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Tokyo shrine raises hackles

By Takehiko Kambayashi

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

July 28, 2005

TOKYO -- Yasukuni Shrine in the heart of the Japanese capital has been likened by some historians to the unthinkable: a shrine to Nazi Germany's Adolf Hitler in the heart of modern-day Berlin.

But to millions of Japanese who visit the leafy compound where white-robed Shinto priests perform rituals to care for the spirits of deceased soldiers who gave their lives for their nation, the site is as sacred as Arlington National Cemetery has been for generations of Americans.

With the 60th anniversary of Japan's surrender just more than two weeks away, a group of Japanese with close emotional ties to the shrine, its adjoining picnic grove and its World War II museum are urging Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to carry out his election pledge to pray at the war memorial on Aug. 15.

"I would like him as a Japanese leader to offer his prayer of gratitude to those who sacrificed themselves for our country," said Minako Yamaguchi, a member of an influential group named the Association to Honor the Spirits of War Dead.

The group has collected more than 15,000 signatures in a petition pressing Mr. Koizumi to visit Yasukuni Shrine on Aug. 15.

Shrine built in 1869

While some Japanese revere the shrine built in 1869, the elegant wood-domed building and immaculately kept grounds stand as a hated symbol of Japan's wartime atrocities for many of Japan's neighbors — particularly China and the two Koreas.

Chinese and Korean leaders expressed anger at Mr. Koizumi's annual visit to the shrine where 2.5 million war dead, including the spirits of Gen. Hideki Tojo and 13 others hanged as "Class A war criminals," are honored. Two of the defendants died during the Tokyo trials and five others died in prison.

Some Japanese like Mrs. Yamaguchi, however, have been impatient with such criticism.

"Why in the world can't a Japanese prime minister pay respect to those who died for the country?" she asked with an old photo of her father, Katsuji Suzuki, a former soldier, hanging from her neck.

"We can't do as told by Chinese and Koreans. We must show our resolute attitude to them," said Hidebumi Murakami, 82, a former soldier who fought in China and Burma, where he spent two years as a prisoner of war. He said Japan "should be remilitarized and, if necessary, we have no choice but to fight China."

Mr. Murakami was among hundreds of demonstrators cruising Tokyo streets in mid-July to call on the prime minister to visit the shrine. They shouted: "China and the Koreas can't tell Japan what to do," and "Japan has no war criminals."

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Opinions shifting

Lately, though, more Japanese have voiced opposition to Mr. Koizumi is visiting the shrine. According to a poll conducted in late June by the major daily Asahi Shimbun, 53 percent of respondents opposed a visit to the shrine by the prime minister on the end-of-war anniversary, while 36 percent favored such a visit. In November, 39 percent opposed his visit, but 38 percent supported it.

The Yasukuni Shrine issue also had a negative effect not only in China and the two Koreas, but in other Asian countries.

"Countries in Southeast Asia wanted Japan to be a leader in the region, but seeing Prime Minister Koizumi's failure to build a friendly relationship with China, they are disappointed with Japan," said Akikazu Hashimoto, a professor of political science at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo.

Meanwhile, some analysts believe China's new generation of leaders like President Hu Jintao want to solve the Yasukuni Shrine issue as soon as possible. In fact, Beijing has never made an issue of the fact that Class B and Class C war criminals are also enshrined there, they point out.

Class A and C criminals are those accused of "crimes against peace" and "crimes against humanity." Class B suspects are "those accused of crimes in violation of the laws and customs of war."

Bilateral ties sought

People don't want this issue "to become an impediment between Japan and China," said Zhu Jian Rong, a professor of international relations at Toyo Gakuen University in Nagareyama, east of Tokyo. "They want to work for the expansion of the bilateral ties." Now more people than ever zero in on whether Mr. Koizumi will show up at the shrine this Aug. 15. Some expect a huge crowd, regardless of whether the prime minister makes an appearance.

