Japan’s China policy on Yasukuni under Abe (2012–2015): a political survival interpretation

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ABSTRACT
This article examines Japan’s different responses toward China’s pressure over the Yasukuni issue during the second Abe administration. It is generally taken for granted that Japan’s official responses to China’s pressure over the issue are determined by the personality of individual leaders and the emergence of Japanese conservative nationalism. With the examination of cases during the second Abe administrations since 2012, this article offers an alternative interpretation by highlighting the rationality of prime minister and the primacy of domestic political survival of individual leader. The article suggests that domestic political legitimacy of individual leaders is a vital factor that affects Japan’s China policy on Yasukuni.

KEYWORDS
Political survival; China; Japan; Yasukuni Shrine; Sino-Japanese Relations

In the end of 2013, Japan’s national broadcaster NHK released a documentary on Japanese politics since the end of Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) governments. The documentary demonstrated how Abe Shinzo, the one who resigned his premiership in 2007 due to medical reason, had been struggling from the bottom of his political failure and gradually become a candidate for Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)’s president for his second premiership. According to the documentary, Abe had been visiting a temple at Yanaka in Tokyo frequently and working hard to recover mentally and physically by constantly practicing Zen meditation (zazen). The major lesson that Abe had learned from his political failure between 2006 and 2007, according to the documentary, was that he gradually realized that front-loading controversial security and constitutional issues in his first term had a negative impact on his government because the electorate in Japan showed little interest in these issues. Instead, advised by his senior political aides, Abe started to understand that offering a brand new policy on economic growth and employment would be the key to his return to power in Japanese politics, as well for his more ambitious blueprint on security reform and constitutional amendment in long term.¹

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¹The name of the temple called Zenshoan, a place that many Japanese political and business figures often visit to practice Zen meditation, including former Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro. For details on this NHK documentary broadcasted on 22 December 2013, see the official homepage of NHK (http://www6.nhk.or.jp/special/detail/index.html?aid=20131222; accessed on 17 August 2015).

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In December 2012, Abe was reelected as Japan’s prime minister after a landslide victory in the general election. In contrast to his first term in office, bilateral relations between China and Japan had become much more complex due to the emergence of the territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2010 and the nationalization of those disputed island initiated by a DPJ prime minister Noda Yoshihiko in 2012. During this period, Abe’s differing policy responses toward Yasukuni visits between 2012 and 2015 offer an interesting comparison in understanding Japan’s China policy. In contrast to the policy option he chose in 2006–2007, one year after returning to office, Abe made a surprise visit to the Yasukuni Shrine on 26 December 2013. The visit was highly controversial outside of Japan, inviting furious protests not only from China and South Korea but also the United States. The U.S. embassy in Tokyo made the unprecedented move of releasing a public statement noting that the U.S. government was disappointed by Abe’s provocation of the sentiments of surrounding countries. In the following two years, however, Abe decided not to visit the Yasukuni Shrine. Why did Abe visit the Yasukuni Shrine in 2013 but cease to visit it in 2014 and 2015? What is the vital factor that caused this policy variation? In the following part, I will first explain the theoretical perspective that this article employs. Then, I will offer a coherent analysis to explain why Abe responded to Chinese pressure over the Yasukuni issue differently and how the perspective of political survival can help us to understand the policy variation of Japan’s China policy on Yasukuni since 2012.

1. Domestic source of Japan’s China policy: a political survival framework

Domestic politics has been the central theme in studying a state’s foreign policy in the literature of international relations studies. This article proposes that Japan’s China policy can be understood through the perspective of the domestic legitimacy of individual leaders. As early as the sixteenth 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. In this sense, Machiavelli suggests that it is much safer for a ruler to be feared than loved.

The importance of political survival of individual leaders during international negotiation was frequently discussed by international relation 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 diplomatic success would in return empower their domestic authority. Robert Putnam points out

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2Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 48.
3For detailed discussion on the importance of power to a ruler, see Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter 10, Chapter 15 and Chapter 17.
4Gourevich, “The Second Image Reversed,” 905.
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. 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. 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.

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. 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 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.

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

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5 Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics,” 456–9.
6 Milner, *Interests, Institutions and Information*, 11.
7 Ibid., 46.
8 Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival*, 7–15.
“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.”⁹ This article 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 re-election 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 extrapolate the general assumption of the political survival approach into the specific context of Japanese political system in the post-Cold War era, the source of Japanese prime ministers’ legitimacy focuses more on the impact of approval rating (naikaku shijilitsu) to the elite politics within the ruling party since the electoral reform in 1994. After the reform, the role of Japanese prime minister in the ruling party has been significantly empowered due to electoral system reform, with a combined electoral system initiated in the House of Representatives with single-member districts and proportional representation in regional constituencies. Under the new electoral system with the introduction of 300 single-member districts, the prime minister has the authority to endorse party members as official candidates and to allocate the political funding of the LDP. Different with the medium-sized election district system, only a single LDP candidate runs in the each lower-house election district, which causes Japanese prime ministers (or the party leader) be able to discourage party members who do not follow his policy preference by not nominating him/her or allocating political funding for their national election campaign (for example, Koizumi’s election on postal service privatization in 2005). In addition, the function of Japan’s Prime Minister’s Office (or Kantei) was also significantly empowered during the administrative reform during the Hashimoto administration (January 1996 to July 1998). After the reform, Japanese Prime Minister would be able to create an extra-ministerial policy-making mechanism by selecting advisors outside the government and build his own professional advisory team for policy analysis, policy coordination, and administrative support. Observers on Japanese politics view this institutional change as a step toward the presidentialization of prime minister in the Japanese politics.

