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Japan and China: reaching reconciliation or stuck in the past?

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The Yasukuni Shrine

Summary

- The North Korean nuclear test on 8 October 2006 created a common strategic concern for China and Japan. Yet both countries still disagree over the history of the Second World War, symbolized by the Yasukuni shrine to the soldiers fallen in Japan's modern wars. The persistence of Japan's former prime minister, Jun'ichiro Koizumi, in visiting the shrine every year exposed it to Beijing's unbridled criticism. Rising nationalism in China and increasing hawkishness in Japan suggest a re-emergence of historical rivalry but current disagreements are as much about each country defining its own identity with reference to the other in a new international environment.
- Until the end of the Cold War China and Japan moved in different circles of international society. The security architecture left over from the Cold War contributes to the confrontational mindset. Only in the last decade has the bilateral relationship become more interactive through economic ties.
- The 'history problem' has been exacerbated by the growing weakness of both the Chinese Communist Party and Japan's Liberal Democratic Party. Each holds a particular view on national history, especially of the Second World War. The LDP's narrative, which begins with Pearl Harbor and ends with Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is incompatible with China's narrative war which begins with the Manchurian Incident in 1931.
- The diplomatic cost of Koizumi's Yasukuni visits has been great. However, the deterioration in Sino-Japanese relations has led many in Japan to question the meaning of Yasukuni. In this sense, Koizumi has contributed to Japan's own attempts to come to terms with the past and rethink history in terms of international relations with its neighbours.

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Introduction

In the face of the invading Imperial Army in 1938, Mao Zedong observed that 'this is a war that will change China, and it is also one in which Japan could be reborn'. He envisaged that Sino-Japanese peace would have a significant role to play in world peace. Mao had no inkling then that the Cold War would close off any meaningful interaction between the revolutionary China and vanquished Japan, with considerable cost to the way the current re-encounter is being shaped.

China and Japan normalized relations in 1972, but the Second World War remains at the core of current disagreements. Both countries hold very different positions on the war. The need to arrive at a historical reconciliation has become of paramount importance. This requires a re-examination of how, if at all, peace was established between the two nations. The Yasukuni shrine, where 2.5 million soldiers fallen in Japan's modern wars – not just the Second World War – are enshrined, and which has become synonymous with the word 'obstacle' between the two countries, may in fact be the very key to reconciliation. And reconciliation, which is about politics and not history, reveals questions of legitimacy and identity of the ruling party in both countries.

Beyond the Koizumi legacy

On 9 October 2006, just as the new Japanese prime minister, Shinzo Abe, arrived in Seoul after meeting the Chinese leaders in Beijing, North Korea sent out the shocking message to the world that it had detonated a nuclear device underground. In one day, the North Korean provocation catapulted Sino-Japanese relations into a dramatically altered security paradigm, robbing the two of the luxury of easing themselves into a new relationship after six years of acrimony during Prime Minister Jun'ichiro Koizumi's tenure.

Although the North Korean problem injected a hitherto lacking sense of urgency and common concern into the relationship between China and Japan, the fundamental mistrust between the two countries remains. Koizumi left office with the reputation of having ruined Japan's relations with Asian countries, as the showdown with Beijing over interpretations of history became one of the more spectacular diplomatic spats in the post-Cold War era. Abe, burdened with the task of breaking the diplomatic impasse, arranged to travel to Beijing and Seoul within weeks of forming his new cabinet. Chinese premier Hu Jintao seems to have welcomed the opportunity to start with a clean slate, disregarding Abe's previously questionable

statements. Yet Abe has remained vague about the Yasukuni visit, and the controversy at the fundamental level is by no means resolved.

