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JAMES KELLY

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James Kelly

Following the October 2017 Japanese election, the ruling coalition under the premiership of Shinzo Abe secured the supermajority necessary to start the process of amending the constitution, which currently prevents Japan from maintaining an official military. However, there are still considerable obstacles to overcome before this can be achieved, not least of which being the pressure from Japan's neighbours who still acutely remember the atrocities committed by the Japanese during the Second World War. This is especially pertinent given Japan's own problematic relationship with the war, typified by the presence and role which Yasukuni Shrine holds in Japanese society. This one holy site could well mean either the success or failure of Abe's constitution-al objectives.

Yasukuni is a Shinto shrine commemorating and housing the souls of those who have died for the Japanese nation – 2.5 million men, women, children and indeed animals in total. The controversy becomes apparent when 1000 of those commemorated were found guilty of war crimes by the Tokyo tribunal following the war. This controversy is only exacerbated by the presence of the “Yūshūkan” in the shrine complex. The Yūshūkan is a notorious war museum with a revisionist perspective on the war, creating a narrative whereby Japan went to war against its will with the aim of liberating Asia from Western imperialism. The shrine is considered an important national memorial, but more provocatively, as a rallying site for Japan's nationalist groups such as Nip-pon Kaigi and worse still the Uyoku Dantai, the far-right gangs.

Given the inflammatory aspects of the shrine, visits on the part of Japanese politicians – specifically prime ministers and cabinet members – strain diplomatic relations with China and South Korea. Despite this, the personal positive symbolic meaning attached to the shrine by conservative Japanese

politicians and the need to placate their nationalist support groups means that vis-its continue regardless of international denouncement.

The cycle of memory

Yasukuni is a physical monument to the constant thorn in East Asian relations: memory of the war. It is impossible to understand the politics of East Asia without acknowledging the impact the memory of the Second World War continues to have on the region. It touches on a myriad of issues in the region, ranging from the eu-phemistically labelled “comfort women” (Korean women forced into prostitution during the war) to the numerous territorial disputes Japan has with China, the Koreas, and Russia. As such, visits to Yasukuni exacerbate disputes and have the effect of negating apologies or attempts at negotiation made by the Japanese government. No matter how many acts of contrition are made, if a politician is seen paying respect to convicted war criminals their sincerity is inevitably brought into question.

The inability to escape this cycle of apology and offence is predominantly because memory of the war is used as political ammunition by politicians and pressure groups in Japan, China, and South Korea alike. In Japan, it is used domestically by conservative nationalist groups to emphasize pride in Japan’s past, countering the pacifism which has been predominant in Japanese politics since the war. In China and South Korea, the importance the war had on their creation as modern nation states means that it is deeply held in their national psyches, and as such can be used to muster nationalist feelings.

Thus, the region is stuck in a cycle with politics unable to escape the memory of a conflict which ended over 70 years ago. This back and forth narrative may help with the objectives of politicians, but as Pollmann points out, it has a destructive effect on peace and stability in the region by stifling communication and increasing the risk of strategic miscalculation.

The question arises then of just how to escape this cycle. Detoxifying Yasukuni shrine would be an excellent place to start.

Escaping the cycle

Aside from politicians ceasing to visit Yasukuni, which would be the simplest method of improving relations but would do nothing to negate the site acting as a hub for revisionist ultra-nationalists, two things can be done to detoxify

the shrine. First, a change in the dialogue surrounding the Shrine is necessary; and that will take efforts on both sides. It is necessary to alter discourse towards its socio-cultural importance as a national memorial and away from the legacy of militarism. Koga suggests that establishing transnational academic discussions on the shrine and having clearer public knowledge on the intention of political visits are needed in order to bridge the perception gap of what Yasukuni represents. Koga also submits that visits to a separate less controversial shrine in the complex, the Chinrei-sha, and timing visits to overlap with traditional religious festivals would also make trips by politicians more justified on cultural grounds. Although he himself admits it is a naive hope that these will have far reaching effects, the bottom up change in discourse surrounding the shrine should be considered progress in of itself.

Second, Yasukuni needs to disassociate itself from the Yūshūkan in order to legitimise the religious and social justifications of shrine visits. This would be the most practicable means of detoxifying the shrine as it would show that the Japanese are willing to make concessions on what is arguably the most controversial part of the shrine complex, whilst not tampering with the sanctity of the shrine itself. As the museum was closed between 1945 and 1985, there is even precedence for its removal.

Crucially though, any reforms made to Yasukuni would count for very little so long as the reliance on the war as a political rallying cry remains. For progress to be made South Korea, China, and Japan must have frank discussions with one another to escape the apology-offense loop which has strained international relations in the region for the past half century. It will ultimately be up to the governments of the three main powers of the region to decide whether political point scoring is more valuable than the peace and security of East Asia.

James Kelly
M.A. International Relations, 2nd semester
Rijksuniversiteit Groningen
Contact: j.h.kellycontact@gmail.com

