

Tokyo governor uses earthquake drill to push rightwing, militarist agenda

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Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara, an outspoken opponent of Japan's post-World War II constitutional limits on the functions of the armed forces, transformed the city's annual earthquake drill on September 3 into a platform for his bellicose nationalism and a public relations exercise for the normally unobtrusive Japanese military.

In an unprecedented deployment of the military in Japan's capital, some 7,100 personnel from the Self-Defence Forces (SDF) took part in the simulated rescue operations, along with over 1,000 military vehicles, 120 aircraft and helicopters and 20 ships. The 1999 drill by comparison, involved less than 500 specialist soldiers, providing limited, low-key support to the civil emergency services.

Crowds gathered at the sites where rescues were staged, less for the actual drill than for a chance to see the armoured vehicles and other military hardware up close. The Tokyo daily, *Asahi Shimbun*, commented: "The earthquake drill, though worthwhile, assumed the appearance of a show rather than a practical exercise. Was it really necessary to mobilise anti-tank helicopters?"

Basking in the media attention, Ishihara took the opportunity to again criticise Japan's military dependency upon the United States. In a speech to assembled SDF soldiers he declared: "Nobody will help us unless we are prepared to defend ourselves with our own hands against a potential invasion of our land by foreign powers."

The political significance of the event was not lost in North America and Asia. The *New York Times* dubbed it a "militarist moment"; Singapore's *Straits Times* said it had a "militarist tone".

In April, when Ishihara foreshadowed the military's role in the drill, he justified it with crude appeals to anti-

immigrant chauvinism. In a prepared speech to an SDF audience he stated: "Atrocious crimes have been committed again and again by *sangokujin* [a derogatory term for ethnic Chinese and Koreans living in Japan] who have entered the country illegally. In the event of a major earthquake, riots could break out. I hope you will not only fight against disasters but also maintain public security on such occasions. I hope you will show the Japanese people and the Tokyo people what the military are for in this state."

Ishihara's comments hark back to the events following the 1923 Tokyo earthquake, when rightwing politicians whipped up a wave of hysteria, falsely accusing Korean immigrants in particular of setting fires and poisoning drinking water. Nationalist gangs operating in league with the police and the military unleashed a pogrom against immigrant communities and socialists, murdering some 7,000 people.

The scapegoating of immigrants continued in the course of the latest earthquake drill. A security advisor to Ishihara, Atsuyuki Sassa, told the media that while Koreans may have adjusted to Japan, illegal Chinese and Middle Eastern immigrants were "carrying out terrible crimes". Another advisor, Toshiyuki Shikata, a retired general, spoke of the need to prepare for "rioting and disturbances" in the event of an earthquake. Addressing a public rally, Ishihara attacked critics of the drill as "leftist fools".

Ishihara, now 68, first entered Japanese politics in 1968 as a national legislator for the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). In the decades since, he has established himself as one of the more conscious and controversial spokesmen for the Japanese ruling class. Throughout the 1990s he has sought to fashion and promote extreme rightwing nationalism as the ideological basis for a political realignment in Japan.

In 1989 he co-authored *The Japan That* which argued that Japan's post-war subservience to the United States had to end. Written amid sharpening US-Japan tensions and the break-up of the Cold War framework, Ishihara called for new political formations capable of advancing the interests of Japanese capitalism against its rivals.

After failing to win the LDP leadership, Ishihara resigned from parliament and the party in 1995. After four years in the political wilderness, he won the election for Tokyo governor in April 1999, running as an independent under the slogan “The Tokyo That Can Say No”. His campaign combined attacks on the Tokyo government for financial irresponsibility with demagogic promises to end American military control of a Tokyo airport.

Throughout the 1990s, the Tokyo municipal government has broadly followed the policy direction of LDP national governments, slashing taxes and taking out vast loans to finance public works spending aimed at stimulating the economy. Its debts spiralled from virtually nothing in the early 1990s to a staggering \$US61 billion in 1999. Since taking office, Ishihara has sold off city government assets, imposed pay cuts on public servants, cut public housing outlays and slashed public works programs in an effort to balance the budget.

In March he used an obscure municipal power to attempt to impose a three percent tax on the profits of major banks, a move that outraged national authorities but won considerable public support. Opinion polls place his approval rating in Tokyo at over 70 percent.

At the same time he has sought to build a constituency for extreme rightwing views. Last month Ishihara became the first Tokyo governor to officially visit the Yasukuni Shrine to the nation's war dead, including those convicted as war criminals by the US after World War II. China, the Koreas and other Asian countries colonised by Japanese imperialism have condemned any official visit to the shrine, considered a symbol of Japan's militarist past.

At a news conference held after the visit, Ishihara brushed aside criticisms declaring: “My relatives and my wife's father's spirits are all enshrined here. Why can't I make a visit in an official capacity? It's about time that Japan awakens from its illusion.”

In recent years he has begun warning of the threat to

Japan posed by China's rise as a political and economic power in Asia. He has opposed the “One China” policy, under which Japan and other countries accept Taiwan as part of China, and is the highest-ranking Japanese figure to tour Taiwan since 1972. His two official visits to Taiwan in his capacity as Tokyo governor were calculated to provoke a diplomatic incident with China. In May, while attending the inauguration ceremony of Taiwan's new president Chen Shui-bian, he compared China's claim on Taiwan with Hitler's claim on Austria and proclaimed his support for a separate Taiwanese nation-state.

In a November 1999 essay published in the *Sankei Shimbun*, Ishihara bewailed Japan's “decline” and declared: “It looks like Japan has become subordinate to two nations—the United States and China—and has increasing difficulty in protecting its national interest.” He called for a more aggressive attitude towards the US, pointing to the large Japanese investments in the US and advocating the hiking up of interest rates to attract capital back to Japan—a move that would almost certainly heighten political tensions and exacerbate international financial instability.

“Under US strategies, the Japanese are allowed to make money through foreign trade, but the profits they make are used to benefit the US. Japan has been forced to accept low interest rates and many Japanese are buying US financial products... It is unreasonable that Japan, the world's largest creditor nation, is suffering from an economic slowdown, while the US, the largest debtor nation, is enjoying a boom,” he wrote.

Ishihara's response to Japan's stagnant economy, sharp trade conflicts and growing social tensions is similar to fascistic formations that have developed in the US and Europe. He is seeking to forge out of a combination of the nostrums of pre-war Japanese militarism, virulent nationalism and populist attacks on the banks and big government, a “Japan First” ideology to serve the interests of Japanese capitalism.



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