

# Japan's Domestic Politics and China Policy: The Yasukuni Controversy (2006-07)

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## **Abstract**

Japan's China policy in the post-Cold War era has often been portrayed as a strategic response to the rise of China in East Asia. Existing literature on the subject most often assumes that Japan's China policy has been guided by a unified, well-calculated foreign strategy vis-à-vis China's growing national power since the late 1990s. In this article, the author challenges this assumption and argues that domestic politics within Japan oftentimes plays a decisive role in Japan's foreign policy towards China. By examining Japan's response toward Chinese pressure over the Yasukuni issue between 2006 and 2007, this article offers an alternative interpretation of Japan's China policy by highlighting the domestic legitimacy of individual political leaders. The author further suggests that impacts of other aspects of Japanese domestic politics on its foreign policy toward China, such as regime transition/the frequent change of prime ministers and the rivalry between the ruling party and elite bureaucrats, should also be taken up for more thorough investigation.

## **Keywords**

Japan's China policy, domestic legitimacy, Yasukuni controversy, Sino-Japanese relations

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\*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the international workshop on "Rising China and Its Implications to East Asia," December 15, 2012 at Waseda University. In this paper, Japanese and Chinese names are written with the surname preceding the given name.

It is unnecessary to make a clear stance on the Yasukuni issue as it will be utilized by China, South Korea and politicians within Japan.

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Since the late 1990s, relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Japan have been undergoing tremendous structural changes within East Asian international politics. Japan's China policy since this period has in great part been viewed as a strategic response to the rise of China in East Asia. Many works in the existing literature, from the writings of scholars to journalists and diplomatic observers, assume that Japan is a unitary actor and that its China policy has been guided by a unified, well-calculated foreign strategy with a focus on China's growing national power in the last two decades.

This article challenges the assumption that Japan's response toward China's rise is guided by this aforementioned "unified, well-calculated foreign strategy". Instead, it will be argued that domestic politics within Japan often play a decisive role in Japan's foreign policy towards China. By examining Japan's response toward Chinese pressure over the Yasukuni issue between 2006 and 2007, this article offers an alternative perspective to Japan's China policy by focusing on the domestic legitimacy of individual political leaders in Japan's China policymaking. The article further suggests that other aspects of Japanese domestic politics, such as regime transition, the frequent change of prime ministers and the coordination problem between the ruling party and elite bureaucrats, should also be studied in detail.

## **1. Conventional Analysis of Japan's China Policy**

Since the 1990s, Japan's China policy has often been viewed as a strategic response to the rise of China. The consequence of the rise of China to the international material structure has been viewed as a major motivation behind Japan's shifting China policy. Mike Mochizuki, for example, identified four strategic options that emerged in the domestic debate within Japan with regards to the rise of China: 1) cooperative engagement with a soft hedge, 2) competitive engagement with a hard hedge, 3) balancing and containment, and 4) strategic accommodation.<sup>2</sup> Mochizuki points out that recent evolution of Japan's

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<sup>1</sup> Abe's public speech on June 11, 2006. See Shibata Gaku, "Sousaisen, saidai no ronten Yasukuni omegurujimintou no hyakkasoumei [The LDP Presidential Election: A Hot Debate within the LDP over the Yasukuni Issue]," *Chuokoron* (August 2006): 211.

<sup>2</sup> Mike M. Mochizuki, "Japan's Shifting Strategy toward the Rise of China," *The Journal of*

strategy towards China is compatible with different theoretical expectations such as offensive realism, defensive realism, and liberalism. He argues that Japan has shifted away from friendship diplomacy toward a mixed strategy that involves both cooperative engagement and realistic balancing to hedge against the potential threats that rising China may pose in the future.<sup>3</sup>

Scholars of Sino-Japanese relations and international relations studies also interpreted Japan's China policy through a foreign strategy perspective. Some scholars argue that, precisely because of the collapse of "the 1955 system" and the decline of progressive forces within Japan since the mid-1990s, the neo-conservative and nationalistic forces within Japan would be able to take an assertive stance, one that intends to lead Japan toward the path of the "normal country."<sup>4</sup> The essence of the so-called "normal country," according to Ryu, for example, mainly refers to the constitutional revision of Article Nine, the state's right to mourn its war dead and to improve the low level of patriotism among the Japanese public.<sup>5</sup> By following this stream of analysis, Japan's assertive policy toward China in certain areas (such as maritime disputes and the Yasukuni problem) has been seen as an effort to promote neo-conservatism, historical revisionism and defense policy reforms, aiming to transform Japan into a normal nation-state in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Zhu argues, for example, that Japan's assertive China policy visible in various policy areas in recent years has been determined by strategic choices prompted by the rise of China in East Asia.<sup>6</sup>

It would be absurd, of course, to deny the impact of strategic calculation in the decision-making process of Japan's China policy. But most often, from a micro-analytical perspective, domestic politics act in a much more complex way within Japan that is less related to foreign strategy calculation. Conventional arguments often take for granted that Japan's foreign policy in most issue areas related to

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Strategic Studies 30, no. 4-5: 739-76.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 767-73.