On the other hand, Japanese prime ministers are also being constrained due to the linkage of their approval rating and their domestic political survival within the party. As the candidate run their election under the name of the party in the single-member district, the role of prime minister (party leader) plays the decisive role during the electoral campaign. If the Prime Minister’s approval rating declined significantly, he will be perceived by the party members not be able to

⁹Geuss, History and Illusion in Politics, 31.
lead the party to win the next national election, undermining his domestic legitimacy within the ruling party. In this sense, maintaining a higher approval rating, rather than seeking support from the faction leader, becomes the vital interest of Japanese prime ministers. The approval rating matters of prime minister's legitimacy because it exerts powerful influence to the elite politics within the ruling party. By maintaining a stable and higher approval rating, prime ministers will be perceived to be able to lead the party to win the next national election, and thus gaining wider support within the party members in grassroots. With this background, Japanese prime ministers would usually consider a policy prudently when they decide whether the policy would benefit their domestic political welfare.

2. Explaining Abe’s different policy on Yasukuni (2012–2015)

2.1. A political survival interpretation

Japan’s response to China’s pressure over the Yasukuni issue during the Abe administration (2012–2015) has interesting implications. This case is selected for study because it meets important methodological criteria. Before assuming premiership, Abe has consistently supported prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni Shrine. He was widely regarded as a postwar-born Japanese prime minister determined to lead 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. 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 choose to visit the Yasukuni Shrine in 2013, a policy choice differing to that of his first term between 2006 and 2007? Why, by contrast, did Abe restrain from visiting the controversial Shrine in 2014 and 2015? While many observers concluded that Abe’s Yasukuni visit was related to his political preference on historical revisionism, most of them have overlook his policy variation on the Yasukuni issue as seen between 2013 and 2015. The policy variation between two recent cases during the second Abe administration offers an interesting comparison and a test of the interpretation based on the political survival approach highlighted in this study. For many watchers of Japanese politics and foreign relations, Abe’s Yasukuni visit in 2013 was definitely a sign of his problematic view toward Japanese wartime history from the perspective of historical revisionism and his ambitions on restoring Japan’s pride and dignity since 1945. Others also speculated Abe’s Yasukuni visit was a direct response to China’s

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10 For the methods of case studies, see Van Evera, Guide to Methods, 50–8; George and Bennett, Case Studies and Theory Development, 153–56.

11 For Abe’s supportive attitude toward Yasukuni visitation, see Abe and Noda, “Seijika toshite Yasukuni mondai o kangaeru”; Abe and Kasai, “Nichu wa seirei kinetsu de teido yoi”; Abe and Okazaki, “Chugoku no yokokuruma wo yurushitenarumonoka.”
assertive stance in the East China Sea by creating an Air Defense Identification Zone in November 2013. These interpretations, however, fail to explain Abe’s differing approaches to the Yasukuni problem between 2013 and 2015. In the following part, I will demonstrate how changes to Abe’s domestic calculations interact with his China policy on Yasukuni between 2013 and 2016.

2.2. Abe’s unexpected Yasukuni visit in 2013: the politics within the LDP

To investigate the cause behind the policy variation of Abe’s policy toward China on Yasukuni, we must firstly understand the essence of the domestic political agenda of the second Abe administration since 2012. Improving Japanese economic growth and employment has been a major pillar of Abe’s domestic political support in his second term. According to a poll in 2012, economic growth and employment accounted for 49% of domestic political support, and foreign and security policy issue for only 10%. Abe well understood that demonstrating a strong vision concerning the economic issue to Japanese voters, symbolized as “Abenomics,” would be a key strategy for maintaining his approval rating and his domestic legitimacy as both prime minister and LDP party leader. This domestic support, then, could be utilized for his core strategic blueprint on security reform and constitutional revision of Article 9 in long run.

