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Abe’s Yasukuni visit escalates tensions in Asia

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Visits by Japanese prime ministers to the Yasukuni Shrine, which honours Japan’s war dead (including convicted Class-A war criminals), have repeatedly caused tensions in Asia over the years. Yasuhiro Nakasone created controversy when he visited the Shrine in 1985. Junichiro Koizumi did substantial damage to Japan’s relations with South Korea and China by visiting annually between 2001 and 2006.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s visit on 26 December, 2013, may prove even more damaging than these previous ructions. Northeast Asia is currently beset by rising strategic tensions, epitomized by the territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands (known as the Diaoyu Islands to China). The islands are administered by Japan but also claimed by China. Although Abe has since attempted to minimize the impact of his visit, it could easily escalate such tensions. Unsurprisingly, China and South Korea, which also has territorial and historical disputes with Japan, have been quick to denounce the visit.

Yasukuni is a potent strategic problem for Japan and Asia. It reveals unresolved antagonisms emanating from Japan’s conduct before and during the Second World War. It has also become a vehicle for domestic politicking, particularly of the nationalist kind, as well as an emotive form of diplomacy. China and South Korea regularly use the ‘history’ card to castigate Japan, while Japan often seems to be deliberately snubbing its nose at the region. Yasukuni thus distorts how these countries perceive each other’s security intentions and exacerbates Northeast Asia’s rising sense of insecurity.

Potential Chinese responses to Abe’s visit highlight how misunderstood intentions could play out. Predisposed to viewing other countries’ behaviour as encirclement, China may view Abe’s

visit as signalling rising Japanese nationalism and remilitarization, especially since the visit comes in the wake of Japan's recently released national security strategy, defence build-up and musings on collective defence. China may now attempt to assert what it views as its core interests even more forcefully.

The most obvious short-term scenario for rising Sino-Japanese confrontation continues to be the Senkakus. Diplomacy over the islands has long been troubled, but has worsened considerably since 2012 when Japan nationalized three islands of the five-island chain. China's recent announcement of an Air Defence Identification Zone covering the islands has strained relations further. If China now backs up its outrage at Abe's visit by acting with greater determination over the Senkakus, the chances of a conflict rise significantly.

Misperceptions triggered by Yasukuni could also isolate Japan from others in Asia. Abe has achieved some success in developing closer relations with countries around the region, especially in Southeast Asia. However, Japan's relations with its major potential partner in Northeast Asia, South Korea, are at serious risk of suffering long-tern deterioration.

The two countries share a number of common interests — strong bilateral trade, democratic politics, close relations with the US, concerns over China's increasing assertiveness, and fears about North Korea. Japanese leaders may feel that South Korea is unreasonably nationalistic in responding angrily to such visits — or that all history issues were resolved in 1965 when the two countries normalized their diplomatic relations — but the reality is that Tokyo's too often dismissive approach to Seoul's grievances is a major obstacle to a closer bilateral relationship.

Finally, Abe's visit could create misunderstandings with its major security partner, the United States. The visit undermines US attempts to reduce frictions stemming from China's rise while encouraging greater cooperation between its regional partners (especially Japan, South Korea, and Australia). In a rare rebuke from the US Embassy in Tokyo, the US stated that it was 'disappointed' at Japan and that its actions would 'exacerbate' problems with its neighbours.

Despite his strong history of support for the US-Japan alliance, Abe already has a reputation for unreliability in Washington. Abe does appear to have achieved some success in resolving the military basing problems in the Japanese prefecture of Okinawa, an issue that has long bedevilled the alliance. However, a weary and more inward-looking superpower will not appreciate being dragged into a potential regional conflict. If the US perceives Japan as entrapping it in such a conflict (whether intentionally or not), the alliance will be damaged. Indeed, US policymakers might now be quietly considering how to establish greater leverage over Japan and Abe.

Considering all this, the obvious question is: why? Electoral politics do not appear especially relevant: the government currently enjoys majorities in both houses of parliament and has been implementing a decisive if incomplete package of economic reforms. Given his particular understanding of history, Abe's nationalist credentials in Japan hardly need buttressing.

Perhaps Abe's visit reflects wider problems in political leadership. Political leaders around the world, struggling to solve the many intractable problems caused by globalization and the 2008

financial crisis, may be tempted to indulge in political grandstanding. Accordingly, Abe might believe that, in the current climate, China is unlikely to allow relations to deteriorate further, making it an opportune time for some grandstanding of his own.

Yet the visit is also indicative of the stubbornness and insularity prevalent in Japanese politics today. With the fragmentation of national party politics over the past two years, the country has become more susceptible to right-wing populism. The problem is that, in the fragile strategic environment Japan now inhabits, such hubris will likely prove costly.

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