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Author(s): Yongwook Ryu

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THE YASUKUNI CONTROVERSY

Divergent Perspectives from the Japanese Political Elite

===== Yongwook Ryu
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Abstract

This paper analyzes the Yasukuni problem and reports the different views existing among as well as within major political parties in Japan. The Yasukuni issue should be understood in the context of the rise of conservative nationalism in Japanese politics and Japan's effort to become a normal nation-state.

Keywords: Yasukuni, history issues, Japan, Korea, China, nationalism

Introduction

Along with the problems of “comfort women” and history textbooks, the Yasukuni Shrine controversy is one of the three “history issues” that strain relations between Japan on one hand and China and Korea on the other. The reason for this is obvious. The shrine's intricate connection with Japan's past imperial conquest evokes the painful memories of Japanese colonialism in the minds of many Koreans and Chinese. Hence, Japan is re-remembered as the enemy and aggressor against “our nation.” The end result is the strengthening of nationalism in all three countries, the worsening of bilateral relations, and the weakening of regional cooperation.

Despite extensive media coverage, however, scant attention has been paid to the multifaceted nature of the issue. Even less attention has been given to how the Japanese political elite view it. This paper seeks to fill those gaps by

===== Yongwook Ryu is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Government, Harvard University. The author would like to thank the Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies, Harvard University, and the Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo, for financial and institutional support. He wishes to thank the anonymous reviewer for helpful and constructive suggestions. Email: <yryu@fas.harvard.edu>.

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presenting an analysis of the so-called Yasukuni controversy and the different views existing among the Japanese political elite. I buttress my arguments with a March 2006 survey I conducted (detailed below) of members of the House of Representatives in the National Diet of Japan as well as with official statements and public speeches made by political leaders in the three countries.

In an era, when Japan is seeking to become a “normal” country, its statesmen consider it crucial to normalize the postwar state’s relations with its war dead, even if this should strain bilateral relations with neighboring countries. The term “normal country” in this regard refers to “normalizing” three separate aspects: (1) the constitutional revision of Article 9; (2) the state’s right to mourn its war dead, including war criminals; and (3) the low level of patriotism among the Japanese public, especially among youth. Much attention has been paid to the first aspect of “normality,” but one must also take into account the other two aspects in order to fully grasp the true meaning and significance of the recent political and social changes in Japan. Doing so will assist us to make sense of a diverse set of events—Yasukuni visits, the constitutional revision initiative, apology issues regarding the “comfort women,” the revisionist movement of the Fundamental Law of Education, and approval of right-wing history textbooks.

The paper considers different views on the issue among as well as within the major political parties in Japan. My survey will reveal that the majority of members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) support visits by the prime minister of Japan to the Yasukuni Shrine. Furthermore, most LDP members regard the shrine as the appropriate site to mourn the war dead; this is the reason for their support. The Yasukuni issue concerns the relationship between the state and its war dead; foreign countries have no right to intervene in this domestic affair. These party members also believe that both China and Korea are using the issue to promote domestic nationalism.

The views of the opposition political parties are different and more diverse, suggesting that Japan is not of one voice on the issue, as is often assumed by China and Korea. Not only do opposition members tend to oppose the prime minister’s visits to the shrine, but they also give greater weight to Japan’s relations with China and Korea and see as problematic the enshrinement of Class A war criminals. This paper also shows that the concern with patriotism among Japanese youth is an important factor that separates those who support prime ministerial shrine visits from those who oppose it.

There are intra-party differences too. Despite being in the minority, many members of the LDP in fact oppose prime ministers’ visits to the shrine, thereby sharing similar views with Koreans and Chinese. Significant numbers of members of Japan’s largest opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), support the shrine visits. They are part of the bipartisan group of Diet members known as “Let’s go to Yasukuni Shrine to pay homage together” (Mina de

Yasukuni ni sanpai suru kaigi), a gathering that aims to protect and promote the Yasukuni Shrine and prime ministerial visits. Their views on the issue are essentially the same as those of the conservative-nationalist segment of the LDP. There is suggestive evidence that what underlies their bipartisan support is concern that Japan's youth demonstrate a low level of patriotism.

An important qualification should be made before proceeding further. While the Yasukuni controversy is an indicator for the rise of conservative nationalism in Japanese domestic politics, the domestic debate has taken place firmly within the normative constraints imposed on Japan after World War Two. It is interesting to note that no politician has yet advocated explicitly that Japan should be a military power in the region, a topic that still appears to be taboo in Japanese domestic politics. While some may argue that what we are witnessing is an early sign of Japan's re-militarization, the evidence thus far is lacking and, at best, inconclusive. But surely there is a need to guide Japan to the right path in this transitional period when the nation is searching for new roles in international affairs. Resistance by neighboring countries to Japan's desire to play a greater regional role is likely to be counterproductive, pushing Japan further toward a more nationalistic path.

This article is organized in the following manner. First, I present an overview of the history of the Yasukuni Shrine. Understanding its origin and historical functions is crucial to understanding why the shrine generates so much passion inside and outside Japan. Second, I analyze the so-called Yasukuni controversy, dividing it into international and domestic dimensions. The next section discusses the results of the Diet survey and the divergent and convergent viewpoints among the LDP and the other political parties. I end the paper with a discussion of the implications of the issue for Japan's foreign policy.

Origin and Historical Functions of the Yasukuni Shrine

The Yasukuni Shrine¹ dates back to 1869 when it was created to commemorate the war dead on the side of the central government (*cho-tei*) in the Boshin War,² the civil war that brought about the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Meiji originally named it Tokyo Shokonsha (shrine for inviting the spirits) and renamed

1. For a discussion of the origin and lineage of the Yasukuni Shrine, see Klaus Antoni, "Yasukuni-Jinja and Folk Religion: The Problem of Vengeful Spirits," *Asian Folklore Studies* 47:1 (1998), pp. 124–28.