Over the last decade, Beijing's use of the 'history card' against Japan had become excessive, with the effect of making reconciliation as humiliating and undignified as possible for the Japanese. Japanese leaders, on the other hand, were finding the idea of reconciliation hard to understand, confusing it with apology. But Koizumi's persistent visits to the Yasukuni shrine inflamed Beijing's anti-Japan fury further, leading to the freezing of summit meetings for five years. What stigmatizes this symbol of pre-war state Shinto-ism, especially as far as China and Korea are concerned, is the fact that 14 major war criminals convicted by the Allied Powers are also enshrined there. That the manner of honouring the war dead from 60 years ago should become a condition for a meeting of the leaders of two global powers today only goes to show how the 30 years of supposed goodwill had been merely cosmetic. The United States had also become increasingly concerned about Japan's political isolation in the region, especially since the anti-Japan riots in China in the spring of 2005. Washington's partner in the 'coalition of the willing' was turning itself into a liability in US attempts to engage China as a 'responsible stakeholder'. President George W. Bush was said to have hinted that Koizumi should stop visiting the Yasukuni shrine, but to no avail.

More worrying to close observers such as Columbia University's Gerald Curtis, however, was the way in which Japan's hitherto restrained nationalist voice was finding a platform from which to criticize both China's meddling in how Japan honours its war dead and the Japanese government's conciliatory policy towards China since 1972.¹ But the problem was that Koizumi's actions spoke louder than his words. Instead, it was Abe, together with Foreign Minister Taro Aso, who tended to expound their tough views on China to the media.

In fact, the 51-year old Abe has even questioned the legitimacy of the post-war settlement, especially the Tokyo Tribunal verdicts. There is a coterie unhappy with what it sees as victor's justice, even though Japan had accepted it as the condition for an end to US occupation with the signing of the San Francisco peace treaty in 1951. In a different way, an increasing number of younger Japanese also want 'historical justice' or a new narrative about the Second World War.

Against such a nationalist backdrop, Koizumi might have given a better explanation of his position on the ideological spectrum. But he did not even appear to be apologetic about the diplomatic impasse,

or shaken by the riots in China. Instead, he remained optimistic about the future: 'In many years down the road, the Chinese and the Koreans will understand.' His singular optimism seemed based on a vision as illusive as that harboured by Mao in 1938.

For the time being, however, any continuation of the bickering over history between Japan and China is likely to be a background noise in view of North Korea's deftly timed nuclear provocation. Already, Beijing's protest against Koizumi's latest visit to Yasukuni has been comparatively subdued, in spite of the fact that he chose the most controversial day, 15 August, the anniversary of Imperial Japan's surrender. Nevertheless it remains true that a moratorium on the Yasukuni visit would be the most sensible course of action. Yet it is precisely over this issue that the Japanese political class has become agitated in recent years. Furthermore, the history of the two post-war states makes historical reconciliation more easily said than done.

It's been 60 years

Why are Beijing and Tokyo unable to emulate the example of France and Germany following the Second World War? The reason, although obscured by the political noise, is obvious. The leaderships do not yet share a sense of purpose or vision for Sino-Japanese peace. The problem is inherent in the security architecture left over from the Cold War, which has also created a tendency for the two countries to regard each other with a confrontational mindset.

With both countries competing for regional leadership, the current situation reflects 60 years of historical separation, in which their mismatched status and power were pitted against each other. After the Second World War, the two countries grew into contrasting powers that moved in different circles. China was one of the victors of the war, became a nuclear power in the 1950s, and was a permanent member of the UN Security Council (a status transferred from the Republic of China to the People's Republic of China in 1971). Japan, on the other hand, regained its international status as a constitutional pacifist on the strength of its economic power and security guarantee from the US. It had little ability, or inclination, to influence international power politics.

Living in two worlds organized according to different ideas, the two nations were predisposed to be mutually suspicious and envious. They did not share political or economic systems and expressed power differently. It is only in the last decade or so that their relationship has become interactive and economically interdependent, leading to a phase of co-existence in a more globalized world. Most

significantly, they now influence each other's domestic policies as they share markets and harmonize those markets through international rules and regulations of trade and business practices.

