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Game Theory as A Method of Analysis of Visits to Yasukuni Shrine by Japanese Prime Ministers: Case Study Based on Jun'ichirō Koizumi's Visits

Abstract

This paper aims to use game theory to analyze the decision-making process associated with Japanese prime ministers' visits to the Yasukuni shrine. The central thesis of the research is that it is possible to construct a model that enables the analysis of past visits to the shrine and assess the probability of such visits in the future. The presented research is a case study based on Jun'ichirō Koizumi's visits during his term as Prime Minister of Japan. The model used for the analysis is based on the 'chicken dilemma' and is an example of a non-cooperative and repeated game. Relying on the model also allows us to juxtapose foreign pressures with those exerted by domestic interest groups, as preliminary findings suggest that using game theory to analyze visits to Yasukuni provides a better understanding of the rationality underlying the decisions to visit the shrine. Overall, the research presented here is preliminary and should be continued to deepen the analysis and develop a more accurate model.

Keywords: *Yasukuni, politics of memory, nationalism in Japan, game theory*

1. Introduction

In September 2020, three days after officially stepping down as Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzō Abe decided to visit the Yasukuni shrine in central Tokyo. Abe announced on social media that the purpose of his

visit was to personally inform the souls enshrined there of the completion of his mission as a head of the Japanese government (Asahi Shimbun, 2020a). Abe's previous visit in December 2013, then as a prime minister, sparked strong protests in Beijing and Seoul. The United States also expressed disappointment over Abe's visit (Asahi Shimbun, 2013). During his seven years in office, Abe did not decide to revisit Yasukuni and did so only after he had resigned, which proves the still crucial symbolic significance of this shrine for Japan's international relations. Since 1985, when Prime Minister Nakasone's visit sparked protests in China and South Korea, Yasukuni has been one of the most controversial elements of Japan's memory politics.

This paper aims to analyze the decision-making process influencing visits to the Yasukuni shrine by Japanese prime ministers. The main research question is: to what extent can it be justified to use game theory to examine the processes that determine the decisions to visit this shrine? The thesis assumes that it is possible to construct a model based on game theory that would provide a basis for analyzing the rationality behind the decision-making process concerning visits to Yasukuni and assessing the likelihood of such visits in the future.

The paper is divided into two main parts. The first is an introduction to the applicability of game theory to the analysis of political decision-making processes. It also focuses on the creation of a model which would most adequately describe the decision-making process related to visits to Yasukuni. The second is a case study of the application of the model, based on Jun'ichirō Koizumi's visits to the shrine between 2001 and 2006.

2. Game theory and modeling of the decision-making process concerning Japanese prime ministers' visits to Yasukuni shrine

The fundamental issue that needs to be defined is game theory itself. The origins of game theory can be found in strategic games, such as chess, whose aim was to create models simulating real conflict situations. In the 19th century, the development of war games began exclusively for purposes of military training (Pietraś, 1997, pp. 15–16). However, if we are talking about the contemporary origins of game theory, we should first mention the 1944 work by John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern: *Theory of Games and Economic Behaviour*. Even though it focuses on the

economic aspect of game theory, it is worth noting the definitions of the essential elements of a game which they cite. According to Neumann and Morgenstern, a game consists first and foremost of specific rules which should be respected while playing. It is these rules that determine the nature of the game. Every game consists of moves which should always represent a particular choice between several options. A move is, in fact, a decision between equivalent and compliant possibilities. Finally, the choice of moves based on the same rules is called a strategy that may differ each time the game is played (Neumann & Morgenstern, 1972, pp. 48–49).

Game theory itself is defined as a theory of conflict situations that seeks to develop rules for rational action by each actor involved in the conflict (Weres, 1982, p. 21). Roger Myerson pointed out that game theory focuses on analyzing mathematical models of conflict and cooperation involving intelligent and rational decision-making actors. For Myerson, the critical point is that game theory focuses on situations in which actors make decisions that affect their mutual status. In Myerson's view, game theory is a conflict theory or an interactive theory of decision-making (Myerson, 1997, p. 1).

