

Text of Ambassador Norihiro Okuda's comment in the Globe and Mail on 15 January 2014 regarding Japan-China relations

After his visit to the Yasukuni Shrine last month, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe issued a statement titled "Pledge for Everlasting Peace". He said the visit was made to pay his respects and to pray for the souls of the war dead, as well as to renew the pledge that Japan would never again wage war – nothing more and nothing less. Certainly not to pay homage to war criminals or to praise militarism, as Chinese Ambassador Zhang Junsai claimed in these pages recently.

Japan has accepted the judgments of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, including those judgments pertaining to Class A war criminals. In the past, Japan caused tremendous suffering to the people of many countries, particularly in Asia. The government of Japan has consistently made it clear it fully acknowledges this history, and has expressed deep remorse and heartfelt apology. Mr. Abe has clearly confirmed this position, and he has no intention whatsoever to challenge it.

Since the end of the Second World War, Japan has built a free and democratic country. It has consistently walked the path of peace for the past 68 years. It has developed many friendships with countries sharing similar values and ideals, including Canada. Japan will continue pursuing this path.

Japan's postwar record illustrates the strength of its democracy. It demonstrates Japanese respect for human rights (one is not arrested in Japan for criticizing the government), commitment to peace (a strong contribution to United Nations peacekeeping operations) and willingness to help developing countries. China itself formally acknowledged Japan's postwar record as a nation of peace in the Japan-China Joint Statement of 2008. By that time, many Japanese prime ministers had visited the Yasukuni Shrine.

China now criticizes Japan for "challenging the postwar international order" and calls Japan "militarist," citing Mr. Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, which is home to approximately 2.5 million war dead who have fallen in various conflicts since 1853.

It is important here to note inconsistencies in China's stance toward the Yasukuni Shrine. More than 60 visits to the shrine have been made by Japanese prime ministers since the end of the Second World War, with almost half taking place after it was made public in 1979 that 14 Class A war criminals had been enshrined there just one year earlier. Prior to 1985, China never raised this issue, by which time more than 20 of these visits had taken place.

It is ironic that a country that has increased its own military spending by more than 10 per cent a year for the past 20 years should call any country "militarist." China's military budget is now the second largest in the world, and more than twice that of Japan. Its attempt to change the status quo by force or coercion has raised concerns not only in Japan but also among its neighbours throughout the East China Sea and the South China Sea. The security situation in the region is now changing rapidly and tensions are escalating as China seeks to pursue its own geopolitical goals without paying due respect to international law.

As neighbouring states, Japan and China should always be open to dialogue, even if there are differences on specific issues. Mr. Abe has reiterated that Japan will always welcome dialogue with China. Yet China has refused to engage in dialogue between leaders. I sincerely hope that China will come forward, rather than keep pursuing a policy designed to create a false image of Japan by invoking a ghost of "militarism" from seven decades ago.