

## Behind China-Japan tensions

# Washington fuels Japanese militarism

## Part One

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*The following is part one of a two-part series. The concluding part will be published tomorrow.*

In the extensive media coverage of the current tensions between Japan and China, the insidious and deeply destabilising role of the Bush administration has been virtually ignored. Yet Washington has been insistently pressing Japan to rearm and play a more “active” role in North East Asia—the basic issues that have repeatedly sparked fears, protests and frictions not only with China, but throughout the region.

The Bush administration’s backing has encouraged Tokyo to take an uncompromising and antagonistic stance towards the latest anti-Japanese protests in China. The White House immediately lined up with the Japanese government by criticising Beijing’s failure to “prevent violence” and bring the demonstrations under control. US spokesmen remained silent on the provocative actions of Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi who deliberately added more fuel to the fire.

In the midst of the demonstrations, the Koizumi government authorised a new school history text that whitewashes the crimes of Japanese imperialism in the 1930s and 1940s and then gave the green light for Japanese companies to drill for oil in an area of the East China Sea contested by Beijing. To cap it off, Japanese Foreign Minister Nobutaka Machimura went to Beijing to demand an apology and compensation for damage caused to Japanese property in the course of the protests.

Koizumi was well aware that these actions would provoke an angry response. But by stirring up fears and prejudice against China, he is pursuing a definite political strategy: to turn the widespread alienation and hostility in Japan over deteriorating living standards in a right-wing nationalist direction and thereby create a social base for his reactionary policies. Allowing for the obvious differences between the two countries, the agendas and methods of Koizumi and Bush are strikingly similar. Each is preying on fear and ignorance to garner support for an aggressive assertion of national interests abroad, and a savage onslaught on the social position and democratic rights of working people at home.

Koizumi’s reaction to the Chinese demonstrations is not an isolated event. Last September, the Japanese prime minister provocatively boarded a coast guard vessel and sailed close to the Russian-held Kurile Islands off the northern tip of Hokkaido. He used the occasion to reiterate Tokyo’s demand for the return of the islands that were seized by Soviet forces in the final days of World War II. Koizumi’s stunt provoked criticisms in Moscow, complicated negotiations over the issue and contributed to delays in a visit by Russian president Vladimir Putin to Tokyo, mooted for February.

In November, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government reacted to the intrusion of a Chinese submarine into Japanese territorial waters off the Okinawa Islands in a belligerent fashion. The Japanese military was ordered to intercept the vessel and force it to surface. Even after it had fled

the area, Japanese maritime patrol planes tracked the submarine for hours. While the Japanese navy has previously been involved in clashes with North Korean ships, the incident marked the first occasion that a Chinese vessel had been set upon. The government, backed by the media, seized on the intrusion to demand an apology from Beijing and to whip up fears in Japan about the dangers of a Chinese military threat.

In February this year, a diplomatic row blew up over Japan’s claims to several South Korean islets lying between the two countries. The dispute erupted when the assembly in the Shimane Prefecture in Japan passed an ordinance to establish February 22 as “Takeshima Day” provoking an angry reaction in South Korea. Takeshima is the Japanese name for the islands known as Dokdo by South Koreans. The following day, Japan’s ambassador to South Korea reiterated Japan’s claim to the islands, making clear that the prefecture had Tokyo’s backing. These barren, uninhabited rocks have a symbolic significance for Koreans as their incorporation into Japan in 1905 was a step towards Japan’s full colonisation of Korea in 1910.

The media has focussed on the recent protests in China, but there have also been angry anti-Japanese demonstrations in South Korea. The ambassador’s remarks triggered South Korean demands for a Japanese apology, headlines accusing Japan of a new invasion and protests in Seoul during which Japanese flags were burnt. Renewed demonstrations erupted this month over the latest Japanese school textbooks, which, among the other affronts to South Korea, included a photograph of the disputed islands with a caption reading “illegally occupied by South Korea”.

Even a decade ago, the actions of the Koizumi government would have been beyond the pale in official circles. Tokyo’s limited and grudging expressions of regret for the actions of the imperial armies in Asia in the 1930s and 1940s have always stopped short of an open acknowledgement of Japanese war crimes. At the same time, postwar governments have generally been careful to present Japan as having turned a new leaf. The symbols of Japanese militarism were shunned, publicly at least, and efforts were made to normalise relations with the country’s neighbours—including China and South Korea.

The installation of Koizumi as prime minister in April 2001, however, marked a sharp turn. For all the media hype about his personal style, he has longstanding connections to the LDP’s hawkish Fukuda faction, which has consistently pushed for increased military spending, opposed Japan’s recognition of China in 1972 and sought to eliminate the so-called pacifist clause from the Japanese constitution. From the outset, Koizumi brazenly appealed to right-wing nationalism, openly breaking previous political taboos—most notably by visiting the controversial Yasukuni Shrine that houses memorials to Japan’s war-dead, including a number of convicted war criminals.

