

North-East Asia and Japan Yasukuni Shrine: Protests over Abe's revisionism

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China, S. Korea alarmed about 'Abe colors'

BEIJING/SEOUL — China and South Korea have not officially reacted to the April 28 ceremony in Tokyo to commemorate the anniversary of Japan's restoration of sovereignty and its return to the international community after World War II.

But Chinese media quoted their Japanese counterparts' reports on the ceremony at the Parliamentary Museum, and remained vigilant about the conservative "Abe colors" exhibited by Japan's prime minister, with the state-run Chinese Central Television saying the event represents a move to try to amend Japan's postwar Constitution.

Chinese news organizations reported on the ceremony in a matter-of-fact manner, and appeared to closely watch how Japan will act at a time when senior Japanese officials have been visiting China one after another. Among those to visit has been Toshihiro Nikai, acting chairman of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) General Council, who is widely considered a pro-China lawmaker.

The Hong Kong magazine Fenghuang Weishi reported in its latest issue published April 25 that political parties in Okinawa Prefecture seeking the Ryukyu Islands' independence have won sizable voter support in local elections and some Chinese experts and military personnel are questioning the ownership of not only the Senkaku Islands, known in China as Diaoyu, but also the Ryukyu Islands.

The magazine has expressed strong interest in developments in Okinawa, saying it is necessary to

get an answer about disputed territories from history and reality by checking how the Ryukyu Islands have become present-day Okinawa Prefecture and how local residents view the Ryukyu independence movement.

In South Korea, the sovereignty restoration ceremony itself was no issue. A Tokyo correspondent for a South Korean daily said he followed the ceremony to see if Abe and other top government officials would make any controversial remarks about perceptions of history.

South Korea's distrust of the Japanese prime minister is deepening due to his recent remarks about his views of history. If South Korea cannot trust the Abe government over historical awareness, bilateral cooperative ties may be impaired on the issue of North Korea. The foreign ministers of China and South Korea agreed during a meeting on April 24 to open a hot line between them.

South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se had planned to visit Japan on April 26 but dropped the plan after Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Taro Aso visited Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine.

According to Japanese and South Korean officials, the two countries were unable to announce Yun's itinerary because officials could not predict what Prime Minister Abe would do during an annual spring festival at Yasukuni Shrine on April 21-23. South Korea bitterly reacted when Aso, the Abe Cabinet's No. 2, visited the Shinto shrine where Class A war criminals are enshrined along with the war dead.

There were no signs of behind-the-scenes dialogue between the two countries over the Yasukuni issue, highlighting once again that there is no unofficial channel of communications between Tokyo and Seoul.

Mainichi Shimbun, April 29, 2013

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130429p2a00m0na011000c.html>

Inada becomes 4th Abe Cabinet minister to visit Yasukuni Shrine

TOKYO (Kyodo) — Japanese administrative reform minister Tomomi Inada visited the war-related Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo on Sunday, becoming the fourth minister of the Cabinet of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reported to have done so, sources close to the matter said.

Her visit came after Internal Affairs and Communications Minister Yoshitaka Shindo visited the Shinto shrine on April 20 and Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso and Keiji Furuya, state minister in charge of handling the issue of North Korea's past abductions of Japanese nationals, did so on April 21.

The shrine visits have angered China and South Korea, both of which suffered under Japan's wartime aggression and view the shrine as a symbol of Japanese militarism. Convicted Class-A World War II war criminals along with the nation's war dead are enshrined at Yasukuni.

South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung Se has canceled a trip to Japan that was being arranged for later this month, after media reports about the Cabinet members' visits to the shrine.

Abe told reporters Sunday, "We will make efforts to improve the Japan-China and Japan-South Korea relationships," adding his government will "deal calmly" even if it face various challenges and problems related to the issue.

Abe's remarks to reporters in Tokyo were viewed as softer than his remarks during Diet sessions in which he defended his ministers, saying there was no problem for Cabinet members to visit the Yasukuni Shrine, even if it triggers criticism from China or South Korea.

"My ministers will not yield to any kind of intimidation," Abe said during a session of parliament Friday. "It's a matter of course to secure the freedom to express one's respect and worship to the precious souls of the war dead."