Whatever the definition, they assume that players have at least partially conflicting interests, that the decisions they make are rational and that the decision-making process itself can be represented by a mathematical model. When applying game theory to the analysis of political decisions, interests will naturally be understood as political interests that are also at least partly conflicting. Based on the level of contradiction of these interests, a vital division of the games themselves is made. The more conflicting the interests are, the more conflictual the game is. The closer the interests, the more likely it is to choose a cooperative game, assuming, of course, that players are rational enough to recognize this community of interests (Weres, 1982, pp. 29–31).

A model is a basis for analysis using game theory. By their very nature, models represent a certain simplification and, therefore, always leave out specific elements they consider less important. Models are not a complete reflection of real situations, but through a certain degree of conventionality, and hence clarity, they facilitate the understanding of the phenomenon which they refer to (Myerson, 1997, p. 2). Therefore, models used in game theory are a kind of abstraction whose main advantage is that they allow us to deepen our understanding of real situations. The main category by which we should judge models is their usefulness, i.e., how accurately they describe the situation we want to analyze. In the case

of game theory, most models are essentially a graphical representation of what can be represented descriptively. However, the use of models is more practical as it allows the decision steps to be shown in an accessible and more readable way (Osborne, 2003, pp. 1–2).

The second key issue that needs to be addressed is rationality. Myerson notes that a player acts rationally when they make decisions based on their goals. This means making decisions that are designed to result in profit maximization. Rationality is therefore measured by the utility. The more rational a decision is, i.e., the higher the profit/payoff can be obtained from it, the more rational it is. However, the utility should be treated as relative, depending, among other things, on the level of uncertainty associated with the dependent and independent variables. Each player may seek to estimate the probability of a given situation and, on that basis, assess which decision from their perspective will be the most rational (Myerson, 1997, pp. 3–4). A key assumption of rationality in game theory is that when faced with a choice between more than two options, assuming that we have full information about them, the player is able to assess not only which of them they prefer the most but is also able to arrange these options in a certain hierarchy (McCarthy & Meirowitz, 2007, pp. 6–7). The relationship between decisions or, in other words, preferences, is visually represented by a payoff matrix. This matrix is a combination of preferences with assigned values that determine which of the possible decisions is considered the most beneficial (Osborne, 2003, pp. 4–5).

The understanding of rationality mentioned above assumes that all players will make decisions based on reliable and comprehensive information. This will allow them to obtain utility maximization, i.e., the highest payoff. John Harsanyi is the author of a thesis on 'mutually expected rationality', which assumes that since all players base their decisions on rational calculations and on reliable and exhaustive information to which all of them have access, none of the players should be surprised by the decision of their opponents (Harsanyi, 1977, pp. 11–12). However, when analyzing political conflicts, a more appropriate concept seems to be 'bounded rationality', which considers the cognitive limitations of the actor making the decision. This concept assumes that due to insufficient information, or lack of confidence in its reliability, the actor may not be following only the maximum utility when making a decision, but rather the satisfying utility, which is essentially a compromise between the goal they wish to achieve and the uncertainty associated with the potential consequences of our decisions (Simon, 1997, p. 291).

Another theoretical concept that helps to explain rationality behind the decision-making process is the expected utility theory. It stresses that the decision maker, a player in the case of game theory, bases decision on weighted sums by adding the utility values of outcomes by their respective probability. As such, expected utility can differ significantly from utility under certainty (David, Hands & Maki, 1998, p. 171). Expected utility theory is also related to two kinds of risks. Ordinary risk addresses uncertainty arising from randomness, while strategic risk arises from the interaction between players in a game. Risk can affect preferences, and therefore affect the decision-making process (Roth, 1988, pp. 57–58). When under risk, players will calculate their expected utility considering a probability of occurrence of a situation they would most likely prefer to avoid. This 'risk aversion' will therefore influence the decision-making process and affect the rationality behind each move in the game (Quiggin, 1993, pp. 7–8).

When creating a model itself, one of the first steps is to define the players. In the situation under analysis, one of the players is relatively easy to define, and for the purposes of this research, it is assumed to be the prime minister of Japan. Obviously, the prime minister does not make decisions alone, but it is prime ministers' visits to Yasukuni that generate the most international controversy. The second player for the purposes of this research is the government of the People's Republic of China, hereafter referred to simply as China. This is a simplification as well, as there are numerous factors influencing decision-making in Beijing. However, since the Chinese position regarding Yasukuni has historically been unified, such an assumption seems to be justified.

