Beware
the Tomb of
the Known Soldier

By Jennifer Lind

For many of Japan’s neighbors, Yasukuni Shrine is the history problem that simply won’t go away. At a time when the region is already troubled by lingering maritime disputes that are based on competing versions of history, the announcement by newly-elected Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe that he might consider visiting the shrine has reignited controversy.

Jennifer Lind explores the ongoing obstacle to reconciliation represented by Yasukuni.
WHEN US PRESIDENT Barack Obama lays a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery, or when French President François Hollande does the same at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, they elicit bowed heads and solemn contemplation. Yet when Japanese leaders visit Tokyo’s Yasukuni Shrine to honor the country’s war dead, controversy rolls East Asia. Australian, Chinese, Korean and other leaders denounce the act as disrespectful to their World War II suffering; people boycott Japanese goods; protestors swarm onto streets. Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe suggested ahead of his election last December that he planned to visit the shrine. Abe and other Japanese conservatives view it as an important place to pay respects to the men who gave their lives to protect Japan. But a visit to Yasukuni at this time would be both dangerous and self-defeating. China and Japan already have tense relations. While the actions and choices of Japanese leaders have contributed to East Asia’s tangled historical grievances, the problem is far more complex. Japanese leaders have at times made efforts to acknowledge and atone for the past, and such efforts should be neither dismissed nor forgotten. Politicians in neighboring countries, meanwhile, appear less interested in resolving history issues than they do in flogging Japan for domestic political gain. Nonetheless, rather than fix the blame, so the saying goes, fix the problem: and there are steps Tokyo might take to improve Japan’s foreign policy position. A Yasukuni visit is not one of them.

HANDLE THE PAST WITH CARE

Commemoration is always a fraught enterprise. Domestically, rival groups compete fiercely over whom or what gets remembered, and how. In the United States, for every John F. Kennedy Square or George Washington Elementary School, there were several groups who competed to have a different name etched onto the brass plaque. And for every monument or museum built, groups struggle over interpretation. For example, as Philadelphians planned their Liberty Bell memorial, they struggled over how — and whether — that memorial would represent the slavery-interwoven history of the American founding fathers.1

In addition to domestic battles, commemoration can have international political ramifications.2 A freedom fighter in one country may be seen as a terrorist in another — such as, for example, Dalal Mughrabi, whose 1978 attack against Israel killed 38 people, including 13 children. Israelis reacted with disgust and outrage when in 2010 Palestinians dedicated Dalal Mughrabi Square, praising her as “a fighter who fought for the liberation of her own land.”3 In Estonia, when the country decided to move a Soviet-erected statue of a World War II Soviet soldier to an obscure place, the Russians reacted with fury, lambasting Estonia’s “blasphemous attitude towards the memory of those who struggled against fascism.”4 Estonia suffered waves of cyber attacks against its state websites, attacks attributed to the Russians.5

Because commemoration is fraught both at home and abroad, countries at times find it useful to view the past through a soft-focus lens. Scholar Benedict Anderson, in his seminal book Imagined Communities, discussed how a “Tomb of an Unknown Soldier” makes citizens feel connected. The vagueness of the memorial serves another important purpose: citizens can project memories and mourning into the tomb, picturing whomever soldier they wish to honor. Foreigners, even former adversaries, can see the occupant in the manner most agreeable to them.

Another way to achieve this palliative vagueness is through greater inclusiveness of victims. Vladimir Putin gave a speech in the forest at Katyn, the site of a 1940 Soviet massacre of more than 20,000 Polish officers. “We bow our heads to those who bravely met death here,” Putin said. “In this ground lay Soviet citizens, burnt in the fire of the Stalinist repression of the 1930s; Polish officers, shot on secret orders; soldiers of the Red Army, executed by the Nazis.”6 Putin’s mourning of the Polish officers offered a gesture of reconciliation to Poland, which has long fumed at Soviet denials of the event. His inclusion of Russian suffering made his gesture to Poland more palatable to audiences back home.

The strategy of the soft-focus lens also eased German disquiet created by Britain’s new memorial to Strategic Bomber Command. The memorial, dedicated last summer, honors the more than 55,000 airmen who died in the World War II bombing raids over Germany. Winston Churchill declares from its marble walls: “The fighters are our salvation, but the bombers alone provide the means of victory.” Germany — today, of course,
Britain’s NATO and EU partner — objected to the memorial: the bombings had destroyed German cities and incinerated hundreds of thousands of civilians. The British agreed to add an inscription: “This memorial also commemorates those of all nations who lost their lives in the bombing of 1939-1945.” Though the monument’s focus remains the airmen who stand proudly at its center, the inscription softens the memorial in the eyes of Britain’s World War II adversaries. It can be their place too.

