INSIGHT: 'Unstoppable' Abe marches on to Yasukuni Shrine

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Emboldened by his successes since launching his second administration, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe judged the timing was right to visit Yasukuni Shrine, which honors Class-A war criminals as well as the war dead, despite expected outrage from China and South Korea.

"No one can stop him anymore," said an executive of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

Since last December, Abe has succeeded in paving the way for a consumption tax rate hike, passed the state secrets protection law through the Diet and advanced the contentious relocation of U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Okinawa Prefecture.

On the morning of Dec. 26, Abe, also the LDP president, called Natsuo Yamaguchi, leader of its junior coalition partner, New Komeito, to inform him of his plan to visit Yasukuni Shrine.

"I will make my visit (to the shrine) as I have been determined to," Abe said.
"I cannot support your visit," Yamaguchi replied.
Abe responded flatly, "I know that you do not support it."

The prime minister even waited to inform LDP Secretary-General Shigeru Ishiba of his intentions until the day of his visit.

The executives of the ruling parties were not the only ones kept in the dark.

Even the United States, Japan's key ally, was not informed until immediately before the visit.

When Seiichi Eto, a special adviser to Abe, visited the United States in November, a high-ranking U.S. government official demanded that Abe refrain from provoking China by visiting Yasukuni.

The purpose of Eto's visit to the United States was the exchange of opinions on the North Korean situation. In addition, Eto was instructed by Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga to feel out the U.S. position on a possible visit to Yasukuni.

Though Abe's visit to Yasukuni Shrine seemed to come from out of nowhere, there were signs of his intentions.

In October, Abe refrained from visiting the autumn festival of the shrine. Immediately after that, however, he told his aides, “That does not mean that I have given up on visiting the shrine.”

At that time, Abe had hoped to wrap up important issues such as the state secrets protection law by year-end. Then, he was actually able to complete them.

On Dec. 22, the prime minister told his aides that he planned to visit Yasukuni before the end of the year. In subsequent days, he examined the plan seriously with Suga and other aides. Dec. 26 was the only day he would be able to visit the shrine.

The previous day, Dec. 25, he met with Okinawa Governor Hirokazu Nakaima. Through the meeting, Abe succeeded in convincing Nakaima to support the proposed relocation of the Futenma base to reclaimed sea land within the prefecture.

The United States placed high values on the Abe administration’s efforts. Therefore, Abe thought that it would not react strongly to his visit.

As Dec. 26 was Abe's one-year anniversary of his second administration, it also seemed to mark good timing.

The circumstances surrounding the Abe administration were also advantageous. The Nikkei stock average had risen above the 16,000 mark for the first time in six years, on the back of a weakened yen. The public support rate for the Abe administration is still high--nearly 50 percent.

At present, there are no prospects of holding summit meetings with China or South Korea. But such a situation also made it convenient timing for Abe to visit the shrine.

Conservative LDP lawmakers, who are supporting Abe, also urged him to visit Yasukuni within this year.

“Unless I visit the shrine now, I will be unable to do so until the closing months of my administration,” Abe was quoted by an aide as saying.

Some of his aides expressed opposition to a visit. But he overrode their objections.

Abe checked and rewrote his statement that was scheduled to be delivered at the time of the visit. He also prepared a version in English.

An LDP lawmaker told Abe after the visit, “That was good timing.” The prime minister replied with a relieved expression, “Because it was the one-year anniversary (of my administration).”

After the visit, Abe also told reporters, “There is criticism based on a misunderstanding that visiting Yasukuni Shrine is an act to revere the so-called war criminals.”

Even if Abe has no intention to honor war criminals, however, the fact that he visited Yasukuni Shrine in his official capacity as prime minister is unchanged.

In particular, China explained to its people in normalizing diplomatic relations with Japan in 1972 that the Japanese wartime leaders and the Japanese people are different.

In spite of that, Abe visited the shrine. “It is my wish to build friendships with China and Korea with respect,” Abe said in his statement on his shrine visit.