Once the players are identified, it is necessary to determine whether the situation in question can be analyzed using a non-cooperative or cooperative game model. As already mentioned, the nature of the game is largely determined by the convergence of interests. Therefore, it can be assumed that while the Japanese side may wish to visit the Yasukuni shrine, both for its symbolic significance and for domestic political gain, the Chinese side is strongly opposed to such visits. It will therefore be justified to rely on a non-cooperative game (Mesquita, 2014, pp. 57–58).

Let us now consider what a simple model of conflict around visits to the Yasukuni shrine might look like. Since we are dealing with a non-cooperative two-player game, we will use the so-called 'chicken dilemma' as a basis. In its traditional form, it describes a situation in which we have, for example, two cars speeding towards each other from opposite

directions. Each of them can either dodge, saving his life but losing prestige (peace strategy P), or decide to drive ahead, counting on the opponent to turn (war strategy W). In case both drivers choose the war strategy, the game ends in a collision (Pietraś, 1997, pp. 57–58). In international relations, this game is mainly used as a basis for analyzing behavior during a military crisis. The game starts when at least one of the players threatens to choose a war strategy, hoping that the opponent will yield and choose a peaceful strategy. Despite its conflicting nature, this game does not exclude some form of cooperation. This is possible when players become aware of the scale of potential losses if each of them chooses a war strategy. While in cooperation, neither side gains anything, but neither loses anything either. If both decide to choose a war strategy, both sides are pure losers. Cooperation is therefore not the expression of common interests but rather the consequence of mutual threats, which both sides perceive as credible. Only the perspective of impending catastrophe forces them to choose a peaceful strategy (Snyder, 1971, pp. 82–87).

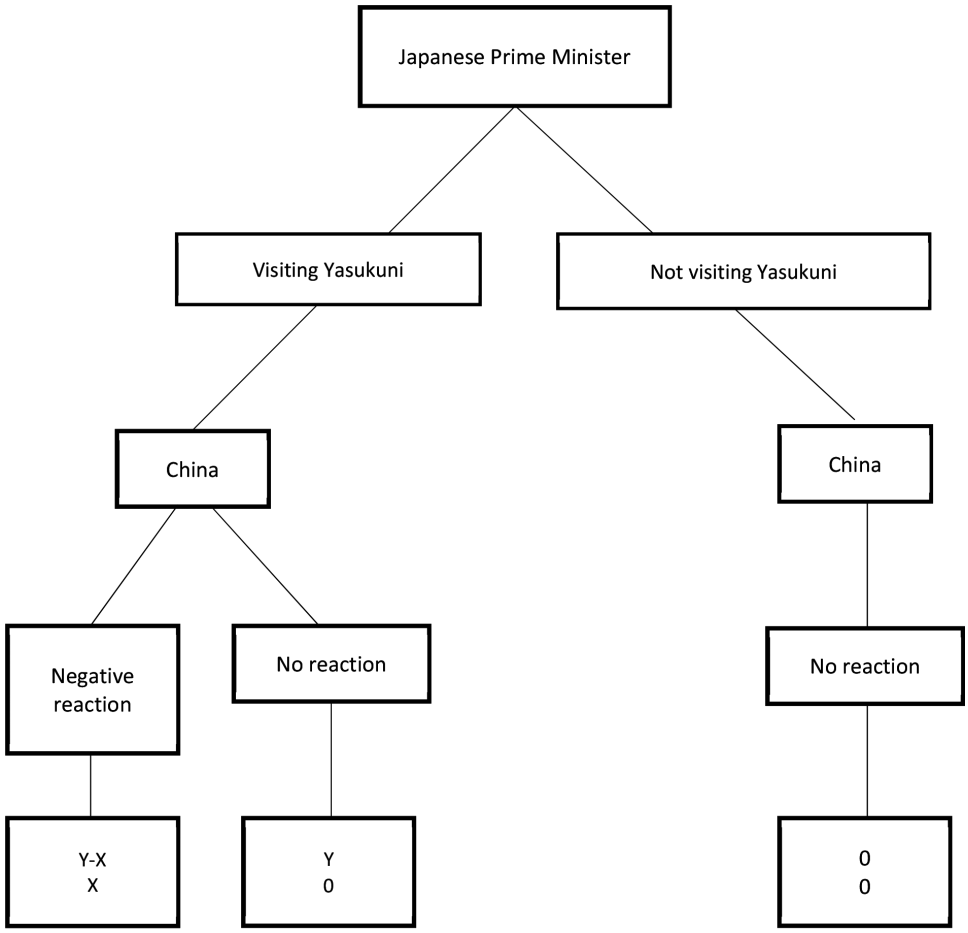
One of the key concepts involved in the 'chicken dilemma' is the issue of probability. Each player must assess how likely it is for their opponent to choose a war strategy. They must also assess their chances of survival, or at least potential losses, in a situation in which the other player decides to confront them in response to their war strategy (Snyder, 1971, p. 87). The concept of 'critical risk' introduced by Daniel Ellsberg allows us to better understand how assessing the probability of which strategy the opponent will choose influences the choice of our strategy. It describes a situation in which a retaliation from the other side is acceptable when choosing a war strategy (Ellsberg, 1961, pp. 475–476).

