

Japan's New Right Flexes, Snubs US, at Yasukuni Shrine

A coalition of conservatives is putting Japanese rearmament and constitutional revision back on the agenda

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Asia's history wars are heating up again after 99 Japanese lawmakers visited the controversial Yasukuni Shrine on December 7 – the 80th anniversary of the day Japan attacked Pearl Harbor as well as American, British and Dutch forces across the Pacific, an assault that massively expanded World War II.

The visitors included not only lawmakers from the ruling conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), but also two right-wing parties – the Japan Innovation Party and Japan's National Democratic Party – that are newly empowered after the election for the Lower House of the Diet in November.

The mass visit – Asia Times has been unable to discover a larger recent visit to the shrine by politicians – makes clear how closely these two “opposition” parties are aligned with the LDP. That alignment goes far beyond an attachment to a revisionist, “Lost Cause” narrative about Japan's Pacific War.

As [Asia Times previously reported](#), the two parties are also bullish on beefing up Japan's armed forces and revising Japan's pacifist constitution. This gives the ruling party added impetus in these areas, both of which are contentious among their neighbors – who, predictably, complained about the visit.

The rising nationalism may well be homegrown. But there are also external factors in play. The expanded strength of conservatives in the Diet indicates that increasing numbers of ordinary Japanese – cautious of China's increasing assertiveness, fearful of North Korean missiles and irked by South Korea's continued stridency about Japan's historical misdeeds – support these trends.

All this suggests that deeper tensions are likely in the near future between Tokyo, on the one hand, and Beijing and Seoul on the other. These tensions could become explosive: Northeast Asia is engaged in an under-reported arms race, with all players adding such weapons as missiles, stealth fighters and aircraft carriers.

Those tensions are likely to further bog down Washington's efforts to get Seoul and Tokyo to operate together against Beijing in areas like the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. Indeed, unconfirmed Korean media reports say Tokyo is preparing economic retaliation against Seoul.

Moreover, the apparent snub aimed at the US suggests that Japanese nationalists are not as closely aligned with Washington – Tokyo's wartime nemesis but post-war ally – as the latter might hope. This explains the gleeful jeering in Chinese media and social media over the date of the visit.

Pearl Harbor day at Yasukuni Shrine

Yasukuni Shrine is seen by some simply as a Shinto site memorializing Japan's millions of war dead – who include not just soldiers and sailors but also civilians killed in fire and atomic bombings.

But others point to the Class-A war criminals who are also enshrined among them, and the shrine's museum, which promotes an imperialistic view of Japanese war-making.

The right-wing organization that organized the visit, "Diet Members' Group Who Say Let's Visit Yasukuni Shrine Together" is chaired by former deputy speaker of the House of Councilors, Hidehisa Otsuji.

It is the first time the parliamentary group has visited the shrine since the autumn festival in October 2019. The group usually visits the shrine in spring and autumn, and on August 15, the anniversary of the end of the Pacific War.

However, for the last two years, the group decided not to visit due to Covid-19. The purpose of this visit was ostensibly, "to ask the spirits of the war dead for protection from coronavirus."

The visit sparked complaints from China, which was invaded by Japan in 1937, and from Korea, which had been colonized by Japan from 1910 to 1945.

Referring to the Yasukuni visit, [Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said](#), "Rather than learning historical lessons, they only seek to revive the specter of militarism. The Japanese side should adopt a right attitude, deeply reflect upon the Japanese militarism's fascist atrocities and crimes against humanity and win trust from people around the world with concrete actions."

South Korean [Foreign Ministry spokesperson Choi Young-sam](#) expressed "deep concern and regret" over the facilities that "glorify" Japan's colonial past and invasions. Earlier, on October 17, the ministry made similar statements after Prime Minister Fumio Kishida sent an offering to the shrine.

What was surprising about the visit was not just the size of the lawmakers' delegation, and its multi-party makeup, but also the date: December 7. The date is the 80th anniversary of

the Japanese naval air strike on Pearl Harbor naval base that brought the United States into World War II.

While that attack was only one element in a superbly coordinated, mass Japanese offensive that near-simultaneously also hit British forces in then-Malaya, Dutch forces in the then-East Indies, and US forces in the Philippines, it is Pearl Harbor that has become enshrined in public memory.



US ships burn amid the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Image: Wikimedia Commons

Due to the time difference across such vast geographies, the attack on Pearl Harbor actually took place on December 8, Japan-time, but in the US it was December 7. The latter date has become enshrined in most histories.

The big question is whether the timing was a deliberate snub to the US, orchestrated by the growing radical revisionist right-wing elements in the Diet – or just (insensitive) business as usual.

Though the Barack Obama administration was critical of Japanese prime ministerial visits to the site, Washington has this time remained silent. There was no response on the US State Department's website, nor did the US Embassy in Japan – called by Asia Times – offer any comment.