“Abenomics” is based upon “three arrows”: fiscal stimulus, monetary easing, and growth strategy. According to the Economist, “Abenomics” is a “mix of reflation, government spending, and a growth strategy designed to jolt the economy out of the suspended animation that has gripped it for more than two decades.” The economic policy of the Abe administration, particularly the performance of stock market, has been regarded as the key indicator of the Abe administration that directly related to his approval rating. According to Tahara Seiichiro, a well-known Japanese journalist, a monitor was provided in the Prime Minister’s office to enable the Kantei to grasp the latest situation of the Japanese stock market. The new policy-making mechanism within the Kantei, according to a senior journalist from Kyoto News agency Tazaki Shiro, was formed by six major members within the Prime Minister’s office (Kantei). These members usually gathered in the Prime Minister office every morning to discuss the details of every policy. Besides Abe, the members of the core decision-making team include Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide, Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretaries including Kato Katsunobu, Seko Hiroshige, and Sugita Kazuhiro, and Abe’s executive

12For example, see comments by political commentators such as Yayama Taro and Yagi Hidetsugu. http://www.zakzak.co.jp/society/politics/news/20131226/plt1312261820005-n1.htm (accessed on 30 June 2015).
13Lin, “Behind Rising East Asian Maritime Tensions,” 481.
14“Abe’s Master Plan”, The Economist. 18 May 2013. http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21578044-shinzo-abe-has-vision-prosperous-and-patriotic-japan-economics-looks-better (accessed on 23 June 2015).
15The Diamond Weekly, a Japanese economic journal, published a special issue on the inside story of the decision-making relating to the Abe administration’s economic policy and its relations with the legitimacy of his cabinet. The reports mentioned that there was a consensus inside the cabinet that the performance of the Japanese stock market is the lifeline of the Abe administration. Core Cabinet members puts the economic issue at top priority during the daily briefing and the making of economic policy was strictly managed by the Kantei, rather than the bureaucrats in the Ministry of Finance and so on. For details, see Diamond Weekly, 26 July 2014, 26–51.
16The interview of Tahara Seichiro by Tase Yasuhiro, a well-known Japanese journalist from Tokyo TV, 23 August 2014. The linkage between the performance of Japanese stock market and Abe’s approval rating was also confirmed by Tahara during the interview.
secretary Imai Takaya, who were all Abe’s close allies and supporters during his first administration.\textsuperscript{17}

The approval rating is the vital indicator that influences the political survival of Japanese prime ministers within the ruling party since the 1994 electoral reform. In late 2013, benefited by “Abenomics,” Abe’s approval rating rose to a relatively high level, which formed a precondition for his upcoming Yasukuni visit. One may argue that the intention of Abe’s visit of Yasukuni was to seek public support among Japanese voters. In late 2013, however, we can see that the Abe administration had already reached a relatively high level of public support. According to the survey conducted by Kyodo News in mid-December of 2013, the approval rating of the Abe administration was 54.2%, with 33% of respondents disapproving of Abe.\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, Abe’s approval rating only increased by 1% after his Yasukuni visit in December 2013.\textsuperscript{19} With the LDP occupying the majority of the upper and lower houses, Abe had already enjoyed a stable political environment regarding elite politics around the end of 2013. With those domestic preconditions, Abe was able to visit the Yasukuni by following his own political faith and domestic calculations without the fear of any opposition within or outside the LDP.

A detailed investigation offered by Tazaki revealed that the decision to visit the shrine in 2013 was related Abe’s domestic calculation on intra-party politics within LDP. According to Tazaki, almost all core members of the decision team inside the Kantei believed that a Yasukuni visit would not be an appropriate choice during that time but they were not be able to stop Abe from visiting the Shrine. The Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide suggested to Abe that he should visit Yasukuni only when the administration is about to end. Vice Cabinet Secretary Imai also promised to the officials from MOFA that he would stop Abe from visiting the Shrine.\textsuperscript{20} What kind of group did Abe intend to please for his domestic interests within the LDP? As Tazaki reveals, the preferences of hawkish conservatives within the LDP needed to be placated by Abe. Those members constituted the core group that supported the return of Abe in 2012 during the LDP presidential election, in which Abe’s votes were able to surpass those of former Minister of Defense, Ishiba Shigeru. This group of hawkish conservatives in the LDP members was exactly the core members who strongly supported the prime ministerial visit to the Yasukuni Shrine. According to Tazaki, after Abe returned to the Kantei after his Yasukuni visit, Suga was told by Abe that he could now calmly continue his work (ochitsuite shigoto ga dekiru).\textsuperscript{21}

2.3. The cease of Yasukuni visits in 2014 and 2015: Abe’s domestic politics and Japan’s China policy on Yasukuni

On 13 July 2014, Mainichi Shimbun published an article on the dialogue between the vice president of LDP Komura Masahiko and former president of National Defense University Iokibe Makoto. In the article, Komura reveals that during his visit to Beijing

\textsuperscript{17}Tazaki, Abe Kantei no Shotai, 29.
\textsuperscript{18}Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 30 December 2013, 2.
\textsuperscript{19}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20}Tazaki, Abe Kantei no Shotai, 152.
\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., 154.
in May 2014, he had expressed the view to the Chinese leader that he believed that Abe would not visit the Yasukuni Shrine anymore.\footnote{For details of Komura’s interview, see \textit{Mainichi Shimbun}, 13 July 2014. http://mainichi.jp/shimen/news/20140713ddm001010153000c.html (accessed on 30 June 2015).} Why did the Abe administration start to adjust its policy toward China on Yasukuni in 2014? What is the major reason that would cause this policy change?