2. The Boshin War was fought from 1868 to 1869 between the ruling Tokugawa Shogunate and those seeking to return political power to the imperial court. Dissatisfied with the Shogunate's handling of foreigners following the opening of Japan to the outside world, southern samurai joined court officials to restore the young Emperor Meiji to political power. The imperial faction was victorious and brought about the Meiji Restoration. For more details, see Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

the site Yasukuni (peaceful country) in 1879. It now commemorates approximately 2.5 million war dead, including Taiwanese and Koreans drafted to fight on the Japanese side during World War Two. The name Yasukuni carries a certain irony; the shrine's past and present are associated with anything but peace: war, imperialism, an authoritarian vision of governance, and the current controversy. Indeed, one notable Japanese scholar opines that Yasukuni generates the image of blood in the minds of both proponents and opponents of the shrine.³

The shrine became the central place in State Shinto (the political-religious ideology of the Meiji period, 1868–1912) and also in Japan's imperial plans, because it became closely linked with *tennosei*, Japan's imperial system. To create a strong state, Meiji elite leaders saw the need for nationalism—a higher locus of unity and loyalty for a people whose previous identification had been limited to family and village.⁴ This goal was to be achieved and sustained by the twin pillars of the Emperor as the symbol of national unity and State Shinto as the national religion and ideology justifying expansionist nationalism. The Confucian ethical maxims of loyalty (*chu*) and filial piety (*ko*) were blended into an ideal of Japan as national body (*kokutai*), with the emperor at the top.⁵

Under the concept of *kokutai*, the civil and military bureaucracy was to be responsible directly to the emperor. A system of universal conscription and compulsory education, coupled with State Shinto, was to cement the entire structure together ideologically.⁶ These two factors were then combined and used to underpin imperial aggression into the Asian continent under the slogan *fukoku kyohei* “rich nation, strong army.” State Shinto was thus born and became exploited for the political purposes of Meiji Japan with its authoritarian vision of domestic social order and expansionist ambitions abroad.⁷ Yasukuni

3. Takahashi Tetsuya, *Yasukuni Mondai* [The Yasukuni problem] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shinsho, 2005), pp. 19–21.

4. C. H. Powles, “The Emperor System in Modern Japan: A Case Study in Japanese Religiosity,” *Studies in Religion* 6 (1976/7), p. 12.

5. This view of *kokutai* in Japan was elaborated mostly by the Mito school of philosophy in late Tokugawa Japan. See Kawada Haruo, *Jinja Shinto no Joshiki* [Basic facts of Shrine Shinto] (Kyoto: Aomeisho, 1982).

6. For more detail, see Herschel Webb, “The Development of an Orthodox Attitude to the Imperial Institution in the 19th Century,” in Marius B. Jansen, ed., *Changing Japanese Attitudes toward Modernization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965). The *tennosei* itself was originally viewed in Confucian terms among its proponents in the 18th century, as a kind of moral influence on the country for peace and unity. It was only with the rise of the Meiji state after 1868 that the religious view of *tennosei* was deliberately manipulated by the ruling oligarchy to furnish their enterprise with an aura of absolute legitimacy.

7. While it may have been the case that the goal of the early Meiji leaders was innocuous, aiming to unify the nation around the imperial institution through quasi-religious ideology, what emerged was not so much a revival of that faith as a new and skillful exploitation of it for political purposes. For an excellent analysis of how religion played a role in Japan's expansion, see J. M. Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966).

was at the center of it. Therefore, despite its religious outward appearance, the Yasukuni Shrine is essentially a political institution representing the state and its interests.

The Yasukuni Shrine was used to achieve three interrelated, self-reinforcing functions under this system.⁸ The overarching aim was to provide ideological support for Japan's imperialist plans through the administration of the life and death of citizens.⁹ First, Yasukuni's presence created and maintained an imagined connection among emperor, soldiers, and those left behind (i.e., wives, children, parents, etc.). This was crucial in maintaining the myth of *kokutai* and ensuring continued support for war. The imagined connection of *kokutai* strengthened the links between the shrine and the people through religious rituals of worshiping the war dead.¹⁰ An effect of this practice is to encourage sacrifice for the nation and to erase the negative aspect of war, as ordinary Japanese shifted their locus of identity from the personal to the national.

Second, the ritual of turning the war dead into deities (*kami*) was performed at Yasukuni. In Shinto, the veneration of individual human beings as *kami* had always been reserved for imperial ancestors or at least notable heroes, never for ordinary people. However, being memorialized at the Yasukuni Shrine turned every soldier, no matter how obscure, into a deity merely by the fact that he had fallen in service to the divine emperor.¹¹ The spirits of the fallen in Japan's subsequent successful wars were duly enshrined at Yasukuni. Today, the shrine continues this function and deifies those fallen in the service of the Self-Defense Forces, Japan's de facto military. Once turned into deities, they can then be worshipped and commemorated. Hence, Yasukuni is also a place of commemorating the war dead. As we will later see in the survey, this is how most Japanese regard the Yasukuni Shrine; it is a place for commemorating those who have fallen in the service of the country.¹²

Lastly, the rituals carried out at Yasukuni had the psychological effect of transforming emotions for the bereaved. The shrine had always maintained

8. In religious terms, Yasukuni resolves the so-called "bad death" problem. When warriors, or soldiers, die a violent death, they become unhappy ghosts and vengeful spirits. The living, fearing such ghosts, would like to appease them through rites. Such fear probably existed in premodern Japan, but what we call the Yasukuni problem today has nothing to do with fear of vengeful spirits. Certainly, Japanese prime ministers do not visit the shrine to appease such spirits.

9. Takahashi, *Yasukuni Mondai*, pp. 29–32.

10. Powles, "The Emperor System in Modern Japan," p. 498.

11. For more detail, see Kishimoto Hideo, ed., *Japanese Religion in the Meiji Era* (Tokyo: Obunsha, 1956).

12. There are two categories of rituals for the dead. One is the rite of "apotheosis." These rites are performed to transform into deities the war dead and those who have died in the service of the Self-Defense Forces. The other is the rite of "propitiation." These rites pacify, propitiate, and venerate the apotheosized war dead, and the vast majority of rites fall into this category. For more detail, see John Breen, "The Dead and the Living in the Land of Peace: A Sociology of the Yasukuni Shrine," *Morality* 9:1 (February 2004), pp. 77–85.

close ties with the imperial family through the emperor's visits or dispatch of imperial emissaries up until 1978, when the emperor stopped visiting because of the enshrinement of Class A war criminals. The close imperial ties provided the religious rituals at the shrine with imperial backing. Thus, the pain and sadness of losing one's son in war was said to be transformed into the pride and joy of his being turned into a deity at the shrine, as the fallen received imperial blessing. There were numerous personal accounts of a 180-degree change of emotions among ordinary Japanese stemming from this transformative function of Yasukuni.¹³ Through this metamorphosis of emotions, not only did sadness and pain change into joy and pride, but a new emotion emerged, namely, a feeling of unquestioned loyalty to the Emperor and the State, a stronger sense of national unity through the collective experience of pain and joy, and a hardened desire to accomplish the imperial mission.

The above description suggests that Yasukuni is not merely a religious site but, more importantly, an ideologically loaded institution where the war dead are mourned and appropriated for political ends.¹⁴ The shrine stands as the symbol of expansionist nationalism and an authoritarian vision of domestic social order. Given this history and these functions, it is not hard to see why Yasukuni means so much to conservative nationalists, why it is so hated by the political left, and why the Koreans and Chinese have difficulty tolerating visits to the shrine by Japanese prime ministers. Yasukuni's past is its present!

