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Yasukuni Shrine and Museum: Japan's WW2 Responsibility

By Barry Desker

Synopsis

While the Yasukuni shrine memorialises Japan's war dead its accompanying museum gives a revisionist view of Japan's responsibility for the Second World War that is troubling.

Commentary

AT THE start of the four-day autumn festival on 17 October 2014, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sent a ritual offering to the Yasukuni shrine, without making a personal visit. Perhaps Abe was hoping that this gesture would appease Chinese leaders who will host him during the forthcoming Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Meeting in Beijing on 10-11 November. This is unlikely to happen.

I had visited the Yasukuni shrine a week earlier during a trip to Tokyo to understand the reasons for the persistence of Japanese politicians in making annual visits on ritual holidays as well as the strong opposition of the Chinese government to such visits. While the shrine honours 2.5 million Japanese war dead since the Meiji Restoration, it is seen by many as a reminder of Japanese militarism during the second world war. Criticism is strongest in China, South Korea and Taiwan. I felt that like many other nations, Japan would want to honour those who had paid the ultimate sacrifice serving their country.

Commemorating war dead or revising history?

My visit to the Yasukuni shrine and its museum changed my view. I did not have great problems with the shrine itself which had an air of tranquillity and was marked by respectful attitudes by middle aged and elderly Japanese paying homage to their ancestors and relatives and worshipping them as "guardian deities". Although Japan lost the war, commemorating its war dead could help to reinforce the belief in the futility of such wars.

Most criticism has centred on the enshrining of 14 Class A war criminals at Yasukuni shrine in 1978. The enshrining was done by the temple's Shinto priests without any public consultation. As a consequence, Japan's emperors have not visited the shrine since then. This enshrining and the criticisms by Japan's neighbours of visits by Japan's leaders and parliamentarians have reinforced the

controversial image of Yasukuni shrine. My view is that the inclusion of the Class A war criminals has symbolic significance and will be an opportunity for China, in particular, to criticise the Japanese government.

However, it is the revisionist view of the second world war presented in the museum which really highlights the perspective taken by the Shinto leadership responsible for the shrine and is most troublesome for Japan's friends. As the museum has excellent descriptions in Japanese, with English translations, the revisionist message is relayed even to foreigners visiting the museum.

Honouring suicide pilots

As someone from Southeast Asia, I was taken aback by the honoured place at the museum's entrance of the original locomotive which had been used during the opening of the Siam/Burma railway. The 'death railway' was built during the war and resulted in the deaths of more than 100,000 Southeast Asian forced labourers and 13,000 allied prisoners-of-war. There was no indication of the cost of the project in terms of the lives lost and the privations undergone by the conscripted work force. The display of the beautifully reconstructed Zero fighter aircraft and heavy artillery next to the locomotive paled in comparison.

In the well-tended garden near the entrance to the museum is a statue honouring kamikaze suicide pilots, after one's views had been positively influenced by walking past statues honouring horses, carrier pigeons and dogs serving the Japanese military which were killed during the war. As I visited the galleries, despite the wide variety of displays, most visitors were drawn to the section on kamikaze suicide attacks, with photographs of successful kamikaze air attacks on naval vessels, photographs of those who had undertaken these attacks and poems and letters written before they embarked on these acts as well as a display of a kamikaze mini-submarine torpedo and a piloted kamikaze glider with three rocket engines that fired for nine seconds each which would be released from an aircraft. As someone familiar with the eulogies to Al-Qaeda and Islamic State suicide terrorists, the reminder was chilling.

The garden also contained a statue honouring Dr Radha Binod Pal who was the Indian judge on the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal (the International Military Tribunal for the Far East). Pal was the only judge who supported not guilty verdicts on all charges for those on trial on the grounds that the impartiality of the tribunal was doubtful and that it was carrying out 'victor's justice'. Pal has legendary status in Japan. During his visit to India in 2007, Prime Minister Abe said that Pal was 'highly respected' for his 'courage' in his address to the Indian parliament.

He also met Pal's octogenarian son in Calcutta and was given photographs of Pal with Abe's grandfather, former Japanese prime minister Nobusuke Kishi. The museum visit thus provided me with an insight into the background for Abe's positive attitudes towards India today and the development of closer ties with the Narendra Modi administration.

Japan as victim of the war

The museum visitor is left with an image of Japan as the victim of the war, reinforced by the scenes of the fire-bombing of Japanese cities and the effects of the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The stark revisionist message is conveyed in a 50-minute film which stresses that Japan was forced to go to war by the American oil embargo in support of American demands that Japan must withdraw from China, denies the 1937 Nanjing Massacre and criticises the wrongful convictions in the Tokyo Tribunal. The dioramas and displays highlight Asian support for Japan's war effort and Japan's role in the national liberation of Asian peoples.

While international attention has been focused on visits to Yasukuni shrine by Japanese leaders, the museum is really more worrying. It draws attention to the lack of recognition in Japan of the Japanese role in the second world war. With the passing of time, stridently nationalist views of history in China and Japan will make peace-making between the two Asian giants more difficult and spark periodic tensions in the bilateral relationship.

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