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Japan takes a reckless gamble

By Senan Fox

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's surprise visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo on December 26, 2013 is certain to exacerbate already fraught relations between Japan and some of its neighbors, in particular China and South Korea.

Abe, leader of the right-wing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), entered office in December 2012 on a platform of economic revitalization ("Abenomics"), the revision of Japan's pacifist post-war constitution, and a strong defense posture against China and North Korea.

His attendance at Yasukuni marked his first year in office, and has drawn strong condemnation from Beijing, Seoul, and Taipei. Russia has also expressed concern. The United States, Japan's most important ally, has taken the unprecedented step of criticizing the visit, stating that it is "disappointed" by Abe's action because it is likely to "exacerbate tensions".

As such, the issue has become a potential source of friction between Tokyo and Washington which Beijing could benefit from.

The affair has also strengthened the arguments of nationalistic hardliners in China and South Korea, who have advocated a strong line against Japan vis-a-vis their respective bilateral disagreements including the Senkaku Islands (the Diaoyu in Chinese) and the Takeshima (Dokdo in Korean) disputes. In addition, Abe's visit has also, at least temporarily, deadlocked already

frustrated regional efforts to encourage high-level talks and summits between the three countries in 2014.

Calls for a joint South Korea-Japan approach to China's unilateral demarcation of an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea in November have likewise been jettisoned.

The last time the Yasukuni shrine hit the headlines in a big way was in the 2001 to 2006 period when Japan's relations with Beijing and Seoul experienced a deep freeze as a result of the then prime minister Junichiro Koizumi's repeated trips to the shrine.

Abe's recent action marks a worrying departure from a tacit understanding with neighboring states that Japanese leaders would not visit Yasukuni in the interest of stable and mutually beneficial ties. He has claimed that his December 26 attendance was in a personal capacity and was for the purpose of commemorating the country's war dead and promoting peace.

Well-known for his conservative and nationalistic views, Abe had previously served as prime minister from 2006 to 2007. At that time, his ambiguous assurance to handle the shrine issue "appropriately" by ultimately not visiting Yasukuni played an instrumental role in improving severely damaged ties with China and South Korea.

Given the outcry and foreign policy fall-out regarding his recent action, one may wonder what he had to benefit from December's shrine visit. At the very least, it indicated the seriousness of Abe's stated public regret in 2012 over his earlier abstentions some six years earlier.

Most pertinently, his decision to go to the Yasukuni shrine on December 26 was a calculated political gamble. In a period of already stagnant ties with Beijing and Seoul, the Japanese PM must have reasoned that there was little to lose externally and much to gain on the domestic front.

If one accepts this argument then Abe's visit was aimed at winning political support within the Japanese Diet (parliament) and amongst the Japanese public as he attempts to push through controversial economic and defense reforms.

While damaging to the country's regional relationships, the trip could strengthen Abe's domestic political position, especially amongst conservatives and hardliners. Heretofore, the prime minister has faced criticism from nationalists for being too focused on "Abenomics", and on being too soft on China and South Korea.

For nationalists, formal attendance at the shrine symbolizes a patriotic defiance against outside interference in a matter, which many Japanese regard as private and religious. The Liberal Democratic Party of Japan leader has probably calculated that the political opprobrium on the world stage surrounding the visit will be temporary but with longer lasting domestic benefits one year into office.

Respected Asia scholar professor Jeff Kingston has suggested, in an interview with the BBC, that Abe's actions were a deliberate provocation of China aimed at goading Beijing into an angry response. Such an outcome would heighten the Japanese public's sense of threat, and

consequently enhance support for the nationalistic leader's plans to revise his country's constitution.

If this appraisal is correct then the Chinese have not, as yet, taken the bait. In ways similar to when former PM Koizumi first visited Yasukuni in August 2001, Beijing has confined its protests to harsh condemnations via its diplomats and the state media. As noted in the international media by security expert, Zhang Baohui, on domestic and strategic grounds, the Chinese authorities have opted to stick to a public denunciation of Abe with the possibility of stepping up patrols around the disputed islands in the East China Sea.

Responding too harshly could pressure the US to make public commitments to its ally in Tokyo while permitting public demonstrations in China could undermine public order and stability within the country. For these reasons, Beijing may take a wait and see approach, and hope that Abe's visit was a one-off miscalculated gesture. In order to prevent a recurrence of potentially destabilizing mass protests in Chinese cities, the communist authorities have placed restrictions on public demonstrations in the country's urban centers and around Japan's embassy and consulates.

Repeated visits and perceived humiliations by Abe however could further marginalize the pragmatists and moderates in China and South Korea. This would increase the chances of a more serious diplomatic and public downturn with security ramifications for the incendiary East China Sea and Takeshima (Dokdo) disputes, as well as implications for the tremendous business ties between the world's second- and third-largest economies. While drawing domestic political rewards for Abe, it is difficult to see how the Yasukuni visit has strengthened his country's security or enhanced its reputation.

With the East China Sea tensions now more volatile and intractable than ever, the US and Russia angered, and the peoples of China, South Korea, and Taiwan deploring the LDP leader's actions, the possibilities of a much-needed public rapprochement between the neighbors looks more remote than ever.

Politicians advocating a hardline are likely to benefit while moderates are likely to suffer in terms of public approval. As such, 2014 looks set to be yet another year where the peace and prosperity of Northeast Asia remains hostage to history and domestic politics.