However, games like the 'chicken dilemma' assumes that both players make a decision simultaneously. Such a model called the 'normal' or 'strategic form' not only says nothing about the sequence of events but also assumes that both strategies are equally likely (Gibbons, 1992, p. 2–4). In the situation under analysis, China's reaction is, in fact, only a response to Japan's actions, or at least to an announcement of those actions. Therefore, it is necessary to rely on an extensive form that assumes the sequence of player movements. The extensive form of a game assumes that players are faced with a finite number of potential choices, and once one choice is made, further choices are revealed until an endpoint is reached, to which a certain utility is assigned on the payoff matrix (Harsanyi, 1977, pp. 89–90). Such a model usually is referred to as a tree, consisting of branches that connect nodes. The last nodes are the payoff values. The

branches represent the potential choices of the players, to which we can assign specific probabilities if we can estimate them (Myerson, 1997, pp. 39–40). What is particularly important in the case of political decision analysis is that a single tree represents a scenario in which one predefined player makes the first move. To analyze a decision from both perspectives, it is necessary to prepare at least two free models.

If we analyze the decision-making process regarding visits to Yasukuni from the Japanese perspective, the extensive model could look as follows:

Figure 1. A model of the decision-making process



Source: own elaboration.

This model assumes that Japan makes the first move and starts the game. Y represents potential political gains on the Japanese side by visiting the shrine. Negative consequences by the Chinese side are represented by X. If the Japanese side decides not to visit the shrine, i.e., chooses a peace strategy, the Chinese side also chooses a peace strategy, so it can be argued that a conflicting situation is not occurring, and therefore the payoff equals 0 for both parties. If the Japanese prime minister decides to visit the shrine, but there are no repercussions from the Chinese side, the payoff represents political gains without any negative consequences (Y; 0). If negative consequences occur, the Japanese side's payoff considers both political gains, and international repercussions, so it is represented as $Y - X$. Therefore, if $Y - X > 0$, the most rational choice from the Japanese perspective is to visit the Yasukuni shrine. In a situation where $Y - X < 0$, it is more rational to forgo the visit. If the result is $Y - X = 0$, then the expected utility of internal political factors becomes crucial for determining rationality.

At this stage of the analysis, a problem becomes apparent. How can we estimate the probability of the Chinese side choosing a war strategy? The concept of repeated games comes to our aid. A potentially infinite number of rounds characterizes repetitive games. Consequently, each player's moves can have potential relevance for future moves and provide valuable information about the player's behavior in certain situations. Since the relationship between players does not end after one game, they can adjust their strategies based on the games already completed (Myerson, 1997, pp. 308–313). For this research, it is assumed that the analyzed situation is an example of an infinite repeated game.

Repetitive games also introduce the concept of 'reputation'. Game theory understands 'reputation' in two ways. The first assumes that a player who always chooses the most rational strategy never changes it, and thus maintains his 'reputation'. In this understanding, any deviation from this strategy would mean a loss of 'reputation'. From the perspective of the presented research, the second understanding of this concept is more interesting. It assumes that players do not have comprehensive information about their opponents, do not know their payouts and do not know the factors determining their decisions. What they can do is based on past rounds, they can assign a certain probability for repeating a particular strategy (Mailath & Samuelson, 2006, pp. 459–460). 'Reputation' can also affect the assessment of the credibility of threats. When a player assesses his 'critical risk' as higher than the credibility of the other player's threats,

he will be inclined to choose a war strategy, regardless of what the payoff matrix would seemingly suggest (Snyder, 1971, pp. 88–89).