<sup>4</sup> Many scholars interpret the issue from the normal country perspective. For example, Lam Peng Er, "Japan's Deteriorating Ties with China: The Koizumi Factor," *China: An International Journal* 3, no. 2 (September 2005): 275-91; Li Jianmin, *Lengzhanhou riben de putongguojiahua yu zhongrgguanxi de fazhan* [The Normalization of Post-Cold War Japan and the Development of Sino-Japanese Relations] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehuikexue chubanshe), 308; Zhou Yongshen, "Xiaoquan neige de waijiao zhence qianqi" [An Analysis of the Foreign Policy of the Koizumi Administration], *Riben Xuankan* [Japanese Study] 5 (2006): 30-31; Li Jianmin, *Lengzhanhou de zhongriguanxishi* [The History of Sino-Japanese Relations in the Post-Cold War Era] (Beijing: Zhongguo jingji chubanshe, 2007), 320-21.

<sup>5</sup> Yongwook Ryu, "The Yasukuni Controversy: Divergent Perspectives from the Japanese Political Elite?" *Asian Survey* 5 (September/October):706.

<sup>6</sup> Zhu Feng, "Quanli biangeng, rentong duili yu zhanlue xuanze - Zhongriguanxi de zhanglue weilai" [Power Shift, Identity Conflict, and Strategic Choice: The Strategic Future of Sino-Japanese Relations], *Shijie zhenzhi yu jingji* [Journal of World Economy and Politics] 319, no. 3 (March 2007):17.

China is guided by a calculated, unified foreign policy strategy. But these views overlook the impact of Japanese domestic politics on its China policy, and fail to explain why Japan sometimes favors a cooperative policy toward China in certain issue areas, if its China policy is perceived to be assertive.<sup>7</sup> Given the frequent shifts within the Japanese cabinet in the recent decade, there is also the question of whether Japan has articulated a long-term, consistent strategy toward the rise of China since the mid-1990s. As the literature on domestic foundation to foreign policy suggests, we must take into account the domestic political process within Japan while analyzing Japanese diplomacy toward rising China.

## **2. Domestic Source of Japan's China Policy: A Framework**

Domestic politics has been the central theme in studying a state's foreign policy. In this article, it is proposed that Japan's China policy can be understood through the perspective of the domestic legitimacy of individual leaders. As early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Italian politician Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1557) outlined the importance of retaining power for a ruler in his book *The Prince* (1531). Machiavelli takes a pessimistic stance toward human nature. In his view, a ruler needs to adopt moral standards different from those of ordinary individuals to ensure the survival of the state in general and the ruler himself in particular. A ruler who "wants to act the part of a good man in all circumstances will bring about his own ruin." A ruler who wants to hold power, Machiavelli stresses, must learn how to not be good and to know when it is necessary to use this knowledge.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, Machiavelli suggests that it is much safer for a ruler to be feared than loved.<sup>9</sup>

The importance of political survival of individual leaders during international negotiation was frequently discussed by IR scholars working on the interaction between domestic politics and foreign policy. Peter Gourevitch, for example, proposes the second image reversed theory, suggesting that individual leaders tend to mobilize the nation's international resources to strengthen their own political legitimacy in a domestic power rivalry. Individual leaders would find that a diplo-

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<sup>7</sup> For example, Koizumi's treatment over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2004 obviously demonstrated certain concern about China's stance on the issue. Koizumi decided to release Chinese crew members who entered the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. For details, see "Nicchu mitsuyaku adda" [Japan-China Senkaku Secret Agreement Found], *Asahi Shimbun Weekly AERA*, October 25, 2010, 12-15.

<sup>8</sup> Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 48.

<sup>9</sup> For detailed discussion on the importance of power to a ruler, see Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter 10, Chapter 15 and Chapter 17.

matic success would in return empower their domestic authority.<sup>10</sup> Robert Putnam points out that a chief negotiator will normally give primacy to his or her domestic calculations during an international negotiation. The chief negotiator may try to enhance his standing in domestic politics by increasing his political resources or by minimizing potential losses in international politics during an international negotiation. If an international agreement would contribute to the domestic interests of the chief negotiator, an international agreement is likely; conversely, if an international agreement would threaten domestic interests, or require him or her to construct a different coalition, the chief negotiator will be reluctant to endorse it.<sup>11</sup> Helen Milner maintains that political actors are rational and cooperation among nations is less affected by fears of other countries' relative gains or cheating than it is by domestic distributional consequences of cooperative endeavors.<sup>12</sup> In discussing the role of executive policy preferences, Milner outlined that the political costs of national leaders during an international negotiation matter. The term "political cost", according to Milner, refers to two aspects: the distributional consequences of choosing cooperative policies and the loss of unilateral control over a policy instrument. By following this logic, international cooperation is unlikely if the policy undermines the interests of domestic actors whose support is valued by political leaders. Political leaders must believe that the political benefits from international cooperation outweigh the costs, and no cooperation should be regarded as the worse choice.<sup>13</sup>

A breakthrough piece of work, *The Logic of Political Survival*, collectively written by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph Siverson, and James Morrow, examines the theme of domestic political survival in detail in the context of the wider range of political, economic, and foreign issues such as revolution, taxation, and war, with the application of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Based on several early studies focusing on office-seeking and political coalition, the study proposes a so-called selectorate theory and draws attention to political survival as a central goal of political leaders.<sup>14</sup> The political survival of every leader, according to this theory, depends on the maintenance of a winning coalition of supporters. If a leader loses the loyalty of a sufficient number

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Gourevitch, "The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics," *International Organization* 32, no. 4 (Autumn, 1978): 905.

<sup>11</sup> Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (Summer, 1988): 456-59.