Legitimacy of rule

Further entrenching the 'leftover' confrontational structure is domestic political inertia. China and Japan both have long-running, self-perpetuating, one-party governments. What has brought the 'history problem' to the fore diplomatically is the growing weakness of both the Chinese Communist Party and Japan's Liberal Democratic Party.

For Beijing, the shift to a market economy has meant ditching the idea of social equality, and the party is in need of a new rationale on which to base its legitimacy. China's dramatic economic transformation has also placed huge pressure on governance. Rising Chinese nationalism is, therefore, a symptom of a quest for a new identity. China's anti-Japanese propaganda may have kept popular dissent from turning against the regime, but even this is probably becoming an old trick. Nevertheless, its repercussions for Japanese politics are hard to ignore.

The decline of the LDP has also been propelled by social change. Since the economic bubble burst and the so-called 'iron triangle' of politicians, businesses and the bureaucracy became unsustainable, the LDP's power base has weakened. Although political and economic reform has been a protracted process, pork-barrel politics is becoming a thing of the past, society is diversifying and people are demanding smaller government. Koizumi was determined to deliver this, and said that if the LDP could not change he would destroy it.

The problem with the LDP is not its inability to change, but how its singular view of international politics affects Sino-Japanese relations. The LDP established its domestic power base in the secure Cold War environment, and grew accustomed to relying on the US for security. It has little practice in lateral, or multilateral, thinking. Social change may induce changes in governance, such as increasing decentralization, and the LDP may adapt as it tries to survive. However, its current difficulty in balancing Japan's relationship with both the US and China is worrying.

Identity versus interest

In a sense, the current diplomatic impasse has more to do with the preservation of party identity against the groundswell of social change that is occurring in both

nations. British diplomat Robert Cooper wrote in *The Breaking of Nations* that foreign policy is not always about interest, but is also about expressing identity. This may be truer for Japan than it is for China.² Bordered by Russia, Central Asia and India, China is compelled to think as a military power. But the Japanese leaders' present response to China's Japan-bashing is more to do with expressing ideas 'about Japan'. Yasukuni is a prime example, but the dispute over history is also about the LDP's interpretation of the Second World War and its own *raison d'être* as the repository of Japanese identity. The party's virtually uninterrupted rule since 1955 has allowed such ideas about history and identity to become established as authentic and official.

One of the LDP's important objectives since its birth in 1955 has been to revise the 1946 constitution, as an important step for post-war Japan to regain a sense of independence. Under this broad objective, the memory of the 'one nation under the sovereign emperor' Meiji state, which started in 1868 and collapsed on 15 August 1945, lingers as the nationalist idea because this is the only alternative modern Japan knows. Down the years, the dilemma of being a constitutional pacifist and the frustration of being perpetually under the control of the United States have also served to accentuate the characteristics of Japan's nationalism as being about lost or suppressed identity.

Although China's nationalism is often seen as deliberately intended to provoke Japanese nationalism, which would be an obvious recipe for disaster, the two nationalisms do not pair up. China's anti-Japan sentiment is based on the memory of Imperial Japan, whose atrocities are undisputable. Japan's recent anti-China sentiment is not rooted in the same past. Rather, the current hardening of attitudes toward China is a reflection of the domestic squabble resulting from Koizumi's political reform. Koizumi ousted from the party leadership the elder statesmen who had held sway over Japan's China policy, and consequently the influence of the 'pro-China' clique in the foreign policy community has declined.

The Yasukuni controversy has set alight hawkish as well as conservative politicians and pundits who are now busy painting a picture of China 'as a threat', arguing that China's military expenditure is rising too fast, it is undemocratic and so cannot share values with Japan, and so on. They want Beijing to know that Japan is no longer a push-over for aid.

This sort of hawkishness is certainly new for Japan. For the public, which had started to wonder why it should provide more carrots to a seemingly ungrateful China, a country capable of launching its

own space rocket, this kind of bravado from their leaders came as a breath of fresh air, administering a tiny bit of justice to a country that behaves rudely. But beyond this point, the LDP leaders and the public part ways. Talking sense to the Chinese leaders and driving them up the wall with no clear sense of how the bilateral relationship might develop are completely different things.

