

Barack Obama's every gesture will be scrutinized in Hiroshima visit

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Japan: Every gesture. Every word uttered or avoided. Every person Barack Obama speaks with, listens to and stands beside in Hiroshima. All of it will help determine the success of a trip with huge potential political and diplomatic pitfalls, both in America and Asia.

Barack Obama

The leader of the United States is already one of the world's most watched people. But that daily scrutiny will be magnified exponentially when Obama makes the first presidential journey to the place where the first atomic bomb attack killed tens of thousands 71 years ago.

Obama's mere presence among the nightmare images of death and destruction that linger in Hiroshima will be what most casual observers will remember. But there are many other people with deep political and personal interests in Northeast Asia's long-running history battles who will be eager to parse Obama's every move.

Bomb victims will be looking for compassion. Many in neighboring countries and the United States will want clear condemnation of Imperial Japan's colonial and wartime atrocities "and not a whiff of anything that could be seen as an apology for what they see as justified bombs. And nonproliferation experts will want proof that Obama is working to "earn" the Nobel Peace Prize he received for advocating a world without nuclear weapons.

Here is a look at how Obama's gestures might shape his historic, politically fraught visit to Hiroshima:

TO BOW OR NOT TO BOW

Obama knows from past experience that every gesture counts when he's on the world stage.

He took a hit early in his presidency when his deep bow before Japanese Emperor Akihito was criticized by U.S. conservatives who saw him as groveling.

But high-stakes political risks can also bring acclaim.

West German Chancellor Willy Brandt, for instance, fell to his knees in 1970 in the former Warsaw Ghetto, in one of recent history's most famous examples of political remorse. He received a Nobel Prize the next year.

Hiroshima will see something much more subtle, but what Obama does will still carry great weight.

Very little is known ahead of time about his trip, but the U.S. president will reportedly lay flowers at Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Park, visit the park museum and make a short statement to about 100 people, an effort at what some call "reconciliation diplomacy."

"The key thing is to restore dignity," said Jeff Kingston, a history professor at Temple University's Japan campus. "He

realizes this is the unfinished business of reconciliation, that there is a long road from foe to friend."

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

The visit, if handled deftly, could reverberate in the United State and in Japan and its neighbors.

But how it is read will depend in large part on the reader.

Differing views, in different countries, exist among historians, politicians and the public about the atomic bombs specifically, and the war in general. That makes shaping a message very tricky.

Japan may see Obama's visit as proof that even memories of war and nuclear attack cannot hurt one of the strongest trade, security and cultural partnerships in the world.

South Korea, a strong American ally that has always been wary of Japan, its former colonial overlord, may be worried that Obama's actions at Hiroshima will overshadow its complaints that Tokyo has failed to fully address Japan's colonial and wartime violence.

China, a major U.S. and Japanese rival, may look at the pictures of Obama and Abe standing side-by-side at Hiroshima and see an aggressive challenge to its push for regional authority.

But Obama's actions could also show Beijing that "by using the past for political purposes you can never build this kind of positive, forward-looking relationship," according to Stephen Nagy, an international relations professor at International Christian University in Tokyo.

A WORLD WITHOUT NUKES

Obama may also look to use the trip to address a piece of unfinished business.

Ever since the accolades that followed his anti-nuclear speech in April 2009, Obama has been criticized for doing little to back up his soaring rhetoric.

"He hopes to find inspiration to realize that agenda of disarmament, nonproliferation and then a nuclear-free world," Kingston said of the president's trip to Hiroshima.

Getting rid of nukes won't happen fast, but his mere presence in Hiroshima, where the nuclear age began, could send a powerful message.

"Where better to start than Hiroshima, which will remind people of what is at stake?" Kingston said.

JUST LISTEN

Perhaps the most powerful gesture Obama has available is also the simplest: To just listen to the bomb victims' memories of suffering and activism.

"Even if he does not say the word 'sorry,' the sincerity with which Obama listens to the stories of the victims will be a touchstone of the meaning of his visit," Tessa Morris-Suzuki, a Japanese history professor at The Australian National University, wrote recently.

It is unclear if Obama will listen to victims' testimonies, Japan's Kyodo News agency reported, although he may briefly speak with some of them.

"If President Obama meets with survivors, listens to their words, looks into their eyes and acknowledges their long-term suffering, that sends a powerful message," said Franziska Seraphim, a Japan expert and history professor at Boston College. "It represents a gesture of reconciliation — possibly the only such gesture — that has meaning 70 years later."

- AP