The Yasukuni Issue: International and Domestic Dimensions

Similar to the shrine's dual identity, what is often called the Yasukuni problem (*Yasukuni mondai*) has a dual dimension, one international and the other domestic. The international dimension centers on the enshrinement of 14 Class A war criminals and the symbolism of Yasukuni Shrine; it concerns Japan's bilateral relations with Korea and China. The domestic dimension is related to the constitutional issue of separation of religion from politics, the relationship between postwar Japanese and the country's war dead, and the issue of patriotism, especially among Japanese youth.

International Dimension

The Yasukuni issue is a window through which foreign countries, especially Korea and China, view Japan's self-understanding of its history of aggression. Thus, Yasukuni has become a political barometer by which to judge Japan's

13. For good analysis, and some personal accounts, of what Yasukuni meant to ordinary Japanese, see Takahashi, *Yasukuni Mondai*, pp. 21–59.

14. Breen, "The Dead and the Living in the Land of Peace," p. 84.

“moral” behavior. Yasukuni as an international issue concerns the enshrinement of the 14 Class A war criminals to whom, along with other war dead, homage is paid. These two factors, the enshrinement and the official homage by public figures, are at the center of how the Japanese of today understand the past and how their understanding differs from that of the Chinese and Koreans.

Although in Japan prime ministerial visits to the shrine caused a domestic political stir from the very beginning, the Yasukuni Shrine first became an international controversy in 1985 when then-Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro visited in his official capacity on the fortieth anniversary of Japan’s defeat in World War Two. Before Nakasone, practically all Japanese prime ministers visited the shrine in an unofficial capacity to pay respect to the war dead. After Nakasone, the number of such visits decreased but certainly was not insignificant. The controversy reached its peak during the government of Koizumi Junichiro (2001–06), who insisted on visiting the shrine once a year despite heated protests from China and Korea. Table 1 lists all the prime ministerial visits to the shrine since the end of World War Two.

The enshrinement of Class A war criminals was carried out on some unknown day in October 1978. It is upon this fact that both Chinese and Korean governments base their criticisms. Their official versions are that the Chinese and Koreans, as well as ordinary Japanese, were victims of the wartime Japanese political leadership represented by the 14 Class A criminals. Thus, while it may be understandable that homage is paid to ordinary Japanese citizens who lost their lives for a wrong cause, honoring war criminals is not; it is tantamount to justifying past wrongdoings.

In addition, Yasukuni’s subsidiary war museum called Yushukan¹⁵ unhesitatingly advances the controversial view that World War Two was a war of liberation rather than a war of aggression, and hence justified. As Breen notes, the Yushukan is no ordinary war museum: “It is a museum without mention of any enemies.”¹⁶ Its purpose is to glorify Japan’s past and the war dead. The invasion into the East Asian continent is ignored, while depictions of brave acts by kamikaze and emotional letters written by soldiers fill the hallway. To the Koreans and Chinese, a Japanese prime minister’s visit to a shrine that supports such a museum is simply intolerable.

Both Chinese and Korean governments regard the correct understanding of past history, including the Yasukuni issue, as the fundamental basis upon which

15. Through its apotheosis and propitiation rites, the dead at Yasukuni are transformed into *kami*; in so doing, each is attributed the virtues of patriotism and heroism. This is an act of selective memory, for it denies the possibility that some deaths were not glorious but brutal and humiliating, and it serves the “center,” namely, the emperor. Yasukuni’s concern with memory and the construction of the past is especially evident in Yushukan, the subsidiary war museum of the shrine. The exhibits are designed to proclaim the glory of dying for the emperor and country.

16. Breen, “The Dead and the Living in the Land of Peace,” p. 81.

TABLE 1 *Japanese PM Visits to Yasukuni Shrine since 1945*

<i>Name of Prime Minister (No. of Visits)</i>	<i>Dates of Visit</i>
Higashikuni Naruhiko (1)	8/18/1945
Shidehara Kijuro (2)	10/23/1945; 11/20/1945
Yoshida Shigeru (5)	10/18/1951; 10/17/1952; 4/23/1953; 10/24/1953; 4/24/1954
Kishi Nobusuke (2)	4/24/1957; 10/21/1958
Ikeda Hayato (5)	10/10/1960; 6/18/1961; 11/15/1961; 11/4/1962; 9/22/1963
Sato Eisaku (11)	4/21/1965; 4/21/1966; 4/22/1967; 4/23/1968; 4/22/1969; 10/18/1969; 4/22/1970; 10/17/1970; 4/22/1971; 10/19/1971; 4/22/1972
Tanaka Kakuei (5)	7/8/1972; 4/23/1973; 10/18/1973; 4/23/1974; 10/19/1974
Miki Takeo (3)	4/22/1975; 8/15/1975; 10/18/1976
Fukuda Takeo (4)	4/21/1977; 4/21/1978; 8/15/1978; 10/18/1978
Ohira Masayoshi (3)	4/21/1979; 10/18/1979; 4/21/1980
Suzuki Zenko (9)	8/15/1980; 10/18/1980; 11/21/1980; 4/21/1981; 8/15/1981; 10/17/1981; 4/21/1982; 8/15/1982; 10/18/1982
Nakasone Yasuhiro (10)	4/21/1983; 8/15/1983; 10/18/1983; 1/5/1984; 4/21/1984; 8/15/1984; 10/18/1984; 1/21/1985; 4/22/1985; 8/15/1985
Miyazawa Kiichi (1)	Unknown date
Hashimoto Ryutaro (1)	7/29/1966
Koizumi Junichiro (6)	8/13/2001; 4/21/2002; 1/14/2003; 1/1/2004; 10/17/2005; 8/15/2006

SOURCE: Mitsuchi Shuhei, *Yasukuni mondai no genten* [The origin of the Yasukuni problem] (Tokyo: Nihon Hyoronsha, 2005).

to build political relations with Japan. Accordingly, they view the resolution of historical issues as a *necessary* condition for the continuation and development of political relations. People's Republic of China (PRC) Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated in 2001 that the Yasukuni issue is "by no means just an internal matter of Japan, but [is] a touchstone of the government attitude of Japan toward its history of aggression."¹⁷ South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun also views the Yasukuni issue as a "touchstone of the extent to which Japan recognizes its past history as well as its commitment to the future of Korea-Japan relations and peace in East Asia."¹⁸ Both governments have sent

17. PRC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi Expounds China's Solemn Position on Yasukuni Shrine," May 18, 2001, <<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn>>.

