

POINT OF VIEW
Shrine Visits Become America's Problem, Too
By Paul Giarra

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When Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi arrives in Washington on Thursday, he already will have forfeited his chance to address a Joint Session of Congress--a steep price for his insistence upon annual official visits to the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, where the souls of Japan's World War II Class-A war criminals are enshrined along with the country's war dead. Just whose problem is Yasukuni, anyway?

This personal and political disappointment on the part of Koizumi highlights the significance of Yasukuni Shrine in international relations and Japan-U.S. alliance politics. Treated as "someone else's problem" in Washington, Yasukuni is America's problem--and our history--too.

Yasukuni is an international issue because Japan's Class-A war criminals, responsible for the origins and excesses of World War II in China and the Asia-Pacific, were consciously enshrined there in 1978. Since then, Yasukuni has been the manifestation of Japan's reluctance to accept responsibility for World War II in the Pacific.

Japan's neighbors, notably China and South Korea, have objected bitterly and at length to Koizumi's official visits. While Washington and Tokyo largely have agreed to forgive and forget, this has not been the case for the rest of Asia, and Yasukuni has been characterized as the manifestation of this Asian recalcitrance.

For the most part, the United States had stayed out of this dispute, but Congressman Henry Hyde, a Republican from Illinois and chairman of the House International Relations Committee, recently observed in a leaked letter to Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert that if Koizumi visited Yasukuni as expected shortly after he were to address a Joint Session of Congress in June, "Mr. Koizumi would dishonor the place where

President Franklin Roosevelt made his 'Day of Infamy' speech after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor."

Yasukuni imposes significant costs upon the United States. First, Japan's policies and actions affect Sino-American relations because Washington is first and foremost a partner of Japan.

The United States is seen in Asia as having a stake in the Sino-Japanese argument due to its commitment to Japan as a major political and military ally and a primary trading partner. After all, it is an article of faith in Washington that Japanese actions affect Chinese calculations: Japan is being pushed forward as a bulwark for America's Pacific strategy.

It also should make a difference to the United States that Japanese actions can affect American strategy negatively as well. American ties with China are simply too important to be put at risk over a political row between Japan and China when Japanese actions are gratuitous and inflammatory.

Second, the United States and Japan overcame their history to become staunch allies, and China and Japan should similarly find a way to put history behind them; American strategic interests require that a strong Japan and a rising China should avoid a deterioration of relations.

Third, Yasukuni is a direct and divisive issue between Japan and the United States. The enshrinement of Class-A war criminals in Yasukuni--pure domestic political populism--represents a repugnant and unreconstructed segment of Japan's political spectrum. The museum associated with the shrine, recently renovated and expanded, insists upon Japanese political and moral righteousness in World War II: Japan was defending itself against a conniving Roosevelt, who maneuvered Tokyo into war for American geo-strategic interests.

This crass, revisionist interpretation of history is a direct challenge to much held dear in

the United States.

Fourth, and perhaps most consequential, has been the profound damage to Japan's international reputation. Since the end of the U.S. Occupation, Japan has been trying to restore its moral standing. Through inspirational hard work, dedication to peace and good works, and a commitment to stability in Asia, Japan largely has succeeded. This certainly has been true in relation to China, where democracy, human rights and the rule of law remain future objectives.

Based on Japan's moral renaissance, the United States has made a profound political, strategic and alliance commitment to Japan.

The insistence on accommodating Yasukuni's version of history, however, threatens to squander the moral advantage achieved by generations of Japanese since 1945, thereby devaluing the U.S. commitment to Japan and weakening the U.S. position in Asia.

It is ironic and unfortunate that this moral decline not only credits Beijing, anything but a paragon of virtue, but that Japan's backsliding has marked negative consequences for the United States. American foreign policy and global security strategy are based upon a strategic partnership with a strong Japan, founded upon shared values as well as shared interests. In a bilateral relationship this close, lost virtue comes at strategic cost.

Koizumi is the one man who can arrest this vicious spiral, by simply walking away from it. He has it in his power to aver that he will not return to Yasukuni in his capacity as prime minister: "Japan's global reputation and relations with China and the United States are too important for me to visit Yasukuni as prime minister, and my successors should not have to do so."

This would disarm his critics and hearten his friends, at virtually no political cost in the waning days of his tenure. The place to do so might just be in the U.S. Capitol, before a Joint Session of Congress.

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