Abe's latest remarks came after the U.S. government informally conveyed its concern to Tokyo over his controversial remarks on the country's history, as well as Cabinet ministers' visits to the shrine, saying they could lead to destabilization in East Asia. The U.S. government's concern was conveyed through the Japanese Embassy in Washington, Japan-U.S. diplomatic sources said Thursday.

Kyodo News, April 29, 2013

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130429p2g00m0dm001000c.html>

South Korea's parliament adopts resolution slamming Japan

SEOUL (Kyodo) — South Korea's parliament adopted a resolution Monday slamming Japan's "recent moves to glorify its militaristic past," Yonhap News Agency reported.

The resolution passed the National Assembly with 238 votes in support from the 239 members at the session, the South Korean news agency said.

One member abstained.

"(The Japanese Cabinet's) irrational and rash acts and words are a diplomatic provocation with serious negative consequences for future-oriented ties between South Korea and Japan and the establishment of peace in Northeast Asia," Yonhap quoted the resolution as stating.

It also called on "responsible" Japanese to stop paying respects to war criminals and stop making "absurd" statements that "deny a past that cannot be denied."

"We strongly urge (Japan) to apologize sincerely and reflect deeply on Japan's past, which caused extreme pain to numerous people," the resolution said, according to Yonhap.

Tension between South Korea and Japan escalated last week after some Japanese Cabinet ministers, including Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso, visited Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo which honors the country's war dead and 14 convicted war criminals.

Both South Korea and China condemned the visits as signs Japan has "not repented" for wartime atrocities.

More than 150 Japanese Diet members visited the shrine later in the week, further angering South

Korea, which had already canceled a planned visit to Japan by its foreign minister as a protest against the shrine visit by Cabinet ministers.

Feelings ran even higher in South Korea after Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said in the Diet that the definition of “aggression” has yet to be fixed and defended the shrine visits.

Yonhap reported the only South Korean assembly member not to support the resolution against Japan’s actions was Kim Gyeong Hyeop of the opposition Democratic United Party.

He said, “I agree with the resolution in general...I demanded a ban on Japanese Cabinet members and politicians entering South Korea, but it was left out, so I abstained in protest.”

Kyodo News, April 30, 2013

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130430p2g00m0dm003000c.html>

South Korea slams Japan’s sovereignty commemoration as ‘incomprehensible’

SEOUL (Kyodo) — South Korea on Tuesday criticized Japan’s commemoration of the day it recovered its sovereignty after its defeat in World War II, calling it “incomprehensible” in view of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe recent remarks about Japan’s past actions, which angered South Korea and China.

“It is truly incomprehensible because Japan celebrated its restoration of sovereignty while saying that its history of forced occupations and invasions into other countries can look different depending on which side views them,” Foreign Ministry spokesman Cho Tai Young was quoted as saying by Yonhap News Agency.

Cho was alluding to Abe’s recent questioning of the word “invasion” during a parliamentary meeting, suggesting that its definition is vague academically and internationally, and depends on from which side one views the situation.

Abe’s statement was taken in Seoul to imply that he does not regard Japan’s militaristic past, including the 1910-1945 colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula, as an aggressive act.

Japan recovered its sovereignty on April 28, 1952, when the San Francisco Peace Treaty took effect, ending World War II and the seven-year occupation by the U.S.-led Allied Forces.

Kyodo News, May 1, 2013

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130501p2g00m0dm027000c.html>

No need to explain Japan constitutional revision to China: Abe

JEDDAH, Saudi Arabia (Kyodo) — Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said Wednesday he sees no need to explain to China and South Korea his cherished goal of rewriting Japan's pacifist Constitution.

"It is our country's Constitution, so it is not an issue that needs to be explained" to China and South Korea, Abe told reporters accompanying him on his visit to Saudi Arabia.

To achieve the goal of revising the Constitution, Abe said he will aim to secure a two-thirds majority in this summer's upper house election.

He also said any reaction from China or South Korea over his attempt to achieve the revision would "not influence" the course of political discussions.

Abe's comments came as relations with China and South Korea have become frayed over territorial rows and recent visits by some of his Cabinet ministers to the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, where Japan's war dead are honored along with convicted war criminals.

China and South Korea, which see the shrine as a symbol of Japan's past militarism, have been irked by Abe's right-leaning political stance.

The Liberal Democratic Party, headed by Abe, believes that the current Constitution was created under the heavy influence of the U.S. occupation and it is no longer sufficient to "protect the people, territory and sovereignty."