Some traditional China-sympathizers in the political cadre have visited Chinese leaders in the belief that the diplomatic ties are salvageable. Others have travelled to the US to complain about the China threat. Some, including Abe, have spoken of befriending India. In short, the impact of this diplomatic disaster on the Japanese political community has been just short of cataclysmic, and the absence of a core strategy to manage relations with China is abundantly clear. Whether the North Korean problem could be a catalyst to calm down the hotheads in the policy community remains questionable.

Romancing Yasukuni

Not surprisingly, Sino-Japanese relations loomed ominously as the top diplomatic agenda for Koizumi's successor. The vortex of national politics, Nagata-cho, the location of the Japanese Diet where power brokers scheme, has been in an unusual situation where concerns over foreign relations compete for attention with issues of domestic social and economic life.

Even though US Japan-bashing in the 1980s over trade, and the incessant application of *gaiatsu* (foreign pressure) to liberalize the Japanese market, have been the cause of diplomatic rifts from time to time, the LDP did not come unstuck as it did earlier this year. Then, the position of prime minister could still be passed around between the factions, each of which represented vested interests within the party. Nationalists and right-wingers resented the fact that the US had the final say, given its responsibility for Japan's security, but most politicians were resigned to the situation.

This kind of existential angst still exists, and will continue while Japan remains attached to the US for security. Shintaro Ishihara, the outspoken and unabashed 'nationalist' Tokyo governor, captures the anti-China stance in his denunciation of the post-war culture of naïvety about security issues: 'Whether against China or any other international issue, we should not rely on the existence of the United States before we think by ourselves.'³ The US is still in a position to act as an ersatz 'opposition party' should it feel so inclined. That is why US caution towards

Yasukuni has unnerved the LDP leaders, who believe that managing affairs with China is their business. But the decision to make a stand against China over the issue of Yasukuni may make sense. What Koizumi has done is to put the shrine, the indisputable symbol and legacy of ultra-nationalism, into the limelight by exposing it to Beijing's unbridled criticism. The diplomatic havoc that this has caused has shaken up conservative politicians' post-war view of how to handle the 'history problem'. In the chorus defending or denouncing Yasukuni, many fragmented pieces of Japan's own memories of war have started to come together.

Those who denounced Koizumi's lack of diplomatic skill, such as former prime minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, tended to gloss over the actual public ambivalence towards Yasukuni. There have been numerous court cases in which the judiciary has repeatedly insinuated that the prime minister's visit to the shrine breaches the principle of separation of politics and religion. To compare Koizumi with his predecessors, who were arguably more prudent and cautious about the visits, seems to applaud the post-war conservative politicians' calculated low-key approach. But there is no denying that their approach also served to keep a lid on the whole Yasukuni controversy.

In the run-up to the September 2006 transfer of power, reference to the shrine became almost obligatory in expressing ideas about relations with China. Here the effects of Koizumi's populist style of leadership, which pitted public opinion against the opposition to his reforms, were also present – but not exactly in favour of Koizumi, or indeed Yasukuni. Public support for the shrine has never been unanimous, but since the riots in China in spring 2005 the wisdom of continuing the visits, if not maintaining the shrine itself, has become questionable in the public's mind. Prospective leaders did not want to appear weak by calling off the visit, but none of the candidates followed in Koizumi's footsteps to make the visit an electoral promise.

The drive to make the case against the Yasukuni visit more explicit, however, has come unexpectedly from the press. Tsuneo Watanabe, the head of the largest conservative daily, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, and one of the most influential opinion-formers in Japan, backed Koizumi's decision to send troops to Iraq but openly criticized the visits for 'creating enemies out of Japan's neighbours' in a leftist journal, *Ronza*, no less (February 2006). In a more surprising turnaround, *Yomiuri* and its ideological arch-rival, *Asahi Shimbun*, which publishes the *Ronza*, formed an alliance to oppose future prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni. Of the other national dailies, *Mainichi*, *Nikkei* and *Sankei*, only *Sankei*, with the smallest circulation, supports the visits.