18. Roh Moo-hyun, "Special Message by President Roh Moo-hyun on Korea-Japan Relations," April 26, 2006, <http://www.mofat.go.kr/me/me_a002/me_b100/1202743_27876.html>.

the consistent message that the correct understanding of the past is the foundation for future relations with Japan—and urged Japanese leaders not to visit the shrine.

This is an important point not well understood by Japanese politicians; hence, they often view the Korean and Chinese criticisms as no more than extensions of their respective domestic politics. Many LDP politicians who responded to my survey view the Korean and Chinese criticisms as a tool with which they (the politicians) can promote their own domestic nationalism in Japan. Certainly, there is an element of domestic politics in play, but it is also a matter of principle and justice for Korea and China and hence less amenable to negotiation.

The official Japanese response to the international criticism has also been rather consistent ever since Koizumi's first shrine visit. The response is as follows. First, the purpose of the visit is to mourn the war dead, not to glorify or exonerate the Class A war criminals. Second, the visit is a way to recognize that Japan's prosperity today is built upon the past sacrifices of the war dead and should not be construed as an effort to upset the feelings of Asian neighbors, as has been acknowledged on several occasions by Koizumi. And third, the visit is to pledge that Japan will never again wage war; thus, it has nothing to do with the rise of militarism in Japan.¹⁹ In his speech at the 2005 Asian-African summit, Koizumi stated the following:

In the past, Japan, through its colonial rule and aggression, caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of many countries, particularly to those of Asian nations. Japan squarely faces these facts of history in a spirit of humility. And with feelings of deep remorse and heartfelt apology always engraved in mind, Japan has consistently since the end of World War Two resolutely maintained its principle of resolving all matters by peaceful means, without recourse to use of force, never turning into a military power but remaining an economic power.²⁰

To the Koreans and Chinese, while the former prime minister's words were encouraging, they were not matched by his actions and hence appeared insincere. From the Japanese perspective, however, there is a need to honor the war dead, because after all this is what the Chinese and Koreans do as well. The fact that Class A war criminals are housed at the site is something that the government cannot alter because the shrine is a private entity, and in any case the visit is not to honor individual deities but to honor the war dead.

19. The official response can be found in various documents published by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). See "Basic Position of the Government of Japan Regarding Prime Minister Koizumi's Visits to Yasukuni Shrine," October 2005, at <<http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/postwar/yasukuni/position.html>>; and "Statement by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi," August 15, 2005, at <<http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/announce/2005/8/0815.html>>.

20. Koizumi Junichiro, "Speech by H. E. Mr. Junichiro Koizumi, Prime Minister of Japan," April 22, 2005, at <<http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/meet0504/speech.html>>.

This gulf of perspectives is hard to bridge and stems from different views of Yasukuni. For the Koreans and Chinese, Yasukuni symbolizes Japan's past militarism and imperialism. But as my survey will show, for Japan's political right (i.e., many LDP members), Yasukuni is the rightful national site for mourning the war dead. To Koreans and Chinese, the prime minister's visit to the shrine validates their view that postwar Japan is the same as prewar Japan, and militarism is a constant feature of Japanese thinking and society. But for the Japanese, this view by Koreans and Chinese misunderstands the nature of postwar Japanese society.

Domestic Dimension

Domestically, the issue is twofold. First, the Yasukuni issue presents a constitutional problem, namely, violation of the separation of religion from politics (*seikyo bunri*).²¹ According to the Japanese Constitution, the state cannot engage in any activities that sponsor a particular religion. A prime minister's visit to the shrine in an official capacity is thus deemed to be favoring the Shinto religion over others. The Osaka High Court has ruled that such an official visit violates the Constitution, and other high courts in Japan have ruled similarly. To date, not a single court has ruled in favor of official visits to the shrine. This is why Koizumi's shrine visits changed from public to private in 2005.

To many Japanese political leaders, the constitutional issue matters more than international criticism and worsening relations with China and Korea. Hence, when asked to choose the best option among five potential solutions to the Yasukuni issue, in my survey below, apart from those who preferred to maintain Yasukuni as the appropriate site for a national memorial service most other politicians chose the option of creating a non-religious site. Considerably fewer politicians chose an option that would involve the removal of Class A war criminals. What this suggests is that the constitutional problem takes higher priority than other aspects of the issue such as bilateral relations with China and Korea and the enshrinement of war criminals.

Quite apart from the constitutional issue, the domestic dimension of the Yasukuni controversy has to do with the issue of patriotism, especially raising the level of patriotism among Japanese youth. Over the decades, a small but vocal coterie of conservative nationalists concerned with the issue of national pride has emerged.²² To them, the political "abnormality" of Japan refers to more

21. See Hiroaki Kobayashi, "Religion in the Public Sphere: Challenges and Opportunities in Japan," *Brigham Young University Law Review* 13 (September 2005), pp. 683–710.

22. For other analyses discussing this issue, see Masaru Tamamoto, "A Land Without Patriots: The Yasukuni Controversy and Japanese Nationalism," *World Policy Journal* 18:3 (Fall 2001), pp. 33–40; and Eugene A. Matthews, "Japan's New Nationalism," *Foreign Affairs* 82:6 (November/December 2003), pp. 74–90.

than just the constitutional constraint of Article 9. Abnormality is also about the right and duty of the state to treat its war dead as it sees fit, as well as what these Japanese conservatives perceive as the dismal lack of patriotism among the public, notably young people. They also lament the loss of Japan's spirit of independence. For instance, in the December 2001 Yasukuni newsletter, emeritus professor of Tokyo University Kobori Keiichiro states the following:

It is imperative that a solution be found to [the failure of the government to patronize Yasukuni]. When it is resolved, I am convinced that the attitudes of the young to their country will be transformed. I am convinced that they will be led to believe that our nation is a nation to be proud of, that we Japanese have something of which we can truly boast. To solve the Yasukuni problem will of itself be an immense plus for the ethical life of the nation.²³

It is obvious that Kobori's concern is not to mourn the war dead but to bring about a moral transformation of Japan's youth, i.e., to use the war dead to effect transformation of postwar society, which is deemed to be lacking in patriotism. In the June 2003 Yasukuni newsletter, the editors insist that "the image [of the prime minister paying tribute] will inspire today's youth, the bearers of the next generation, to feelings of patriotism and gratitude to the war dead."²⁴

In this regard, it is not surprising that Koizumi's visits to the shrine have been accompanied by a rise of conservative politics in Japan, especially in the area of education. On November 16, 2006, the Cabinet approved a bill to revise the Fundamental Law of Education to inculcate a more nationalistic spirit—"an attitude of loving one's nation and homeland."²⁵ The Fundamental Law, often viewed as a constitution for education, has never been revised; it has stood as the symbol of Japan's post-World War Two education and emphasis on individualism and peace. The critics fear that revision would force the students to sing "Kimigayo," Japan's national anthem, and stand for the rising sun flag, both of which are still associated with the images of Japan's militaristic past.