"If he does, China and South Korea would be in big trouble," predicted Mitsuo Miyauchi, another member of the Association to Honor the Spirits of War Dead. The leaders of both those countries "could face serious internal problems because they could not deter him from visiting the shrine on the anniversary."

In 1985, Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone became the first postwar leader to visit Yasukuni Shrine on Aug. 15. Fierce protests from Asian countries kept him from repeating the visit on subsequent anniversaries. No prime minister has gone to the shrine on the surrender anniversary since then.

As the Shinto shrine gains more attention at home and abroad, the central issue of guilt rises in importance. Many Japanese believe the Tokyo trials — organized under the occupation led by Gen. Douglas MacArthur — were "unjust." This view is not expressed only by ultranationalist groups, but also by more and more politicians, scholars and journalists.

'Justice of victors'

"The trials were not fair at all because it was 'justice of the victors.' If Japan were retried, we all know it would be found not guilty," said Mr. Miyauchi. "America's atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and its massed air raids on Tokyo should also have been tried."

Emperor Hirohito and Unit 731, Japan's biological-warfare unit, did not face criminal trials because of considerations of the U.S. occupation, critics argue.

"Perhaps what the U.S. now regrets most is the Tokyo trials and the pacifist constitution," Mr. Miyauchi speculated.

Officials at Yushukan, the shrine's war museum, which was renovated and expanded in 2002, also argue that the United States forced Japan into World War II to help get itself out of the Great Depression, and that once the United States entered the war, its economy "made a complete recovery."

Thus, when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "political plot succeeded," claims a 50-minute video shown in the museum titled "We Won't Forget." Also emphasized at Yushukan is the assertion that the "unjust" Tokyo trials "imposed a distorted view of history [on Japanese]."

Yasukuni Shrine's public relations department said in a written statement that the shrine's basic stance is "to bring up a perspective and raise an issue based on reliable historical data. ... Certainly [we] don't mean to impose a specific historical view based on political ideology."

Textbooks are an issue

"They deny the Tokyo trials because they want to deny Japan's war of aggression," said Yoshifumi Tawara, director of Children and Textbooks Japan 21, a Tokyo-based citizens group.

Mr. Tawara said: "Yasukuni's view of history is close to what is claimed by Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform," which was involved in the production of revised textbooks.

"What both groups are trying to do is to justify Japan's invasion and colonization in other Asian countries," he continued.

"The ultimate objective" of Japanese political and business leaders "is to remilitarize Japan." Japan's so-called "neo-nationalism" has accelerated because the United States doesn't say anything, said Minoru Morita, a Tokyo-based political analyst. "These days we very often hear more experts say publicly that the U.S. wants such adversary relationship between China and Japan and that's why they remain silent."

Mr. Zhu of Toyo Gakuen University said he can hardly understand America's silence over the denial of war guilt by some Japanese leaders. "It makes no sense," he said. "It was the U.S. that initiated the Tokyo trials. China and South Korea simply followed the U.S."

U.S. silence faulted

"I think the U.S. is reluctant to say anything that would embarrass the Japanese government or be interpreted as rebuking Japan for playing the role of a normal country in world affairs," said Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign-policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

"The U.S. sees Japan as a strategic counterweight to China, but broader than that, it regards Japan as an important partner dealing with a number of issues, including a North Korean nuclear issue," he added.

The argument over Yasukuni Shrine underlines the deterioration in Japan's relations with China and South Korea. And there is no shortage of such flash points — among them, history textbooks that critics said whitewash Japanese wartime atrocities in Asia and long-standing territorial disputes over small islands.

China criticized Japan's agreement in February to support the United States in defending Taiwan, after a Chinese nuclear submarine's encroachment into Japanese waters in November that angered Japan. In addition, there is a conflict between Beijing and Tokyo over natural-gas deposits in the East China Sea.