Among many constitutional amendment plans, the ruling party aims to revise the war-renouncing Article 9 to enable the Self-Defense Forces to become a full military.

Abe, who has until now focused more on reviving Japan's economy, suggested that whether it is necessary to rewrite the war-renouncing Constitution would be a major issue to be debated by political parties in the run-up to the House of Councillors election.

The prime minister, whose Cabinet has enjoyed high approval ratings since its formation in December, said "there is no change" regarding the LDP pushing for constitutional revision in the next national election.

"I want to start with Article 96," he said, referring to the provision that states constitutional amendments must be backed by a vote of at least two-thirds of all the members of each house of parliament.

Abe has been hoping to relax the requirement stipulated in the article to make it easier to rewrite the Constitution, which has not been amended since it was enforced in 1947.

Together with its junior coalition partner the New Komeito party, the LDP returned to power after three years in opposition following a landslide victory in the House of Representatives election in December.

The New Komeito party, backed by the major lay Buddhist organization Soka Gakkai, has adopted a cautious stance on revising the Constitution

But Abe's LDP can rely on the support of the Japan Restoration Party and other political groups to achieve the two-thirds majority in the more powerful lower house.

Abe said he wants to discuss constitutional issues with his coalition partner “with sincerity.”

Abe, who is on a four-nation tour through Saturday, was in Saudi Arabia after visiting Russia.

He again showed his strong desire to settle a long-standing territorial dispute with Russia involving four islands off northern Japan during his premiership.

Abe said the dispute dating back to the end of World War II will not be solved unless he and Russian President Vladimir Putin “make decisions.”

The dispute over the ownership of the islands — Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan and the Habomai islet group — which are known as the Northern Territories in Japan and the Southern Kurils in Russia, has prevented the two countries from signing a postwar peace treaty.

Putin mentioned to Abe during their talks Monday in Moscow that Russia has previously settled some of its border issues with other countries by splitting the disputed areas evenly, according to a Japanese government source.

Abe stopped short of confirming whether Putin made reference to Russia’s previous resolution of territorial disputes and said that Japan’s policy of seeking the return of all four islands and then signing a bilateral peace treaty remains intact.

Kyodo News, May 2, 2013

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130502p2g00m0dm013000c.html>

Ministers’ Yasukuni visits draws mixed reaction from parties

TOKYO (Kyodo) — Ruling and opposition parties showed mixed reactions Monday to visits over the weekend to the war-related Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo by Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso and two other Japanese Cabinet ministers, which triggered protests from China and South Korea.

A senior official of the New Komeito party, a coalition partner of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, criticized the visits to the shrine by the three members of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s Cabinet, saying it was a “self-satisfying” move “meant to live up to expectations of conservatives who support the LDP.”

Referring to Japan’s already strained ties with China and South Korea over territorial disputes, the New Komeito official said the Cabinet members’ decision to visit the shrine was “politically wrong.”

The New Komeito official said the ministers’ visits could negatively affect Japan’s economic, trade and cultural ties with its neighbors and damage national interests.

Yasukuni enshrines convicted Class-A war criminals from World War II along with Japan’s other war dead. Repeated visits to the shrine by Japanese leaders have angered China and South Korea, both of which suffered under the Japanese military during the war.

South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung Se has canceled his scheduled trip to Japan this week in protest at the three ministers’ Yasukuni visits, while China has made solemn representations to

Japan over the “negative behavior” of the Japanese side.

Banri Kaieda, leader of the major opposition Democratic Party of Japan, accused the three ministers of causing the cancellation of Yun’s Japan trip and urged other members of the Abe Cabinet not to visit the shrine, saying those in power should “behave from a broader point of view.”

Kazuo Shii, chief of the Japanese Communist Party, called Yasukuni “an unconventional shrine that glorifies and touts Japan’s past militarism, which caused a war of aggression.” Shii rapped the ministers’ visits, saying the Cabinet members justify the nation’s wartime invasion of other countries.

But Yoriyori Matsuno of the opposition Japan Restoration Party said it is “natural to pay respect to those who perished for our country.”

Osaka Gov. Ichiro Matsui, who serves as secretary general of the opposition party, also showed understanding of the ministers’ shrine visits, saying it is “wrong to deny our ancestors’ contributions to the country and not to offer prayers for them.”