Chinese media and social media had no such restraint. Outspoken [state-owned media Global Times](#) said the visit “spits on the US victory” in World War II.

Da Zhigang, director and research fellow of the Institute of Northeast Asian Studies at the Heilongjiang Provincial Academy of Social Sciences, told the Chinese newspaper that it was a “challenge” to the US.

Chinese social media users piled on, tagging the account of the US Embassy in China, asking, “You seen this? Global Times reported.

“Oh no, now the one who tags along stands up and slaps the US in the face?” wrote another Chinese netizen. “What are you gonna do big boss?”

Resurgent right wing

The LDP is a broad conservative church, and Prime Minister Fumio Kishida is widely considered a more middle-of-the-road figure than his two predecessors at the premiership, Yoshihide Suga and Shinzo Abe.

However, there are doubtless pressures pushing him further toward the right – pressures manifest on December 7.

Post-visit, Otsuji breezily told a press conference, “I am glad that I was able to visit the shrine for the first time in a long time.” But he also referred to Kishida, who has not been to Yasukuni since he took the national helm.

“I know he has a desire to visit the shrine,” Otsuji said. “I hope he will visit the shrine at the earliest opportunity.”

If he does, that will be a turnaround by a premier.

After the opprobrium that Abe caused by visiting the shrine in 2013, he did not go again for the rest of his term. That practice was followed by Suga. However, Abe made his personal feelings clear to all when he visited the shrine after resigning the premiership.

More broadly, over the last 20 years, a range of Japanese politicians and opinion leaders have steadily walked back early admissions of guilt and responsibility for World War II.

In July 2006, in a session of the Diet, Abe implied that the Class A War Criminals at Yasukuni weren’t really criminals at all and that a visit to Yasukuni was fine. In 2016, Suga made clear just before Abe’s visit to Pearl Harbor that the aim was “to pay respects to the war dead, not to offer an apology.”

Central in this attitude is the nationwide conservative lobby group Nippon Kagi (“Japan Conference”), which brings together influential members of society, such as media, business and politics. Otsuji is not just a member of the group; he has served on its board.

Among the aims of the group is gutting Article 9 of the constitution, which prohibits Japan from waging war, and allowing Japan to build a military capable of, and free to conduct, offensive operations.

While many in the United States would also like to see a more capable and less restrained Japanese military, they might be surprised to learn the animosity some members of Nippon Kaigi have toward the US-authored constitution, as well as its promotion of conservative, traditionalist gender and family values.

Since 2006, when Abe first became prime minister, “throwing off the shackles of the US,” has long been a goal of hard-right factions in the LDP. In 2012, the LDP created their own draft of a constitution to replace the current post-war version, which the majority of

Japanese still holds sacrosanct.

Nippon Kaigi also wants an educational system that will promote a distinctly Japanese identity. That aim has raised accusations of blatant revisionism regarding historical touchpoints including the Nanjing Massacre and “comfort women.”

For such conservatives, Pearl Harbor was not a sneak attack but a defensive action necessitated by the US and Europe denying Japan strategic resources. And at a time when much of Asia was colonized by Western imperialists, Tokyo painted its strike into Southeast Asia as a war of liberation.

Seen through a historical prism, there is no question that Japanese actions did, indeed, hasten the end of Western imperialism in Southeast Asia and India. However, this narrative overlooks Japanese prior colonization of Korea, and its awesomely destructive war in China.

Constitution in the cross hairs

Constitutional revision is not simply about defense. The LDP’s proposed new constitution, which includes an emergency powers act, would enable the prime minister to suspend civil rights and make laws during a state of emergency.

Legal scholar Lawrence Repeta wrote in his 2013 essay, “Japan’s Democracy at Risk – The LDP’s Ten Most Dangerous Proposals for Constitutional Change” that it would “reject the universality of human rights” and possibly end Japan’s post-war liberal democracy.

From 2009, Abe, who remains an LDP kingmaker as he heads the largest faction of the LDP, was head of an extremist think tank and lobby group, Sosei Nippon (“Create Japan”), comprised of LDP lawmakers and other conservatives. There is considerable overlap between Nihon Sosei and Diet Members’ “Group Who Say Let’s Visit Yasukuni Shrine Together.”

Former minister of justice Nagase Jinenm at a grand convention on constitutional revision, held by Sosei Nippon in 2012, declared, “The people’s sovereignty, basic human rights and pacifism — these three things date to the postwar regime imposed by MacArthur on Japan, therefore we have to get rid of them to make the constitution our own.”

At the same meeting, Tomomi Inada, a former minister of defense, proclaimed, “To protect the country, the people must shed their blood. Only Japan, which has dedicated itself to the imperial family for 2,600 years, is qualified to become a moral superpower.”