To answer these questions, one still needs to trace the domestic context that Abe faced in the spring of 2014. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the economic policy of the second Abe administration, symbolized by “Abenomics,” has been the source of Abe’s high approval rating and domestic legitimacy. Since April 2014, however, “Abenomics” started to show its weakness after the raise of the consumption tax from 5% to 8%. In the summer, the official data released by the government showed that Japan’s second-quarter gross domestic product had shrunk by 7.1%.\footnote{“Japan Second-Quarter GDP Shrinks 7.1 Percent, Adds to Doubt Over Inflation Goal,” \textit{Reuters}, 8 September 2014. http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/08/us-japan-economy-gdp-idUSKBN0H300320140908 (accessed on 30 October 2015).} Furthermore, in August, the reinterpretation of Japan’s right of collective defense also caused Abe’s approval rating started to shrink from around 50% in April to 44% in July (Figure 1).

A decline in approval rating has a profound impact on Japanese prime ministers. It may gradually undermine party member support within the ruling party. Following the logic of “loss reduction,” a political leader might often demonstrate some diplomatic achievements to seek domestic support. Similarly, as “Abenomics,” the major policy area that lays the foundation for Abe’s domestic support, started to reveal its weakness in April 2014, the Abe administration intended to improve its domestic support by achieving a diplomatic success through foreign relations affairs. For Abe, the first potential option was a surprise visit to North Korea. As a senior politician who accompanied Koizumi’s trip to Pyongyang in 2002, Abe well understood the past experience that successfully dealing the problem of missing Japanese hostages and even a surprise visit to North Korea would definitely help him regain his domestic

![Abe’s approval rating 2014](https://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/yoron/political/2014.html)

\textbf{Figure 1.} Abe’s approval rating in 2014.

Source: Poll data by NHK Broadcasting Cultural Research Institute, 2014 (https://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/yoron/political/2014.html; aAccessed on 16 December 2015).
support. However, Washington noticed this move at a very early stage and objected to this diplomatic initiative. On 7 July, U.S. State Secretary Kerry urged Abe to refrain from visiting the North Korea, as such a trip might undermine the policy coordination involving Tokyo, Washington, and Seoul to rein in Pyongyang’s missile and nuclear programs.24

As the diplomatic initiative to North Korea came to a standstill due to the warning from Washington, improving relations with China – a foreign policy issue that would not be objected to by the United States but also gain limited support within Japan – became an option for Abe. Compromising on the Yasukuni visit could benefit Abe on two domestic objectives in the short term: (1) to use the foreign policy fulfillment to improve his declining approval rating and (2) to strategically use the improved domestic support for his snap election planned in December 2014.

Abe’s diplomatic initiative toward Beijing started in April 2014. The Japanese Foreign Ministry invited Hu Deping, the son of the former reformist Chinese leader Hu Yaobang who had the direct access to China’s top leadership, to Tokyo on April 6–13. It was reported that Prime Minister Abe, Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide, and Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio met with Hu on 8 April at the Prime Minister’s Office and exchanged views on how to improve China–Japan relations.25 Following Hu’s visit to Tokyo, on 5 May 2014, a group of LDP Diet members of the Japan-China Friendship Parliamentarians’ Union led by vice president of the ruling LDP Komura Masahiko visited Beijing. Beijing treated Komura’s group well, arranging a meeting with Zhang Dejiang, the third-highest-ranking official in the Communist Party to meet with Komura for one hour. Both sides exchanged their opinions on the Yasukuni issue and territorial dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, but remained different understanding toward the issue. A Japan specialist in China who attended the meeting with the LDP delegation in May recalled that the message delivered by Komura basically demonstrated the Japanese side had no intention to compromise on both Yasukuni and territorial issues at the beginning. Instead, Tokyo was consistently calling for “dialogue without preconditions” and “restoring bilateral ties to a strategic mutually beneficial relationship.”26 It was considered that Komura’s visit was a warm-up visit and intended to pave way for Abe’s visit to Beijing and a possible China–Japan one-on-one top leader summit during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum that was scheduled to be held in Beijing in November 2014.