Kyodo News, April 23, 2013

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130423p2g00m0dm038000c.html>

Japan lawmakers visit war shrine amid rows with China, S. Korea

TOKYO (Kyodo) — A group of 168 Japanese ruling and opposition party lawmakers visited the war-related Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo on Tuesday, stirring a further backlash from China and South Korea at a time when ties with them have already soured over territorial issues.

The number of lawmakers participating in the mass visit to the shrine — which came after Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made offerings and three Cabinet ministers paid homage there over the weekend — was the largest since 1989, accounting for nearly one-fourth of Japan’s total parliamentary seats of 722.

“It’s common in any country that a parliamentarian offers prayers for the souls of the departed war heroes who gave their lives up in defense of his or her country, so it’s a very natural act,” Hidehisa Otsuji, the group’s head and an upper house member from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, told reporters after the visit.

“The angry reactions (of China and South Korea) are not readily comprehensible,” Otsuji said.

The shrine visits have angered China and South Korea, both of which suffered under Japan’s wartime aggression and view the shrine as symbolic of Japanese militarism.

South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung Se has canceled a trip to Japan scheduled for later this month.

A South Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman told a news conference on Tuesday that the lawmakers should “regret deeply” visiting the shrine and the Japanese government needs to think about why the minister’s trip has been cancelled.

A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman criticized the visit by saying, "No matter how and under what title they made the visit, offering prayers at the shrine means essentially they are trying to deny the history of militarism and invasion."

But the three ministers, including Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso, on Tuesday tried to fend off criticism that their weekend visits to the shrine will undermine Japan's diplomatic relations with its Asian neighbors.

"I visit (the shrine) two or three times a year," Aso, who doubles as finance minister, said at a press conference. "I don't think (the visit) will have an influence on our diplomacy" with other countries such as China and South Korea.

The other two ministers are Keiji Furuya, state minister in charge of dealing with North Korea's past abductions of Japanese nationals, and Internal Affairs and Communications Minister Yoshitaka Shindo.

The cross-party group pays homage at the controversial shrine during its spring and fall festivals as well as on the Aug. 15 anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II, with around 30 to 80 lawmakers joining in recent visits.

This time, Senior Vice Finance Minister Shunichi Yamaguchi and Senior Vice Environment Minister Shinji Inoue as well as LDP policy chief Sanae Takaichi were among the participating lawmakers.

The number was the biggest since the group started keeping records in 1989, apparently because many conservative politicians, mainly from the LDP headed by Abe, won parliamentary seats in the general election in December.

The previous high was in April 1997 when 152 parliamentarians visited the shrine. It is the first time since October 2005 that the number has topped 100.

The Shinto shrine enshrines convicted Class-A World War II war criminals along with the nation's war dead and is seen by China and South Korea as a symbol of Japan's past militarism.

On Tuesday, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said Japan respects freedom of religion, and that visits to the shrine should be left to the discretion of those who wish to make them.

Suga, Japan's top government spokesman, also said that visits to the shrine should not impact on foreign policies.

This time, Abe only sent the shrine an offering of a "masakaki" tree traditionally used in rituals celebrated by Japan's Shinto religion with his name written below his title of prime minister.

But it remains uncertain whether he will forgo visiting Yasukuni on Aug. 15 or during the shrine's autumn festival.

During his previous stint as prime minister from 2006 to 2007, Abe did not visit Yasukuni after repeated visits by his predecessor Junichiro Koizumi had angered Japan's neighbors.

He visited the shrine last October during the autumn festival in the capacity of LDP leader.

Since becoming prime minister for the second time last December, Abe has said it was "extremely regrettable" that he could not visit the shrine when he was previously in office.

Abe seems likely to make a careful decision over a visit to the shrine at a time when Japan's relationship with China has deteriorated over the Japanese-administered Senkakus Islands in the East China Sea. The uninhabited islets are claimed by China, where they are known as Diaoyu.

Relations with Seoul have also been strained by a dispute over South Korean-controlled islands in the Sea of Japan, called Dokdo in South Korea and Takeshima in Japan.

Trilateral summits involving Japan, China and South Korea have been held every year since 2008 in around May, but the date has not yet been fixed for this year in a sign of the chilly atmosphere.