<sup>12</sup> Helen Milner, *Interests, Institutions and Information: Domestic Politics and International Relations* (Princeton University, 1997), 11.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>14</sup> For early studies related to political survival of politicians in democracies, see Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracies* (New York: Harper, 1957); William H. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962).

of members of the winning coalition, a challenger can replace the leader in office. Coalition members come from a group called the “selectorate”, which consists of those individuals who might find themselves in the winning coalition. In a democracy, the winning coalition is the group of voters who elect the leader. With a large winning coalition and large selectorate in the democratic institution, which increase the probability that a member of the current leader’s coalition will be included in a challenger’s coalition, the bonds between leaders and their coalition members become weaker. In this sense, with the desire to survive and retain power, political leaders in a democracy tend to spend more effort maintaining their winning coalition supporters’ loyalties, thus influencing the selection of domestic and foreign policies they pursue. This interest explains why bad policy might sometimes be good politics, and similarly, good policies bad politics.<sup>15</sup>

This study shares the assumptions stated above. In this article, Japan’s China policy is examined by focusing on the domestic political legitimacy of individual leaders. The term “legitimacy”, according to Geuss, can be applied to “a certain specific government or regime” or to “the personnel who claim to be the representatives of an organization.”<sup>16</sup> This paper assumes that political leaders of a state, particularly in democracies, would need to consider a foreign policy decision by calculating the consequences of such a decision in the context of their domestic political welfare. Extending this framework, as Japan is a democracy with a parliamentary system, it will be assumed that seeking election or reelection on the national party level and thusly consolidating majority support within the ruling party are of vital interest to the domestic political survival of Japanese prime ministers. This study contends that the domestic political legitimacy of individual leaders is a vital factor that affects Japan’s China policy. The orientation of Japan’s China policy is dependent on whether a cooperative policy would undermine a prime minister’s chance of staying in office. A cooperative policy is more likely to pass if it does not threaten to undermine, or rather, has potential to contribute to, the domestic interests of an office-seeking prime minister.

To illustrate the argument, Japan’s response to China’s pressure over the Yasukuni issue during the Abe administration (2006-07) has intentionally been chosen. This case is selected because it meets important methodological criteria.<sup>17</sup> Of particular interest here in Abe’s case is that before assuming office in 2006, Abe consistently supported prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni Shrine. He was widely regarded as a postwar born Japanese prime minister determined to lead

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<sup>15</sup> Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 7-15.

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Geuss, *History and Illusion in Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 31.

<sup>17</sup> For the methods of case studies, see George and Bennett (2004), 153-56.

Japan in breaking away from the postwar regime. Before assuming premiership, Abe had repeatedly stressed the legitimacy of prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni and the necessity of a stronger stance against Chinese pressure.<sup>18</sup> While serving as chief cabinet secretary in the Koizumi administration from October 2005, Abe was critical toward China's protests over the Yasukuni issue and defined China's pressure as an intervention of Japan's domestic affairs. Ironically, it was also Abe who succumbed to Beijing's demand at the beginning of his term in 2006, ceasing visitation of Yasukuni Shrine during his whole tenure in office. Why did Abe Shinzo, a Japanese Prime Minister who originally promoted official Yasukuni visits, comply with China's wishes? What is to account for this divergence? In the following section, we should expect to see evidence in the case study that Japanese prime ministers were particularly concerned with the domestic consequences of different policy options on how to respond to Chinese pressure.

### 3. Case Study: The Yasukuni Controversy (2006-07)

#### 1) A Political Survival Interpretation

Abe's two-day "ice-breaking" visit to Beijing in October 2006 symbolized a turning point in the deadlocked political relations between China and Japan, first brought upon by Koizumi's persistent Yasukuni visits in the previous six years. As Koizumi's successor, Abe entered a relatively favorable political climate compared to that which welcomed Koizumi in 2001. He had enjoyed majority favor both within the LDP and the general public. Within the LDP, Abe was supported by the Mori faction, the largest faction within the LDP, and by most of the Diet members with no factional background since the landslide LDP victory in the September 2005 lower house election. In addition, Abe was also supported by other small factions, such as Koga and Nikai.<sup>19</sup> As for the general public, a poll conducted by the *Yomiuri Shimbun* in mid-August 2006 showed that the majority of those polled thought Abe would be the most appropriate next prime minister of Japan.<sup>20</sup> Such a political context indicates that Abe had strong enough domestic support in his early period of premiership to compromise on the Yasukuni issue.

On the other hand, however, although he enjoyed majority support within the LDP and general public, Abe found himself in a challenging situation after assum-

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<sup>18</sup> For Abe's supportive attitude toward Yasukuni visitation, see Abe and Noda (2002); Abe and Okazaki (2004): 135-58; Abe (2006), 66-74.

<sup>19</sup> *Yomiuri Shimbun*, August 9, 2006, morning edition, 1; *Yomiuri Shimbun*, September 14, 2006, morning edition, 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Yomiuri Shimbun*, August 17, 2006, morning edition, 4.

ing premiership. The major reason Abe was able to gain such tremendous support from the majority of the LDP, apart from Koizumi's influence, was that he was widely conceived by major faction leaders as a person able to lead the LDP to victory in the upcoming upper house election in August 2007. In other words, Abe would face a serious legitimacy problem within the LDP if he could not win the forthcoming election. In this sense, maintaining majority support and widening the domestic coalitions within the LDP as long as possible became Abe's primary political objectives in his first year of office. Policies related to Yasukuni were thus carefully considered in the context of domestic politics.