Alongside this change of the Fundamental Law exists the approval by the Ministry of Education of right-wing history textbooks.²⁶ Although such textbooks are used by less than 1% of schools in Japan, often because of vehement opposition from parents and ordinary citizens,²⁷ it is the ministry's approval of

23. Quoted in Breen, "The Dead and the Living in the Land of Peace," p. 82.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

25. "The Revision of the Fundamental Law of Education," *Asahi Shimbun* [Asahi News], April 29, 2006, p. 3.

26. For more details, see Lynne Parmenter, "Constructing National Identity in a Changing World: Perspectives in Japanese Education," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 20:4 (December 1999), pp. 453–63.

27. Kimihiko Baba, "Japan and East Asia: Shifting Images on an Imagined Map," *Japanese Studies* 21:3 (December 2001), pp. 237–60.

such textbooks that generates doubt over Japan's self-understanding of its past. The attempt to revise the Fundamental Law, the inclusion of more right-wing history textbooks, and prime ministerial shrine visit are not separate events; they should be regarded as all part of the movement to "normalize" Japan.

However, Japan by no means shows a unified voice on the Yasukuni issue. Against the group of conservative nationalists are politicians mainly of the left, as well as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the business community. These two groups want nothing to do with what Yasukuni is meant to represent—war and blind patriotism, and the supremacy of the state over the sanctity of individual life. Also, they worry about the negative impact the Yasukuni issue has on Japan's relations with its Asian neighbors.

For instance, in a proposal in May 2006 on Sino-Japanese relations, the Keizai Doyukai (Japan Association of Corporate Executives) opposed the prime minister's Yasukuni visits out of concern for doing business with China and instead suggested that the government establish a new secular memorial site to honor all victims of war. The association further stated that since a consensus has not emerged among the Japanese people over whether Yasukuni is an appropriate location to promise not to wage war, they feel the prime minister's shrine visits should be reconsidered. Koizumi rejected their call, saying "it is different from politics" because the Yasukuni issue is a problem of the heart (*kokoro no mondai*).²⁸ There is also some sign of doubt about the utility of prime ministerial visits among traditional shrine supporters such as Nippon Izokukai (Bereaved Families of Japan), which has said that the country's leadership should take into account the feelings of Asian neighbors about Yasukuni visits. Nippon Izokukai now says it is grateful for Koizumi's efforts but that if they cause such trouble, the spirits of the war dead cannot rest in peace.

How Do Japanese Political Leaders See the Yasukuni Controversy?

This section discusses how Japanese political leaders see the Yasukuni issue. Despite the apparent importance of this topic, no work exists that analyzes the views of the Japanese political elite on historical issues, including Yasukuni. This section reports the different views among as well as within political parties in Japan.

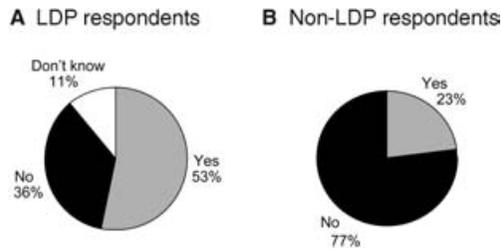
The discussion in this section is based on a survey I conducted in March 2006. The questionnaire containing 20 questions was sent to 450 members of the House of Representatives, and 80 of them responded. Thus, the margin of error of the survey results is about $\pm 10\%$ at the 95% confidence level. It should be noted that while the response rate is low (18%), the composition of

28. "Koizumi Responds to Keizai Doyukai," *Asahi Shimbun*, May 11, 2006, p. 2.

TABLE 2 *Summary Statistics of the Diet Survey*

Age	LDP	DPJ	NKP	SDP	PNP	JCP	Indep.	Total
30s	8	4	0	0	0	0	0	12 (15%)
40s	8	5	2	0	0	0	1	16 (20%)
50s	13	8	1	1	0	1	0	24 (30%)
60s	12	6	1	2	1	0	1	23 (29%)
70s	4	0	0	0	1	0	0	5 (6%)
Total	45(56%)	23(29%)	4 (5%)	3 (4%)	2 (2.5%)	1 (1%)	2 (2.5%)	80(100%)

SOURCE: March 2006 Diet Survey, by the author.

FIGURE 1 *Should the PM Continue Visiting the Yasukuni Shrine?*

SOURCE: The March 2006 Diet Survey, by the author.

the respondents closely reflects the actual composition of the House of Representatives in terms of age distribution and the percentages of seats occupied by each party.²⁹ This close overlapping between the sample and the population improves the “goodness” of the sample. Table 2 presents the summary statistics of the sample.

What the survey reveals is both important and interesting. First, there are important differences between the LDP and other political parties. When asked, “Should the Prime Minister continue visiting the Yasukuni Shrine?” a clear difference is demonstrated (see Figures 1A and 1B). Among the LDP

29. The age and seat distribution of the major political parties (LDP, DPJ, NKP [New Komeito], SDP [Social Democratic Party], PNP [People’s New Party], JCP [Japan Communist Party], and Independents) respectively are as follows: 20s (0.4%), 30s (11%), 40s (24.5%), 50s (30.4%), 60s (25.2%), 70s (6.5%), 80s (0.2%), 90s (2.8%) for age distribution; LDP (61.6%), DPJ (23.5%), NKP (6.5%), SDP (1.5%), PNP (0.8%), JCP (1.9%), and Independents (3.8%) for party seat distribution. The raw data are available at <<http://seiji.yahoo.co.jp/>>.

