US belligerence encourages Japanese politician to rattle the nuclear sabre against China

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22 April 2002

The aggressive actions of the Bush administration since September 11 in invading Afghanistan and declaring another three nations part of an "axis of evil" are provoking like-minded responses around the world. The most rightwing political tendencies are coming to the surface as the ruling classes conclude that they too will need to use military force to pursue their economic and strategic interests.

Two recent statements by leading politicians in Tokyo have firmly placed Japanese militarism back on the agenda. In both cases the cue has been taken from Washington where Bush has pinpointed Beijing as "a strategic competitor" and the White House's "nuclear posture review" put China on its list of potential nuclear targets. The inclusion of North Korea along with Iran and Iraq in the "axis of evil" has encouraged the Japanese rightwing to follow suit.

On April 6, Liberal Party leader Ichiro Ozawa declared to a surprised group of middle-level Chinese officials that Japan could rapidly build a nuclear arsenal capable of obliterating China if Beijing did not wind back its military.

"China is applying itself to expand its military power in the hope of becoming a superpower," Ozawa said. "If China gets too inflated, then the Japanese people will get hysterical. If Japan desires, it could have thousands of nuclear warheads overnight. Japan probably has enough plutonium in use at its nuclear power plants for three to four thousand of them. If it comes to that, we wouldn't lose in terms of military strength."

Taken at face value, Ozawa's claim that China is becoming a superpower is absurd. In the first place, Beijing's efforts to increase its military spending are overwhelmingly in response to the stepped-up US military activity all around its borders, including the threat of nuclear attack, and a series of moves by Tokyo to remove the postwar constitutional limits on Japan's use of military force.

Secondly, it is Beijing not Tokyo that has some justification of feeling under threat. There are still bitter memories in China, as in other countries of the region, of Japan's brutal colonial rule in the first half of the 20th century. Despite its rapid growth, China's largely backward economy is less than a quarter the size of Japan's. The only truthful aspect of Ozawa's remarks is that Japan's sophisticated nuclear energy and satellite-launching industries would enable the country to rapidly assemble a nuclear arsenal far greater than China's.

Even without nuclear weapons Japan possesses a technically superior military that has been in use in the past seven months in a fashion unprecedented since World War II. To support the US war on Afghanistan, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi placed Japanese warships on active duty in the Indian Ocean. New legislation expanded the ability of the Japanese Self Defense Forces (SDF) to engage in offensive operations against suspect vessels and planes outside Japanese territory. Using these powers, the Japanese Coast Guard pursued an alleged North Korean spy-ship into Chinese claimed waters last December and sunk it.

Efforts were made in the Japanese and American press to downplay the significance of Ozawa's statement on the grounds that he is not part of the government. Nevertheless, he is one of the most prominent figures in the Japanese parliament—a former leading figure in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), who split from the LDP in 1993 and has been central to the debate in ruling circles over the future direction of Japan.

Several days later, Ozawa claimed that his remarks had been "dreadfully distorted" but effectively repeated the message. He told the press that during a visit to Beijing he had warned Chinese leaders against a buildup of nuclear weapons. "It is easy to produce nuclear weapons technologically and economically if Japan wants to do so politically," he reiterated.

Ozawa was not alone in his militarist comments. In an interview published April 6 by the *Asahi Shimbun*, Shintaro Ishihara, the ultra-nationalist Governor of Tokyo, envisaged Japan launching a war against both North Korea and China.

Answering a question about proposals to further expand the powers of the Japanese SDF, Ishihara declared: "The Americans defined the September 11 terrorist attacks as a 'new war', but we Japanese have been through that sort of thing for years. Many Japanese have been kidnapped by North Korean agents. In the movie *The Wind and the Lion*, an American woman is kidnapped by an Arab chieftain. The US president

sends warships and starts a war to save the woman. I believe this is how any nation should act...."

Unsubstantiated allegations that North Korea kidnapped Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s have long been raised by the rightwing in Japan as a pretext for blocking the normalisation of relations with Pyongyang. To date, however, no senior political figure has suggested that Japan should invade North Korea to retrieve the victims. While no one has joined Ishihara in advocating war, Koizumi has made the "kidnapping issue" the precondition for any official talks with Pyongyang.

Ishihara's attitude to China was no less belligerent. During his interview, he provocatively called for a joint US-Japanese military force to enter Chinese waters to raise the "spy ship" sunk last December—with or without the permission of Beijing. "The government should demand China's cooperation, and if the Chinese don't comply, the government would be wise to play hardball, using the strength of the US-Japan Security Treaty," he declared. In a separate statement, Ishihara warned that Koizumi would "not last long" if the ship was not salvaged.

Like Ozawa, Ishihara is a significant figure. Since splitting from the LDP and being elected Tokyo governor in 1999, Ishihara has become the leading "independent" in Japanese politics. He has implemented budget austerity demanded by big business, while attacking government bureaucracy, encouraging anti-immigrant xenophobia, denouncing Wall Street for causing Japan's economic woes and advocating rearmament. His following among layers of the middle class has produced moves within the LDP for his return to national politics as the prime minister.

These rightwing appeals to militarism are part of a bitter and ongoing debate since the end of the Cold War over the direction that Japanese capitalism should take. The Pacific and East Asia have become a battleground of competing ambitions. The collapse of the Soviet Union has opened up the resource rich areas of the Central Asian republics and Russia's Far East for investment, as well as the possibility of land transport links between the European Union and the major economies of East Asia. China has become a major production platform for world manufacturing and more of its cheap labour, resources and potential markets will be opened up over the next five years.

However, the ability of Japanese corporations to vie for a stake has been hindered by more than 12 years of economic slump. In 1990, a frenzy of stock market and real estate speculation crashed leaving a legacy of debt-ridden companies and banks weighed down with hundreds of billions of dollars in outstanding loans that will never be paid back. Despite a series of massive government stimulus packages and the reduction of interest rates to zero, there is still no sign of recovery.

Public debt has reached an unsustainable 130 percent of Gross Domestic Product and the government is slashing spending on pensions, welfare, health and education. Real estate values are below 1985 levels leaving millions of middle and working class families paying off enormous home loans for property worth far less than the purchase price. Unemployment is at record highs and wages have fallen to pre-1995 levels. The deterioration in living standards and high unemployment has led to rising social tensions and political alienation.

On top of the parlous state of affairs domestically the Japanese ruling class confronts the aggressive assertion of US hegemony throughout the region that threatens to isolate Japan and block its influence in Central Asia and China. The US and Japan may formally be military allies under the US-Japan Security Treaty but the two countries are economic rivals and their interests in Asia do not coincide.

As in the US, the trend towards militarism in Japanese ruling circles is fed by two inter-linked needs: to gain access to new avenues of profit and to prevent mounting social unrest from threatening the existing social order. The bellicose comments of Ozawa and Ishihara not only point to Japan's economic ambitions in North East Asia but also to the emergence of a social base for such rightwing demagogy. Political leaders are demanding workers accept huge cuts in their living standards and blaming the economic crisis on everything from immigrants to corruption and US financial policies. More and more, though, their rhetoric is focused on the claim that Japan is threatened and deprived of prosperity due to its military weakness.

The situation has certain eerie parallels with the 1930s. Following the advent of the Great Depression, the Japanese ruling class confronted an economic disaster and mass discontent among the working class and rural poor. A rightwing militarist regime was installed to repress any opposition at home and pave the way for a reckless invasion of first Manchuria then China as a whole—in order to challenge US economic power in the region. By 1941, the two rivals were at war.