



# JAPAN CHAIR PLATFORM

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## **Japan's History Problem: A Snapshot of U.S. Media Opinion**

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To *yasukuni* or not to *yasukuni*? That is the question posed in Japanese media circles ever since Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi last visited the shrine where Japan's war dead and several Class A war criminals are memorialized. His official visit last October reinvigorated a debate with China and South Korea over recent history and placed a great burden on Japanese regional diplomacy. The "history problem," as this issue is commonly dubbed, also presents a conundrum for members of Koizumi's Liberal Democratic Party who wish to succeed him as prime minister in a party election this September. Domestic concern is so grave that the editorial board chairmen of two rival newspapers joined forces in calling for a separate national memorial to resolve the controversy.<sup>1</sup> Debating whether or not politicians should visit the shrine, while important, is not enough to resolve this dilemma. The government must pursue a comprehensive strategy to remind the world that Japan, through its commitment to political freedom, the rule of law, and economic prosperity, is making positive contributions to international society. A sampling of U.S. media commentary on the history problem suggests Japan could do more to convince its close ally.

U.S. editorial opinion can be divided into three broad groupings. The first argues forcefully that Japan is not addressing the history problem seriously and should stop provoking its neighbors. The second goes further by discussing China's exploitation of the situation for its own political purposes and how that damages Japan's reputation as a constructive regional player. And a third suggests there is no monopoly on historical truth and emphasizes Japan's positive role in global affairs. An interesting question for Japan is whether wide-ranging U.S. opinion on the history problem translates into a lack of consensus on Japan's role as a strategic partner.

### **Deal with History**

One editorial assailed Prime Minister Koizumi for "publicly embracing the worst traditions of Japanese militarism" and associated the Yasukuni shrine with "an unapologetic view of Japan's atrocity-scarred rampages through Korea, much of China, and Southeast Asia during the first few decades of the twentieth century."<sup>2</sup> Another editorial referred to Yasukuni as a symbol of Japanese remilitarization, referencing the topic to denounce Japan's interest in "an expensive and dubious U.S. missile defense shield" that could precipitate an arms race between Japan and China.<sup>3</sup> In other words, some Americans believe that Koizumi has magnified the history problem to a point where Japan is considered a destabilizing force in the region. As the provocateur, Japan must "face up to its history in the twentieth century so that it can move honorably into the 21st."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Yomiuri, Asahi Editorial Chiefs Call for a National Memorial," *Asahi Shimbun*, February 8, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> "Pointless Provocation in Tokyo," *New York Times*, October 18, 2005, sec. A, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> "Changing Japan," *Boston Globe*, September 15, 2005, sec. A, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> "Pointless Provocation in Tokyo," *New York Times*, October 18, 2005, sec. A, p. 26.

## Take Away China's History Card

Other editorials criticized Japan for failing to resolve the Yasukuni imbroglio but also lamented China's ability to ignore its own history and sully Japan's image with nationalistic rhetoric. This argument acknowledges a positive role for Japan and, contrary to Koizumi's stance, likens the shrine visits to handing China a "history card" that can obstruct Japanese diplomacy. Japan's "capacity to contribute to Asia's stability will remain diminished as long as it refuses to accept and acknowledge the facts of its own history."<sup>5</sup> But the history dilemma "festers in part because reminding Japan of its war record allows the Chinese regime to divert attention away from its own authoritarian behavior—not to mention its increasingly antagonistic stance toward Taiwan."<sup>6</sup> Both Japan and China must take action for the sake of regional stability. "Japan's right-wingers will have to change their bellicose ways and China's communist leaders will have to refrain from seizing on Japanese provocations to stir up their own people's nationalistic passions."<sup>7</sup>

## Play a Positive Role

Despite widespread disappointment with Japan's approach to the history problem, some observers have taken China to task on history, while defending Japan's status as a key ally of the United States. Yasukuni is undoubtedly controversial, but "China's loud complaints about the visits are rich, considering that—its current repression aside—it maintains a public shrine to Mao, one of history's champion mass-murderers."<sup>8</sup> Koizumi took a diplomatic hit for his shrine visits, but these visits sparked an open debate in Japan, a place "where historical interpretations can be constantly challenged, revised, maybe brought closer to the truth," whereas in China, "there is only one acceptable version of history, at least at any given time; history often changes, but only when the Communist Party decides to change it."<sup>9</sup> Japan should come to terms with its history. But that shouldn't detract from its standing as "one of the world's largest contributors of foreign aid and most generous backers of the United Nations, a successful democracy for more than half a century, with a powerhouse economy and a constitution that forbids aggression."<sup>10</sup>

## Be the "Thought Leader"

Japanese foreign minister Taro Aso gave a speech last December entitled, "Japan as a Thought Leader," in which he outlined a positive diplomatic role for Japan in East Asia. The address offered a perfect antidote to the backlash from the region regarding Yasukuni. Subsequently, Aso made some remarks on Japan's history that infuriated China and South Korea and prompted one U.S. newspaper to declare his "sense of diplomacy as odd as his sense of history."<sup>11</sup> Is there cause for concern about the impact of the history problem on U.S. perceptions of Japan? Yes, and Japan has work to do in the realm of public opinion. On the other hand, it is unrealistic for Americans to assume that *gaiatsu* (outside pressure) will influence Japanese policy. Japan knows it must deal with history but will do so on its own terms consistent with its national interests. Concurrently, the leadership must reassure skeptics that Japan is a responsible member of the international community. Japan must continue to demonstrate its credentials as a "thought leader" and must advance sensible diplomacy to overcome its struggle with history.

*The Japan Chair invites other essays for the Platform. Please contact Eri Hirano at (202) 775-3144 or by e-mail at [ehirano@csis.org](mailto:ehirano@csis.org).*

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5 "Glossing over History," *Kansas City Star*, January 9, 2006, sec. B, p. 4.

6 Ibid.

7 "Japan's History Lesson," *Boston Globe*, February 8, 2006, sec. A, p. 12.

8 Richard Lowry, "Time for the Sun to Rise: How a Newly Confident and Engaged Japan Would Help the United States, and the World," *National Review*, July 4, 2005.

9 Fred Hiatt, "China's Selective Memory," *Washington Post*, April 18, 2005, sec. A, p. 17.

10 Ibid.

11 "Japan's Offensive Foreign Minister," *New York Times*, February 13, 2006, sec. A, p. 22.