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Abe accelerates the remilitarisation of Japan

Peter Symonds

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Amid the worsening global economic slump and sharpening geo-political tensions, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is accelerating his remilitarisation agenda. While the government is pushing legislation through parliament to evade constitutional restraints on the armed forces, the Japanese defence ministry is requesting another 2.2 percent rise in its budget next year to a record 5.1 billion yen, or \$US42 billion.

The military budget increase, formally announced on Monday, is the fourth since the right-wing Abe government took office in 2012, following a decade of contracting defence spending. The extra money will largely be spent on sophisticated new weaponry, including six F-35 fighters, three advanced Global Hawk drones, 17 surveillance helicopters, amphibious assault vehicles and the construction of another Soryu-class submarine.

The Obama administration, as part of its “pivot to Asia” directed against China, has encouraged Tokyo to boost its armed forces and take a more aggressive stance towards Beijing. Since 2012, the Abe government has escalated tensions with China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, as well as backing the US campaign against Chinese land reclamation in the South China Sea.

The Japanese defence expansion is taking place in tandem with a US military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific, aimed at encircling China. Japan is already deeply embedded in the Pentagon's Air/Sea Battle Plan for war against China which envisages US bases in Japan, South Korea and Guam as launching pads for an aerial and missile blitzkrieg against Chinese military and infrastructure targets.

Japan's strategic focus is on boosting "island defence"—that is, fortifying and expanding its military presence in the southern island chain adjacent to the Chinese mainland. As well as buying new naval and air force hardware, the budget will finance the building of a radar station on Yonaguni Island, the expansion of the military base on Miyakojima and the establishment of a new base on Amami-Oshima.

Japan's military build-up further heightens the danger that a minor incident or miscalculation in one of the many flashpoints in Asia will precipitate a conflict that escalates into a world war, involving nuclear-armed states. This drive to war is being fuelled by the global economic breakdown that erupted in 2008. All the major powers are seeking to extricate themselves from the economic crisis at the expense of their rivals, precipitating a scramble for markets, raw materials and sources of cheap labour including by military means.

For the past two decades, US imperialism has engaged in one criminal war after another in the Middle East, the Balkans and Central Asia, in a bid to use its military might to offset its historic decline and establish its global dominance. Germany, like Japan, is casting off the constraints imposed on it by its defeat in World War II and preparing to use its armed forces to prosecute German interests in Europe and around the world. Just as the "pivot to Asia" threatens war against China, so the 2014 fascist coup in Ukraine, engineered by the US and Germany, has heightened the danger of conflict with Russia.

At the same time, every government, including the Japanese, is attempting to channel mounting social tensions at home against an external enemy. The Japanese economy has been hit hard by the Chinese economic downturn, shrinking by 1.6 percent on an annualised basis in the second quarter this year. While the official understated jobless rate was just 3.3 percent in July, the number of irregular workers has jumped by 1.5 million under the Abe government to nearly 20 million or almost 40 percent of the Japanese workforce. Millions of young people are forced to live with their parents and the number of people on welfare reached over 1.6 million in May. Relative poverty—defined as less than half the national median income—rose to a record 16 percent of the population last year.

In order to try to drum up support for remilitarisation, Abe is waging a propaganda campaign aimed at whitewashing the Japanese military's war crimes during the 1930s and 1940s. His visit to the notorious Yasukuni Shrine, a potent symbol of Japanese militarism, in 2013 was designed to legitimise claims that Japan was waging a war of liberation in Asia against Western colonialism, as well as denials of such atrocities as the Nanjing Massacre. Abe himself has publicly criticised American history textbooks for referring to the Japanese military's systematic abuse of an estimated 200,000 "comfort women" who were forced into sex slavery.

Anti-war sentiment, however, has deep roots in Japan, particularly in the working class. Japanese imperialism's colonial conquests in Asia during World War II were accompanied by vicious police state repression at home. Anti-war opposition has erupted again and again in the post war period—in mass protests against the US-Japan Security Treaty in 1960, demonstrations against the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s, and, more recently, in large demonstrations against Japanese participation in the US-led occupation of Iraq from 2003.

The government's latest security laws, which are currently under debate in the upper house of the Japanese parliament or Diet, have provoked broad popular opposition. The legislation aims to give legal force to Abe's "reinterpretation" of the country's constitution last year, in order to allow for "collective self-defence"—that is, to take part in US-led wars of aggression. As many legal scholars have explained, the laws directly contravene Article 7 of the constitution, which renounces war forever and declares that land, sea and air forces will never be maintained. The laws will set a precedent for the complete removal of all restrictions on the use of the military to pursue the interests of Japanese imperialism.

Large anti-war protests against the security legislation swelled last weekend to an estimated 120,000 in Tokyo and smaller rallies in some 200 other locations around the country. The Abe government is nevertheless proceeding, confident that the establishment opposition parties, such as the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and Japanese Communist Party (JCP), will channel popular hostility into safe parliamentary channels. Both the DPJ and JCP have backed the Abe government's stand against China on the key issue of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

Workers and young people in Japan, like their counterparts around the world, can only fight the dangerous slide to war by turning to a new political perspective. In its statement "Socialism and the Fight against Imperialist War" issued on July 3, 2014, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) warned that war is not only possible, but inevitable, unless the working class intervenes to put an end to capitalism:

"The collision of imperialist and national state interests expresses the impossibility, under capitalism, of organising a globally-integrated economy on a rational foundation and thus ensuring the harmonious development of the productive forces. However, the same contradictions driving imperialism to the brink provide the objective impulse for social revolution. The globalisation of production has led to a massive growth of the working class. Only this social force, which owes no allegiance to any nation, is capable of putting an end to the profit system, which is the root cause of war."

We urge workers and youth in Japan, throughout Asia and around the world to support and participate in the campaign being waged by the ICFI to build a unified anti-war movement of the international working class, based on the program and principles of socialist internationalism.