Chinese riots raise ire

In April, protests erupted in several major Chinese cities over Tokyo's approval of the textbooks and its attempt to be named to an enlarged U.N. Security Council. Protesters took to the streets to throw rocks and bottles at the Japanese Embassy in Beijing and vandalized Japanese businesses.

Many Japanese were shocked at the scenes flashing on Television, and some became angry at China, which brushed aside years of Japanese financial contribution.

"There is no way they can hold a demonstration under such a national system [in communist China]," said Tadae Takubo, a guest professor of international relations at Kyorin University in Tokyo. "So they were clearly initiated by the government."

Mr. Takubo, an executive board member of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, who also served as a Washington bureau chief of Jiji Press, a major Japanese news agency, criticized the idea that Japanese diplomacy means bowing and repeatedly apologizing to China and South Korea. Recently, however, more opinion leaders and the journalists respond to criticism from Beijing and Seoul, which Mr. Takubo applauds as "sound nationalism."

A generational shift

The rising nationalism, as well as the denial of the Tokyo trials and Mr. Koizumi's annual visit to Yasukuni Shrine, underscore substantial changes in the political atmosphere in Japan during the last decade. In 1995, on the 50th anniversary of its defeat, Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama issued a statement apologizing to the victims of his country's aggression. Although it was a personal gesture, many thought it was sincere.

These shifts are attributed to generational replacements and changes in party politics, said Robert Pekkanen, an assistant professor at the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington in Seattle.

"Many younger Japanese are sick of being lectured by Koreans and Chinese about something they did not do. They don't feel responsible at all," said Mr. Pekkanen. In addition, "the domestic political party spectrum now does not include significant pacifist elements. ... Mr. Murayama was a socialist prime minister. There is no Socialist Party today."

Moreover, the rise of China and Japan's protracted economic recession have contributed to a sense of stagnation among the public, which helped create "inward-looking nationalism," said Mr. Zhu of Toyo Gakuen University, who has lived in Japan since 1986. "People have been worried about where Japan will go."

Pyongyang threat

In addition to China's rise, the North Korean threat is another important international factor, analysts said. In August 1998, the secretive communist regime launched a

Taepo-Dong missile that overflowed Japan's main island. Then Japan faced the second North Korean nuclear crisis in 2002 and also was indignant to learn that Japanese citizens were kidnapped by Pyongyang in the 1970s and 1980s to help train its spies.

Japan, however, came to recognize that the U.S. government did not have the same interest in North Korea as Japan, say analysts. Moreover, since the September 11 terrorist attacks on American cities, Washington has been preoccupied with Iraq and al Qaeda.

Washington views issues of abductees as "trivial compared with those of nuclear missiles," said Mr. Pekkanen. "The U.S. interest is not completely aligned with Japan on that. So it's very unsettling."

As the international situation has changed dramatically the past 10 years, Japan has been bound to play different roles in world affairs. Its dispatch of the Self Defense Forces (SDF) to a war zone for the first time was one symbolic move. The SDF was sent to Iraq to help rebuild the war-torn country.

Japan seen rearming

The MacArthur constitution renounced war and the threat or use of force to settle international disputes. But now Japan is researching a missile-defense system with the United States.

Meanwhile, some worry that a resurgence of Japan's militarism could pose a threat to other countries in the region.

"This idea that Japan will be aggressive militarily again is extraordinarily unlikely," Mr. Pekkanen said emphatically. "Japan today is so different from what it was in the 1930s. It is a well-established democracy."

"Strengthening military ties between the U.S. and Japan contributes to the security of the Asia-Pacific region," said Mr. Takubo of Kyorin University.

But critics argue that Mr. Koizumi has been doing nothing but look to Washington, making Japan "America's the 51st state," while jeopardizing relations with other Asian countries.

"Japan doesn't have to follow an American style of democracy," said Mr. Hashimoto of the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies. "What type of democracy does Japan want? On this occasion of the 60th anniversary, Mr. Koizumi failed to send that important message to the international community."

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