



**Yasukuni Shrine: Time to Make a Deal** by Ralph A. Cossa

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi remains in denial over the negative impact his continued visits to the Yasukuni Shrine are having on Japanese and U.S. national security interests. ROK President Roh Moo-hyun and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao just provided the latest clear example when they refused to arrange a three-way side meeting with him during the East Asia Summit (EAS) meeting scheduled for Kuala Lumpur on Dec 14. The three nations make up the "Plus 3" component in the ASEAN Plus Three (A+3) arrangement that remains at the core of this first-ever EAS and its leaders and senior officials traditionally have met to discuss closer political and economic cooperation among the three major East Asia economies whenever the A+3 convenes.

Mr. Koizumi is, of course, honoring his campaign pledge to continue paying tribute to Japan's war dead – there are over 2½ million souls interred at Yasukuni, unfortunately including 14 World War II class A criminals; the source of the tension with the ROK and PRC. But, Mr. Koizumi has also sworn to preserve, protect, and promote Japanese national security interests, and his continued annual visits to the Shrine are making this increasingly impossible to do, at least when it comes to promoting harmony in the immediate neighbor, much less attempting to create a sense of East Asia Community, the presumed goal of A+3 and the EAS.

Meanwhile, the failure of the U.S. to speak out on this issue, combined with the (correct) impression that the U.S. stands firmly behind Mr. Koizumi and his quest for acceptance of a greater political and security role in East Asia, has translated into increased ill will against Washington, especially from its other key East Asia ally, South Korea. President Bush was questioned repeatedly during his recent Asia visit about his reaction to the "antagonizing" visits. He repeatedly ducked the question, responding instead that "I believe a useful role for me, as someone who is friendly with the three leaders involved, is to remind people that it is best to put the past behind and move forward in the future." Unfortunately the high profile visits make putting the past behind impossible.

By almost any measurement, Tokyo's relations with Beijing and Seoul are considerably worse today than when Koizumi assumed office. While his Korean and Chinese counterparts must share the blame, primary responsibility rests with Koizumi. More importantly, the opportunity to reverse current downward trends also resides in the Japanese prime minister's hands.

I have long defended his right to go to the shrine; during each of his personal visits, Koizumi has delivered a strong anti-war message, calling attention to Japan's militaristic past and pledging "never again." Unfortunately, the symbolism of the visits has completely overshadowed the message, making

it easy for Koizumi's detractors to politically exploit the visits. (This is not to imply that the visits do not offend the sensibilities of many in Korea, China, and, for that matter, in Japan; they do! But it is equally undeniable that they have become a political stick with which to beat the anti-Koizumi drum.)

The time has come for Prime Minister Koizumi to stop exercising his right to visit Yasukuni for the sake of the greater good . . . but only if the leaders of China and South Korea are prepared to make an equally bold diplomatic gesture that will finally let all three countries focus on the future instead of being continually blinded by the past.

Mr. Koizumi should announce that he is willing, out of respect for his neighbor's sensitivities, to curtail his visits to Yasukuni and then call on his Chinese and South Korean counterparts to meet with him in a three-way summit along the sidelines of the EAS to discuss both history and the future.

As regards history, Mr. Koizumi should lend his personal endorsement to a recent textbook entitled "The Contemporary and Modern History of Three East Asian Countries" jointly produced by Chinese, Korean, and Japanese scholars, which provides a balanced history of relations among the three states. Koizumi should pledge that every library in every school in Japan will receive multiple copies of the text.

The leaders of Korea and China should then make the same pledge and finally articulate to their own publics the positive things that Japan has done to promote economic development in their countries over the past 60 years. After all, history did not end in 1945. Since the end of World War Two, no country has had a better record of promoting peace and prosperity, in word and in deed, than Japan.

Certainly China cannot make the same claim – Beijing has used military force on more than one occasion against many of its neighbors, not to mention against its own people: Mao's policies in the second half of the 20th century accounted for the deaths of many more innocent Chinese civilians than did the Japanese Imperial Army in the first half; a fact conveniently overlooked in Chinese history books (which also imply the U.S. and South Korea started the Korean War and that intervening Chinese military forces subsequently "liberated" the Peninsula).

A more balanced view of the history of both halves of the last century would go a long way toward healing the wounds of history jointly suffered by the people of China, Korea, and Japan, as would a toning down of the rhetoric and a depoliticizing of the history issue in all three countries.

Mr. Koizumi should take the critical next step by announcing his decision to curtail future visits in return for a three-way summit, preferably in Kuala Lumpur or as soon thereafter as practical. At that meeting, the three leaders

should endorse the common history project, stress the positive things Japan has done in helping the economic miracles in South Korea and China, and pledge to move their trilateral relations constructively forward.

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