

Japan: Koizumi's provocative visit to the Yasukuni shrine

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In one of his final acts before leaving office next month, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi paid a sixth visit last week to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine where Japan's war dead, including convicted war criminals, are worshipped. Particularly significant was the date of Koizumi's visit—August 15 was the day on which Japan formally surrendered to US forces in 1945.

Koizumi's determination to make the trip to the Shinto religious shrine on that date, despite repeated protests by China and South Korea, was designed to send a message: Japan is no longer prepared to be restrained by its defeat in World War II nor apologetic for the terrible crimes committed by Japanese imperialism in the 1930s and 1940s. More than any of his postwar predecessors, Koizumi is responsible for reviving the country's militarist traditions and aggressively reasserting Japan's interests in North East Asia.

The Yasukuni Shrine has long been a symbol of Japanese nationalism and militarism. Its associated history museum falsifies Japan's wartime conquests as "liberating" Asia from Western powers and whitewashes Japanese military atrocities. It proudly displays a Mitsubishi "Zero" aircraft used in the invasion of China. "Japan's dream of building a Great East Asia was necessitated by history and it was sought after by the countries of Asia," the shrine declares on its website.

Koizumi was the first prime minister to visit the Yasukuni Shrine on August 15 since Yasuhiro Nakasone in 1985. Nakasone's visit provoked such strong protests from Japan's neighbours that it was also his last. It took another decade for Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto to make his only trip to the shrine in July 1996. Before becoming prime minister in 2001, Koizumi pledged to visit the shrine on August 15 but backed away, under domestic and international pressure, making a trip annually on less sensitive dates.

Every aspect of the latest visit was contrived to blunt criticism, while encouraging right-wing nationalists. Koizumi claimed he was making the trip as an individual

who happened to be prime minister, yet deliberately signed the guest book as "Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi". Unlike previous years, he prayed in the main building itself, thus more formally paying homage to the war dead. He denied glorifying wartime militarism and brushed aside adverse comment about the date by declaring: "I have always been criticised and opposed, even when I avoided (visiting Yasukuni) on August 15."

The message was not lost on the hundreds of right-wing activists who gather annually at the shrine on August 15. Among them was Yuko Tojo—the granddaughter of wartime Prime Minister Hideki Tojo—who was tried and executed as a war criminal by a US-led tribunal in 1948. "I thank Prime Minister Koizumi from the bottom of my heart for today's visit, since he put away other countries' interference in domestic affairs," she declared.

Others were dressed in wartime military uniforms bearing the imperial Chrysanthemum badge. They shouted "Long live the Emperor!", waved the wartime flag and sang the national anthem as nearby sound trucks blared out military marches. Shinichi Kamijo told the *Japan Times* that he was there to "patrol the environs outside Yasukuni for leftwingers". He said the more Chinese and South Koreans protested, the more often the prime minister should come. Another 56 Japanese MPs visited the shrine later in the day.

The visit did not go unopposed—a reflection of the deep-seated hostility in Japan to militarism. A busload of protestors attempted to enter the shrine's grounds but they were barred by police. A group of 300 protestors gathered in Tokyo's Sakamotocho Park. Another 300 assembled near the shrine. Professor Koichi Yokota, a speaker at the protest, accused Koizumi of violating the constitution's separation of the state and religion.

Koizumi's visit provoked strong opposition in the region. A Chinese spokesperson declared that it "challenges international justice and tramples on the conscience of mankind". South Korea said the Yasukuni visit "strained South Korea-Japan relations" and damaged cooperative ties in North East Asia. Taiwan called on Tokyo to "face the past

squarely”. Singapore said it was not helpful for “cooperation in East Asia”. Even Russia warned that the visit and Japan’s wartime history were “extremely delicate subjects”.

