

Japanese lawmakers visit notorious Yasukuni war shrine

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A large group of 80 Japanese lawmakers and three cabinet ministers visited the infamous Yasukuni Shrine to the war dead last Friday—the 69th anniversary of the end of World War II. The visit was part and parcel of the revival of Japanese militarism being pursued by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his government, which includes whitewashing the war crimes of the Japanese military during the 1930s and 1940s.

While the government claims that the Yasukuni Shrine is like other war memorials around the world, it symbolically interments 14 convicted, class-A war criminals and its associated museum denies or minimises atrocities such as the 1937 Nanjing massacre. The three cabinet members were National Public Safety Commission chairman Keiji Furuya, Internal Affairs and Communications Minister Yoshitaka Shindo and Administrative Reform Minister Tomomi Inada.

Last December, Abe became the first sitting prime minister to visit the shrine since Junichiro Koizumi in 2006. He did not join his ministers this time, but sent a cash offering with one of his aides, signing as head of the ruling Liberal Democrat Party and not as prime minister. Abe appeared at a government ceremony and claimed that Japan “will contribute to a lasting peace in the world with all our might.”

Abe’s decision not to visit the shrine was apparently a conciliatory gesture to China and President Xi Jinping, whom Abe is attempting to meet later this year. Since coming to office in December 2012, Abe has not met with Xi or South Korean President Park Geun-hye, both of whom came to office around the same time.

Abe’s claim to be seeking “lasting peace” is belied by his government’s actions. Over the past year and a half, the government has increased the military budget, established a US-style National Security Council and

revised the interpretation of the country’s constitution to allow for “collective self-defence”—that is, Japanese participation in US-led wars of aggression.

The Abe government, with Washington’s backing, has ramped up tensions with China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea in order to justify Japan’s remilitarisation. Abe has closely aligned Japan with the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” and military build-up against China.

Abe’s visit to the Yasukuni Shrine last year signaled an intensification of the ideological campaign to cover up past war crimes. The government is seeking to overcome deep-seated antiwar sentiment, particularly in the Japanese working class, which suffered police-state repression and deprivation in the 1930s and 1940s.

That sentiment was reflected in the critical remarks of some of those who fought in World War II. Tokuro Inokuma, a soldier in the Japanese Imperial Army, now 85, drew parallels between the current political atmosphere and that before World War II. “I find it quite dangerous ... This is the path we once took,” he warned. “We have neither killed nor been killed [in war] for almost 70 years. That’s unprecedented. It’s important that we think hard about that.”

Former Kamikaze pilot Yutaka Kanbe, 91, who was saved from a suicide mission by Japan’s surrender, said he was worried about the rightward shift under Abe and the recent glorification of kamikaze pilots. “Japan could go to war again if our leaders are all like Abe. I’m going to die soon, but I worry about Japan’s future,” he said.

The Chinese and South Korean governments condemned the latest visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. The two countries were both subject to Japan’s brutal colonial rule in the 1930s and 1940s, leaving a legacy of resentment and anger. However, Beijing and Seoul

exploit these memories to whip up anti-Japanese chauvinism to divert attention from the worsening economic and social crisis at home.

China's foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying declared: "Sino-Japanese relations can develop in a healthy and stable way only if Japan can face up to and reflect on the history of invasion and make a clear break with militarism." A Xinhua news agency article went further, denouncing Japan's militarization and warning: "By doing this, Japan is sowing the seeds of another war."

South Korea's foreign ministry spokesman No Gwang-il said: "Only when Japanese politicians abandon their historical revisionism and repent for Japan's wartime atrocities sincerely, the relations between Seoul and Japan could be developed in a stable manner, as people in both nations hope."

The Abe government's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine and efforts to revive Japanese militarism reflect a broader shift within the Japanese media and political establishment. The previous Democratic Party-led government deliberately stirred up tensions with China by "nationalizing" the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, which are under Japanese administration.

Another sign of this rightward lurch was the decision of Japan's main liberal newspaper, the *Asahi Shimbun*, to retract a series of articles dealing with one of Japan's most notorious wartime abuses—the kidnapping and coercion of as many as 200,000 women in Asia, mostly from Korea, to be used as sex slaves for the Japanese Imperial Army.

On August 5, the *Asahi Shimbun* published a formal retraction of more than a dozen articles dating back to 1982 dealing with the abduction of women in South Korea during World War II. Japanese right-wing leaders welcomed the decision as proof of their allegation that these "comfort women," the euphemistic term for those forced into sexual slavery, were not coerced. Abe has previously made similar claims.

The articles concerned the accounts of Seiji Yoshida, a soldier in the Japanese army who was stationed in South Korea during the war. After the war, Yoshida, a member of the Stalinist Communist Party, authored a 1983 memoir recounting how he participated in rounding up as many as 200 women on South Korea's Jeju Island to be forced into military brothels. The *Asahi Shimbun* now claims that Yoshida's account was

false.

Yoshida, who died in 2000, admitted to making some changes in his description of what took place, but did not retract his account. His work played a role in bringing the issue to light in the 1980s and encouraged others to step forward with their own experiences. Japan issued a limited apology in 1993, known as the Kono Statement. For this reason, Yoshida has long been the subject of attacks from the Japanese right.

The timing of the *Asahi Shimbun*'s retraction is not coincidental. Just a few weeks ago, the Japanese government released a report by supposed experts, questioning the validity of the testimonies of Korean comfort women and claiming that there was no definitive evidence of coercion. This falsification of history is part of the ideological preparations for Japanese imperialism's involvement in new wars.



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