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Please, no more Yasukuni visits

BY CLYDE PRESTOWITZ

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WASHINGTON – Japan's top leaders are tempting fate. They are waving a red flag at the bulls. And they are doing so at just the wrong time.

On April 20 and 21, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Taro Aso and two other Cabinet members visited Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine. This was followed by a visit by 168 members of the Diet, mostly from Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Liberal Democratic Party.

The shrine unfortunately serves several conflicting purposes. In principle it is a memorial to the dead from all of Japan's wars — a kind of Arlington Cemetery in U.S. terms. But it also enshrines several former officials and soldiers who were convicted as Class A war criminals after World War II.

The shrine also has a museum of World War II, which portrays a highly nationalistic and even inflammatory version of the causes and course of the war. In addition, over the post war years, the shrine has become associated intellectually and emotionally with rightwing causes and thinking in Japan. Some of this thinking denies the inhuman treatment of Nanking, the involvement of the Imperial Japanese armed forces in a scheme to use a large number of Korean, Filipina, and other women in prostitution as so-called comfort women, and other wartime tragedies.

Because of this, the shrine and visits to it are not popular with countries like South Korea, China, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Australia that were occupied or in combat with Japan during the war. They see it as analogous to a scenario in which high-ranking Germans would make a pilgrimage to a shrine to the Nazis. Obviously, were such a shrine to exist and were Germans to visit it, there would be an enormous uproar in the countries that suffered and fought in the war against the Nazis.

Japanese officials, of course, argue that they are merely honoring the memory and service of the dead veterans. And no doubt, this is so in many cases. Nevertheless, no high ranking Japanese official can visit Yasukuni without sending the message, both to Japanese and to foreigners, that he or she sympathizes with the deniers and with the nationalistic rightwing sentiments. Indeed, such a visit hints at denial of Japan's numerous apologies for its role in World War II. Japanese often are exasperated that their opponents in the war have never fully accepted the Japanese apologies. But an important reason for this hesitating acceptance is the continued subtle denial

by the shrine visitors.

Visits at this moment are a particularly bad idea in view of the fact that Japan is engaged in a potentially explosive dispute with China over the control of the Senkaku islands, with South Korea over the control of the Takeshima islands, and with North Korea over its nuclear and warlike threats. Japan needs allies at this moment, not enemies.

Yet the shrine visits have enraged the South Koreans, who cancelled a visit to Japan by their foreign minister, and the Chinese whose Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement saying: “Only when the Japanese government faces history with the right attitude and can profoundly reflect on the history will it march toward the future and develop a friendly and cooperative relationship with its neighboring countries.”

Prime Minister Abe is engaged in a momentous effort to revitalize the Japanese economy and, more broadly, the whole Japanese nation. He has needed and gotten the cooperation of the G-20 and of his neighbors in South Korea, China and Southeast Asia in accepting a major devaluation of the yen. He has requested and received acceptance of Japan as a new partner in the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) free-trade-agreement negotiations. He has asked and is receiving major U.S. support with regard to North Korea’s threat of missiles and possible nuclear bombs.

Why, in this situation, would he (Abe didn’t visit the shrine but sent an offering of *sakaki* evergreen branches) and his lieutenants do something they knew would gratuitously insult and enrage the very people with whom they need to cooperate? Of course, a lot of it is domestic politics and perhaps certain allowances should be made for that. At least that is what Abe and his team are telling the diplomats of the United States and of the other countries involved. But it is dangerous domestic politics.

Over the years, the U.S. has never publicly objected to these visits. Privately, some American diplomats have suggested that they are not a good idea, but the Japanese politicians have always been able to rely on the certainty that Washington would hold its nose and keep quiet.

One reason that Washington has been able to keep quiet is that the American public has no idea of what Yasukuni means. If it did, these visits would blow the U.S.-Japan alliance completely out of the water.

Since there is always the chance that the American public will become better informed, it would be wise for Washington to stop holding its nose and perhaps have a good sneeze.

For the White House to be welcoming Japan into the TPP talks, flying B-2 bombers over the Korean Peninsula as a warning to North Korea, telling the Chinese to back off on the Senkakus and urging the Koreans to cooperate more with Japan while Japan’s top leaders visit Yasukuni is in a word — ridiculous. U.S. President Barack Obama ought to get the word to Abe that there should be no more Yasukuni visits on his (Obama’s) watch.

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