TABLE 3 *Chi-squared Test for the Homogeneity of Supporting Yasukuni Visits between LDP and Non-LDP Politicians*

	Yasukuni Visits	
	Support	Oppose
n (LDP)	24	16
n (non-LDP)	5	18
χ^2 test (corrected)	99% (p-value = 0.0076)	
χ^2 test (not corrected)	99% (p-value = 0.0034)	
Fisher's exact test	Mean odds ratio = 5.2	
	99% (p-value = 0.0041)	
	95% confidence interval = (1.5, 20.1)	

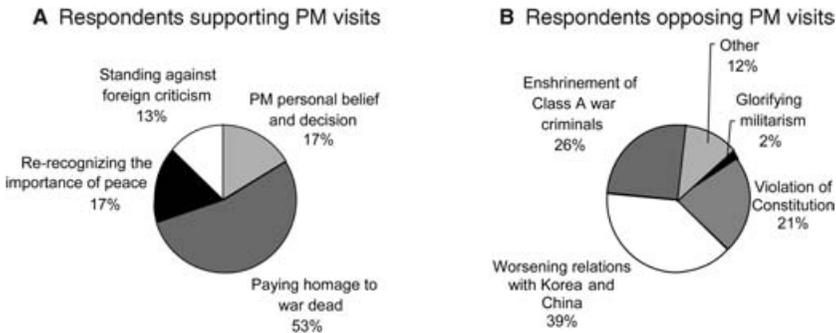
SOURCE: March 2006 Diet Survey, by the author.

respondents, the majority (53%) supported the visit, while only 36% were against it. However, 77% of the opposition respondents were against such an idea, while 23% were in favor of it. Statistical analysis proves the existence of differing views between the LDP and the opposition. The χ^2 test reveals that the two groups are different at the 99% significance level, and Fisher's exact test suggests that belonging to the LDP increases the probability of supporting Yasukuni visits by 5.2 times, on average (see Table 3).

This particular result suggests a potential, and plausible, explanation for prime ministerial visits to the shrine despite strong opposition from the public and other political parties. The prime minister of Japan visits the shrine because the majority of LDP members support it, especially when the Yasukuni issue ranks low on voters' agendas.³⁰ Such action is needed in order to maintain the intra-party coalition between economic liberals and conservative nationalists. To push for his top priority, reform of the postal system, Koizumi needed to satisfy the conservative nationalists by visiting the shrine.

But the LDP is not a unified voice. Within the party there is also strong opposition to prime ministerial visits to the shrine. For example, Yamasaki Taku, a former LDP vice president who heads a nonpartisan group of Diet members debating the establishment of a new national war memorial, agrees with the Keizai Doyukai's proposals discussed above. Another prominent LDP politician who publicly declared against shrine visits is Fukuda Yasuo, the former Cabinet secretary. The DPJ also takes the view that Koizumi's Asia policy failed largely because of historical issues, including Yasukuni. However, in terms of the overall picture, the "average" view of LDP members differs considerably from that of other political parties.

30. "2005 Elections," *Ronza* [Ronza], November 2005, pp. 93–104.

FIGURE 2 *Why Do You Support PM Visits to Yasukuni?*

SOURCE: The March 2006 Diet Survey, by the author.

Within the DPJ, although the majority oppose prime ministerial visits to the shrine, there are also many who support it. *Mina de Yasukuni ni sanpai suru kaigi*, the bipartisan group of Diet members mentioned previously, organizes meetings and visits to Yasukuni. Its aims are to support visits by the prime minister, oppose the building of a new national site to mourn the war dead, and take issue with the judgment of the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal. Despite having different party affiliations, the DPJ members of this bipartisan group share similar conservative and nationalistic views on history issues as the mainstream LDP.

The main reason for support by the Diet members of prime ministerial visits concerns the need to pay homage to the war dead. In terms of the reasoning behind the support, there are no major differences between the LDP and the opposition. The single biggest reason for the support is that they view the shrine as the rightful site to pay homage to the war dead (53%) (see Figure 2A). This is consistent with the earlier point that Yasukuni for the Japanese political right is the rightful national site to mourn the war dead and does not carry the image of militarism and imperialism.

The same reason also appears to be the main factor that brings politicians of different parties together and unites them in their support for shrine visits. *Mina de Yasukuni ni sanpai suru kaigi*, the group that seeks to protect and promote the shrine, says that “Yasukuni Shrine is the rightful site to pay respect to the war dead, including Class A war criminals, and foreign governments have no right to have a say in this.”³¹ Others surveyed in Figure 2A stated that

31. “*Yasukuni mondai no hon jitsu wa?*” [What is the essence of the Yasukuni problem?], at <<http://homepage2.nifty.com/kumando/mj/mj020819.html>>. The group maintains the following website <<http://blog.livedoor.jp/kokuminnokai>>.

TABLE 4 *Two Sample T-Tests for the Relationship between Support for Yasukuni Visits and the View of Patriotism Level of Japanese Youth*

	<i>Yasukuni Visits</i>	
	<i>Support</i>	<i>Oppose</i>
Mean patriotism level*	2.23	2.70
Mean difference	0.47 (2.70–2.23)	
n	34	36
sd	1.1	0.75
t-test (df = 68)	98% (p-value = 0.013)	

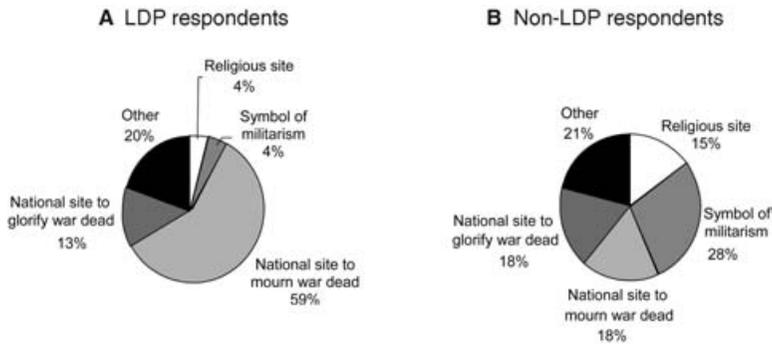
SOURCE: March 2006 Diet Survey, by the author.

*Mean patriotism level is measured on a 5-point scale, with 1 = very weak patriotism level and 5 = very strong patriotism level.

shrine visits would result in re-recognition of the importance of peace (17%), that it was up to the prime minister's personal beliefs (17%), or that Japan should not bend under foreign criticisms and hence the premier should visit the shrine (13%).

Of those who opposed prime ministers' shrine visits, once again there were no differences of reasoning between different political parties. Three main reasons for their opposition emerge from the survey (see Figure 2B). The first and most important is concern with worsening bilateral relations with China and Korea (39%). Second, a sizable 26% are against it because the shrine houses Class A war criminals. And lastly, 21% objected because it was in violation of the constitutional principle of separation of religion from politics. There is also another potential reason for support for shrine visits. As mentioned earlier, the Yasukuni controversy concerns the issue of patriotism and is viewed by some as a means to bring about a moral transformation of Japanese youth. If the concern with the low level of patriotism was indeed a factor behind support for shrine visits, then we would expect that those who oppose visits would assess youth patriotism levels as being higher than do those who support it. Table 4 shows statistical evidence for this relationship.