Unlike the situation in 2006, Beijing consistently urged Japan to treat the Yasukuni problem properly and admitted that there was a territorial dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. On 7 July 2014, during a memorial event related to the Sino-Japanese War, Chinese President Xi Jinping made an open statement on the history issue related to Japan. Beyond Japan’s expectation, Xi gave a warning to Japan by saying that “anyone who intends to deny, distort, or beautify the history of aggression will never be tolerated by Chinese people or people of any other country.” Xi further blamed

24“U.S. Warns Abe Against Visiting North Korea,” Japan Times, 16 July 2014. http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/07/16/national/politics-diplomacy/u-s-warns-abe-visiting-north-korea/#.VkXK72aCZEI (accessed on 29 October 2015).
25“High Hopes for Princeling Hu Deping’s Tokyo Visit,” South China Morning Post, 10 April 2014. http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1474609/high-hopes-princeling-hu-depings-tokyo-visit (accessed on 3 June 2015).
26Huaizhong, “The Trend of Sino-Japanese Relations in 2014,” 159.
“a small minority of people” who sought to deny history for stoking modern-day regional tensions and undermining regional trust.27

Given China’s tough stance, Abe started to seriously seek the possibility of realizing a China–Japan top summit during the APEC meeting by making a limited concession. Fukuda Yasuo, a former prime minister of Japan and also a senior LDP politician who has maintained good relations with China, was chosen by Abe to probe Beijing’s bottom line. Fukuda, indeed, started to contact Chinese high-level officials in June, soon after the Komura’s visit to Beijing in May. It was reported that Fukuda was informed through his personal channel that Xi had started to request State Councilor Yang Jieshi and Foreign Minister Wang Yi to articulate a plan to improve China’s diplomacy with surrounding countries, which also included Japan. Sensing the changing atmosphere of Chinese foreign policy, Fukuda returned to Tokyo and reported to Abe on his trip to Beijing, and suggested that it might be an opportunity for Japan to improve its relations with China.28 Given this new development, Fukuda Yasuo visited Beijing again, accompanied by Secretary General of the National Security Council Yachi Shotarou, on July 28. This time, Fukuda conveyed the message directly from Abe and was able to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping for about an hour. Fukuda introduced the idea offered by Abe that China and Japan need to have a top leader summit first and discuss to establish a crisis management mechanism on the territorial disputes over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Xi gave a positive response to Fukuda’s suggestion by showing certain level of understanding. On the other hand, Xi also expressed doubts to Fukuda, indicating that the Chinese side is not so sure about what kind of attitude would Japan want to take in the future in dealing with China. Xi also showed suspicion to the reinterpretation of the right of collective defense and Abe’s concept of active pacifism (sekkyokuteki heiwashugi). It was reported that the State Councilor Yang Jieshi and Foreign Minister Wang Yi also attended the meeting between Fukuda and Xi. Yang was later appointed as the chief negotiator on the Chinese side in handling improvements in China–Japan relations before the APEC summit in November 2014.29 On the Japanese side, Yachi, the one who had been the chief negotiator with China during the first Abe administration, naturally become the person who directly linked with Abe and negotiated with China. The Yang-Yachi diplomatic channel was thus successfully established since July 2014.

In early October, the Abe administration faced further domestic challenges due to political scandals of two female cabinet members, Industry Minister Obuchi Yuko and Justice Minister Matsushima Midori. The two female ministers were persuaded by Abe to resign in order to avoid the further damage to the administration. Abe’s approval rating suffered further. On the diplomatic front, further improvement in relations with China, a policy adjustment that would not be opposed by Washington, continued. Diplomatic meetings between China and Japan continued to be frequently held during this period of time. The Chinese Foreign minister Wang Yi, who is also a Japan expert among Chinese diplomats, met with Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio in Burma in August and in New York in September 2014. In October, Abe met with Li

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27“Xi Criticizes Anti-Japan War,” Xinhua Net. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-07/07/c_133465725.htm (accessed on 30 June 2015).
28Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 18 November 2014, 2.
29See note 19.
Keqiang, the New Chinese premier, in Italy. In later October, Fukuda visited Beijing again. On the other hand, Prime Minister Abe also avoided visiting the Yasukuni, instead sending a ritual offering during the autumn festival.

In the end of October, Fukuda again visited Beijing and met Xi to handle the China–Japan diplomatic negotiations, which had not been going smoothly. With the deterioration of China–Japan relations since 2012 due to the nationalization of Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, Beijing requested Tokyo to admit two issues to restart the top leader summit: (1) to admit that there is a dispute concerning the islands issue and (2) to promise that prime minister Abe would not visit the Yasukuni Shrine anymore. Obviously, Beijing was suspicious of Abe’s intentions due to the surprise visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in the previous year. Yachi visited Beijing again on 6 November, four days before the China–Japan top leader summit. He was treated well and met State Councilor Yang Jiechi, who has been also been regarded as the senior advisor to Chinese President Xi Jinping over the foreign affairs issue. With several rounds of negotiations, the so-called “Four-Point Principled Agreement on Handling and Improving China-Japan Relations” was eventually reached in the predawn of November 7. The consensus was declared by both sides as the diplomatic preparation for the upcoming Abe-Xi summit that was scheduled to be held on November 10. Both sides have come to share views on the following points over the controversial issues in the bilateral relations:

