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A Presidential Visit to Hiroshima

Overview

On May 10, the White House announced that President Obama will visit Hiroshima when he travels to Japan for the May 26-27 G-7 summit, becoming the first sitting U.S. president to visit the city. In the closing days of World War II, the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing an estimated 200,000 people, about half of whom died immediately. The bombings were the two and only times that nuclear weapons have been used in war. On August 15, 1945, six days after the Nagasaki bombing, Japan surrendered to Allied Forces.

A visit to Hiroshima allows President Obama to return to the issue of nuclear disarmament that he broached in the early months of his Administration. In a speech in Prague in April 2009, he pledged to pursue an agenda that would reduce nuclear dangers and lead, in the future, to the worldwide elimination of nuclear weapons. The Norwegian Nobel Committee in 2009 awarded him the Nobel Peace Prize due in part to his advocacy for a world free of nuclear weapons. During a visit to Japan in 2009, Obama was quoted by a reporter as saying, "The memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are etched in the minds of the world, and I would be honored to have the opportunity to visit those cities at some point during my presidency."

In what some observers interpreted as a prelude to an Obama visit, on April 11, 2016, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry became the highest-level U.S. official to visit Hiroshima. He laid a wreath at the memorial site and toured the museum that portrays the destruction of the atomic bombing. Kerry visited with his counterparts from the other G7 countries (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the United Kingdom), including Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida, a Hiroshima native.

Some critics could interpret the presidential visit to Hiroshima as an implicit apology for a military decision justified by ending a devastating war and saving American lives. Further, it could unearth difficult historical issues between Washington and Tokyo that could potentially degrade the strength of the thriving bilateral alliance. In contrast, supporters see the visit as an opportunity to reiterate the President's commitment to work towards a world free of nuclear weapons, as well as a powerful demonstration of reconciliation between erstwhile enemies. The emotional element of a visit could animate domestic politics in both countries, as well as engage the international disarmament community and regional powers.

Impact on the Alliance

Recent statements by high-level Japanese officials indicate that, despite some initial ambivalence, Tokyo welcomes Obama's visit to Hiroshima as another indication of the robust health of the bilateral relationship. In the past three years, updated bilateral defense arrangements, regular and successful high-level visits, and strategic alignment have solidified the two countries' military alliance. During his visit in April 2015, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Washington's World War II memorial before expressing his "deep repentance" for Japan's actions during the war in an address to a joint meeting of Congress.

While some observers on both sides fear that re-opening painful history between the two countries carries risk of hurting the alliance, others feel that a forthright discussion of history actually could deepen trust. Supporters of the visit point to the benefits of reinforcing the Obama Administration's strategic rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific region by showcasing the strength of the partnership 70 years after the conclusion of the war. Some analysts posit that Abe may consider visiting Pearl Harbor as Prime Minister to reciprocate Obama's gesture.

> Before Secretary Kerry's visit, then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi had been the highest ranking U.S. official to visit the site, in 2008. President Jimmy Carter visited Hiroshima in 1984 after leaving office. Obama's first envoy to Japan, John Roos, was the first ambassador to attend the annual ceremonies marking the anniversaries of the bombing in Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, respectively. Current ambassador Caroline Kennedy has continued the practice.

The Politics of a Visit

Much of the U.S. media speculation surrounding the visit centers on the questions of whether it would be interpreted as an apology. The White House has been clear that Obama will not apologize but instead would offer a "forward-looking signal for his ambition of realizing the goal of a planet without nuclear weapons." During his visit, Secretary Kerry did not issue an apology. After visiting the museum that details the human suffering caused by the bombing, Kerry called the experience "gut-wrenching" and went on to underscore the importance of curbing the existence of nuclear weapons worldwide. This in some respects parallels Abe's speech to Congress in 2015, in which he reflected with remorse on the damage that Japan caused in World War II without giving an explicit apology.

Critics who charge that simply appearing at the atomic bombing memorial site would imply an apology say that a presidential visit may be particularly offensive to U.S. veteran and Prisoners of War (POW) groups. Some U.S. activists have called on Obama also to visit sites in Japan where U.S. POWs were subjected to brutal treatment.

American and Japanese views on the use of atomic weapons on Japan differ, although support for the bombings has dropped in both countries. A 2015 Pew Research Center opinion poll found that 56% of Americans thought the bombings were justified, down from 63% in 1991, while in Japan 14% thought the attacks were justified, down from 29% in 1991. The survey also revealed the U.S. public's opposition to a formal apology for the use of atomic bombs: 20% supported an apology and 73% did not.

