Even after the fact that Class-A war criminals were enshrined at the shrine was made known, China did not protest publicly when prime ministers Ohira and Suzuki made successive visits to the shrine.

It was after then Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro made an official visit to the shrine in 1985 that China began lodging protests to such visits.

In yielding to Beijing's protest, Nakasone discontinued his visits to the shrine in the following year. The action handed China a diplomatic bargaining chip that it has continued to exploit.

In later years, China, alarmed by the declining power of the Chinese Communist Party regime after the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, intensified its policy of "educating people with patriotism and anti-Japanese sentiment," fostering a vast population with anti-Japanese sentiment year after year.

The slogans seen during the wave of anti-Japanese protests in April focused on the issue of Japan's campaign for a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council and on Taiwan.

When pondering future bilateral relations with China, the government must keep a close eye on the domestic situation there.

This editorial appeared in The Yomiuri Shimbun, June 4, 2005.

China-Japan Relations and Koizumi's Yasukuni visits

By The Asahi Shimbun

The Asahi Shimbun has received numerous letters and suggestions from members of war-bereaved families and other readers concerning its opposition to Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro 's visits to Yasukuni Shrine.

One line of thought has repeatedly appeared in these messages: What is wrong with grieving for those who gave their lives for their country in the past war? What could possibly be more natural than visits by the prime minister to pay reverence to such persons?

We wish to address the issues raised by such opinions.

Grieving for husbands, fathers and sons who perished after being sent out to the battlefield is indeed natural behavior. It is crucial, in fact, for those of us who live in the peaceful postwar era to share in this sentiment and action.

Each of the several million Japanese who died in war had families and futures. When we consider that, we are painfully aware of the cruelty and tragedy of war. The feelings of grief harbored by war-bereaved families and Japanese people for fallen family and friends are certainly the most natural of human sentiments.

However, it is a mistake to combine the mourning and display of respect for those who lost their lives in war with assessments of the war itself, or with the issue of leaders who have a responsibility for the war. There is a need to draw clear lines between soldiers who had no choice but to obey the orders handed to them by superiors and the responsibilities of military leaders, politicians and others who planned and carried out the war.

In 1978, Yasukuni enshrined the souls of 14 Class-A war criminals, including wartime Prime Minister Tojo Hideki, who was convicted and executed for war crimes. This action compounded the complexity of the issue of mourning for Japan's war dead.

Yasukuni Shrine, previously attached to the defunct ministries of the army and navy, in the past served the purpose of providing a site to publicly manifest both grief and admiration for those who perished in conflict. In this sense, it functioned to enhance the will to fight and mobilize the populace for war. After World War II, the shrine became a religious corporation. But there has been no change in its basic message of justification for the past war.

The Yasukuni stance is that World War II was an unavoidable battle fought in self-defense. It also claims that the Class-A war criminals blamed for the war at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East were falsely accused by the Allied powers.

Some readers have also accused The Asahi Shimbun of accommodating the recent flare-up of anti-Japanese sentiment in China.

We would like to point out, however, that the Chinese are not making an issue over mourning for ordinary soldiers. Rather, they oppose mourning for the officers who championed the war. Beijing says it cannot condone visits by the prime minister, the representative of the Japanese nation, to a shrine that honors the souls of the Class-A war criminals.

This criticism, voiced by a nation that was invaded and victimized by Japanese forces in the past, cannot be casually dismissed as anti-Japan in content.

Koizumi says he goes to Yasukuni to pray for future peace. However, we wonder if the victims of war enshrined there would really be pleased to see him engage in practices that undermine the peaceful relations Japan has built up with China and South Korea.

We would like to see a place of mourning established that a truly broad segment of the Japanese people will accept, where overseas guests of honor can also visit without hesitation to show their respect.

In 2002, a private advisory panel headed by then Chief Cabinet Secretary Fukuda Yasuo proposed constructing a new nonreligious national facility as a site for mourning the war dead.

In view of recent events, we feel even more strongly that such a facility would be a far more suitable venue for the prime minister, as the representative of the Japanese people, to articulate the sincerity of our sorrow.

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