After becoming prime minister in September 2006, despite the fact that he had majority support within the LDP and the general public, Abe was faced with a clear test. Because Abe's perceived ability to secure a win for the LDP in the August 2007 upper house election factored so heavily in his popularity among major faction leaders within the LDP, the upcoming upper house election was especially charged. Three major facets stood out here. The first concerned the influence of local elections in April 2007 to the upper house election. It was widely recognized within the LDP that a concentration of time and effort of many local LDP members toward their own local election rather than the national-level upper house election might result in unavoidable failure for the LDP election campaign. The second was the influence of the reform in local towns. Originally, most members of local town assemblies were from the LDP. When the number of local towns decreased due to the administrative reform, LDP power on a local level shrunk drastically, causing a negative impact on the national-level election. The third was the influence of Koizumi's reform. As many local areas were dissatisfied with the policy advocated by the Koizumi administration, which focused on economic development in urban areas, voters in rural areas tended to support the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) led by Ozawa Ichiro. With these three upcoming domestic challenges in mind, keeping the current majority support as long as possible while widening the domestic coalitions as soon as possible within the LDP and the general public became Abe's primary political objectives for his first year in office. In this sense, how to deal with China's pressure over the Yasukuni issue was given careful consideration within the context of domestic politics.

A limited compromise with ambiguity over the Yasukuni issue would not undermine but rather contribute to Abe's political survival in domestic politics. Starting from 2006, sufficient evidence indicates that Abe started to treat the Yasukuni issue strategically for two purposes: 1) to win the LDP presidential election, and 2) to consolidate domestic support after assuming premiership.

For the first purpose, Abe's motivation was to prevent the Yasukuni issue from casting a negative shadow on his LDP presidential election campaign. Major figures within the Mori faction and advisors around Abe took a prudent approach to



the Yasukuni issue. Mori and Koizumi themselves openly suggested that it was unnecessary for the new prime minister to visit Yasukuni Shrine.<sup>21</sup> Advisors in Abe's camp were extremely worried that Abe's opposition within the LDP might utilize this Yasukuni issue during the presidential election. On January 17, 2006, Fukuda Yasuo, one of Abe's major potential adversaries, expressed a cautious attitude toward the Yasukuni issue during a conference held in Fukuoka. Fukuda was also a member of the group related to the national memorial facility (Kokuritsu tsuito shisetsu o kangaeru kai), which suggests an alternative plan for national mourning.<sup>22</sup> The major participants of this group, such as Kato Koichi and Yamasaki Taku, were uniformly against Koizumi's Yasukuni visits. For this reason, supporters within the Abe camp were particularly worried that a clear distinction would emerge if Abe were to express a supportive attitude toward Yasukuni visits, as such explicit advocacy would breed uncertainty around Abe's election campaign. In this sense, it is understandable why Abe's camp was so worried about critical voices from the United States over the Yasukuni issue, as this criticism could be used as fodder to attack Abe's campaign during the LDP presidential election.<sup>23</sup> It was reported that major advisors of Abe debated appropriate attitudes toward the Yasukuni issue in July 2006. Although most of them suggested that Abe take an assertive stance against China's pressure, the political risks accompanying this option, such as possible attack from opposition within the LDP and even within the Mori faction against Abe, forced them to carefully reconsider the issue.<sup>24</sup> It was reported that this so-called ambiguous strategy later employed by Abe over the Yasukuni issue throughout his term was confirmed during this period.<sup>25</sup>

For the second purpose, advisors in Abe's camp believed the stability of the Abe administration in the upcoming upper house election in August 2007 was the most important mission and any disputes over the Yasukuni issue with China would only shake the stability of Abe's new administration.<sup>26</sup> Shimomura Hakubun, Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary of the Abe administration, mentioned that the long-term objective of the Abe cabinet was to hold office for two terms with six years.<sup>27</sup> Shimizu Masato, a *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* senior political journal-

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<sup>21</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, March 28, 2006, morning edition, 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Mainichi Shimbun*, January 31, 2006, morning edition, 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Yomiuri Shimbun*, July 21, 2006, morning edition, 14.

<sup>24</sup> These major advisors included Ito Tetsuo, Nakanishi Terumasa, Nishioka Tsutomu, Shimada Youichi, Yagi Hidetsugu, Shimomura Hakubun, Takaichi Sanae, and Seko Hiroshige. Some of them were later appointed as cabinet members in the Abe administration. See Uesugi Takashi, *Kantei houkai* [The Collapse of the Prime Ministerial Office] (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 2007), 36.

<sup>25</sup> Uesugi Takashi, *Kantei houkai*, 60.

