

The issue of visits to Yasukuni Shrine and the 14 Class-A war criminals enshrined there has continued to dominate and determine regional politics for the past year, yet the leadership of the LDP believes it has no place in the debate for the forthcoming party leadership election. The LDP consistently downplays the importance of the Yasukuni issue, regardless of its continuing negative impact on political relations between Japan and its neighbours - primarily China and South Korea. So why do the visits continue, and why are they off the agenda for the leadership debate?

Two front runners for Koizumi's job, Foreign Minister Aso Taro and Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe Shinzo, have both consistently expressed approval over Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni and have each indicated they would continue visits if they win September's election. Moreover, they both join Koizumi in denying that the issue needs to be discussed in the run-up to the election, claiming the debate would have a negative impact. "Making Yasukuni a topic in the party presidential election will make the issue an even bigger problem diplomatically and politically. It is better not to do so," said Abe earlier this year, attributing domestic interest in the topic to the Chinese government. "Not once have I thought that Yasukuni should be a point of contention," echoed Aso days later.

This is not to say there isn't dissent within the LDP. Former party vice-president Yamasaki Takafu, for one, has noted relations with other Asian nations "are at an impasse" and adopted a conciliatory stance, stressing the need to repair relations with China and Korea. In contrast to Aso and Abe's apparent belief that the issue will simply go away if ignored, Yamasaki fears there is a danger that the problem will simply become graver. But his is a minority voice.

The justification offered by those who defend visits to Yasukuni rests on two simple assumptions: that the visits honor the war dead, not war criminals; and that they are a domestic, not international, issue. As such, they don't concern Japan's neighbors and any criticism from other nations amounts to interference in Japan's internal affairs. Case closed.

Well, maybe not.

The facts surrounding Koizumi's annual visits are well known. He goes to "pay respect" to those "who died for the country." He refuses to discuss

the war criminals on the shrine's rolls and pleads ignorance to the outrage the visits provoke in China and Korea. But in attending, he aligns himself and the government with an ideology that is deeply disturbing. Essays on the shrine's official website discuss the "Greater East Asian War" (WWII) at length and contain numerous references to the deaths of Japanese innocents, but make no acknowledgment of any wrongdoing on Japan's part. The military aggression prior to and during WWII is presented as an unfortunate necessity: "[To] maintain the independence and peace of the nation and for the prosperity of all of Asia, Japan was forced into conflict." Reference is also made to the "1,068 martyrs of Showa who were cruelly and unjustly tried as war criminals by a sham-like tribunal of the Allied forces."

The shrine's grounds are also home to the Yushukan, a museum of modern Japanese history. Unsurprisingly, displays in the Yushukan also consistently portray Japan as a victim of WWII, not an aggressor. The museum focuses on suicide attacks, denies or ignores atrocities such as the Nanking massacre, and memorializes imperial Japan's militarism - a Zero fighter, a suicide torpedo and a suicide rocket-plane are prominently displayed. Aso stated last year "the exhibition merely shows what happened in those days." For his part, Abe added recently that "the criticism that the Yasukuni visits are linked to militarism is based on a misunderstanding." A misunderstanding? Where then is Yasukuni's acknowledgment that millions died needlessly under Japan's brutal occupying forces?

Given the flagrant distortions of historical reality presented by Yasukuni, Japanese politicians should be striving to distance themselves from such revisionist right-wing propaganda, not duplicitously aligning themselves with it. As long as the shrine continues to lionize men responsible for millions of deaths and portray WWII as an act of

# The elephant in the corner

Chris Mathews comments on the Yasukuni controversy

WWII cannon barrel on Yasukuni grounds.  
Photo by Chris Mathews.

self-defence, continued visits by prominent politicians reveal a refusal to critically engage with the country's war history or truly acknowledge and atone for crimes of the past.

Nonetheless, the LDP leadership doesn't consider it a worthy topic for discussion. Why not? It is tempting to attribute this refusal to the very indefensibility of the position - the shrine represents far-right militarism and historical revisionism, and for that reason visits by senior politicians are clearly offensive to the victims of Japan's past military conquests. Yet the party wants to avoid the debate because it doesn't want it to become a diplomatic or political issue - blatantly ignoring the fact that it is already both. This controversy is seriously disrupting regional political stability and will continue to do so until resolved. It is a key foreign policy issue. As such, giving it a central position in the upcoming leadership debate is essential.

The LDP leadership brazenly maintains that no substantive problem exists, and that complaints are merely hyper-sensitivity and political opportunism on the part of China and Korea. This is nonsense, as is the farcical claim that the visits are simply a domestic issue. There is an elephant in the corner of the room, and a very large, irritated elephant at that. No amount of stonewalling or obfuscation by the LDP is going to be able to deny its presence. The visits serve to align the government with the repellent emperor-worshipping ideology of Yasukuni's wards, and will continue to poison relations with Japan's neighbours and overshadow everything else on the political landscape until they cease. The visits need to be debated. The visits need to stop. **KTO**