The shrine, in turn, has become the centre of the Japanese equivalent of Germany's Bitburg controversy, which erupted in 1985 when the US president, Ronald Reagan, was due to visit the military cemetery as part of the celebrations of the 40th anniversary of VE Day. Reagan's intended gesture of reconciliation became politically controversial since Bitburg honoured, among others soldiers, 49 SS troops. The cemetery 'in short, became a sacrament of resentment, not reconciliation'.⁴ Similarly, at Yasukuni, as mentioned above, 14 major war criminals found guilty at the Tokyo Tribunal are enshrined together with 2.5 million other soldiers from Japan's modern wars. Yasukuni unilaterally made the decision to enshrine them in 1978, and this decision has since been both controversial and contested.⁵

Now with the high level of international as well as national attention focusing on Yasukuni, however, the location of Japan's latent nationalism has been exposed to an unprecedented degree. When Koizumi made his last visit on 15 August, Yasukuni received a record 250,000 visitors, many of them young students who were curious to know about the establishment that was causing so much political noise. Some interviewed on television found the sight of elderly men in the Imperial Army uniform marching into the shrine odd and unnerving. Others could not understand why the shrine should be so troublesome.

All this public attention put the LDP leadership hopefuls in a bind. The visit to Yasukuni was meant to satisfy the association of bereaved war families and veterans associations, whose religious or spiritual need for the shrine cannot be disputed but who also deliver some 260,000 member votes and funding to the party. To redress the more serious situation where the visits are deemed to compromise constitutional secularism risks damaging the LDP. Such myopic residues of factional politics have been scarcely visible to the general public, whose fundamental respect for the dead has been usurped to paint the Chinese as the only disingenuous party over Yasukuni. It is against such a backdrop that the leadership contest was played out.

Ending the last war

But conceptualizing the relationship after Koizumi is perhaps the biggest challenge for both sides. The diplomatic rift has grabbed all the attention, and Tokyo in particular is so shaken that the foreign policy community is now obsessed with restoring the relationship. Beijing is beholden to the nationalism it incited at home and it does not appear able to lower it. This is what happens when leaders are unable to think beyond narrow concerns of domestic stability.

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There is increasing talk in Japan that the shrine should be forced to separate the spirits of the 14 war criminals from the rest, in the Shinto shrine's practice known as *bunshi*.⁶ But bringing up this *bunshi* idea merely reflects the tendency of political leaders to find stopgap measures. The fundamental problem lies in the conflict between the post-war constitution that guarantees Yasukuni's religious freedom (like any other religious establishment) and its wilful retention of pre-war dogma as the symbol of state Shinto-ism. In any case, on a practical level, no amount of back-peddalling on Yasukuni is likely to quell *popular* anti-Japanese sentiment in China, for there is also a new generation of younger Chinese who have been taught anti-Japan views since 1994.

But the weight of China's importance to the Japanese economy has given rise to a broadly shared sense of pragmatism to make Yasukuni less controversial, especially among the business community.

Seeing the current state of Sino-Japanese relations as a rupture in smooth-running diplomatic ties forged in 1972 misses the point that there is little to go back to beyond being on speaking terms, the original intention of the *détente*. What is at issue is the closure of the last war.

Metaphorically, the war that Mao spoke about is not over. Japan's post-war narrative of *this* war has predominantly been about the war lost to the US. The experience of defeat forged the collective Japanese memory from Pearl Harbor to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is only recently that it has been possible to question this narrow definition of the Second World War in Japan. The idea of incorporating the longer war in China – starting from the Manchurian incident in 1931 – has become less controversial. It is on this episode of the protracted war that the Chinese today want closure, and the Japanese are only just starting to see this war in a different light.