Japanese Reaction

Opinion polls in Japan indicate that the Japanese public overwhelmingly supports (nearly 75% in a recent poll) an Obama visit to Hiroshima. Advocates of the visit argue that such a gesture could be meaningful to a public that still holds strong pacifist sentiments and is uncomfortable with some of Abe's defense reforms that have eased restrictions on Japan's military and were supported by the Obama Administration. This line of thinking suggests that paying respects at Hiroshima could, at least initially, broaden Japanese popular support for the alliance.

Others argue that an Obama visit could boost Japanese rightists who deny or downplay the atrocities committed by the Imperial Japanese military during World War II, and who argue that the U.S. imposed a type of "victors' justice" on Japan after the war. The visit, however, could also reduce the potency of hardline revisionists, who argue that Japan is blamed for its past transgressions while the United States does not acknowledge its mistakes. Abe's record suggests that while he keeps company with the right-wing of his party, he also seeks a pragmatic course to maintain his international standing and the U.S. alliance. Whether the prestige of an Obama visit would encourage Abe to moderate his more nationalistic impulses or, conversely, give him the stature to promote the historical views of more revisionist groups, remains an open question.

Regional Sensitivities and Ramifications

An Obama visit to Hiroshima could have implications for regional ties as well. Japan's contemporary relations with South Korea have been disrupted over issues surrounding Japan's record of colonialism and wartime atrocities. Many South Koreans have long maintained that Japan has not sufficiently apologized or "atoned" for its past actions. They also may feel that paying respects at Hiroshima furthers the narrative of Japan as a victim, rather than an aggressor, in World War II. South Koreans have singled out Abe as unrepentant and revisionist for his past statements. The downturn in Japan-South Korea relations after Abe took office in December 2012 became an acute concern for Washington because of missed opportunities for trilateral defense cooperation on dealing with North Korean provocations and China's rise.

Since 2014, however, Abe appears to have responded to criticism that his handling of these controversial issues could be damaging to Japan's and—to some extent—U.S. national interests. Abe has not visited the controversial Yasukuni Shrine since late 2013. The Shinto shrine was established to "enshrine" the "souls" of Japanese soldiers who died during war, and includes 14 convicted Class A war criminals. In December 2015, Seoul and Tokyo reached an agreement on how to resolve the "comfort women" issue, a euphemism that refers to the thousands of women who were forced to provide sex to Japanese soldiers. Although relations remain fragile, there is a sense that Abe has dealt with historical issues more responsibly than he did during his first year in office. Critics, however, maintain that an Obama visit would unjustly reward Abe for his own questionable record on facing history squarely. Other scholars are concerned that an excessive focus on the U.S.-Japan conflict would fix Japan's collective memory of the war as a bilateral contest and minimize Japan's aggression and invasion on the Asian continent in the 1930s.

Disarmament Agenda

Supporters see the visit as a reinforcement of Obama's Prague speech that expressed "America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons." Disarmament advocates point to Obama's success in concluding a 2015 agreement that aims to curb Iran's ability to develop nuclear weapons and the 2010 New Start treaty with Russia to reduce the number of nuclear warheads in both countries. At the same time, they express disappointment that the Administration continues to modernize nuclear weapons and that it has not pressed the Senate to consider ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. For non-proliferation groups, the symbolism of paying respects at Hiroshima could underscore the disarmament goal, however distant that reality.

The Obama Administration may be motivated to reaffirm the U.S. commitment to Japan's defense and bolster Japan's resistance to "going nuclear." Presidential candidate Donald Trump recently said he was open to the idea of Japan developing its own nuclear arsenal, prompting mainstream politicians in Tokyo to dismiss the possibility. The United States guarantees Japan's security through the 1960 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security and U.S. officials have repeatedly emphasized the American commitment to deter Japan's adversaries using the full range of U.S. capabilities. Moreover, Japan has been a leading advocate of disarmament in international fora, but some figures in the Japanese security establishment have questioned the strength of the U.S. guarantee if dependence on nuclear weapons is reduced. This anxiety is heightened by apparent advancements in North Korea's nuclear weapons program and China's possession of a nuclear arsenal.

Other countries are also alarmed by the possibility of an arms race in Asia and may seek reassurance about the U.S. commitment to nonproliferation. That concern may have spurred the UK and French foreign ministers to join Kerry at Hiroshima; until then, no foreign minister or sitting leader from a nuclear-armed nation had visited the memorial. The collective nature of that occasion could suggest that many world powers welcome an Obama visit as a means to reengage on the disarmament agenda.

Emma Chanlett-Avery, Specialist in Asian Affairs

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