In summary, the research so far suggests that an extended form of the 'chicken dilemma' can be a useful model, although naturally highly simplified, to describe the decision-making process associated with the Japanese prime ministers' visit to the Yasukuni shrine. The game is repeated and infinite, and the probability of choosing a particular strategy is assessed based on past decisions.

3. Case study: analysis of visits to the Yasukuni shrine by Prime Minister Jun'ichirō Koizumi

The model presented in the previous section assumes that we are dealing with a repeated and infinite game. It does, however, have a clearly marked first round. Prime Minister Nakasone's visit to the Yasukuni shrine on August 15, 1985, the year the war ended, provoked massive criticism from Japan's closest neighbors. Violent protests took place in China and South Korea, as the Prime Minister's gesture was interpreted as praise of pre-war militarism and a signal that perhaps in the future, Japan would want to regain its once lost influence (Hardcare, 1991, p. 151). Another visit by a sitting Japanese Prime Minister did not take place until 1992. However, Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa's visit took place in secrecy, and it did not become public until 1996 (Tanaka, 2008, p. 124).

Ryūtaro Hashimoto, who, as Prime Minister, visited Yasukuni on his birthday on July 29, 1996, had previously been the long-term president of the Japanese War-Bereaved Family Association, (Nippon Izokukai), an organization which has supported official visits to Yasukuni shrine by Japanese politicians in the past (Pletnia, 2020). It was primarily due to the support of the Association that he was able to take the position (Mochizuki, 2010, pp. 43–44). After the 1996 visit, Chinese Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai and Vice-Premier Qian Qichen expressed outrage and called on the Japanese authorities to stop visiting the shrine. The Chinese press also openly criticized the visit and the Prime Minister himself (Cheung, 2017, pp. 51–52).

As a result of China's reaction, Hashimoto not only did not revisit Yasukuni during his time in office but – perhaps even more significantly – during the election for chairman of the Liberal Democratic Party in 2001, he did not declare that in the event of his re-election he would visit the

shrine again. Instead, such a declaration was made by his main competitor Jun'ichirō Koizumi, who additionally declared that he would visit Yasukuni on the anniversary of the end of the war, something that had not occurred since Nakasone's visit in 1985. As a result, Koizumi received the support of the Izokukai, and he served as prime minister of Japan from 2001 to 2006 (Cheung, 2010, p. 538). Koizumi visited Yasukuni six times during his term, each time provoking a negative reaction from China. In 2005, a visit to the shrine resulted in a temporary freeze of official talks between China and Japan (Breen, 2008, p. 91). Koizumi visited Yasukuni for the last time in 2006, finally deciding on a promised date of August 15. At that time, it was already well known then that he would resign from office in September of the same year (Smith, 2014, p. 93). Throughout his term, Koizumi sought to pass postal reform. However, for this to be possible, he needed the support of the Izokukai, particularly of then president of the Association, Makoto Koga. The support of Koga and his faction of the Liberal Democratic Party in the Diet for the proposed reform was essential to secure the votes necessary to pass the bill (Cheung, 2010, p. 538).

Koizumi's term represents a relatively unusual situation, with both players constantly choosing a war strategy each time, hoping it would force the other to yield. However, as a result, with each round, the chances of choosing a peaceful strategy became less and less likely. From Koizumi's perspective, it was crucial to push through the postal reform. Hence the war strategy (Y) was considered rational, since it might guarantee a higher payout than the peace strategy, regardless of the Chinese threats. From this perspective, the value of 'critical risk', or in other words, acceptable losses, was high enough that Koizumi was willing to continue visiting Yasukuni as long as it brought him closer to finally passing the bill mentioned above. The costs involved, namely the protests of Chinese politicians and public opinion, were acceptable from his perspective.