While many people recollect Japan’s wartime atrocities and legitimately fear a revival of Japanese militarism, Beijing and Seoul are exploiting these sentiments to divert from social tensions at home. Last year the Chinese government encouraged anti-Japanese protests by layers of middle-class youth, leading to racist attacks on innocent Japanese visitors. On August 15, dozens of anti-Japanese activists were allowed to protest outside the Japanese embassy in Beijing.

Powerful sections of the Japanese ruling class have been pressing for a more aggressive assertion of national economic and strategic interests since the early 1990s. But the country’s armed forces were constrained by the so-called pacifist clause in the post-war constitution that effectively blocked the development of an offensive military capacity and the deployment of Japanese troops overseas. The limitations on the Japanese military became embarrassingly apparent during the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War—Tokyo was unable to contribute troops to the US-led force but was forced to pay a large portion of the costs.

Posturing as a “reformist” opposed to the political establishment, Koizumi succeeded where a long string of prime ministers failed. As well as consciously breaking the post-war restraints on Japanese foreign policy, he pushed ahead with an agenda of far reaching economic restructuring. He made a deliberate appeal to disaffected young people by combining an “unconventional” image with nationalist appeals to build “a new Japan” that would not apologise to China and Korea over its wartime record.

The Bush administration’s “war on terrorism” proved a political boon to Koizumi. Following September 11, he sacked his popular foreign minister, Makiko Tanaka, who was critical of the US and advocated a more independent Japanese foreign policy, including closer ties with China. Koizumi strengthened Japan’s alliance with Washington, calculating that the “war on terrorism” would enable his government to undermine the constitutional restraints on the Japanese military.

In 2001, Koizumi established a precedent by sending Japanese warships to the Indian Ocean to support the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. In 2004, Koizumi defied overwhelming popular opposition to send troops to support the US-led occupation of Iraq—the first time that Japanese soldiers had been sent to a foreign combat zone since 1945. Following last month’s missile test by North Korea, Japan, rather than the US, took the lead in pressing for a punitive resolution in the UN Security Council. Inside Japan, senior government figures argued that Japan had to have offensive

military capabilities for a “pre-emptive” strike against North Korea.

Encouraged by the Bush administration to take a more aggressive role in North East Asia, particularly against China, the Koizumi government has provoked a series of territorial disputes, not only with Beijing, but also with Russia, South Korea and Taiwan. Koizumi’s visits to the Yasukuni shrine and his government’s approval of controversial history texts whitewashing Japan’s wartime role have only compounded regional tensions.

Within Japan, sections of the business elite are concerned that Koizumi has damaged their commercial interests. Finance Minister Sadakazu Tanigaki—a contender to replace Koizumi next month—issued a statement saying, “a prime minister should avoid actions that worsen relations with China and South Korea” and lower Japan’s standing in Asia.

The frontrunner as the next prime minister is, however, Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe, a right-wing nationalist who openly defended the shrine visit. At a press conference last week, he praised Koizumi for explaining the reasons “in a very easy-to-understand way”. Abe’s grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, became prime minister in 1957 despite allegations of his involvement in war crimes. Abe has been a frequent visitor to the Yasukuni shrine.

The debate over the shrine visits also reflects concerns about popular opposition. An editorial in *Asahi Shimbun* on August 17 warned that the visit was a serious “political mistake” that deeply divided the nation. “Is he totally unaware of the growing domestic opposition to his Yasukuni visits?” the newspaper exclaimed.

“In an *Asahi Shimbun* poll in July, 57 percent of respondents expressed opposition to Koizumi’s shrine visits. The figure was double that of the people who supported the visits. Most national and local newspapers are also at odds with Koizumi. Even within his own party, many influential politicians, including former prime ministers, have called on Koizumi to stop visiting the shrine,” the editorial stated. “Is Koizumi ready to brand all these critics as people trying to curry favour with China and South Korea?”

Despite this widespread opposition, it is likely that Abe will succeed Koizumi and continue the aggressive assertion of Japanese imperialism’s interests in the region and internationally.



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