

## **The Yasukuni Puzzle** by Yoichiro Sato

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On Dec. 26, 2013, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo visited the Yasukuni Shrine. The visit invited harsh criticism from China and Korea and more reserved criticism from the United States and others. Domestically, there has not been strong controversy regarding the visit, unlike when Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro visited in 1985 or when Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro made his first in 2002. In popular international media discourse, Abe is characterized as ultranationalist and Japan as drifting to the right. These overly simplistic narratives fail to appreciate the tremendous diversity among Japanese views and to understand the role the Yasukuni Shrine has played in both uniting and dividing the nation.

The Yasukuni Shrine claims to have hosted the deified souls of military personnel who lost their lives in service for the nation. The controversy arose mainly after 1978 when the new chief priest of the Yasukuni Shrine added 14 war-time military and civilian leaders who were executed as Class-A war criminals by decisions of the Tokyo War Criminal Tribunal or who died during imprisonment to the list of souls enshrined at the shrine. The doubts of many Japanese about the legal, ethical, and factual legitimacy of the Tribunal and its rulings are at the heart of Japanese indifference to Abe's visit.

The process between the issuing of arrest orders for 126 Japanese suspects on Class-A (Crime against Peace) charges during the first several months of the allied occupation and the eventual narrowing down to 14 was a highly political process mired in international politics among the allied powers, bureaucratic politics within MacArthur's General Headquarters (especially between New Deal liberals and anti-communist conservatives), and personal rivalry and a struggle to survive among the accused Japanese. Of those who were released without charge were the likes of Kishi Nobusuke, Kodama Yoshio, Shoriki Matsutarō, and Sasakawa Ryoichi, all of whom later played prominent roles (some more public, some in the shadows) promoting the anti-communist alliance with the United States. (Kishi is Abe's grandfather.)

Some contrasting within the list of the 14 indicted leaders sheds light on the complexity of the roles they played. Togo Shigenori, a career diplomat who was foreign minister both at the beginning and the end of the war against the United States, died during his prison term. His opposition to the pro-Axis alliance and being removed from his ambassadorship in Germany did not save him from the charge of taking part in the planning of the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. His last-

minute diplomatic effort to avert a war against the United States was interpreted as a disguise.

It was nearly 50 years after the end of the war before the Foreign Ministry with its own investigation concluded that the embassy in Washington was ill prepared and failed to serve a timely declaration of war. But the "surprise attack" discourse continues to be used to downplay the gross negligence of the US Navy at the time. Togo is enshrined with two other diplomats, Matsuoka Yosuke, a pro-Axis foreign minister in the Konoe Cabinet, whom Konoe eventually replaced during the last-ditch effort to avert a war against the United States, and Shiratori Toshio, a pro-Axis ambassador to Italy. The Emperor's despising of Matsuoka and Shiratori and his displeasure with the Yasukuni Shrine's decision to enshrine them (explained in a memo by the director of the Imperial Household Agency) was disclosed by *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* in 2006. The emperor had visited the Yasukuni Shrine, but stopped doing so after 1978.

As early as 1952, Japan's Parliament passed resolutions -- with a great majority, including the Socialists -- to demand release of all war-crime prisoners. By 1958, all of them were released with consent of the allied powers through a scheme of reduced terms. This included Class-B war criminals, who were judged to have violated then existing international law on the conduct of war (especially treatment of prisoners of war and civilians), and Class-C war criminals, who were charged with "crimes against humanity." Some 1,000 of those charged with Class-B and Class-C crimes were, however, executed at regional tribunals in and out of Japan. Their names were added to the list of the enshrined in 1959. Unlike the Tokyo Tribunal, which was highly influenced by international and US bureaucratic politics, these local tribunals were more prone to a direct sort of vigilante justice and incompetence (due to language and cultural barriers), although a large number of acquittals, despite the well-known poor handling of POWs by the Japanese during World War II, suggests that vigilante justice and mistrials were exceptions rather than the norm.

Quiet inclusion of the Class-B and Class-C war criminals in 1959 represented the Japanese consensus to forgive those who followed illegal and unethical orders on the ground, to accept the unfortunate fate of those who were falsely accused (sometimes by colleagues and superiors who betrayed them), and move on. In contrast, inclusion of Class-A war criminals in 1978 opened the debate about war responsibility. As a result, historical revisionism about the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal has taken place, but not to the effect of indiscriminately glorifying all the enshrined, as China and Korea seem to accuse Japan. Ultra-nationalists in Japan may have activated the drive for historical revision, but they cannot dominate the historical discourse in Japan's open pluralistic society. As more historical details are made available, they are

discrediting the official Allied version of history, but restoration of “honor” will be limited to those who truly deserve it in *and out* of the Yasukuni Shrine.

It is likely that Abe and future prime ministers will continue to visit Yasukuni Shrine. Such visits, however, should not automatically be interpreted as blanket endorsement of the past acts of all the enshrined by the prime minister or the public. The visits (regardless of the intentions of the visitor) will not by themselves encourage an ultra-right interpretation of Japan’s wartime history, but will encourage holistic inquiry into domestic politics and decision-making, especially between the late 1920s (the Manchurian Incident) and the 1950s (consolidation of postwar conservative dominance). The resulting domestic debate will fill the vacuum of historical knowledge among Japanese youth with balanced perspectives. Chinese and Korean fear of a “right-leaning” Japan and their excessive protests have contributed to the polarization of the debate and in effect helped the ultra-right discourse penetrate the youth population at the expense of the centrists. The United States should have confidence in Japan’s open, pluralistic society and let revision of wartime history take its course.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*