(1) Both sides confirmed that they would observe the principles and spirit of the four basic documents between Japan and China and that they would continue to develop a mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests.
(2) Both sides shared some recognition that, following the spirit of squarely facing history and advancing toward the future, they would overcome political difficulties that affect their bilateral relations.
(3) Both sides recognized that they had differing views as to the emergence of the tense situation in recent years in the waters of the East China Sea, including those surrounding the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, and shared the view that, through dialogue and consultation, they would prevent the situation from deteriorating, establish a crisis management mechanism, and avert the rise of unforeseen circumstances.
(4) Both sides shared the view that, by utilizing various multilateral and bilateral channels, they would gradually resume dialogue in the political, diplomatic, and security fields and make an effort to build a political relationship of mutual trust.

30 See “Yang Jiechi Meets National Security Advisor of Japan Shōtarō Yachi, China and Japan Reach Four-Point Principled Agreement on Handling and Improving Bilateral Relations,” the homepage of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zoom_662805/71208368.shtm (accessed on 25 June 2015).
31 Yomiuri Shimbun, 27 December 2014, 4.
32 See the official homepage of Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Japan http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page4e_000150.html (accessed on 5 May 2015). For an English translation of the speech, see official homepage offered by Kantei http://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201508/0814statement.html (accessed on 5 September 2015). Before the announcement of the speech, Abe did not seek advice from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in advance. Two bureaucrats near Abe from the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry drafted the Abe Danwa announced in August 2015. Author’s conversation with an anonymous former Japanese diplomat, Tokyo, 14 November 2015.
On the day of the meeting, Abe was left standing in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing while he waited for Xi’s entrance. After Xi entered the hall, he just shook Abe’s hand but did not smile, said nothing to Abe, and turned away. This delicate gesture displayed a highly calculated political posture that might also have been related to Xi’s domestic audience in China.33

One week after the Abe-Xi summit, on 18 November 2014, Abe announced that he would postpone the planned consumption tax hike and call a general election in the Lower House on 14 December 2014. According to Yomiuri Shimbun, Abe had linked the snap election with the China–Japan top leader summit in early November. From the perspective of Abe, there was a possibility that the deterioration of China–Japan relations caused by Abe’s Yasukuni visit in 2013 would become an issue during the upcoming general election if the China–Japan top leader summit could not be realized. The China–Japan top leader summit therefore can also be regarded as the pre-preparation for Abe’s domestic elections, and Abe had obviously anticipated the positive impact of the summit to the snap election in favor of the ruling LDP.34 At this point, very similar to the approach Abe adopted in 2006, Abe once again strategically utilized the Yasukuni issue for his domestic welfare, and this time it contributed significantly to his second term in office. The reason for Abe refraining from visiting the Yasukuni Shrine since May 2014 could then be well explained in the context of the domestic politics mentioned above.

The top leader summit in 2014 brought a relatively favorable atmosphere for both countries to manage their worsening relations in 2014. In this case, why did Abe once again refrain from visiting the Yasukuni Shrine in 2015? To tackle this puzzle, one must also look back to Abe’s domestic situation since April 2015. Abe’s moderate policy on Yasukuni was directly linked to his declining approval rating resulting from the new security bills he adopted since June 2015. During his visit to the United States in April 2015, Abe promised the U.S. Congress that he would advocate the new security bills to be passed and enact them by the end of the summer in 2015.35 The new security bills gave more emphasis to the expanding role of the Japan Self Defense Forces to support the U.S. military on a global scale. This promise, however, stimulated strong domestic backlash within Japan. Not only did the oppositional party in the national Diet condemn Abe’s way of making a promise regarding a Japanese domestic issue in the legislature of a foreign country, the general public and intellectual circle, particularly constitutional scholars, severely criticized Abe’s new security bills that would entrap Japan into American’s wars around the

33According to analysis offered by one of the Japanese journalists, the realization of the China–Japan top leader summit was welcomed by Beijing. But in public, the Chinese leader needed to create an image that China was handling requests that were originally initiated by Japan. It is a domestic public strategy that aims at avoiding domestic criticism within China on the Japan issue. See Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 18 November 2014, 2. For this domestic political struggle within the Chinese Communist Party since 2012 and its linkage with foreign affairs related to Japan, see Minemura, 13 okubun no ichi no otoko, Chapter 4 and 5. Minemura Kenji has been the senior correspondent of Asahi Shimbun on China’s politics and foreign relations.

34For details of the inside story on the negotiation between Japan and China, see Yomiuri Shimbun, 27 December 2014, 4. The report indicated that Yachi and Fukuda Yasuo were the key figures who represented Abe to negotiate with China. On the issue of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, Japan’s bottom line is that Tokyo would recognize that there was a territorial dispute between China and Japan, but Japan would not compromise over its sovereignty claims on Senkaku Islands.

