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Koizumi's dangerous determination to keep a promise
by Brad Glosserman

This week, Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro made his fifth visit to Yasukuni Shrine. There was the predictable response from other Asian nations, but it is clear that those protests fall on deaf ears. If the prime minister's determination is plain, so too are the consequences, and they have become the real issue in the debate over Yasukuni Shrine: Tokyo's readiness to ignore the concerns of its neighbors and to stoke tensions undermine its efforts to play a leading role in the region. They risk isolation and threaten to undo the gains made in recent years.

Koziumi pledged when running for Liberal Democratic Party president – the post that allows him to become prime minister – that he would visit Yasukuni Shrine every year. He has done so, determined to keep a promise to constituents, but also to honor the country's war dead, to reinvigorate and legitimate healthy patriotism in Japan, to underscore his government's commitment to peace, and to push his country closer to "normalcy" in international relations.

Wary of the protests that followed previous visits, this year's was toned down. He did not enter the inner shrine, only worshipped for a few minutes, did not repeat Shinto rituals, and only identified himself in the guest book as a private citizen, not as prime minister as in the past.

Those efforts failed to dampen controversy. China reacted with predictable vitriol, saying the visit "hurt the feeling and dignity" of victims of Japanese aggression during World War II and that it "seriously undermined Sino-Japanese relations." Senior-level meetings between the two countries were canceled, as was a visit by Japanese Foreign Minister Machimura Nobutaka to discuss the oil field dispute in the South China Sea.

South Korea was also upset. The Foreign Ministry expressed "disappointment and outrage," while Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon told the Japanese ambassador that he had "deep regrets and disappointment." Ban's visit to Japan later this month has been canceled, and a similar fate is likely for the meeting scheduled later this year between Koizumi and ROK President Roh Moo-hyun. (Sadly, the Yasukuni visit overshadowed Japan's return to Korea of the "Bukgwandaechupbi," a 300-year-old Korean war monument stolen by a Japanese general in1905. The move could have helped smooth relations between the two countries; instead it has been virtually ignored.)

Significantly, even Southeast Asians have been upset by the visit. Singapore's Straits Times editorialized that the visit showed Japan "clearly does not value" relations with neighboring countries. "His visit to the shrine …demonstrates yet again that better ties with its Asian neighbors matter less to him than his dogged loyalty to a personal ritual."

That is the most important point. There is no disputing a Japanese prime minister's right to honor the country's war dead or to instill a healthy patriotism in the Japanese public. And the visits make political sense; all opinion polls show the public divided, with a narrow majority usually favoring the visit. (A larger majority usually believes that foreign protests are not reason enough to cancel the visit.)

But the determination to play to domestic audiences has a high and rising international price: it isolates Japan within the region and forfeits Tokyo's claim to a leading role in Asia. Even Singapore, which favors deepened Japanese engagement with the region, including on security issues, has been forced to complain. The concern isn't revamped militarism, but Tokyo's seeming indifference to the consequences of its actions and its readiness to increase tensions in the region. Prime Minister Koizumi's response when questioned in the Diet – that "Japan-China relations should not be defined solely by the Yasukuni issue" – was glib. It's right, but irrelevant.

Canceled visits and meetings make it hard, if not impossible, for Japan to protect its national interests. Japan's indifference to foreign sentiment makes it harder for other countries, such as China, to compromise on key disputes, like territorial disputes. Tokyo can expect no sympathy as it tries to rally support for its demand that North Korea address the abductee issue in multilateral negotiations. The visit plainly undermines the country's bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

Isolated within the region, Tokyo is pushed closer to the U.S. While that may help the alliance in the short-term, it could be dangerous over time. No country should ever be seen as not having options: it encourages allies and partners to take it for granted. There is also a real risk that U.S. "support" might one day be seen as "indulgence." Washington could interpret Japanese actions through a filter like that of Southeast Asians: While withholding judgment on the merits of shrine visits, U.S. policymakers have every reason to be concerned about their consequences and their impact on the U.S. ability to protect its national interests. Tokyo's behavior could be seen as heightening tension in the region, and the U.S. could be blamed for encouraging it.

Far fetched? The U.S. State Department response to this week's visit was restrained: "We think everyone understands the history of the region and the region-specific issues and concerns. … We hope the countries that worry about the current problems can solve this issue with the Japanese government through dialogue." The emphasis on regional issues and current problems seems to take the broader perspective that would encourage Japanese restraint.

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A U.S. administration that focuses on solving problems rather than the history of the alliance may well be less supportive of Japan. In this context, the Six-Party Talks is an important test, as is the upcoming World Trade Organization ministerial meeting: Japan's reluctance to embrace agricultural reform – always a tough issue – is likely to irritate Washington. And it shouldn't be forgotten that Defense Secretary Rumsfeld didn't stop in Japan on his way to the region, reportedly the result of frustration over a lack of progress in troop realignment talks.

Prime Minister Koizumi has made his point; now he, and his successor, should be concerned about Japan's standing in the region. A compromise on Yasukuni would not undermine his larger mission: rehabilitating Japan in the eyes of the world. A stubborn determination to visit the shrine, consequences be damned, does.

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