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Editorial

Pointless Provocation in Tokyo

Fresh from an election that showcased him as a modernizing reformer, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi of Japan has now made a point of publicly embracing the worst traditions of Japanese militarism. Yesterday he made a nationally televised visit to a memorial in central Tokyo called the Yasukuni Shrine. But Yasukuni is not merely a memorial to Japan's 2.5 million war dead. The shrine and its accompanying museum promote an unapologetic view of Japan's atrocity-scarred rampages through Korea, much of China and Southeast Asia during the first few decades of the 20th century. Among those memorialized and worshiped as deities in an annual festival beginning this week are 14 Class A war criminals who were tried, convicted and executed.

The shrine visit is a calculated affront to the descendants of those victimized by Japanese war crimes, as the leaders of China, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore quickly made clear. Mr. Koizumi clearly knew what he was doing. He has now visited the shrine in each of the last four years, brushing aside repeated protests by Asian diplomats and, this time, an adverse judgment from a Japanese court.

No one realistically worries about today's Japan re-embarking on the road of imperial conquest. But Japan, Asia's richest, most economically powerful and technologically advanced nation, is shedding some of the military and foreign policy restraints it has observed for the past 60 years.

This is exactly the wrong time to be stirring up nightmare memories among the neighbors. Such provocations seem particularly gratuitous in an era that has seen an economically booming China become Japan's most critical economic partner and its biggest geopolitical challenge.

Mr. Koizumi's shrine visits draw praise from the right-wing nationalists who form a significant component of his Liberal Democratic Party. Instead of appeasing this group, Mr. Koizumi needs to face them down, just as he successfully faced down the party reactionaries who opposed his postal privatization plan. It is time for Japan to face up to its history in the 20th century so that it can move honorably into the 21st.

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