The Politics and Strategy of Japanese Politicians’ Sensitivity to South Korean Feelings

M. Erika Pollmann

The Korean peninsula has historically played an important role in Japanese elites’ calculations of their national security. Yet, in recent years, Japanese politicians have shown a remarkable degree of insensitivity to Korean feelings. This is particularly puzzling in regards to Japan’s relationship with the South Korea because realist balance-of-power and balance-of-threat theories would predict greater Japan-South Korea cooperation due to China’s increasing military capabilities and North Korea’s development of missile and nuclear weapons. This study tries to determine what are the most important factors (international or domestic) that determine how sensitive Japanese politicians are to South Korean feelings.

This study begins with the Kim-Obuchi statement (1998), heralded as the beginning of a new era in Japan-South Korea relations, and uses visits to Yasukuni shrine as a proxy measure for Japanese politicians’ willingness to tolerate downturns in their bilateral relationship with South Korea. In other words, when Japanese politicians value a strong relationship with South Korea (unwilling to tolerate a downturn), they are more sensitive to South Korean feelings, and this can be manifested as a non-visit to the Yasukuni Shrine. Yasukuni Shrine visits are chosen for the dependent variable because they eliminate unplanned provocations, make it easier to apply two-level analysis on elected officials by eliminating intermediary bureaucratic processes, and can be measured objectively and consistently every year.

The Yasukuni Shrine is controversial within Japan itself; therefore, a necessary but insufficient condition for a shrine visit to take place is for the politician to attach a positive meaning to the shrine on a deeply personal level. Over-determined cases will not be examined in detail (e.g. Hatoyama, Kan), whereas cases where the prime minister has a weak to strong preference for making a shrine visit but did not or pledged not to will be given greater attention than they have received in the literature so far (e.g. Obuchi, Mori, Abe during his first term, Fukuda, Aso, Noda).

Independent variables considered that are expected to affect the value Japan places on strong relations with South Korea are: Japan-U.S. relations, Japan-China relations, Japan-North Korea relations, Japan-South Korea relations, and Japanese domestic politics. These variables will be analyzed with an emphasis on how each of these variables change in such a way as to either increase or decrease the diplomatic and political costs (or benefits) of a shrine visit.

The findings of this paper are correlative: the “success rate” of each independent variable was measured by the number of times the dependent variable was correctly predicted by the independent variable divided by the number of times the independent variable changed significantly over the course of the 16 years. According to these correlations, Japanese domestic politics is the variable that matters most in determining whether a politician is likely to visit the Shrine or not – as a proxy for whether the politician is sensitive to South Korea or not. The number of Diet members and Cabinet ministers was also examined, but the findings do not particularly shed new light on the question.
In conclusion, Japanese politicians’ sensitivity to South Korea seems to be based on a baseline status quo of sensitivity, expressed through non-visits. Usually prime ministers, even prime ministers with a strong preference to make visits, such as Obuchi, Mori, Aso and Noda, refrain once they attain the premiership. However, this baseline can be overcome by prime ministers who have a strong will to visit, are voluntarily “captured” by groups that share such goals, and are sufficiently popular to withstand the domestic backlash. A prime minister determined to visit is unlikely to be deterred by changes in the international environment because they have perceptions of other countries that are rather unresponsive to such changes.

In fact, the rigidity of the “quasi-alliance” structure in light of the growing military capabilities of China and North Korea may actually embolden them to make insensitive gestures, because South Korea does not have many other options in terms of regional allies either. Though an outside observer in retrospect might be able to see some change over time in Japan’s relationship with the U.S. and other countries, from the agent’s perspective, working on a time horizon of one to five years, their beliefs about the underlying nature of the regimes they are dealing with are unlikely to change. Instead, what appears to matter most is carefully choosing the timing of the visit to maximize the domestic benefits of their insensitive acts, since the costs to the relationship with South Korea are already relatively well known.

There is some good news, because based on the current trend lines, visits are unlikely to be repeated by Abe in the next few years. He has already visited once, as he most likely had planned on doing since before he was reelected (otherwise he would not express “contrition” at not visiting the first time he was prime minister), but he has never expressed the desire to make it a signature piece of his premiership. Furthermore, Japanese prime ministers are sensitive to what the public wants. With clear public disapproval for gestures that worsen relations with South Korea, Abe’s sensitivity to South Korea is only likely to increase in the future. Sensitivity to South Korea is likely to return to its baseline of non-visits, until perhaps Abe’s last month in office in 2018.

In light of these findings, there are two important lessons for U.S. policymakers. First, U.S. policymakers should not expect external threats to solve the problem of Japanese insensitivity to South Korea. Second, U.S. policymakers should not try to publicly dissuade Japanese prime ministers from visiting. If it were effective it would be worth pursuing, but to publicly pressure Japan, and have such efforts fail, exposes gaps in the U.S.-Japan relationship that other actors, such as South Korea and China, might seek to undermine. Japanese sensitivity to South Korea is not an issue that the U.S. has a lot of influence over, and the best strategy for the U.S. is to try create a clear barrier separating historical issues from security issues.