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Koizumi's Shrine Visit Fulfills Pledge, Complicates East Asian Relations

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On 15 August, under the close watch of the world, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited the Yasukuni Shrine on the anniversary of Japanese surrender in World War II. Although fulfilling a campaign pledge in 2001 to visit the shrine on the anniversary, the Prime Minister's actions may have come at a high political price. The visit has dampened the newly-emerged optimism surrounding relations between China and Japan that had grown from the meeting of their foreign ministers meeting at the recently held ASEAN conference.

Koizumi's motives

Koizumi has visited the shrine five times since he came to power in 2001 but never on 15 August. His visit this time to the politically sensitive shrine which honors Japan's 2.5 million war dead as well as 14 Class A war criminals convicted by the Allied tribunal was widely anticipated. On August 9, Koizumi announced in Nagasaki that his campaign promise of worshipping the Yasukuni Shrine on 15 August was still valid and he would honor his pledge. Koizumi's visit appealed to his conservative base and was seen by his supporters as a demonstration of Japan's ability to stand up to pressures from its neighbours, especially China.

Despite Koizumi's clear determination to visit the shrine, Japan's neighbors were still caught by surprise due to its politically sensitive timing. Prior to the visit, Beijing had done everything it could to try to prevent the visit from taking place. When speculation about Koizumi's possible visit to the shrine mounted, the People's Daily published a commentary, which on one hand encouraged the Japanese leader to cancel the planned visit in order to be remembered as a wise politician who can "act with courage and courageously change", and on the other hand sent a strong warning by saying that Koizumi "could be forever spurned by Asian people and be firmly nailed to the pole of historical shame" if he would insist making the homage. The Chinese ambassador to Japan went back to Beijing before the anticipated visit, which officials at the Foreign Ministry explained as a job reporting trip, but it was widely interpreted by the outside world as a preliminary warning against Koizumi's possible visit.

China Lashes Out at Koizumi's Visit

In the early morning of August 15, the visit took place and it triggered a strong diplomatic and public reaction in Beijing and Seoul. The Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing summoned the Japanese ambassador to China to express Beijing's strong indignation and

stern denunciation of Koizumi's visit. News and criticisms of the Japanese leader's action inundated the headlines of major Chinese media outlets. The Chinese Foreign Ministry stated that Koizumi's visit "challenged international justice and trampled human conscience".

A commentary published by Xinhua, China's state news agency argued that the Japanese leader's behavior once again seriously hurt the feelings of Asians who were victimized by Japan's past military atrocities. The same article also refuted Koizumi's justification for making the trip to the Yasukuni Shrine by arguing that Koizumi as a state leader does not enjoy the personal freedom to worship at the shrine, that the visit is not a purely Japanese domestic matter, and that the visit is not conducive to peace.

The Shrine Issue to Continue to Haunt Sino-Japanese Ties

The outrage from Beijing was not solely aimed at the incumbent Japanese Prime Minister. It was also probably engineered to be a warning for the next possible leader of the LDP Shinzo Abe. Although Koizumi probably has little to worry about the impact of his shrine visits on his legacy, the issues surrounding the shrine will be an enormous challenge for his successor to deal with.

Disputes between Japan and China over the past few years, most notably over the Yasukuni Shrine, have not only chilled contact and communication between the highest echelons of the leadership of the two countries, but it has also worsened public perceptions in the two countries towards each other.

Japan's Yomiuri Shimbun revealed in its opinion poll last month that about two-thirds of the polled Japanese were of the opinion that they can not trust China. The newspaper also noted that the increase in negative perceptions of China appeared to be related to China's unrelenting opposition to Koizumi's visits to the shrine. Other polls have revealed that a majority of Japanese – including the business community and the media – do not support the visits to the Yasukuni Shrine by top state leaders. When considered together, the results of the two sets of surveys gives the impression that most Japanese people disagree with their leaders visiting the shrine but they are also resentful when foreigners criticize their leaders' actions.

This paradox essentially means that Japanese politicians will have significant space for political maneuvering. Foreign policy issues, at least in the case of official visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, usually do not concern the direct personal interests of the public. In addition, there is still a significant number of the public who are sympathetic or supportive of the visits. Thus, future Japanese leaders, if they happen to be pro-visit, will continue to face some pressure from the society, but not in a politically threatening fashion.

With regard to China, a Sino-Japanese joint survey revealed in early August that nearly 57 percent of the Chinese polled said that they had a bad impression of Japan. The issue of history and visits by Japanese leaders to the Yasukuni Shrine were cited to be the two most significant factors affecting the Chinese public's perception of Japan. Koizumi's visit this time certainly has made the situation worse. In the past years, under the strong pressure of surging nationalism, Beijing has had to maintain an uncompromising position on the shrine issue. To react in a more measured manner may not be an option for the Chinese government if one considers the resentment generated when the government did suppress protest activities in response to Koizumi's shrine visit. Thus, in the foreseeable future, China will not be able

to adopt any more flexible stance on the history and shrine issues.

So, the question eventually boils down to whether Koizumi's successor will be able to depart drastically from his predecessor's hard-line.

Judging from available evidence, it is unlikely that Shinzo Abe, the most likely new Prime Minister in September, will reverse Koizumi's hawkish line. Mr. Abe is currently the Chief Cabinet Secretary and has been known for his sympathy of and support for Koizumi's visits to the shrine – according to reports, Abe made a secret homage of the Yasukuni Shrine in April. So far, Mr. Abe has tried to dodge questions on whether or not he will pay visits to the shrine if he wins the September election. But his strategy of evasion will not last long into his tenure as Japan's Prime Minister. Unfortunately, steps short of ending the visits will undoubtedly continue to irritate Beijing.

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