



PEACE NEGOTIATIONS  
POST-CONFLICT CONSTITUTIONS  
WAR CRIMES PROSECUTION

**Title:** The Yasukuni Puzzle: Why the United States Should not Buy into the Narrative of Japan's Rightward Drift

**Location:** East-West Center, Washington, DC

**Date & Time:** Friday, February 7, at 11:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

**Speaker:** **Dr. Yoichiro Sato**, *Professor, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University Beppu, Japan*

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**Event Summary:**

Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's late December visit to the Yasukuni Shrine invited criticism from China, Korea, and the United States. The shrine, long considered a resting place for Japan's dead, became controversial after 13 Class A war criminals were included in 1978 among the interred in the post-war years. Visits by Japanese government officials raise fears among some in the region of a tacit official reverence for Japan's militant past.

In response to Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's visit, Dr. Yoichiro Sato, professor of Asia Pacific Studies in Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, gave a speech on its political implication on the international relationship with United States, China, and Korea. He started with a brief introduction of the Shinto in Japan. Kami, which is commonly mistranslated into God, actually describes the supernatural forces beyond the action of man. According to Shinto, everything contains Kami. The Shrine is built for Kami and is almost everywhere in Japan.

Dr. Sato continued to explain why the visit to Yasukuni Shrine by the high-ranking government officials attracted criticism from other countries. Yasukuni Shrine is a war memorial for soldiers that died for their country. In 1959, 1000 Class B and Class C Japanese war criminals were quietly moved to the Yasukuni Shrine, which did not draw much international attention. In 1978, 14 Class A war criminals were moved into Yasukuni. Since then, Yasukuni has been closely

associated with the glorification of war criminals, which raised fears among some in the region.

Dr. Sato argued that the act of Prime Minister Shinzo was distinguishable from the general Japanese people. It was a gross misinterpretation by the international media that Japanese people broadly supported his visit. First, according to a poll conducted in Japan, a slight majority of people were opposed to Shinzo's visit. Second, there was no sign that the Japanese were turning rightward. The general Japanese people did not admire or glorify those war criminals, such as Tojo Hideki, the Minister of Japan during the World War II. Even some conservative politicians criticized Tojo Hideki for his hesitation in ending the war. Last but not least, Abe Shinzo was just using the visit as a political tool. On the one hand, he needed to rely on the rightwing party for votes, especially when the domestic economy was going down. On the other hand, it was a fight against China's strong opposition to admitting Japan as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

Dr. Sato concluded that Abe Shinzo's visit not only damaged its relationship with China and Korea, but also its relationship with the United States, as it signaled that Japan wanted to become autonomous and get rid of its alliance with the United States.

### **PILPG Question and Summary of Response:**

During the question and answer period, a PILPG Foreign Legal Specialist asked why Japanese people are generally friendlier to American people than to Chinese people, when historically, China did not invade Japan but the United States dropped a nuclear bomb onto Japan and killed many civilians. Dr. Sato answered that Japan and United States have gone a long way after the war. They worked closely during the Cold War and afterwards on regional security and international security issues. The United States gradually brought Japan up to be a partner. However, China and Korea have always tried to keep Japan down. This made Japanese people generally friendlier to American people than to Chinese people.