<sup>26</sup> *Yomiuri Shimbun*, August 17, 2006, morning edition, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Shimizu Masato, *Shusho no Satetsu – Posuto Koizumi kenryoku no tasokare* [The Failure of the Prime Minister: The Dawn of Power in the Post-Koizumi Era] (Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Shimbunsha, 2009), 121-22.

ist, correctly points out that maintaining strategic ambiguity over the Yasukuni issue with China until the upper house election in 2007 was intentional on Abe's part, it being the safest approach for the survival of the new administration.<sup>28</sup> Obviously, maintaining an ambiguous attitude over the issue while ceasing visits to Yasukuni Shrine would be the best strategy for gaining support from both liberals and conservatives within the LDP. Yamamoto Ichita, a close ally of Abe's and an LDP Diet member of the upper house, expressed to the *Mainichi Shimbun* in 2006 that the conservatives would be satisfied if Abe were to visit Yasukuni Shrine at the beginning of his premiership and then cease visits temporarily.<sup>29</sup> It was reported that there were expectations within the LDP that Abe's new initiative on Asian diplomacy would benefit the by-elections in the Kanagawa Prefecture No. 16 and Osaka Prefecture No. 9 districts held on October 22, which were considered the prelude to the upper house election in 2007.<sup>30</sup>

The priority of seeking office influenced Abe's responses to China's pressure over the Yasukuni issue. In Abe's calculation, the Yasukuni issue was no longer an appropriate card for seeking domestic support as it was for Koizumi, as many members within the LDP thought maintaining the stability of the new administration and preparing for the upcoming election should be the primary concerns. Instead, an implicit compromise to China's demands would conversely strengthen support for Abe in terms of ability to handle foreign affairs and widen his domestic coalition. Seko Hiroshige, one of his senior political advisors, also openly admitted in August 2006 to believing that Abe regards the Yasukuni issue as a useful diplomatic card to China and thusly approaches the issue strategically.<sup>31</sup>

Based on Table 1 below, Abe tackled Yasukuni and China's pressure strategically, step by step. First, Abe made a secret visit to Yasukuni Shrine in April 2006, waiting until early August to make his visit known to the media. It was on August 5 that Japanese media reported that Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe had visited Yasukuni Shrine in April; according to Uesugi, this information was intentionally leaked to NHK and *Sankei Shimbun*.<sup>32</sup> The timing of the declaration was exactly one week before Koizumi's last Yasukuni visit. Abe clearly planned the timing of his Yasukuni visit and successfully avoided demands from both conservatives and liberals. It would also be difficult for China to protest, as the visit was conducted in a low profile.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>29</sup> *Mainichi Shimbun*, January 31, 2006, morning edition, 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Yomiuri Shimbun*, October 5, 2006, p.4.

<sup>31</sup> Interview of Seko Hiroshige, *Bungeishunju* (August 2006), 122.

<sup>32</sup> Uesugi Takeshi, *Kantei hokai* [The Collapse of the Prime Ministerial Office] (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 2007), 38.

<sup>33</sup> *Yomiuri Shimbun*, August 5, 2006, morning edition, 4; *Yomiuri Weekly*, September 3, 2006, 22-23.

Date	Events
April 2006	Abe secretly visits Yasukuni Shrine
September 20, 2006	Abe elected as Prime Minister of Japan
September 23, 2006	The 6 <sup>th</sup> round of China-Japan strategic dialogue, Tokyo
September 28, 2006	Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo visits Tokyo for the second round of diplomatic negotiation
October 2, 2006	Cabinet Secretariat declares Abe's official visit to China
October 8, 2006	Abe visits Beijing and meets major Chinese leaders
April 11, 2007	Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visits Japan
May 8, 2007	Cabinet Secretariat confirms that Prime Minister Abe sent an offering to Yasukuni Shrine
August 15, 2007	No visit to Yasukuni Shrine by Prime Minister Abe

**Table 1: Sino-Japanese Yasukuni Controversy, 2006-07**

**Source: Author**

The second step was to negotiate secretly with Beijing and to make political profit from Beijing's demands. The rapid official visit to Beijing just 11 days after Abe assumed premiership indicated that Abe's policy toward Chinese pressure over Yasukuni was guided by a calculation starting from a very early period. Abe's political advisors had been working actively under the table on the issue. Nakagawa Hidenao, Chairman of the Policy Research Council in the LDP and also a close political ally of Abe, was one example. In as early as June 2006, Nakagawa suggested to Koizumi that the Chidorigahuchi National Garden be considered as a place for national mourning that could allow visits by overseas leaders.<sup>34</sup> This suggestion was later surprisingly accepted by Koizumi for further consideration.<sup>35</sup> On August 3, 2006, during a seminar held in Tokyo, Nakagawa also stated that it was the mission of the next administration to improve Sino-Japanese relations.<sup>36</sup> All of these subtle changes indicated that Abe intended to rework the political function of the Yasukuni issue under his new administration.

Negotiation with China was also given higher priority in the political agenda very early on. In January 2006, a well-known Japanese journalist Dasei Yasuhiro was told by Nakagawa Hidenao, the LDP's Policy Research Council Chairman and also one of Abe's trusted political allies, that negotiation with China on Yasukuni had already begun.<sup>37</sup> Further evidence exists in Nakagawa's frequent meetings with Chinese officials, such as Chinese Ambassador to Japan Wang Yi. As early as February 19, 2006, Nakagawa visited Beijing and discussed Sino-

<sup>34</sup> Shibata Gaku, "Sousaisen Saidai no ronten Yasukuni o meguru jimintou no hyakka soumei" [LDP Presidential Election: A Hot Debate within the LDP over the Yasukuni Issue], *Chuokoron* (August 2006): 215.

<sup>35</sup> *Mainichi Shimbun*, June 27, 2006, morning edition, 2.

<sup>36</sup> *Mainichi Shimbun*, August 4, 2006, morning edition, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Uesugi Takeshi, "Nakagawa Hidenao kanjicho ura no rirekisho," 284.