Kyodo News, April 23, 2013

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130423p2g00m0dm040000c.html>

China makes solemn representations to Japan over Yasukuni visits

BEIJING (Kyodo) — Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said Monday that China has made solemn representations to Japan over the “negative behavior” of the Japanese side with respect to visits by Japanese Cabinet members to the controversial Yasukuni war shrine over the weekend.

Hua stressed at a press conference that the issue of Yasukuni Shrine is connected to whether the Japanese government correctly faces its history of militarist aggression and whether it can respect the feelings of victimized countries.

“Japan can open a future by reflecting deeply on and looking squarely at the history of its past aggression,” she said.

On the cancellation of a trip to China planned for May by a nonpartisan group of Japanese lawmakers friendly with China, Hua avoided commenting on whether the cancellation was connected with the visits to the shrine by Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso and two other Japanese Cabinet ministers.

The leader of the Diet members' group said earlier Monday that the trip was cancelled due to difficulties in arranging meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping and other senior officials.

Yasukuni enshrines convicted Class-A war criminals from World War II along with Japan's other war dead. Visits to the shrine by Japanese leaders have angered China and South Korea, both of which suffered under the Japanese military during the war.

Kyodo News, April 23, 2013

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130423p2g00m0dm041000c.html>

South Korea calls on Japan to reflect on Yasukuni visit

SEOUL (Kyodo) — The South Korean Foreign Ministry said Tuesday that Japan must reflect deeply on a visit earlier in the day by a nonpartisan group of 168 Japanese lawmakers to the war-related Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo.

Speaking at a news briefing, ministry spokesman Cho Tai Young also said, “Some say there may be a different view on history, but what’s right is right and what’s wrong is wrong.”

Cho said Japan should show reflect on why neighboring countries are criticizing high-ranking Japanese officials’ visits to Yasukuni Shrine and a scheduled visit (by South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung Se) to Japan has been called off.

The lawmakers’ visit followed those by three Cabinet ministers and offerings made by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe over the weekend.

The shrine visits to Yasukuni by the three ministers and the offerings by Abe angered China and South Korea, both of which suffered under Japan’s wartime aggression and view the shrine as symbolic of Japanese militarism.

South Korea announced Monday that Yun had canceled his scheduled trip to Japan this week in protest at the visits by the Japanese Cabinet members.

Kyodo News, April 23, 2013

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130423p2g00m0dm080000c.html>

Japan PM defends shrine visits amid tensions with China, South Korea

TOKYO (Kyodo) — Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said Wednesday there is no problem for his Cabinet members to visit the war-linked Yasukuni Shrine, even if there is criticism from China or South Korea.

“My ministers will not yield to any kind of intimidation,” Abe said during a session of parliament. “It’s a matter of course to secure the freedom to express one’s respect and worship to precious souls of the war dead.”

Abe made the remarks at a time when China and South Korea, which see Yasukuni as a symbol of Japan’s past militarism, have sternly protested against the visits to the Tokyo shrine by Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso and two other Cabinet members last weekend, as well as Tuesday’s mass homage there by 168 Japanese lawmakers.

Yasukuni honors Japan’s war dead and convicted Class-A war criminals from World War II. Repeated visits to the shrine by Japanese leaders have angered China and South Korea, both of which suffered under the Japanese military during the war.

During the session of the upper house’s budget panel, Abe said one of his important jobs is “to protect the pride (of the Japanese people) built on history and tradition and to protect national

interests.”

The prime minister, who has been enjoying high public approval ratings since his inauguration in December, said that “it is wrong to think that diplomatic relations will go well” if his government stops making efforts to pay more respect to Japan’s tradition.

Aso, who doubles as finance minister, also justified his visit, telling the committee, “No country bans the government from paying respect to those who sacrificed their precious lives for their country. It is a natural duty as a citizen.”

The visits by Aso, Keiji Furuya, state minister in charge of dealing with North Korea’s abductions of Japanese nationals, and Internal Affairs and Communications Minister Yoshitaka Shindo were made when Japan’s ties with China and South Korea were already strained over territorial issues.

Concerns are growing even in Japan among some opposition lawmakers, business leaders and citizens that the shrine visits by the three ministers will further delay mending relations with the two neighboring countries.

But Abe apparently could not care less about such worries. He said “it is necessary to examine” when China and South Korea “suddenly” started protesting against visits to Yasukuni.