THE TOMB OF THE KNOWN SOLDIER

For many years after World War II, Yasukuni Shrine enjoyed at least at some of this gentle ambiguity. The shrine, to be sure, was controversial: US occupation officials, viewing it as linked to emperor worship and imperialism, had stripped it of its national funding. In 1953, Japanese officials suggested to a touring US Vice-President Richard Nixon that he visit Yasukuni; he refused when he learned its history. Many of Japan’s own critics of the shrine object to prime-ministerial visits there as a violation of the separation of religion and state. Yasukuni, then, was never devoid of controversy.

Nevertheless, the shrine, the name of which means “peaceful country,” was the final spiritual resting place of Japan’s 2.5 million war dead. As seen through the eyes of the politically powerful Japan War Bereaved Families’ Association, and many other Japanese as well, Yasukuni was the proper place to shed tears for brave boys who had paid the ultimate price to protect their country from what the Japanese saw as the grave threat of Western colonization.

Regional outrage over the shrine began when its ambiguity ended: in 1978, Yasukuni became a Tomb of the Known Soldier. That year, the souls of 14 men, convicted as “Class-A” war criminals in the Tokyo Trials, were enshrined there. The 14 men included Hideki Tojo, the wartime prime minister, and Iwane Matsui, the commanding officer of the Japanese force responsible for the Nanjing Massacre. Class-A crimes were a new category, “crimes against peace.” The Tokyo trials that set down these verdicts were, and remain, highly fraught in Japan. Many people view them as puppet trials carrying out victor’s justice, point to their rampant procedural flaws and rail against the hypocrisy that leaders of other countries were not held accountable for similar or even identical actions. One Japanese person who held this view was the Yasukuni head priest Matsuda Nagayoshi, a Navy lieutenant commander during the war, who in 1978 made the decision to go against precedent and enshrine the 14 men at Yasukuni.

In 1985, on the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II, it was this Yasukuni—which honored 14 men convicted as war criminals—that Yasuda Nakasone visited, clad in formal mourning dress, in his official capacity as prime minister. Nakasone said, “I did not go to pray for Tojo. My younger brother died during the war and his spirit lives there. I went to meet my brother.”

Decades later, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi echoed a similar theme when he visited. “I do not go to Yasukuni to pay my respects to specific people,” he said. “There are soldiers who suffered during the war and there are those who did not go to war but still died. We should offer sincere condolences to those victims. This is our country’s culture.” Koizumi emphasized, “I do not go to Yasukuni to pay my respects to Class-A war criminals. Class-A war criminals were punished, taking responsibility for the war. There are two different issues here.”

However, after 1978, it was simply not possible for Nakasone to pay respects to his brother, or for Koizumi to honor the fallen, without also honoring the architects of Japanese aggression and atrocities. Japan’s Emperor Hirohito ceased visiting Yasukuni after 1978 for this reason. Nakasone’s 1985 visit was particularly troubling today—because he was promoting a more assertive national security posture. In the 1980s, a Soviet military buildup in the Pacific threatened Japan, and Nakasone wanted to respond, within the US-Japan alliance, by mobilizing his nation spiritually as well as militarily. He urged greater patriotism, calling for a “final accounting” about the war. He and other conservatives sought changes in history textbooks that dismayed liberals at home and, a few years before, sparked crises with Japan’s neighbors. Nakasone also sought to increase the defense budget and revise Japan’s “peace constitution” to permit greater military activism. From the outset, Asia worried about Japan’s conservative concoction of nationalistic education, higher defense spending, and increased military participation. The dash of Tojo, however, was too much: the region recoiled in protest.

After the diplomatic imbroglio triggered by his visit, Nakasone realized that acknowledging Japan’s past was essential to achieving his foreign-policy goals. Although he had planned a second trip to Yasukuni for a fall festival, he announced he would not visit. Chief Cabinet Secretary Masaharu Gotoda explained that the prime minister had decided to abstain out of “consideration of the feelings of the peoples of neighboring countries.” (The accommodation of the neighbors required snubbing an influential domestic constituency. The Bereaved Families Association registered its displeasure by withdrawing 160,000 of its members from Nakasone’s Liberal Democratic Party.)

Nakasone also provided leadership on the issue of the boundaries between politically acceptable and unacceptable speech about Japan’s past: he fired a cabinet minister who denied wartime atrocities and antagonized Japan’s neighbors. Furthermore, Nakasone also issued an apology in the United Nations in October 1985. He said: “Since the end of that war, Japan has profoundly regretted the ultra-nationalism and militarism it unleashed, and the untold suffering the war inflicted upon peoples around the world and, indeed, upon its own people.” He added that, “having suffered the scourge of war and the atomic bomb, the Japanese people will never again permit the revival of militarism on their soil.”

A visit to Yasukuni today would be as unhelpful to Abe’s agenda as it was to Nakasone’s. As Japan’s strategic competition with China is intensifying, its conservatives favor shedding pacific taboos and embracing a more assertive diplo-
matic and defense posture. Many of these taboos have already gone by the wayside; for example, Japan’s Defense Agency, long relegated to inferior status in the government so as to minimize the military’s influence in politics, was in 2007 upgraded to Defense Ministry. But conservatives want to shed the constraints that linger. Tokyo is relaxing its ban against weapons exports, and its leaders talk more openly about collective security (anathema during the Cold War). Many conservatives also advocate revision of the Japanese “peace constitution” in order to provide a more solid legal framework for greater Japanese activism in international peacekeeping (and, possibly, for conflicts in the East China Sea).