Japanese relations with Chinese leadership. On September 8, Shiozaki Yasuhisa, who was later appointed as chief cabinet secretary during the Abe administration, was ordered by Nakagawa to visit China for three days.

At the bureaucratic level, Yachi Shotaro, Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs, was the key figure that negotiated directly with Beijing for Tokyo's new initiative. Yachi was reportedly the most trusted person of Abe within MOFA, and he was requested by Abe to set a plan for an official visit to China and South Korea while Abe was still serving as chief cabinet secretary.<sup>38</sup> Hong Kong-based media reports also confirmed that the plan for improving relations with China had been secretly drafted within MOFA in early 2006, based on the instruction of Yachi.<sup>39</sup> In his memoir published in April 2009, Yachi confirmed that he spoke frankly with Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo in an informal meeting in Niigata prefecture after the 4<sup>th</sup> round of the China-Japan strategic dialogue held in February 2006. Yachi persuaded Dai to accept Abe's plan to visit China by pointing out that Abe's ambiguous attitude over the Yasukuni issue itself would serve as an opportunity for China, and rejecting Abe's official visit would virtually offer an excuse for Abe to potentially pay a visit to Yasukuni in the future.<sup>40</sup> After several rounds of communication, on September 28, 2006, China accepted Tokyo's plan for Abe to make a two-day trip to Beijing on October 8 and 9.

As governmental policy over the Yasukuni issue shifted, Abe adopted an ambiguous strategy at both international and domestic tables, refraining from stating whether or not he would visit Yasukuni Shrine. Public opinion in Japan was gradually re-manipulated by the Abe administration. Public statements made by Abe changed tremendously, displaying increasing ambiguity since the summer of 2006. Abe's basic strategy was to avoid making an explicit statement on the Yasukuni issue. In a TV program on June 3, Abe stated that he did not intend to make a clear statement on whether he would visit Yasukuni Shrine. Abe further stressed that if the issue became a diplomatic problem, it would not be necessary to address it during the LDP presidential election. In a public speech on June 11, Abe further solidified his equivocal position by stressing that it was unnecessary to take a clear stance on the Yasukuni issue, lest it be utilized by China, South Korea and politicians within Japan.<sup>41</sup> This stance remained unchanged until the last day

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<sup>38</sup> *Yomiuri Shimbun*, October 5, 2006, p.3.

<sup>39</sup> For details, see *Yazhou Zhoukan* [Asia Weekly], May 25, 2008, 34-38; Tarumi Hideo, a China specialist in MOFA who was appointed as the director of the China and Mongolian Division in 2008, confirmed to Hong Kong journalist that he drafted the plan on improving relations with China in 2006. See *Yazhou Zhoukan* [Asia Weekly], January 11, 2009, 30-31.

<sup>40</sup> Yachi Shotaro, *Gaiko no senryaku to kokorozashi* [The Strategy of Diplomacy and Ambition] (Tokyo: Sankeishimbunsha, 2009), 36-41.

<sup>41</sup> Shibata Gaku, "Sousaisen saidai no ronten Yasukuni wo meguru jimintou no hyakka soumei," 211.

of the Abe administration in September 2007.

On the other hand, at the international front, Abe avoided creating the impression among his domestic audience that he made a compromise with China. On October 6, the Chinese consulate in Tokyo Embassy Kong Quanyou stated that China believed that Abe would not visit Yasukuni Shrine within his term as prime minister. On the same day, Abe implicitly refuted China's statement and stressed that no such agreement had been made between the two countries, secretly or otherwise, previous to the conclusion of the Japan-China top leader summit in October 2006.<sup>42</sup>

Yasukuni was doubtlessly a stepping-stone for Abe. However Abe may have rationalized his actions to both sides, it should be acknowledged that by abstaining from Yasukuni visits while embracing a strategy that allowed ambiguity, Abe was able to resume a bilateral summit meeting with China that had been suspended for almost five years. The summit meeting in early October 2006, in return, benefited Abe domestically. A poll conducted by *Asahi Shimbun* after Abe's visit to Beijing in October revealed that 83% of those polled commented positively on Abe's diplomatic initiative with China and South Korea. 52% valued his style in dealing with the Yasukuni issue.<sup>43</sup> At this stage, Abe's objective of utilizing Yasukuni to consolidate and broaden his domestic coalition was basically achieved. It is worth noting that Abe visited Yasukuni on August 15, 2008, one year after his resignation as Prime Minister in September 2007.

## **2) Alternative Interpretations: A Comparison**

What other factors might account for the responses of the Abe administration to China's pressure over the Yasukuni issue? This section discusses two alternative explanations for making sense of this puzzle. While acknowledging the certain explanatory power of these factors, it will be demonstrated why these explanations are insufficient in explaining the abnormal response of the Abe administration to China in 2006-07.

### **Economic Interdependence**

Firstly, one may argue that Abe adopted a cooperative policy toward Chinese pressure by offering analysis from the perspective of economic interdependence. By following the logic that the chance of conflict between two countries can be largely reduced given a dynamic of economic interdependence, it is tempting to view Abe's compromise to Chinese pressure as an effort to deepen economic interdependence between China and Japan. Upon this interpretation, Abe acted as a

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<sup>42</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*, October 7, 2006, morning edition, 1.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, October 11, 2006, 4.

national leader prioritizing the national interest when he ceased visits to Yasukuni Shrine.<sup>44</sup>

This economic interdependence-based argument is somehow convincing. But it cannot answer a very fundamental question: According to official data, China had assumed the rank of number one trading partner to Japan in 2004.<sup>45</sup> Why, then, considering the closeness of China-Japan economic relations, would Koizumi still choose to visit Yasukuni Shrine in 2004? Why does the factor of economic interdependence carry such weight for Abe but not Koizumi? An interpretation based on economic interdependence fails to offer a convincing answer to these questions from a comparative perspective. In fact, as demonstrated previously, Koizumi was determined to visit Yasukuni Shrine despite strong urging against it from major figures in the Japanese economic circle.

