

Policy Forum 06-80A: Overcoming the Yasukuni Issue is Good for Both China and Japan



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Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 06-80A: Overcoming the Yasukuni Issue is Good for Both China and Japan", NAPSNet Policy Forum, September 28, 2006, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/overcoming-the-yasukuni-issue-is-good-for-both-china-and-japan/>

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Policy Forum Online 06-80A: September 28th, 2006

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Article by Shen Dingli and Tatsujiro Suzuki

This article was written on August 15th, 2006 before the election of Shinzo Abe to the post of Japanese Prime Minister.

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I. Introduction

Shen Dingli, Executive Dean of Institute of International Studies, and Director of Center for American Studies at Fudan University, Shanghai, and Tatsujiro Suzuki, Visiting Professor of Graduate School of Public Policy at University of Tokyo, Japan, write, "The history issue is an important issue of justice but should not hold the relationship hostage. As a former brutal colonizer, Japan has the moral responsibility to be sensitive and behave honestly while Beijing needs to develop a firm policy that is not subject to nationalism."

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II. Article by Shen Dingli and Tatsujiro Suzuki

- Overcoming the Yasukuni Issue is Good for Both China and Japan
by Shen Dingli and Tatsujiro Suzuki

On the morning of August 15, 2006, Prime Minister Koizumi visited the Yasukuni Shrine for the fifth time. Both Chinese and S. Korean governments quickly issued statements of protest. After the visit, the China-Japan relationship sank to a new low point. Beijing has shown no interest in meeting with any Japanese Prime Minister that continues to pay tribute to Yasukuni Shrine, while the Japanese government deems such a policy irrational.

This historical issue of visits to the Yasukuni Shrine by Japanese leaders, in an official or personal capacity, is the thorniest obstacle in Sino-Japanese affairs and has had an irritating and emotional impact on relations between the two East Asian giants.

For the part of Beijing, there are sound reasons not to remember, on a daily basis, the wounds of WWII when the imperial Japanese armed forces invaded and committed tremendous brutalities in China. This might be possible if Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi and some of his cabinet members would be sensible and sensitive. One could understand the need to pay tribute to those who died for the nation, but only for the justified cases rather than the unjustified ones.

The Yasukuni Shrine, not an official, state-run institution, has been able to choose which souls of which former officials and officers were put to rest there. As Japan has no official shrine, its leadership has to go to this important and symbolic private site instead. However, given the fact that there are 14 A-class war criminals in Yasukuni, any visit, official or private, by serving officials would inevitably carry the message of paying respect to those souls as well, unless clearly specified otherwise. As the war occurred between Japan and its East Asian neighbors sixty one years ago, such a visit is, by definition, not a domestic issue. Therefore, identifying such a visit as "domestic" and thus "not subject to interference" deviates from the facts and doesn't help the situation. This is the source of contention between the East Asian victim states and Japan today.

But officially, Japan cannot accept linking shrine visits to high-level meetings between the two states. Japan might still remember that after the Tiananmen incident in 1989, when it didn't support America's initiative of boycotting China as a punishment. In 1991 the then Japanese Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu visited Beijing, officially breaking Western sanctions and a year later, the Japanese Emperor came to Beijing, paying the first visit to China in the history of Sino-Japanese relations. Thus Japan might think that it should not link its bilateral relations with China's internal business, and consider the visit to Yasukuni to be a domestic affair.

Indeed, a policy not to hold high level meetings is not as desirable as it appears. China did not opt for this policy from the very beginning. Even though Japan's current PM has visited the Shrine five times in a row, the Chinese Premier and President have met him during the past five years, allowing opportunities for improving the bilateral relationship. Regrettably, Prime Minister Koizumi has not responded constructively.

Japan will have a new Prime Minister this fall. The Yasukuni issue has become one of the most important campaign issues after a private memo of the late Emperor's assistant was revealed. In that memo, the Emperor was quoted as saying, "it is my mind not to pay tribute to Yasukuni anymore as Class A war criminals are now enshrined." Suddenly, visits to the Shrine have become a major "domestic" policy issue.

We urge all candidates of the LDP to discuss this issue with more sincerity, not because of its foreign concern, but to deal with the past sincerely. We believe that this issue cannot be solved without thorough debate about Japan's war responsibility between the Japanese people.

Despite this, one may still insist on a policy delinking visiting Yasukuni and allowing bilateral high-level talks, as permitting discussions between the two nations doesn't mean agreeing to accept visits to the Yasukuni shrine. Continuing the high-level meetings neither shows China's weakness nor acceptance of Japan's position on shrine visit. Rather, it would present China's strength and willingness to address differences through talks.

Sustaining high-level talks between the two states would permit direct dialogue on the shrine visit and face-to-face critiques, while maintaining a mechanism for effective communication to resolve various issues and substantiate the relations. The two countries need to talk at much higher level than bureau chief and should open the discussions to include topics such as energy security, economic and trade cooperation, territorial dispute, counterterrorism, WMD nonproliferation in Iran and Korean Peninsula, military and nuclear transparency, as well as multilateral cooperation.

Meanwhile, dialogues among non-governmental sectors should be promoted further. There are numerous opportunities for productive relationships between the two countries in non-governmental sectors and those opportunities should not be lost. In fact, by promoting such dialogues and cooperation, confidence between the two countries could be enhanced. Good examples can be seen in the energy and environmental sectors where many bi-lateral projects have been developed and are still underway.

The core of the Beijing-Tokyo tie is their economic bond and their interest in Asia-Pacific stability. The history issue is an important issue of justice but should not hold the relationship hostage. As a former brutal colonizer, Japan has the moral responsibility to be sensitive and behave honestly while Beijing needs to develop a firm policy that is not subject to nationalism. These two countries have only one destiny - to co-exist and co-prosper peacefully.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project (napsnet-reply@nautilus.org)

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