There is hope, for the history issue can no longer be dismissed as a 'misunderstanding' between statesmen. The easing of the ideological tension of the Cold War has brought more freedom for the Japanese public to express views against 'Imperial Japan' – views long held by the political left but suppressed for being too pro-China. The Japanese stories of war suffering are still being excavated from unpublished manuscripts and tales of survivors. Only recently, an NHK documentary on the battle of Iwo Jima revealed that there were actually civilian survivors. Most Japanese had long believed that they all perished 'heroically'. The *Yomiuri* ran a series of articles in 2005 that questioned and exposed the pre-war leadership's responsibility with the kind of intellectual honesty and historical objectivity that had long characterized

arguments made by the ideological left but that were not part of the rhetoric of the nationalist right or political conservatives. Interpretations of history emphasizing the suffering of the Japanese at the hands of their own leaders are gaining weight.

When these two stories begin to meet, in a more comprehensive and objective narrative of the long war, the operative words 'change' and 'reborn' in Mao's 1938 observation acquire new meanings – for one thing, they become related to each other. Of course, after 1945, China changed dramatically and Japan was reborn, too. China became a communist regime, Japan a capitalist democracy. But how much did China inform Japan's 'rebirth' as a 'constitutional pacifist'? As the re-emergence of China lays out a new and tangible international environment for Japan, this question is becoming relevant. As if both had spent the last 60 years in a separate time and space (in a way, they did), the two are now weaving a new narrative where the war in Asia is the dominant story, beginning at the point where they merely reached a cease-fire as enemies.

The new world

There is nothing pessimistic about the relationship today between China and Japan as a sum of its parts. Their economies are increasingly interdependent, Japanese investment in China in the last two years has been the highest among foreign investors, and regional-level cooperation, exchange and dialogue are keys to the future shape of the relationship. Globalization now provides a new setting to sort out the question of political peace. The problem for East Asia is the tendency of leaders to use nationalism despite a gradual warming to the idea of mutual prosperity. This is a novel situation for the two countries, and it needs orchestrating against the backdrop of the memory of the Second World War and the Cold War.

What the Japanese foreign policy community fails to see is that Japan's manner of reckoning with the past matters today because regional relations have reached the stage of building mutual trust. This is a sea change from what Japan has long been accustomed to. But the old mindset is a product of what is arguably a unique history of success that Japan wove in the realm of the modernizing powers. It is entrenched in the notion of being and acting as an independent 'nation-state,' with a monopoly of force. Nationalism in Japan is about regaining this status, which the conservative leaders felt was lost with the post-war settlement.

Modern history for Japan has been about catching up with the West. Sources of pride and punishment lay

in becoming a player in the Western world. In this conception of its place in the modern world, Japan was able to look down on China for the first time in its 2,000-year history, as it rose to the pinnacle of the hierarchy in East Asia.

But East Asia is no longer an arena of rival spheres of influence, empires or aid-dependent developing economies. With the re-emergence of China, coupled with the political and economic maturity of other smaller Asian nations, Japan's historical status as a dominant power has become relative. The same applies to China.

What is at least reassuring is that both countries take 'peace' to be something valuable. This underlines the fact that both are aware of where the future lies: in closer economic integration, which is possible only under peaceful conditions. But there is also an absurdity. The two countries are upstaging each other's 'pacifist' intentions, to see whose version of 'peace' is more appealing and trustworthy. From this point of view, how Japan and China as two regional powers handle North Korea's hardened attitude towards the international community will be a measure of their leadership quality and ideas about 'peace'.

In this kind of comparison with China, it becomes sadly evident that, despite the fact that Japan has not gone to war for 60 years, pacifism remains an abstract notion in that country. It is often perceived by Japan's neighbours, especially China and Korea, as being a fig-leaf for an unrepentant and unchanged nationalist Japan. This is lazy thinking, however, and the border between being realistic about security and being an irrational nationalist is still a fine line for this constitutional pacifist democracy.