### **The Role of the United States**

One may also be argued that the United States might factor into Abe's different response to Chinese pressure. It is true that Washington's concern over Japan's stance toward Yasukuni had grown by Abe's time, and the US urged Japan to exercise prudence over the issue. This change in attitude, according to this stream of analysis, is attributable to the United States' realization that growing anti-Japanese sentiments in China could undermine the interests of the United States in East Asia. And so it may have been US pressure that caused Abe to reconsider his policy over the Yasukuni issue as well as his responses to Chinese pressure.<sup>46</sup>

This vein of interpretation is insufficient in two ways. First, as was shown in the previous section, the United States never pressured Japan over the Yasukuni issue in an official capacity during the Koizumi or Abe administrations. Criticism of Japan's stance over the Yasukuni issue within the United States came mostly from the legislative branch and from former officials responsible for diplomatic and security affairs in East Asia.<sup>47</sup> These figures included US House of Representatives Committee on International Relations Chairman Henry J. Hyde, former US Ambassador to Japan Howard Baker, former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Kurt Campbell, former US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage,

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<sup>44</sup> For this type of argument, see, for example, Xide Jin, "Anbei waijiao de chuqichengxiao yu zhanwang" [The Initial Achievements and Prospects of Abe Diplomacy], *Riben xukan* [Japanese Studies] 6 (2006): 36.

<sup>45</sup> *Gaiko seisho 2006* [Japanese Diplomatic Bluebook], 40.

<sup>46</sup> Hoshi Hiroshi, *Abe seiken no nihon* [Japan under the Abe Administration] (Asahi Shimbunsha, 2006), 67-68.

<sup>47</sup> Relevant criticism to Japan's stance over Yasukuni may also from US think tank experts in the informal occasions. For this point, the author appreciates comments from Mr. Watanabe Tsuneo.

former US Deputy Secretary of Defense John Hamre, and former political counselor at the US Embassy in Japan William Breer.<sup>48</sup> The executive branch of the US government has been very judicious in giving any official comments on the Yasukuni controversy between China and Japan.<sup>49</sup> On December 8, 2005, US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns expressed concern about the history problem between China and Japan during his meeting with Maehara Seiji, the former president of the DPJ. Burns only stressed that the United States hoped that the dispute could be settled by the efforts of the two countries.<sup>50</sup> In addition, as mentioned earlier, Washington did not positively respond to China's request to pressure Japan over the Yasukuni issue in April 2006.<sup>51</sup> As Michael J. Green, the former senior director for Asian affairs at the National Security Council (NSC) in the Bush administration, pointed out, Washington hoped that the Yasukuni dispute could be settled by Japan itself, not by pressure from any other country. Green stressed that Japan would not benefit from the Yasukuni problem because diplomatically the issue could be utilized by China against Japan.<sup>52</sup> The official statements released by the White House soon after Koizumi's sixth visit to Yasukuni Shrine in 2006 confirmed Green's analysis. On August 15, 2006, the White House spokesperson openly clarified that the President did not intend to interfere in the Yasukuni

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<sup>48</sup> For a general introduction to the US view of the China-Japan Yasukuni controversy, see Mike Mochizuki, "Beikoku wa dou miteirunoka" [How the United States Views (the Yasukuni Problem)], *Ronza* (September 2006): 66-73; The *Mainichi Shimbun* also published a detailed special report on how the US views the Yasukuni issue. See *Mainichi Shimbun*, January 1, 2006, morning edition, 1-2; *Mainichi Shimbun*, January 30, 2006, morning edition, 1-2; For criticism, for example, in April 2006, Henry J. Hyde sent a letter to Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert, demanding Koizumi not be invited to give a speech at Congress during his June visit to the United States, unless Koizumi pledged that he would not pay a shrine visit after returning home. The former US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage pointed out in an interview by *Sankei Shimbun* on July 20, 2006 that the historical narrative adopted by the Yushukan, a war museum within Yasukuni Shrine, would hurt the feelings of American and Chinese. However, Armitage also expressed that Japan should not compromise to China's pressure over the Yasukuni issue during TBS news program *News 23* on May 30, 2005. Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Kurt Campbell explicitly expressed a critical view of Yushukan and pointed out that US silence over the Yasukuni issue does not mean Washington supports Tokyo's stance. For details on Campbell's view, see an interview by Tatsumi Yuki, *Ronza* (September 2006): 74-79.

<sup>49</sup> For example, during a press conference after the US-Japan summit held in Kyoto in November 2005, US Ambassador to Japan Thomas Schieffer avoided direct comment on the Yasukuni problem. But in 2006, Ambassador Schieffer expressed a negative view of Yushukan during an interview by Japanese TBS television on July 12, 2006. For details, see *Mainichi Shimbun*, August 10, 2006, morning edition, 2.

<sup>50</sup> *Mainichi Shimbun*, January 1, 2006, morning edition, 2.