SOLVING THE YASUKUNI DILEMMA

As Japan’s conservatives pursue this agenda, how should they approach the past? As Rowan Moore mused regarding the challenge of commemorating Britain’s Strategic Bomber Command, it is a difficult thing “to recognize at once the courage and loss of airmen, and the awfulness of the thing they were told to do.”15 How might Japan honor its war dead — satisfying an important human need in the Japanese people — without alienating and alarming its neighbors?

One failed approach has been to tinker at the margins of the problem. Perhaps, thought various prime ministers, they could avoid censure by visiting the shrine not on the emotionally charged date of Japan’s World War II surrender (August 15), but on a different date in August, or in April. Perhaps they could softlen the visit by avoiding Shinto rituals: by offering flowers instead of the sacred tree branch, and bowing in lieu of the ritual clapping. Or perhaps they could declare their visit unofficial, that they weren’t visiting as a family of spirits that cannot be separated.

If vagueness is the answer, and Yasukuni can never again be made vague, there is another Tokyo site that fills the bill. Japan already has a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery in Tokyo commemorates and houses the remains of more than 300,000 unidentified soldiers and civilians who died in the chaos of World War II. The Japanese government created the cemetery in 1959 partly in response to a place where Japan, its allies and its victims might pay respects together.16 Japanese leaders have indeed visited there. Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda went in 2008, and Koizumi — though he visited Yasukuni on different days as part of the “tinkering” approach described above — went to Chidorigafuchi on August 15.

But this solution seems to have been tried and found wanting. “Chidorigafuchi greets few mourners, and covers in the shadow of tall buildings constructed on its perimeters,” scholar Ann Saphir has written. She notes that the place “is abstract, cold, and lacking in symbolism of mourning or national memories.”17 Forty years after this cemetery’s creation, the problem of Yasukuni remains.

Another solution is to construct a new memorial, one that is more inclusive in its commemoration, and is free from the taint of men viewed by others as war criminals. This idea has been proposed and explored over the years by several Japanese intellectuals and leaders. Koizumi discussed the idea with South Korean president Kim Dae-jung, and subsequently created an advisory panel to study the issue. The panel recommended building a new memorial, because, as stated in its final report, “Japan has not sufficiently sent its messages home and abroad about its pre-war behavior regarding peace and war, and its post-war activities for international peace.”18

Japanese conservatives may still decide to visit Yasukuni. After all, American conservatives recoiled at then Democratic presidential candidate (now US Secretary of State) John Kerry’s off-hand line about a “global test” — namely, that US foreign policy-making might be informed by the views of America’s allies and partners. Japanese conservatives might similarly reject the idea that others might have a say in whom Japan honors and where. Some Japanese conservatives, writes Brad Glosserman, view a proposed new memorial “as capitulation to the wishes of other nations” and “denounce such interference in Japan’s sovereignty.”19 Perhaps such leaders would reject the politically correct new digs and journey to Yasukuni to show that they represent the Real Japan, just as American conservatives today claim to speak for “traditional Americans.”

But visits to Yasukuni, and the jaw-dropping denials sometimes uttered by Japanese leaders, are dangerous during this era of growing Sino-Japanese tension. Moreover, visits to Yasukuni hurt the very agenda that Japan’s conservatives want to pursue. Focusing attention on Japan’s human rights violations in the past distracts regional and world attention from China’s threats and human rights violations in the present. They alienate Japan from countries that also worry about China and North Korea, most importantly South Korea.

Critics might argue that leaders in Seoul will continue to flog Japan for domestic political gain regardless — as is clear from last summer, when then President Lee Myung-bak demanded another Japanese apology. But the calculus of those leaders can change. It can change depending on the extent to which co-operation with Japan grows more valuable (namely, in response to growing Chinese aggressiveness in the region).

And it can change depending on the extent to which Tokyo is willing to remember its past in ways compatible with the South Korean mindset. Indeed, when former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung discussed the idea of a new memorial in Japan with Koizumi, Kim said he would be happy to pay respects at a Japanese war memorial that did not commemorate war criminals.

In 1985, when Nakasone announced he would not repeat his visit to the shrine, it set an important precedent respected by subsequent Japanese leaders. It was Koizumi’s repeated visits, during his 2001-2006 rule, that reignited the Yasukuni problem in Japan’s foreign relations. After Koizumi, prime ministers returned to the pattern of avoiding the shrine — including Shinzo Abe, during his first stint in the role from 2006-2007, — reportedly out of deference to healthy Japan-China relations. For the sake of calm in East Asia, and for the betterment of Japan’s own foreign relations, one can only hope he follows Nakasone’s, and his own, precedent, and keeps his morning coat in the closet.

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17 Ibid.