These kinds of comments, and the visit to Yasukuni, raise the eyebrows of scholars.

“One hopes that they went there to pray for the three million Japanese and some 15 million Asians sacrificed on the altar of ultra-nationalism in a reckless war initiated in 1931 by Japan’s ruling militarist and civilian leaders – not genuflecting at ground zero of the revisionist exculpatory and vindicating narrative of Japan’s wartime aggression,” said Jeff Kingston, an author and professor of Japanese studies.

Another scholar suggested that the visit was not out of context with those visits to war graves by Western politicians, whose forces have also fought colonial and expeditionary wars.

“They are signaling to conservative constituencies their respect for what in other countries would be regarded as a War Memorial site,” said Shaun O’Dwyer, an associate professor in the Faculty of Languages and Cultures at Kyushu University. “That does not mean they are genuflecting to any State Shinto ideology.”

But, he added, “It may be that a higher number of such conservative politicians embrace a ‘Lost Cause’ ideology of Japan’s war of 1937-45.”

Koichi Nakano, an expert on Japanese politics at Sophia University, was uncertain about the motive and date of the visit. It was hard to tell if it was a deliberate snub to the US, he said, noting that the Diet session had just opened the day before, meaning all parliamentarians were in Tokyo.

“I would say that there are not enough reasons to assume that it was a deliberate snub,” he continued. “They would easily do something like that against the Chinese or the Koreans, but they generally avoid antagonizing the Americans.”

As an example, he noted that the Yasukuni Museum’s display about Pearl Harbor was modified due to complaints from the US. But he also suggested that the December 7 visit was making up for the lack of a visit during the customary autumn festival that was made impossible due to Covid-19.

The latter point is germane. While there are high-profile visits every August 15, Yasukuni authorities prefer visits during the spring and autumn festivals, as they are not related to a single conflict. Yasukuni is a shrine for all Japanese war dead – not just those from the Pacific War.



The controversial Yasukuni Shrine – where war criminals are enshrined, but which conservative politicians feel compelled to visit – is an emotive touchstone for both the Japanese right and the country’s neighbors. Photo: Tom Coyner

Apology fatigue

Another scholar noted that even within Japan, Yasukuni polarizes opinion but external criticisms are driving a nationalist backlash.

“Yasukuni is divisive in Japan but there is a legitimate view that regardless of whether or not it is wholly representative, there is this question of, ‘Why can’t we go?’ – it should be the national leader’s choice to visit,” said Haruko Satoh, who teaches Japan’s relations with Asia at the Osaka School of International Public Policy.

Satoh is critical of Abe and points out that Kishida’s cabinet is not hard right with members from across a broad political spectrum. But she frets that Beijing and Seoul are – ironically – empowering Japanese nationalists.

“People like Abe and elements of the right-wing are more to do with restoring the imperial state and all that nationalism,” she said. “But there is also a reaction to Chinese and Koreans harping on these issues. There is apology fatigue.”

[Korean vernacular media KBS](#) reported this week that the LDP had chaired a committee to respond economically to South Korea’s actions, which include seizing the assets of Japanese firms to compensate those forced to labor during World War II. Asia Times has been unable to confirm this report.

Japan’s position is that hundreds of millions of dollars were paid in compensation to settle this and other issues in 1965 and that the Korean courts’ actions breach that agreement.

But beyond Korean-Japan economic squabbles, and beyond the domestic actions and aspirations of Japan’s hard right, real, region-relevant, political power dynamics are in play.

High-profile politicians have opened a national debate on what Japan’s stance should be toward the defense of Taiwan, which is fast becoming a regional flashpoint.

Regardless of the lack so far of constitutional revision, Japan is beefing up its self-defense forces with expeditionary assets, including marines and aircraft carriers – assets it has not held since 1945. Having given up on an Aegis-ashore missile defense system, Tokyo is mulling a first-strike capability against North Korea.

And this week, as Tokyo invited media to watch military drills in Hokkaido, Prime Minister Kishida addressed the Diet on the issue of raising the national defense budget. That followed the passage last month of a record supplementary defense budget.

In October, Kishida raised the possibility of doubling defense spending, customarily kept within 1% of GDP, to the NATO standard of 2%. With Japan the world’s third-largest economy and already a global Top-10 defense spender, that would be huge sum.

Amid these developments, Japanese nationalism and Tokyo’s increased defense spending “are being coalesced by China and Korea,” Satoh said. “If they keep doing this, they will make it happen, as they are inciting this unnecessary level of Japanese drive.”

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Featured image: The Yasukuni Shrine is a symbol of nationalism to many Japanese and one of aggression and abuse among its former and current adversaries. Image: Facebook

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