



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on April 25, 2013

Visits to Japan's War Memorial Shrine Irk Asian Neighbors

Visits made by several members of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's cabinet to the [Yasukuni Shrine](#) (shown) in Tokyo this past weekend proved to be highly controversial this week, as leaders in other Asian nations criticized the visits because the remains of persons convicted by Allied military tribunals as war criminals are enshrined there.



The Shinto shrine, dedicated to those who lost their lives while serving Japan, lists the names of 2,466,532 men, women, and children who died defending the Japanese Empire from the Boshin War of 1867 through World War II. The controversy stems from the enshrinement at Yasukuni of 1,068 Class-B and Class-C war criminals and 14 Class-A war criminals who were executed and sentenced to death by Allied military tribunals. Since the sole requirement for being enshrined there is to have died in the service of the Empire of Japan, the priesthood that directs the shrine did not exclude anyone based on their conviction for crimes.

Three Cabinet members, including Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso, visited the shrine over the weekend, while a group of 168 lawmakers paid their respects there on Tuesday.

The visits to the shrine were strongly criticized by spokesmen from China and South Korea, whose Foreign Ministry summoned Japan's Ambassador to South Korea Koro Bessho, reported [Japan Times](#). The objection from Seoul was made in response to a statement from Prime Minister Abe, who said "my ministers will not yield to any kind of intimidation" and are free to "pay respects and worship the precious souls of the war dead."

Leaders in South Korea and other Asian nations, including China, also took issue with Abe's assertion that what constitutes "aggression" depends on the point of view of individual countries, as there is no internationally fixed definition, noted the *Times*.

Seoul's First Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kyou Hyun told Ambassador Bessho that South Korea "strongly expresses regrets over Japanese government and political leaders' distorted view of the history and anachronistic words and deeds," South Korea's Yonhap News Agency reported.

"It can never be understood how Japanese society puts such a high value on honesty and trust while closing eye and ear to the history of aggression and colonial rule," Kim stated.



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Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said that he saw no problem with people paying respect to those who sacrificed their lives for the country, reported the *Times*. "Japan, as a nation responsible for peace and prosperity of the region, will aim to strengthen ties with South Korea and China from a broad perspective," said Suga. "South Korea and China are Japan's important neighbors and Japan does not wish that its ties with them will be affected."

But South Korean President Park Geun Hye made a statement on April 24 in a meeting with managing editors of media organizations reported by Yonhap News Agency:

Relations between South Korea and Japan are very important in terms of security and economy, but having a different recognition of the past history will make the wounds of the past history worse and make it difficult for the two countries to move in a future-oriented way.

Yonhap also quoted from a statement made April 25 by Hwang Woo Yea, chairman of South Korea's Saenuri Party, "Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's remarks that he was doubtful of the exact definition of 'aggression' not only pervert the fundamental basis of the U.N. international peace regime, but also revive the specter of militarism. It just astonishes us."

Hwang also called for a UN resolution condemning Japan's "history perceptions."

The controversy stemming from the Japanese visits to the shrine and Prime Minister Abe's subsequent statements come during a time of more substantive tensions between Japan and China — [a dispute over possession of a group of islands](#) in the East China Sea known as the Senkaku in Japan, the Tiaoyutai Islands in Taiwan, and the Diaoyu in China.

The United States occupied the islands during World War II and turned them over to Japan in 1971. However, both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC) each claim sovereignty over the islands. They are included within the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan, which would require the United States to assist Japan if they were invaded by another nation.

In a speech to Japan's parliament on April 24, Prime Minister Abe issued a stern warning against any attempt by the Chinese to land on the islands, following a report from Japan's coast guard that eight Chinese patrol ships had entered waters near the islands. "We would take decisive action against any attempt to enter our territorial waters and to land," Abe was quoted in the *Irish Times* as saying. "It would be natural for us to expel by force the Chinese if they were to make a landing."

Abe said that for Japan to ignore the Chinese incursions would encourage the conflict to escalate, adding: "The correct approach is to respond physically to show our strong will that we will absolutely not let them make land."

Making a countering demand, China's ambassador to Japan, Cheng Yonghua, protested Japan's intrusion into waters around the islands and demanded that all Japanese ships leave the waters immediately, according to a report by the Chinese state news agency Xinhua.

The third party in the dispute, Taiwan (ROC) also sounded in, noted the Taiwan-based [China Post](#). "We hope all sides will exercise restraint" and not engage in actions that will raise tensions in the region, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Anna Kao said.

Kao also reiterated Taiwan's sovereignty over the islands, said the *Post*.

The United States did not escape controversy in the Asian sphere, either. When Japan announced on April 23 that it would be conducting joint military drills with the United States off the coast of California



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— and that the drills involved the recapture of an isolated, unspecified island — the Chinese government interpreted the drills as preparation of a U.S.-Japanese defense of the disputed islands in the East China Sea.

According to Reuters, China's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Hua Chunying, made the following statement at a regular news briefing when asked by reporters to comment on the drills:

For any related provocative actions, the Chinese government will maintain a resolute response. We have always upheld the same stance on issues related to the Diaoyu Islands: to appropriately solve, manage and control the relevant issues through bilateral dialogue and negotiations.

Amidst these tense verbal exchanges between China and Japan, the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, left China on April 25 and made a stop at Yokota Air Base, a U.S. Air Force base located west of Tokyo.

[The Armed Forces Press Service](#) reported that Dempsey used a sports analogy to describe the shift of American interest to Asia as “skating to where the puck is going.”

Dempsey also said that re-balancing the focus of U.S. interests doesn't mean pulling U.S. troops from other places to flood the Pacific. The military will add “intellectual bandwidth” to its activities here and “pay more attention, do more engagements at every level ... and send our best quality — not only human capital, but also some of our best equipment,” he said.

“Whatever we do, we'll stay true to our important alliances in the region while trying to build relationships with others,” said Dempsey. “That was my message in China, by the way.”

When questioned about U.S. position on the dispute over the Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands, Dempsey replied, “We are postured, with our Japanese allies by the way, in order to protect our citizens, their citizens, our facilities and their facilities. And that will remain the case.”



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