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Japanese imperialism rearms

Peter Symonds

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Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is exploiting the extremely tense situation on the Korean Peninsula to push for its military to be able to carry out "pre-emptive" strikes on an enemy such as North Korea. The acquisition of offensive weapons, such as cruise missiles, for the first time since the end of World War II would be another major step by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government to rearm Japan, heightening the danger of war.

Commenting on North Korean missile tests, Defence Minister Tomomi Inada suggested on March 9 that Japan could acquire the capacity for "pre-emptive" attacks. "I do not rule out any method and we consider various options, consistent of course with international law and the constitution of our country," she said.

Hiroshi Imazu, chairman of the LDP's policy council on security, was more forthright: "It is time we acquired the capacity. I don't know whether that would be with ballistic missiles, cruise missiles or even the F-35 [fighter], but without a deterrence North Korea will see us as weak." The policy council plans to submit a proposal in the current parliamentary session with a view to its inclusion in the next five-year defence plan.

Inada's caveat notwithstanding, the purchase of weapons of aggression would openly breach Article 9 of the Japanese post-war constitution, which renounces "war ... and the threat or use of

force as a means of settling international disputes” and declares that “land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained.” Such a move would also dispense with the longstanding legal fig leaf that Japan’s existing military forces are purely for self-defence.

To date, Japanese governments have balked at the acquisition of obviously offensive weapons, such as ballistic missiles, aircraft carriers and long-range bombers, not least because of widespread anti-war opposition among Japanese workers and youth. On Wednesday, however, Japan commissioned the Kaga, its second helicopter carrier. The ships are the largest put into operation by the Japanese military since World War II and could be modified to carry fighter aircraft.

The Abe government, the most right-wing in post-war history, has greatly accelerated the drive to remilitarise Japan and remove legal and constitutional restraints on its armed forces. Since coming to office in 2012, Abe has used the slogan of “pro-active pacifism” to justify increased military budgets, the establishment of a US-style National Security Council to centralise war planning in the prime minister’s office and a shift in the strategic focus of the military from the north to the southern island chain, adjacent to the Chinese mainland.

Abe underscored his confrontational stance toward Beijing at the 2014 World Economic Forum in Davos where he drew a false comparison between China today and German imperialism in 1914 so as to brand China as “aggressive” and “expansionist.” He deliberately heightened the dangerous standoff with China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islets in the East China Sea by insisting his government would not enter negotiations over their status with Beijing.

In 2015, the Abe government provoked huge protests against legislation that, under the deceptive banner of “collective self-defence,” allows the Japanese military to participate in US-led wars of aggression.

Abe has campaigned on the program of making Japan “a normal nation” with a strong military—in other words, for Japanese imperialism to prosecute its strategic and economic interests through all, including military, means. The LDP is pushing for a complete revision of the constitution, including the modification or removal of Article 9. The document has long been regarded in right-wing militarist circles as an “occupiers’ constitution” drawn up by the United States to render Japan impotent.

Abe and his cabinet have very strong links to ultra-right groupings such as Nippon Kaigi, which campaigns for a new constitution, promotes militarism and patriotism, and seeks to whitewash the crimes of Japanese militarism in the 1930s and 1940s. Nippon Kaigi’s parliamentary grouping includes 280 of the 717 parliamentarians in the lower and upper houses. Significantly, Abe is a special adviser to the organisation and 16 of his 20-member cabinet are members. He is now embroiled in scandal over claims that his wife, allegedly acting on his behalf, gave a cash donation to the ultra-nationalist operator of a private kindergarten in Osaka that indoctrinates pre-school children in Japanese patriotism.

The drive to remilitarise is being fuelled by the worsening crisis of Japanese and world capitalism, and the deep concern in Japanese ruling circles about the country’s historic decline,

underlined by its relegation to the third largest world economy, behind China. As well as boosting the military, Abe has sought to extend Japanese influence, including military ties, especially in Asia, through the most active diplomatic drive of any post-war prime minister.

The Abe government has prosecuted remilitarisation under the umbrella of the US-Japan military alliance and with the active support of Washington. In part, this is to avoid stirring up memories of Japan's wartime atrocities in Asia and generating opposition in the region to Japanese imperialism. Abe has also sought to continue to work closely with the Trump administration. He was one of the first world leaders to visit Trump after the US election, and again after Trump took office.

Trump's installation, however, has profoundly destabilised world politics, including in Asia. His repudiation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was a blow to the Abe government, which had invested considerable political capital in overcoming opposition within the LDP, in order to ensure its ratification. Abe regarded the economic pact as critical to countering Chinese economic clout, ensuring a dominant position in Asia for Japan, in league with the US, and overcoming the protracted stagnation of the Japanese economy.

Moreover, Trump's "America First" demagoguery and threats of trade war have not just been directed against China. He has a long history of denouncing Japan for its trade surplus with the United States and "unfair" trade practices. During the US presidential election campaign, Trump also called into question the US-Japan Security Treaty, threatening to walk away if Japan did not pay more toward the cost of US military bases in the country. He even suggested that Japan should protect itself by building its own nuclear weapons.

As in Europe, all the geo-political fault lines that led to two disastrous world wars in the 20th century are emerging again. The Abe government's determination to rearm Japan as rapidly as possible is not about countering the "threat" posed by North Korea, but defending the interests of Japanese imperialism by every means, compounding the danger of war. As in the 1940s, intense rivalry for markets, raw materials and cheap labour could fuel trade conflicts between US and Japan and a competition to dominate Asia, ending in a catastrophic war that would inevitably engulf the region and the world.