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Japanese PM revives militarist traditions

Peter Symonds

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s visit yesterday to the notorious Yasukuni Shrine to the country’s war dead is another provocative step towards the revival of Japanese militarism that has exacerbated already sharp regional tensions. China and South Korea, which were both subject to Japan’s brutal wartime rule, immediately condemned the visit—the first by an incumbent prime minister since Junichiro Koizumi went to the shrine in 2006.

The Yasukuni Shrine is not simply a war memorial, but a potent symbol of Japanese militarism in the 1930s and 1940s. It symbolically inters many of Japan’s war dead, including 14 “Class A” war criminals convicted by an Allied tribunal. In its incendiary character, Abe’s visit to Yasukuni is comparable to a government leader in Germany deciding to pay homage at the graves of Nazi leaders.

Abe’s visit marked one year since his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government came to power. He cynically claimed that he went to the shrine to renew “the pledge that Japan must never wage war again.” But over the past year his government has boosted military spending for the first time in a decade, stoked up tensions with China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea, and integrated Japan more closely into US war preparations against China.

Abe's visit is part of an ongoing campaign to whip up nationalism to counter deeply rooted anti-war sentiment, particularly in the working class. In an essay in *Bungei Shunju* just before assuming office last December, Abe declared he was in "a fight to free the Japanese nation from the postwar history"—that is, from any acknowledgement of the military's war crimes. This ideological campaign is bound up with ending the restraints of the country's post-war constitution to enable Japanese imperialism to wage war in pursuit of its economic and strategic interests.

While the US embassy in Tokyo expressed "disappointment" over Abe's visit, the Obama administration bears prime responsibility for encouraging the re-emergence of Japanese militarism. During his first term as prime minister in 2006–2007, Abe sought to mend relations with China that had been fraught under his predecessor Koizumi, not least as a result of the latter's trips to the Yasukuni Shrine. Over the past four years, however, Obama has implemented his "pivot to Asia", aimed at undermining China diplomatically and encircling it militarily. This has encouraged US allies, especially Japan, to take a more aggressive stance against China.

The Obama administration had a direct hand in the 2010 removal of Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, who, while reaffirming the US alliance, had sought closer ties with China. Hatoyama's successors from the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)—Naoto Kan and Yoshihiko Noda—both took a hard line against Beijing, particularly over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Noda "nationalised" the rocky islets in September 2010, escalating the standoff with China and opening the door for Abe and his right-wing LDP to win last year's election.

Tensions flared again last month when China announced the establishment of an Air Defence Identification Zone in the East China Sea that included the disputed islands. The US immediately challenged Chinese authority by flying nuclear-capable B-52 bombers into the zone unannounced. Japan followed suit with its own warplanes. China responded by scrambling fighters, raising the danger that a miscalculation or error could provoke a clash. Just weeks later, American and Chinese vessels avoided a near collision in the South China Sea as a US cruiser provocatively shadowed a Chinese naval exercise.

As the anniversary of the outbreak of World War I approaches, the world today bears a chilling similarity to one hundred years ago. Then, amid a deepening crisis of world capitalism, the major powers were engaged in a high stakes game of diplomatic intrigue, provocation and military intervention that produced one "war scare" after another. In the end, a seemingly minor incident—the assassination of an Austrian archduke—precipitated an unparalleled bloodbath to determine which of the major powers would dominate the globe.

A quarter century later, the world was again plunged into war on an even vaster scale. In Asia, the Japanese economy had been hard hit by the Great Depression, fuelling desperation in ruling circles. The Japanese elite sought to overcome the crisis through wars of colonial conquest—with the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and China as whole in 1937. Ultimately, Japan's

ambitions to become the dominant power in Asia brought it into head-on conflict with US imperialism, leading to the eruption of the Pacific War in 1941.

Today, five years after the eruption of the 2008 global financial crisis, the world capitalist system remains mired in slump and recession. Over the past three decades, Asia has become the cheap labour platform of the world, making it the focus for global rivalries. Obama's "pivot to Asia" is above all aimed at offsetting the relative decline of American capitalism by using its military might to ensure US imperialism remains the dominant power in the region. In doing so, Washington has encouraged a more aggressive Japanese imperialism that is also desperate to prevent its eclipse as a major power.

The ruling classes in Japan, China and throughout the world are again pumping out the poisonous fumes of nationalism as they prepare for war. The only means for halting this drive to war is the abolition of the social order that has already produced two world wars. Capitalism is wracked by the same fundamental contradictions—between global economy and the outmoded nation-state system, and between socialised production and the private ownership of the means of production—as it was one hundred years ago. The only social force capable of overthrowing the profit system is the international working class, through a unified struggle of workers in China, Japan, the US and the world on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.