Abe pointed out that South Korea’s criticism came to the fore during President Roh Moo Hyun’s five-year administration through 2008.

Abe, who did not visit the shrine this time, also said that China did not make any protest when Japanese Class-A war criminals were enshrined there in 1978.

Timed with its spring festival, instead of visiting the shrine, Abe made an offering of a “masakaki” tree traditionally used in rituals celebrated by Japan’s Shinto religion, with his name written below his title of prime minister.

Kyodo News, April 24, 2013

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130424p2g00m0dm091000c.html>

Abe war comment roils S. Korean media — Newspapers have a field day with Diet remark

Tokyo has again been forced into damage control over issues of history as Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s remarks on Japan’s wartime aggression Tuesday triggered big headlines in South Korea.

“Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe denied the fact of aggression itself in answering a question in the Upper House on April 23,” read a translated article posted Wednesday on the Japanese-language website of the major South Korean newspaper Chosun Ilbo.

The Chosun Ilbo quoted experts as saying Abe may have “denied” Japan waged a war of aggression to shed its “reputation as war criminal country” and thereby rearm and become a country “that can wage a war” again.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide stressed Wednesday that the policy of regarding South Korea and China as key partners is unchanged, saying he believes only “fragmentary parts” of Abe’s remarks were reported.

“We don’t want (history issues) to affect our entire bilateral relationships” with China and South Korea, Suga told a news conference. “Our policy to strengthen our bilateral relationships has not changed at all.”

On Tuesday during an Upper House session, Abe was asked to comment on the 1995 statement by then-Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama, who straightforwardly apologized for Japan’s “colonial rule and aggression,” which “caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of many countries.”

Abe didn’t elaborate, but he did claim that the definition of “aggression” in general has yet to be “firmly determined” by academic experts or the international community.

What is described as aggression “can be viewed differently” depending on which side you’re on, Abe said.

Major South Korean newspapers slammed Abe on their front pages Wednesday, adding to the strain over Sunday’s visit by Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso and scores of other lawmakers to war-related Yasukuni Shrine.

Murayama’s statement, which has been officially endorsed by every Cabinet since, including Abe’s own, has been regarded as a key apology for Japan’s wartime aggression in other parts of Asia as well as its colonial rule over the Korean Peninsula.

Three Cabinet ministers and 168 other Diet members have visited Yasukuni Shrine in the past few days, enraging China and South Korea.

The visits drew flak from the Japanese media as well, as Japan needs close cooperation from China and South Korea to deal with North Korea’s belligerence.

South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung Se canceled a meeting with Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida planned for later this week, and a three-way summit with South Korea and China in May is expected to be canceled or postponed.

Reiji Yoshida, *Japan Times* Staff Writer, April 24, 2013

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/04/24/national/abe-war-comment-roils-s-korean-media/#.UYOPqUpOj1U>

North Korea calls Yasukuni offering, visit ‘intolerable insult’

PYONGYANG (Kyodo) — North Korea’s official Korean Central News Agency on Wednesday published a commentary criticizing the offering by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to Yasukuni Shrine and visits to the war-related shrine by Cabinet members, saying such actions are an “intolerable insult and a wanton challenge” to North Korea and Asian countries.

The commentary by KCNA marks the first response by the North Korean side to the shrine visit by

the ministers and the offering of a “masakaki” tree by Abe.

It called Yasukuni Shrine a “symbol of aggression and massacre” and said the actions of the premier and ministers brought into relief “the black-hearted intention of the Abe Cabinet to make the roots of militarization struck invariably and more deeply in all fabrics of Japan’s society with Yasukuni Shrine.”

Kyodo News, April 25, 2013

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130424p2g00m0dm092000c.html>

South Korea summons Japanese envoy to protest Abe’s remarks over Yasukuni

SEOUL (Kyodo) — South Korea’s Foreign Ministry on Thursday summoned Japan’s ambassador in Seoul to lodge an official protest against Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s remarks defending his Cabinet members’ recent visits to the war-related Yasukuni Shrine.

The protest was filed with Ambassador Koro Bessho a day after Abe, speaking in parliament in the wake of protests from South Korea and China over the shrine visits, said his ministers “will not yield to any kind of intimidation” and are free to “pay respects and worship the precious souls of the war dead.”