<sup>51</sup> According to a researcher in the American Enterprise Institute, visitors from China to their think tank started to raise the Japanese nationalism issue frequently during the Koizumi era. See *Mainichi Shimbun*, January 30, 2006, morning edition, 2

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

controversy and the dispute should be settled by the countries involved—China, South Korea and Japan. In responding to questions about the US government's view toward the next Japanese prime minister's stance on the Yasukuni issue, the spokesman avoided direct commentary, stressing that it was an issue that should be left to Japanese politicians.<sup>53</sup>

Second, the analysis focusing on US influence fails to explain why criticism from the United States did not work for Koizumi but did for Abe. Criticism from former diplomatic officials and scholars in the United States surfaced in early 2006. These criticisms, however, did not interfere with Koizumi's last visit to Yasukuni Shrine that year. During the US-Japan summit held in Kyoto on November 16, 2005, Koizumi openly claimed that he would continue to visit Yasukuni Shrine in spite of President Bush's entreaty against it.<sup>54</sup> Considering the similar climate and circumstances of the Koizumi and Abe administrations, the analysis focused on the role of the US is not able to explain the inconsistency of Japan's response to Chinese pressure.

## Conclusion

As seen in the previous analysis, political survival analysis, which stresses the domestic legitimacy of individual leaders, can offer a logical explanation to Japan's responses to Chinese pressure over the Yasukuni issue during the Abe administration. This article suggests that the low domestic cost of international cooperation in terms of office-seeking is what led Abe to compromise to China's pressure over the Yasukuni issue. Ceasing visits to Yasukuni Shrine allowed him to avoid potential criticism from his opponents within the LDP during the presidential election and helped foster diplomatic reconciliation with China in 2006, which in return offered Abe an opportunity to broaden his domestic coalition within the LDP before the upcoming upper house election. The power rivalry in office-seeking was found to be a vital factor behind Japan's cooperative policy towards China vis-à-vis the Yasukuni issue during the Abe administration.

The case of Abe also has a profound implication for the study of Japan's China policy in general. As shown in the case study in this paper, domestic political rivalry of individual leaders, rather than foreign strategic calculation to China, was

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<sup>53</sup> *Yomiuri Shimbun*, August 16, 2006, accessed May 12, 2007, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/feature/fe6700/news/20060816i102.htm>.

<sup>54</sup> *Kyoto News*, January 21, 2006, accessed August 12, 2008, <http://www.47news.jp/CN/200601/CN2006012101004377.html>. Koizumi himself introduced this part of conversation with US president George W. Bush during a speech in Kagoshima after he retired from prime minister in July 2007. See *Yomiuri Shimbun*, July 24, 2007, morning edition, 4. Also see *Mainichi Shimbun*, February 3, 2006, morning edition, 2.



at the heart of Japan's policy toward China over the Yasukuni issue. Abe utilized the seemingly nationalistic and sentimental controversy over Yasukuni Shrine for his domestic purposes. Thus, Japan's China policy in certain issue areas may not necessarily follow a unified China policy, but may, with little thought of China itself, be guided by a strategy for winning support at home.

Other aspects of Japanese domestic politics are also relevant. After studying the Chinese fishing boat collision incident near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in 2010, Wan, for instance, pointed out that we may also take into account other factors in Japanese party politics that may further complicate the relations of the two countries.<sup>55</sup> Here, I briefly suggest two additional aspects of Japanese domestic politics for further research:

### **1) The frequent change of prime ministers / Regime Transition**

Japan has unusually unstable leadership, with prime ministers cycling through rather frequently in the past decade. Unstable leadership may cause inconsistency in foreign policy, leading to misperceptions or miscalculations of previously settled issues. In addition, the regime transition from LDP to DPJ in Japan has also posed a major challenge to the consistency of the country's China policy. For instance, it is open to doubt whether the LDP is well organized in terms of communication with the DPJ on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute with China. The Chinese fishing boat collision incident in 2010 indicated that the DPJ's top leaders may not have fully understood the complexity of the island dispute with China, resulting in Chinese fury.

### **2) The conflict between the ruling party and elite bureaucrats**

The issue of coordination between the ruling party and elite bureaucrats on foreign affairs has long been one of the central problems of the Japanese political system. It is imperative that whether the role of decision maker on the Japanese side is well coordinated, and that diplomatic message is being well received by the key person on the Japanese side. For instance, during the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands fishing boat incident in 2010, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not properly inform the Kan administration about the Chinese protests. It was also reported later that it was bureaucrats specializing on China, rather than the party leaders in Kantei, who played the decisive role in communicating with the Chinese government.<sup>56</sup> Clearly, a lack of coordination within Japanese government could pose a

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<sup>55</sup> Ming Wan, "Japan's Party Politics and China Policy: The Chinese Fishing Boat Collision Incident," George Mason University, accessed February 3, 2012, [http://www.iss.u-tokyo.ac.jp/democracy/doc/Paper\\_Wan.pdf](http://www.iss.u-tokyo.ac.jp/democracy/doc/Paper_Wan.pdf)

<sup>56</sup> "Gaimushou ga hanatta chuugoku misshi" [The Secret Messenger from the Foreign Ministry], *Asahi Shimbun Weekly AERA*, November 8, 2010, 19-22.

major problem to decision-making in Japan's China policy, and this issue is worth further detailed investigation in the future.

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