A way out?

There is now no knowing from the ineloquent former prime minister whether his intention to destroy the old LDP included a stab at Yasukuni. But what he precipitated by driving the issue to the limit with China may be a turning point in Japan's long post-war identity crisis. The dramatic revelation by *Nikkei* (*Nihon Keizai Shinbun*) on 19 July that Emperor Hirohito actually deplored the enshrinement of the 14 war criminals has added poignancy to the Yasukuni controversy, and the debate on the question of Japan's war guilt.

Reflecting on the election campaign to succeed Koizumi already shows how much the Yasukuni debate has evolved in Japan since the diplomatic *faux pas*. Of note is how the issue has become openly debatable in Japanese politics. In this regard, Yasuo Fukuda, Koizumi's first chief cabinet secretary,

positioned himself as an important counterpoint. He led the formation of the cross-party parliamentary group to consider building a secular war memorial. Takenori Kanzaki, the then leader of LDP's coalition partner, the Buddhist-backed Komeito, also joined. The group included members from the opposition Democratic Party (DPJ).

The idea has also been shared by *Yomiuri's* Watanabe, who has lambasted the shrine for eulogizing militarism in its Yushukan museum, arguing that the priests of the shrine have failed to grasp the importance of passing on the anti-militarism message to younger generations. He is a man approaching 80, who for the last two decades has given intellectual ammunition to those wanting to remilitarize politics, but his anti-militarism speaks from another persona, one that remembers the war differently from the post-war generation. His generation experienced militarism at first hand and has a heartfelt desire for peace that crosses over the ideological divide.

Fukuda's and Watanabe's main concern was the impact of Yasukuni on the state of Japan's Asia policy, which they felt was poorly managed by Koizumi. For Fukuda, some conscious decision to capitalize on the legacy of his father, Takeo Fukuda, who when prime minister in the 1970s defined the compassionate facet of Japan's post-war Asia policy, was probably inevitable. But at the political level, Fukuda was able to effectively place the Yasukuni issue in the wider Asian context.

In the actual race, the three candidates offered the public the widest options yet for ways of thinking about the shrine. Foreign Minister Taro Aso said he would visit the shrine in the event that a secular facility was erected. Finance Minister Sadakazu Tanigaki said that he would not visit the shrine. Shinzo Abe, the popular choice, modified his pro-Yasukuni visit stance, opting to remain vague. But Abe is likely to choose a pragmatic course, with room to manoeuvre ideologically, thanks to Koizumi, who has set the most extreme example. In effect, the domestic wheel to address Yasukuni and related war guilt issues has been set in motion.

In view of the gravity of North Korea's nuclear challenge, the Yasukuni débâcle may temporarily become background noise. But that does not take away the importance for China and Japan of reaching a historical reconciliation. In fact, it has become more crucial in order for the two to cooperate as leaders to keep East Asia as an economic powerhouse. On the other hand, 60 years of closet nationalism have only begun to come out into the mainstream of open, democratic debate in Japan. Perhaps Koizumi had intended that to happen all along. So, can China wait?

Endnotes

¹ 'A bargain that could end Japan–China bickering', *Financial Times*, 20 February 2006.

² Robert Cooper, *The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003).

³ *The Seiron Extra*, January 2006.

⁴ Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA: 1977), p. 12.

⁵ In a recent scoop by *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* (*Nikkei*, 19 July 2006), it was revealed that Emperor Hirohito was deeply upset by this decision, and cited this as the reason for his own decision to stop the visit. No member of the Japanese imperial family has visited the shrine since 1975.

⁶ *Bunshi* is to give separate seats for the spirits or the gods, so that in one shrine it is possible to have multiple gods, each occupying individual seats. Yasukuni argues that its dogma is unique in maintaining one 'seat' for all the spirits, and *bunshi* cannot be done. Since Yasukuni is a religious establishment, and its religious independence is protected by the constitution, political interference of the kind expressed by politicians would be a violation of the constitution.

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