He also raised eyebrows in South Korea and other neighboring countries that suffered from Japanese military aggression in the past by suggesting that what constitutes an “invasion” really depends on the point of view of individual countries as there is no internationally fixed definition.

First Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kyou Hyun told the Japanese envoy that South Korea “strongly expresses regrets over Japanese government and political leaders’ distorted view of the history and anachronistic words and deeds,” according to Yonhap News Agency.

“It can never be understood the Japanese society put such a high value on honesty and trust, while closing the eye and the ear to the history of aggression and colonial rule,” Kim was quoted as saying.

Bessho told Kim he will convey the South Korean position to the Japanese government.

Later Thursday, South Korea’s Foreign Ministry spokesman also criticized Abe’s remarks in a similar tone.

“Japan should behave after clearly acknowledging its misdeeds as an aggressor and that’s very important to develop relations among countries,” spokesman Cho Tai Young told a news briefing.

Cho added that South Korea has told Japan “of the importance of having a correct recognition of the past history.”

The latest visits to Yasukuni Shrine were made Friday through Sunday by three Cabinet members including Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso, while 168 lawmakers paid homage there en masse on Tuesday.

Yasukuni honors convicted Class-A war criminals from World War II along with Japan’s war dead.

Repeated visits to the shrine by Japanese leaders have angered South Korea and China,

The Korean Peninsula was under Japan's harsh colonial rule between 1910 and 1945.

In Tokyo, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga reiterated that he saw no problem with people paying tribute to those who sacrificed their lives for the country.

At the same time, the top government spokesman said, "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."

"South Korea and China are Japan's important neighbors and Japan does not wish that its ties with them will be affected," he said.

On Wednesday, South Korean President Park Geun Hye expressed concern over Japan's apparent lean toward the right, saying that is "not desirable for Japan" because it will complicate its relations with other countries in the region.

"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," she said in a meeting with managing editors of media organizations, according to Yonhap News Agency.

"Japan should move along with international society in a harmonious way," Park was quoted as saying.

On Thursday, South Korea's ruling party chief called for a resolution at the United Nations to rein what Seoul sees as Tokyo's fresh attempts to gloss over Japanese wartime atrocities, Yonhap reported.

"Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's remarks that he was doubtful of the exact definition of 'invasion' 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 Woo Yea, chairman of the ruling Saenuri Party, was quoted as saying.

"It is necessary to draw discussions about and a resolution against Japan's history perceptions at the U.N., which run counter to its charter on peace and security," said Hwang, who leads a South Korea-Japan parliamentary league.

Kyodo News, April 25, 2013

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130425p2g00m0dm053000c.html>

U.S. airs concern over Abe's remarks, ministers' Yasukuni visit

WASHINGTON (Kyodo) — The U.S. government has informally conveyed concern to Tokyo over controversial remarks by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on the country's history, as well as his Cabinet members' recent visits to the war-related Yasukuni Shrine, Japan-U.S. diplomatic sources said Thursday.

The U.S. administration of President Barack Obama relayed the concern to the Japanese government through a diplomatic channel, saying that Abe's remarks and the Yasukuni visits could lead to destabilization in East Asia.

Japan's neighboring countries, particularly China and South Korea, are wary of Abe's historical view. Recent visits by some of Abe's Cabinet members including Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Taro Aso drew sharp criticism from Beijing and Seoul.

Abe also defended these visits, saying, "My Cabinet members will not give in to any threats."

The Tokyo shrine, which honors convicted Class-A war criminals from World War II along with Japan's other war dead, is seen as symbolic of Japanese militarism by China and South Korea which both suffered under Japan's wartime aggression.

According to the sources, the Obama administration conveyed the concern through the Japanese Embassy in Washington.

Asked to comment on the issue, State Department acting deputy spokesman Patrick Ventrell told a daily briefing that his department "did not issue a formal protest" to the Japanese Embassy.

But Ventrell urged Japan to resolve these issues with its Asian neighbors in a calm manner.

"Broadly speaking, where we've been on these issues is that we stated many times we hope the countries in the region can work together to resolve their differences in an amicable way and through dialogue," he said.

Noting that China and South Korea have expressed concerns on these issues, the spokesman said, "We believe that strong and constructive relations between the countries in the region promotes peace and stability."

