

International Affairs Forum Op-Ed:

July 24th, 2006

By Jason Miks

Diplomacy Around Yasukuni

With what feels like painful monotony, the issue of Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine is once again making news in Asia. This time the question is whether he will make a sixth and final visit as prime minister, possibly even on August 15th, the day marking Japan's surrender in the Second World War.

The visits have enraged both Chinese and South Korean popular opinion because 14 Class A war criminals lie enshrined there and in the countries that had fallen victim to Japanese aggression during the war, many people feel that the visits reflects a failure by Japan to fully come to terms with its wartime past. (Anyone who visits the adjacent museum on the shrine's site, presenting a stunningly revisionist account of Japan's role in those years, can understand why.) This sensitivity is not confined to Japan's neighbors. Last week came the revelation, as recorded by one of his stewards, that the late emperor Hirohito, on the throne during the Second World War, ceased visiting Yasukuni because of his unease at the enshrinement of the war criminals.

Koizumi has defended the visits, pointing out that the shrine is also a memorial to over 2 million Japanese war dead and arguing that it these that he is paying his respects to, while praying for peace. He has also argued that he is paying his respects as a private citizen and not in his capacity as prime minister. Yet this argument is perhaps a little disingenuous as it begs the question why, if he is visiting as a private citizen, he would feel the need to visit again before he steps down in September.

The debate has taken on added significance for the role it could play in the leadership contest to succeed Koizumi, who is to step down in September under Liberal Democratic Party rules. At present the clear front runner to replace Koizumi as President of the LDP, and therefore prime minister, is chief cabinet secretary Shinzo Abe. His position has been strengthened since the decision by his senior colleague Yasuo Fukuda at the weekend not to run.

Shinzo Abe is regarded as more hawkish on foreign policy than Fukuda and has previously voiced support for Koizumi's Yasukuni visits, though he has shied away from re-iterating that support as the leadership contest has drawn nearer. He has strong support within the party, especially among younger members, and his more youthful, telegenic image allows him to paint himself as the upholder of Koizumi's reforms.

With Fukuda out of the running there is certainly room for a more conciliatory candidate, at least in regards to foreign relations, and a candidate who recognizes the damage done to Japan's relations in the region. Such a candidate might also pick up support from the business community, much as Fukuda did, as many feel that the visits have adversely affected trade, as well as from the many Japanese who have grown concerned at the deterioration in relations with China and South Korea.

Of course whoever is chosen to succeed Koizumi, and even if the LDP leadership abandon's the Yasukuni visits, the many diplomatic (never mind strategic) differences between Japan and China are not simply going to go away. Territorial disputes linger and Missile Defense as well as Japan's more assertive role in international affairs are bound to keep Japan and China in a tense relationship for decades to come. It Yasukuni won't be the lightning rod of future rows, something else will.

Even so, Japan can do better than to have their prime minister provide China with such a convenient moral stick with which to beat them over the head. And though China's leaders have persisted in their criticism of the Yasukuni visits, they have weeks toned down much of the rhetoric in recent weeks. These are flames not in need of re-kindling.

Relations between Asia's two great local powers are at a worryingly low point. Even if future clashes are inevitable, there are plenty current issues that would benefit from a closer working relationship – North Korea just being the most obvious one. If Japan is looking for support for a much coveted - and well-deserved - Security Council seat, and if it is to reassure neighbors that its increasing international assertiveness is truly benign, it must remember that gestures are important in international affairs. Many of Japan's neighbors feel Japan does not value good regional relations and are looking on with concern as Japan looks to amend war-renouncing Article 9 of its constitution.

In the future Japan's leaders should look at some of the suggestions for resolving the Yasukuni issue, perhaps by adopting a 2002 proposal from a private advisory panel headed by then Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda to construct a new, non-religious memorial as a site at which to mourn the country's war dead. It is believed that Koizumi's visits in part stem from a promise he made to visit the shrine when running for the post of Liberal Democratic Party president, presumably to shore up support amidst a rising feeling of national assertiveness. For the good of the country his successor should avoid any such promises. Japan's foreign relations are too important to use as a political bargaining chip.