

Japan's Offensive Foreign Minister

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Editorial

People everywhere wish they could be proud of every bit of their countries' histories. But honest people understand that's impossible, and wise people appreciate the positive value of acknowledging and learning from painful truths about past misdeeds. Then there is Japan's new foreign minister, Taro Aso, who has been neither honest nor wise in the inflammatory statements he has been making about Japan's disastrous era of militarism, colonialism and war crimes that culminated in the Second World War.

Besides offending neighboring countries that Japan needs as allies and trading partners, he is disserving the people he has been pandering to. World War II ended before most of today's Japanese were born. Yet public discourse in Japan and modern history lessons in its schools have never properly come to terms with the country's responsibility for such terrible events as the mass kidnapping and sexual enslavement of Korean young women, the biological warfare experiments carried out on Chinese cities and helpless prisoners of war, and the sadistic slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians in the city of Nanjing.

That is why so many Asians have been angered by a string of appalling remarks Mr. Aso has made since being named foreign minister last fall. Two of the most recent were his suggestion that Japan's emperor ought to visit the militaristic Yasukuni Shrine, where 14 Japanese war criminals are among those honored, and his claim that Taiwan owes its high educational standards to enlightened Japanese policies during the 50-year occupation that began when Tokyo grabbed the island as war booty from China in 1895. Mr. Aso's later lame efforts to clarify his words left their effect unchanged.

Mr. Aso has also been going out of his way to inflame Japan's already difficult relations with Beijing by characterizing China's long-term military buildup as a "considerable threat" to Japan. China has no recent record of threatening Japan. As the rest of the world knows, it was the other way around. Mr. Aso's sense of diplomacy is as odd as his sense of history.