The respondents were asked to rank the level of patriotism among Japanese youth on a five-point scale, with 5 representing a very strong level of patriotism. The mean patriotism level scored by those who support Yasukuni visits is 2.23, while that scored by those who oppose the visit is 2.7. In other words, those who support Yasukuni visits view the level of patriotism among Japanese youth as lower than those who oppose such visits. The t-test reveals that the mean difference (0.47) cannot be due to random chance, and the finding is significant at a 98% level. The finding suggests that concern with patriotism is indeed an important factor for supporting Yasukuni visits.

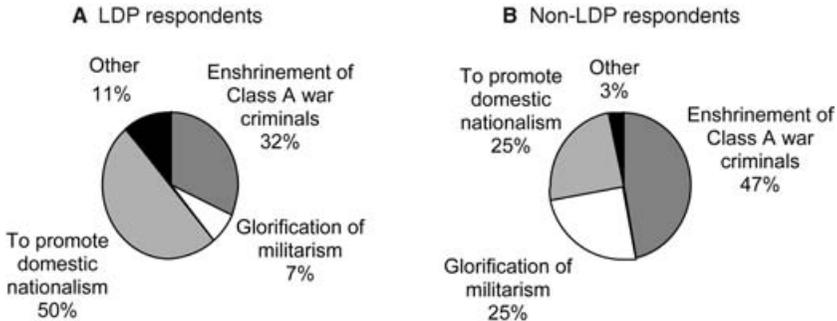
FIGURE 3 *Meaning of the Yasukuni Shrine*

SOURCE: The March 2006 Diet Survey, by the author.

Partisan differences exist in the meaning of the Yasukuni Shrine held by politicians (see Figures 3A and 3B). For the opposition parties, views were diverse and quite evenly spread. A total of 28% of respondents viewed the shrine as a symbol of Japanese militarism during World War Two, and 18% as a national site to glorify the war dead. These two answers represent a negative view of Yasukuni. Another 18% viewed the shrine as a national site to mourn the war dead, and 15% thought of it as a Shinto religious site. These two answers represent an innocuous view of the shrine. This diversity of views contrasts sharply with the more or less unified view existing within the LDP, where the majority (59%) regarded the shrine as a national site to mourn the war dead, and 13% thought it a national site to glorify the war dead. Only 4% opined that Yasukuni was a symbol of Japanese militarism during World War Two. Hence, it is reasonable to infer that the dominant view of Yasukuni within LDP is that the shrine is the rightful site for a national ceremony for the war dead, and not a symbol of militarism and imperialism.

In Figures 4A and 4B, we see that partisan differences also exist in views concerning why Korea and China oppose prime ministerial visits to the shrine. Half of the LDP respondents thought that the purpose of such opposition was to promote and strengthen domestic nationalism. Only 32% of them correctly responded that the opposition was because of the enshrinement of Class A war criminals. Among the opposition political parties, a greater percentage of respondents (47%) thought that the war criminals' presence was the main reason for Korean and Chinese opposition; another 25% pointed to glorification of militarism and imperialism. The same percentage thought that Korean and Chinese opposition had more to do with strengthening their domestic nationalisms.

FIGURE 4 *Why Do You Think That China and Korea Oppose PM Visits to the Yasukuni Shrine?*



SOURCE: The March 2006 Diet Survey, by the author.

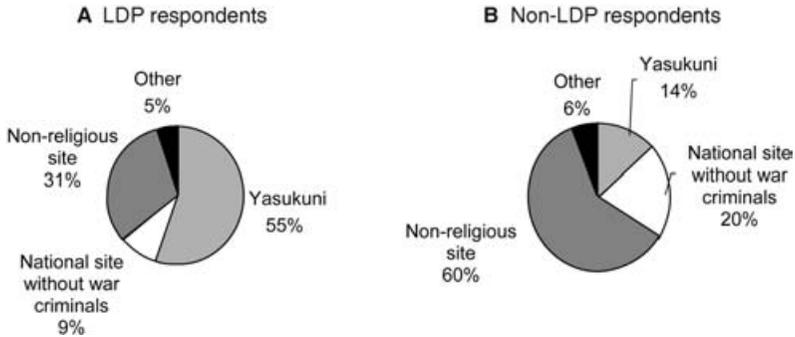
Interestingly, none of the respondents thought that the Korean and Chinese governments' opposition was based on pressure from the war-bereaved families in their respective countries.

Partisan differences extend to the solution of the Yasukuni controversy (see Figures 5A and 5B). A total of 55% of LDP respondents insisted that homage to the war dead continue to be paid at Yasukuni. Some 31% thought that a non-religious national memorial site would be the best option. Only 9% opined that a new site that excludes the Class A war criminals should be created. Among the opposition political parties, only 14% insisted on Yasukuni as the site of national ceremonial services. A majority of opposition respondents (60%) saw the need to build a non-religious national site, while another 20% thought that removal or exclusion of the Class A war criminals was necessary.

The sample answers to this particular question suggest that as far as Japanese political leaders are concerned, the Yasukuni problem is really a domestic issue that touches on the constitutional principle of separation of religion from politics. The view of the Yasukuni controversy as an international issue is much weaker. Indeed, it is the usual view among Japanese politicians that Yasukuni is an international issue only because Korea and China politicize and make it one.

Before concluding this section, some discussion of various proposals made by Japanese politicians to resolve the issue is in order. Two solutions have been most prominent thus far—the nationalization of Yasukuni Shrine and the creation of a new non-religious site. Proposed recently by former Minister of Foreign Affairs Aso Taro, nationalization of the shrine is in fact an old idea dating back to the 1969 Diet “Bill for the National Establishment of Yasukuni Shrine”

FIGURE 5 Which of the Following Is the Appropriate Place to Pay Homage to the War Dead?



SOURCE: The March 2006 Diet Survey, by the author.

(Yasukuni jinjya hoan). The rationale behind it seems to be that once the shrine is “nationalized,” the Diet can decide whom to commemorate there. This raises the possibility that the Class A war criminals could be removed from the site, although it might be possible that they could receive “democratic” endorsement, which would cause a bigger problem in Japan’s relations with its neighboring countries.

There are two obstacles to this proposal. First, it is doubtful that the authorities at Yasukuni Shrine would agree to the plan. While favoring the idea of Yasukuni becoming a state institution, they have consistently opposed state intervention in the matters of the shrine’s religious characteristics and in the question of the war criminals’ removal.³² Second, it is uncertain whether this would resolve the issue at all. Even with nationalization, if Yasukuni were to maintain its religious identity then the constitutional issue of separation of politics from religion would still remain. Furthermore, if the war criminals were not removed after nationalization it would surely generate more criticism from neighboring countries because they would view inaction as being tantamount to tacit approval.