35“Abes’s Visit Highlights Strong Ties with U.S., Rifts with Neighbors,” The Japan Times, 4 May 2015. http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/05/04/national/politics-diplomacy/abes-visit-highlights-strong-ties-with-u-s-rifts-with-neighbors/#.Vg4p5maCZEI (accessed on 25 October 2015).
With this as a domestic backdrop, the approval rating of the Abe administration started to decline significantly. According to a survey by NHK, Abe’s approving rating dropped from 51% in May to 37% in August. The disapproval rating rose from 32% in May to 46% in August. Other media organizations’ surveys also demonstrated a similar tendency, particularly after the passing of Abe’s security bill in the lower house in July (Figure 2).

To avoid the negative effect of the declining approval rating, once again, Abe considered improving its domestic status by making diplomatic achievements. Yachi again visited Beijing on 16–18 July and intended to discuss the possibility of a China–Japan top leader summit in Beijing during the military parade in celebration of the 70th anniversary of victory in the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. It was also reported that Yachi also informed the Chinese leadership in advance of the content of Abe’s speech for the 70th anniversary of the war and sought understanding. Beijing welcomed Yachi by offering him an unusual status. Yachi was not only able to meet Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi, but also Defense Minister Chang Wanquan and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. According to Mainichi Shimbun, Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi met Yachi for almost five hours at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing and agreed to continue bilateral dialogue. Beijing has suggested accepting Abe’s visit to Beijing under three conditions even if Abe does not attend the victory against Japan day ceremony on 3 September. According to the report, the three conditions presented by China were that Japan adheres to four political statements jointly issued by Japan and China, that Japan follows the spirit of the 1995 statement by Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi, and that Japan conveys Abe’s intention not to visit the Yasukuni Shrine.

Figure 2. Abe’s approval rating in 2015.
Source: Poll data by NHK Broadcasting Cultural Research Institute, 2015 (https://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/yonron/political/index.html; accessed on 21 December 2015).

One of the major events that caused public anger toward Abe was that three senior constitutional scholars, who were invited by the LDP to express their opinions during the National Diet, also expressed that Abe’s new security bills would violate the principle of the peace constitution in Japan. For details, see “Experts’ Tongue-Lashing Rekindles Diet Debate on Reinterpreted Constitution,” The Japan Times, 5 June 2015. http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/06/05/national/politics-diplomacy/experts-blast-constitutional-reinterpretation-lower-house-session/#.Vl2d62aCaDU (accessed on 27 October 2015).

For details on the changing approval rating in the summer of 2015, see surveys offered by NHK broadcasting cultural research institute. https://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/yonron/political/index.html (accessed on 5 October 2015).

Mainichi Shimbun, 23 July 2015. http://mainichi.jp/shimen/news/20150723ddm001030217000c.html (accessed on 2 October 2015).
is worth noting that Yachi also visited Mongolia after his trip in Beijing. Abe also sought to communicate with the North Korean leadership through the mediation of Mongolia to resolve the Japanese abductee issue, which could also contribute to his domestic support, as proven during the Koizumi era in 2002.

Abe responded to China’s demand in a skillful manner. First, in his statement on the 70th anniversary of World War, known as the Abe speech (Abe Danwa), Abe ditched key phrases that appeared in the “Murayama Speech,” including the words “remorse” and “apology,” while referencing these words in an indirect manner, which somehow fulfilled Beijing’s conditions. Second, on 15 August, Abe refrained from visiting the controversial Yasukuni Shrine and instead sent a ritual offering to the Shrine through his secretary, which also demonstrated a certain level of concern to the Chinese demand.

At the last minute, however, Abe did not accept the invitation sent by Xi to attend the 70th anniversary military parade in Beijing on 3 September. According to media reports in Japan, Beijing and Tokyo were not able to reach a consensus on the date of Abe’s visit. Beijing hoped Abe would visit Beijing on 3 September before the military parade, but Tokyo hoped to avoid giving China the impression that Japan supports China’s military expansion in the East China Sea and South China Sea. In addition, Tokyo also conceived that the ceremony was less about reconciliation and sought some adjustments to be made by the Chinese side. Beijing, however, refused to do so. It is worth noting that Abe’s approval rating rose to 43% in September, an increase of 6% compared to the previous month. This might also constitute the domestic backdrop that made Abe unwilling to make too many concessions to China.