In October 2005, the privatization of the postal system was finally passed (Maclachlan, 2006, pp. 1–2). However, Koizumi decided to make one more visit to the shrine on August 15, 2006. This visit may have seemed irrational, as he had already accomplished his goal, so the payoff would have to be lesser than in case of not visiting Yasukuni ($Y - X < 0$). It is true that Koizumi no longer needed the support of Izokukai to push through the proposed reform, and relations with China were already extremely strained at this point. However, by changing his strategy, Koizumi would be acting inconsistently with his 'reputation' (understood as pursuing a strategy perceived as optimal), which would have consequences for

future games, regardless of who served as a prime minister. Koizumi could have assumed with a high degree of probability that China would again choose a war strategy. He could also have assumed that the very value of China's strategy (X) would be no greater than it was in 2005, since after *de facto* suspension of diplomatic relations, China had little room for further escalation. Furthermore, Japanese public opinion was also becoming increasingly supportive of Koizumi's visits. A 2006 opinion poll showed that 5.6% of respondents supported the Prime Minister's visit to Yasukuni on the anniversary of the end of the war. Additionally, 25.3% believed that the visits should not be canceled under foreign pressure (Shoji, 2012, p. 129). In conclusion, despite already achieving his main political goal, at the time of his last visit, the payoff for choosing war strategy was higher than if Koizumi decided to break his promise to Izokukai and cancel his visit to the shrine.

4. Conclusions

The last visit by a sitting Japanese prime minister to the Yasukuni shrine took place on December 26, 2013. Shinzō Abe waited a year after becoming the prime minister for the second time before making his first and only visit. Crucial to understanding Abe's decision is the international context. At that time, there was an extremely heated dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands (Stockwin & Ampiah, 2017, p. 89). In 2012, before Abe returned to power, diplomatic relations between Beijing and Tokyo were almost completely frozen. Abe's unannounced visit to Yasukuni sparked protests from China and South Korea. For the first time, the United States also spoke out, expressing disappointment with Abe's visit. However, it should be emphasized that Abe himself declared during the election campaign that he would visit Yasukuni, so it was not a complete surprise. In addition, throughout 2013, Liberal Democratic Party politicians frequently visited the shrine, and the Prime Minister himself also made an offering on his behalf in the form of a 'masakaki' tree (Smith, 2014, pp. 57–58).

The controversy over visits to the Yasukuni shrine has, undoubtedly, not ended with Shinzō Abe. Although his successor, Yoshihide Suga, has not yet had the opportunity to visit the shrine during his time in office, he did make an offering in the form of a 'masakaki' tree on October 17, 2020 (Asahi Shimbun, 2020b). A few months earlier, on August 15, four cabinet

ministers visited the shrine. This was the first visit by politicians at this level since 2016 (Asahi Shimbun, 2020c). In general, if visits to Yasukuni shrine can help build and consolidate political support for conservatives, they will remain an element of Japanese politics.

Game theory can be a useful tool for analyzing the rationality of decision-making in conflict situations. The research presented above proves that it can also be successfully applied to studying the decision-making process related to the visits of Japanese prime ministers to Yasukuni Shrine. By using the developed model, it allows us to indicate to what extent the final decision to visit the shrine is based on reliable information regarding the potential Chinese reaction. The reliance on the tree model allows the sequentially of events to be captured, while the assumption that the game is repeatable enables the analysis of the relationship between past strategies.

This paper, however, only provides some introduction to further considerations of the application of game theory to the analysis of Yasukuni shrine visits. It is, undoubtedly, worth considering how to incorporate more varied strategies of Japanese prime ministers concerning visits to the shrine into the model, such as the offering of a 'masakaki' tree already mentioned. Consideration should also be given to extending the model to include, for example, the United States and perhaps also South Korea. This would naturally involve a redesign of the payment matrix. In addition, it would be worth considering adding another level of decisions that would consider the further reaction of players. Finally, to show the full complexity of the controversy surrounding the Yasukuni shrine visits, it would be necessary to construct a model that shows the decision-making process from the perspective of the other players and not just the Japanese side. It would also be necessary to reconsider to what extent we are dealing with one game repeated indefinitely and to what extent we are dealing with several repeated, finite games for which separate models would have to be constructed. However, this does not change the fact that the above research proves the validity of using game theory to analyze visits to the Yasukuni shrine. Its application allows us to deepen our understanding of the extremely complex decision-making process behind each visit so far, as well as to predict with some probability what might influence the decision to visit Yasukuni by Japanese prime ministers in the future.

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