The other proposal that has received attention is the idea of building a new national mourning site. While the idea is promising, once again there are several obstacles to its implementation. First, many LDP politicians oppose the idea. Viewing the Yasukuni Shrine as the appropriate place to mourn the war dead, they might see the proposal as unnecessarily politicizing the issue or

32. See Takahashi, *Yasukuni Mondai*, pp. 73–77 and 103–13.

even as bending to foreign pressure.³³ Second, the difficult decision has to be made whether to include the war criminals in the national commemoration ceremony. Certainly, some quarters of the LDP and the opposition, as well as interest groups such as the War Bereaved Association, would strongly resist any measure to exclude the war criminals. And lastly, even if a new site were constructed, the Yasukuni Shrine would still exist. If after the construction of a new site prime ministers no longer visit Yasukuni, there will not be a problem, but what if they continue to pay respect to the war dead there? Then Japan will face the same problems as before; hence, the proposal would not resolve the issue entirely unless it dealt with these difficult aspects in the first place.

The most likely scenario in the foreseeable future is continuation of the status quo. The Japanese political leaders will visit the shrine as they see fit, while trying to downplay the political significance and implications of their visits. The specific timing of shrine visits may vary according to domestic public opinion and consideration of foreign relations with Korea and China, but the possibility of visits will not be denounced. Thus, the Yasukuni controversy is unlikely to disappear any time soon and will continue to strain relations between Japan and its neighbors.

Implications for Japanese Foreign Policy

Once described as the “preeminent party of the center,” the LDP under Koizumi changed into a political coalition of economic liberals and conservative nationalists. The Yasukuni issue should be understood in this light and in the context of the overall attempt by Japanese conservative nationalists to “normalize” Japan.

Domestically, their efforts extend into the relationship between the state and the war dead and into the area of education, including the history textbook issue. In foreign policy, these conservative nationalists would like to revise Article 9 of the Constitution, which would enable Japan to play a greater political and military role in international affairs. Accordingly, Japan has shown greater activism in the area of U.N. peacekeeping operations and anti-terrorism activities.³⁴ The attempt to reform the U.N. and gain a Security Council seat is another good example of Japan’s enhanced activism in the international arena.

How then does the Yasukuni controversy affect Japanese foreign policy? Despite many Japanese politicians’ belief that the Yasukuni issue is a domestic one—a problem of the heart—and therefore does not concern foreign relations,

33. The Office of Prime Minister, “*Koizumi Souri Interview*” [Interview with PM Koizumi], August 15, 2006, at <<http://www.kantei.go.jp/koizumispeech/2006/08/15interview.html>>.

34. “Japan’s Efforts on Peacebuilding—Toward the Consolidation of Peace and Nation-Building,” *Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, April 2007, at <<http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/un/pko/index.html>>.

in reality it has a significant effect on Japan's foreign policy. Herein lies the true importance of the Yasukuni issue.

In short, the Yasukuni controversy is unlikely to serve Japan's own foreign policy objectives and national interests. First, the issue is in discordance with other foreign policy objectives. In the effort to gain a permanent Security Council seat, the Yasukuni controversy worked against Japan's interest, as middle-level powers such as South Korea opposed the change and China, with its veto power, would have blocked it. The Yasukuni issue gave the Korean and Chinese governments greater legitimacy and added motivation to defeat Japan's U.N. reform initiative.

Second, the issue will continue to strain bilateral relations with both China and Korea. All three countries have been careful thus far not to let the issue negatively affect bilateral trade and cultural exchanges. However, politically the issue has harmed top level relations. Through what was known as the "Japan passing" strategy, both China and Korea refused to hold summit meetings with Japanese prime ministers on several occasions in the past until the issue was resolved. Given different perspectives on the issue between the mainstream segment of the LDP and Korea and China, the issue is unlikely to be resolved in the near future and hence will continue to strain bilateral relations.

And lastly, the issue will make the negative image of Japan persist in the minds of other East Asians. It must be regarded as a failure of postwar Japanese foreign policy that the large amount of foreign economic aid given to other East Asian countries has not resulted in a greatly improved regional image of Japan. The view of Japan as the aggressor during World War Two is still strong because of the persistence of historical issues, and the Yasukuni controversy only reconfirms and strengthens this stereotypical image of Japan. What this means is that while functional cooperation between regional countries is possible, "deeper" cooperation becomes harder to achieve.

In short, the Yasukuni issue represents the conservative nationalists' inability to re-orientate their country in the post-Cold War era so that Japan's desire to play a greater political role in international affairs could be welcomed by the international community, especially by the victims of Japan's past aggression. Instead, by focusing on revising Japan's past history, inculcating patriotic feelings among youth, and creating a strong, nationalistic Japan, the conservative nationalists have only managed to make it harder to pursue their own foreign policy goals.

Conclusions

This article has demonstrated that Japan does not speak in one voice on the Yasukuni issue. As shown by the Diet survey results, there are important differences between as well as within the LDP and the other political parties.

While the LDP values Yasukuni as the rightful site to mourn the war dead, the latter are more concerned with resolving the issue through creation of a non-religious memorial site—or by excluding the Class A war criminals from national memorial ceremonies.

The intensification of the Yasukuni issue represents the rise of conservative nationalism in Japanese politics. The key agendas concern constitutional reform, normalization of the state's relations with its war dead, and increasing the level of patriotism among the Japanese public, especially among youth, through educational reform and historical revision. These diverse factors constitute the different aspects of the "normalization" debate in Japanese politics. In foreign policy, this is manifested through a hardening attitude by the Japanese government on history issues, including the Yasukuni controversy.

Under the administration headed by Abe Shinzo, the history issues did not die away. Indeed, the contrary was the case, as the recent controversy centering on the comfort women issue and the issue of Japan's official apology clearly demonstrates. This is because Abe was one of the leading proponents of revisionism and conservative nationalism in Japanese politics. He has led the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform and demanded that history textbooks help form a national consciousness. Moreover, he has publicly expressed his views concerning the war criminals, stating that "they are not criminals in the eyes of domestic law."³⁵ This conservative, nationalistic stance on the history issues is a barrier to the goal of improving bilateral relations with China and Korea.

Although efforts will be made to resolve the Yasukuni issue, it is doubtful whether an agreeable solution can be reached in Japanese domestic politics and whether such a solution would be satisfactory to Korea and China. The new conservative nationalist politics will characterize Japanese politics and foreign policy in the future as Japan searches for its new, and appropriate, roles in international affairs. This means that the Yasukuni controversy is likely to stay for some time, and will continue to strain Japan's bilateral relations with China and Korea in the future.

35. "The Abe Enigma," *Time*, September 11, 2006, at <<http://205.188.238.109/time/asia/magazine/article/0,13673,501060918-1533514,00.html>>, accessed on October 10, 2006.