Earlier this week, Abe told the House of Councillors' Budget Committee that his Cabinet "has not necessarily inherited" Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama's statement in 1995 apologizing for Japan's wartime aggression in Asia, which had been endorsed by successive governments for nearly two decades.

Washington has been frustrated by continued tensions between Japan and its neighbors — China and South Korea — over the historical issues and respective territorial disputes at a time when the United States want them to stand firm together in dealing with North Korea's security threats.

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<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130426p2g00m0dm001000c.html>

Yasukuni visits make unified response to N. Korea difficult

At a time when North Korea's erratic behavior has underscored the need for cooperation in Asia, Japan's delicate ties with China and South Korea have become even more tenuous amid increasing displays of nationalism by the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

The latest cooling of relations, precipitated by visits over the weekend by several members of the Abe Cabinet to war-linked Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, has raised fears Japan will see its regional influence dissipate more as China's clout grows apace.

This week's standoff between Japan and China over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, with as many as eight Chinese government vessels cruising in Japanese waters around the disputed islets for hours on Tuesday, has cast a further pall over dealings between the world's second- and third-largest economies.

With a key election coming up in July, Abe is eager to maintain the backing of nationalist voters, the main supporters of the Liberal Democratic Party, observers say.

On Wednesday, Abe rebutted Chinese and South Korean criticism of his ministers' visits to Yasukuni, telling a parliamentary session in a defiant tone that his ministers "will not yield to any form of intimidation. . . . It's natural to uphold the freedom to express feelings of respect to the respected souls."

South Korea said Monday that Foreign Minister Yun Byung Se had canceled his scheduled trip to Japan this week to protest the visits of three ministers to the Shinto shrine, which honors Class-A war criminals from World War II and millions of Japan's war dead.

The reaction of Seoul, which appeared particularly offended by the visit of Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso, the No. 2 man in the Cabinet, surprised Tokyo because Abe, who visited the shrine regularly before becoming prime minister, refrained from doing so this time.

"While in August, when the Democratic Party of Japan was still in power and several Cabinet ministers visited the shrine, the government of then-President Lee Myung Bak did not react as sharply," a high-level Japanese official said, expressing discomfort with the reaction from the government of new President Park Geun Hye.

China has also registered its displeasure with the Shinto visits, saying that the issue of Yasukuni is connected to whether Tokyo acknowledges its history of militarist aggression and whether it can respect the feelings of the victimized countries.

It did not help that a total of 168 Japanese lawmakers visited the shrine as a group on Tuesday, the largest since 1989, when an interparty league of parliamentarians began keeping records.

The controversial shrine is viewed by Japan's neighbors as the spiritual backbone of the country's militarism in the first half of the 20th century. In 1978, it enshrined 14 people convicted as Class-A criminals by the Tokyo war crimes tribunal, including former Prime Minister Gen. Hideki Tojo. Shinto rules also required that the populace worship the emperor as a god.

While some Japanese officials have sought to mitigate the furor among its neighbors, others, including Abe, who is known for his hawkish views, have expressed increasing frustration with China and South Korea.

At a Diet session Tuesday, Abe said the word aggression is not uniformly defined internationally, and that the evaluation of such an act varies "depending on the side from which you look at it."

Abe also told the Diet on Monday that his Cabinet "has not necessarily inherited" Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama's statement in 1995, which unequivocally apologized for Japan's wartime aggression in Asia. The statement had been endorsed by successive governments for nearly two decades.

Abe's remarks have further angered Japan's neighbors, prompting a warning from South Korea's Park that if Tokyo "turns rightist, its relations with many countries in Asia will become difficult, which is not desirable for Japan as well," the Yonhap news agency reported.

Japan's chilly ties with China and South Korea have left some Japanese officials concerned about an unraveling of cooperation among Japan, the United States and South Korea in responding to North Korean threats, the most pressing matter in the region at the moment.

'It is North Korea, which is developing nuclear weapons, that stands to gain from squabbling between Japan and South Korea,' a Foreign Ministry source said. 'The United States, our ally, must feel like asking what in the world Japan and South Korea are quarreling over.'

China may also reach out to South Korea to form a united front over the Yasukuni issue, observers say.

Daisuke Yamamoto, Kyodo News, April 26, 2013

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/04/26/national/yasukuni-visits-make-unified-response-to-n-korea-difficult/#.UYRsK0pOj1U>