3. Conclusion and discussion

The Yasukuni controversy during the second Abe administration from 2012 and 2015 demonstrates the importance of political survival in explaining the variation in Japan’s policy toward China on Yasukuni. In this article, we find that the decision of whether or not to visit the Yasukuni Shrine related to different domestic contexts and political calculations of Prime Minister Abe. In 2013, Abe was able to visit the controversial Yasukuni based on his own political judgment because the domestic political cost of his shrine visit was relatively low, despite the opposition within the coalition government such as from the Komeito or even from political advisors within the Kantei. In 2014 and 2015, due to the decline in approval rating on the domestic front due to the weakening performance of “Abenomics” and domestic backlash caused by the legislation of new security bills which might undermine his support within the ruling party, Abe adopted a pragmatic strategy and

39 Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 19 July 2015. http://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXLASFS19H1P_Z10C15A7000000/ (accessed on 2 October 2015).
40 During the special committee on security affairs held on 29 July 2015, Abe mentioned that China’s incursion in the East China Sea and expansion in the South China Sea were threats. Kanehara Nobukatsu, assistant to the Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary of Abe administration, reportedly also suggested to Abe that he not visit Beijing in September. Mr Kanehara is the former chief of the Foreign Ministry’s International Legal Affairs Bureau and was generally regarded as the senior advisor to Abe on the foreign relations issue. For details, see Weekly Toyo Keizai, 22 August 2015, 96.
41 Mainichi Shimbun, 25 August 2015. http://mainichi.jp/shimen/news/20150825ddm002010102000c.html (accessed on 2 October 2015).
42 See surveys offered by NHK broadcasting cultural research institute. https://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/yoron/political/ (accessed on 5 October 2015).
improved relations with China by refraining from visiting the Yasukuni Shrine. This, in
return, contributed to his performance in the snap election of December 2014, as well as to
his longer governance in Japanese domestic politics afterwards.

One may wonder what role the United States played to influence Abe’s decision on whether
or not to visit the Yasukuni Shrine. Pressure from Washington based on its grand strategy in
the Asia-Pacific region certainly matters in this round of Yasukuni controversies, particularly
after Abe’s controversial visit in December 2013. The role of the United States certainly should
not be ruled out in the case. But such argument is insufficient in the sense that it is hard to
explain why U.S. pressure failed in 2013 but succeeded in 2014. As we have seen in the
previous section, the United States has also repeatedly expressed its deep concern over
Yasukuni soon after Abe returned to office in 2012. The U.S. side had urged Japan to take a
prudent position over the issue after Aso and other cabinet members visited Yasukuni in April
2012, which is eight months before Abe’s Yasukuni visit. Despite the warning from the United
States, Abe still visited Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013 based on his own personal
judgment and domestic calculation. Several aides and advisors near Abe were seemingly
even more willing to show their dissatisfaction toward U.S. pressure publicly. For example, Eto
Seiichi, a member of the Diet’s upper house and a special aide to the prime minister, said he
was indeed “disappointed” by US criticism of Abe’s December visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in
2013, which infuriated China and South Korea. During a party gathering for the young
members of the LDP, Hagiuda Koichi, who serves as special adviser to Abe as head of the
ruling LDP, also expressed dissatisfaction toward President Barack Obama’s administration
for expressing its disappointment over the Japanese leader’s controversial visit to the Yasukuni
Shrine, saying past Republican-led US administrations would not have responded in such a
fashion. He also compared Yasukuni Shrine with Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia,
which honors US veterans, and questioned how the United States would respond if Japanese
leaders criticized a visit to Arlington.

Certainly, the author does agree that the role of the United States would be much
more important in the decision-making of Japan’s policy toward China on Yasukuni in
the future. Since the beginning of the second Abe administration to 2016, Washington
has gradually started to link the issue of the Yasukuni controversy between China and
Japan with its strategic plan in East Asia. The United States has been exerting increasing
influence over the issue due to the rapid rise of Chinese national power, hoping that
Japan’s restrained attitude over the Yasukuni issue would be helpful in forming U.S.–
Japan–South Korea security cooperation in East Asia. For the United States, a toleration
of a Japanese prime ministerial visit to Yasukuni would not only send a misleading
message to the Japanese historical revisionists, who have questioned the legitimacy of
the Far East Tribunal in the postwar era, but also endangers American strategy for
linking South Korea and Japan to be the ally for hedging against the possible threat

43“Abe Adviser’s Remarks Stir Controversy,” The Wall Street Journal, 19 February 2014. http://www.wsj.com/articles/
SB100014240527023037755045579392381356264774 (accessed on 5 June 2015). It was reported that the Mr Eto was
ordered by the Chief Cabinet Suga to delete the video expressing his dissatisfaction toward the United States that
had been uploaded on YouTube. Fearful of being further criticized by the United States, Eto’s speech was regarded by
the Japanese government as a private view and not the official stance of the Abe administration. For details, see
Nihon Keizai Shimbun, evening edition, 20 February 2014, 4.
44“Abe Aide Takes Aim at U.S. Over Response to Yasukuni,” The Japan Times, 18 January 2014. http://www.japantimes.
co.jp/news/2014/01/18/national/politics-diplomacy/abe-aide-takes-aim-at-u-s-over-response-to-yasukuni-visit/
(accessed on 15 June 2016). Also see Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 18 January 2014, 4.
from a rising China. A comprehensive framework including both domestic politics of Japanese prime minister and the U.S. factor is necessary for future research agenda on Japan’s diplomacy toward China.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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