Koizumi’s stance, at home and in the region, is due in no small measure

to the support he has received from the Bush administration. For the past five years, the White House has actively pursued a strategy of forging close military ties with Japan, pressing it to end the constitutional limitations on its armed forces and to take a more aggressive international posture, particularly in relation to China. These objectives dovetail, for the present, with the ambitions of Koizumi and the most right-wing sections of the Japanese ruling elite, who have been seeking a means of clearing away the legal and political obstacles to the assertion of Japanese imperialist interests.

The essential basis for the Bush administration's policy was laid out in an influential bipartisan document issued in October 2000 entitled "The United States and Japan: Advancing Towards a Mature Partnership"—more usually known as the Armitage-Nye report. Richard Armitage, who became Bush's deputy secretary of state, and another study group member, Paul Wolfowitz, who was installed as US deputy defence secretary, played major roles in implementing its recommendations.

Both the Democrats and Republicans in the study group agreed that the "prospects for conflict in Asia are far from remote" and concluded that the US had to ramp up its alliance with Japan. "Japan remains the keystone of the US involvement in Asia. The US-Japan alliance is central to America's global security strategy," the report stated. It went on to declare: "We see the special relationship between the United States and Britain as a model for the alliance". In other words, just as London had become Washington's loyal instrument in Europe, Tokyo was to play a similar role in Asia. The unnamed, but unmistakable, target was China.

Many of the report's elements—closer cooperation between the two militaries; reorganisation of US military bases in North East Asia; broadening the scope of US-Japan missile defence cooperation; encouraging Japan to play a larger international role; US support for Japan's bid for a permanent UN Security Council seat—read like a recipe book for the Bush administration's subsequent relations with Japan. Its most controversial aspect was the open advocacy of constitutional change in Japan. While paying lip service to the need for the Japanese people to decide, it bluntly declared: "Japan's prohibition against collective self-defence is a constraint on alliance cooperation. Lifting this prohibition would allow for closer and more efficient security cooperation."

Immediately after Bush was installed in office, it appeared that the US, in league with Japan, was heading for a direct confrontation with China. Throughout the 2000 election, Bush had campaigned against Clinton's policy of establishing closer relations with Beijing, by declaring China to be a "strategic competitor" rather than a strategic partner. The Bush administration reaffirmed its commitment to building a National Missile Defense (NMD) system, abruptly ended moves towards normalising relations with North Korea and announced a major arms sale to Taiwan, all of which were designed to put pressure on Beijing.

Following a mid-air collision between a Chinese jet and a US spy plane off the Chinese coast in April 2001, the White House ratcheted up its rhetoric against Beijing. When asked in the immediate aftermath of the incident about the means the US would use to defend Taiwan, Bush declared: "Whatever it took to help Taiwan defend herself." The obvious implication of this extraordinary statement was that, in the event of conflict between Beijing and Taipei, the US would use the full weight of its military, up to and including nuclear weapons, against China.

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, Washington's focus shifted away from China. Beijing made itself a useful partner in Bush's "global war on terrorism", fully backing the US-led military intervention into Afghanistan. There were also concerns within US ruling circles about the wisdom of provoking a conflict with a country in which American corporations had so much at stake economically. While tensions with China eased, the Bush administration's policy of forging a closer strategic alliance with Japan nevertheless proceeded apace.

In fact, September 2001 proved to be a turning point in cementing US-Japan relations. Like Bush, Koizumi saw in the "global war on terrorism" the means for realising his agenda. By exploiting concerns over terrorist attacks, particularly after Bush branded North Korea part of an "axis of evil", Koizumi calculated that he could stampede public opinion into supporting constitutional change and a military build up. Moreover, by forging closer ties with the US, Japan would gain Washington's backing for these ends.

The Koizumi government immediately supported the US military adventure in Afghanistan. It pushed new legislation through the Diet to circumvent the Japanese constitution and give a veneer of legitimacy to its naval support for US operations in Central Asia. In flouting Article 9 of the constitution—the so-called pacifist clause—previous governments had always insisted that Japan's substantial armed forces were simply there for "self defence". The new legislation, which enabled the deployment of an armada of sophisticated destroyers and logistics ships half way around the world to the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, stretched "self defence" to an absurdity.

Koizumi's decision to back Bush's "war on terrorism" provoked divisions in Japanese ruling circles and an open split in his government. In January 2002, amid bristling tensions, the prime minister sacked his foreign minister Makiko Tanaka over trumped-up claims that she had lied to parliament. The central issue in the dispute was the direction of foreign policy. Koizumi's warm embrace of Washington and his promotion of right-wing nationalism cut directly across Tanaka's efforts to steer a more independent course and to establish closer ties in Asia, especially with China. An outspoken, populist politician with a significant personal following, Tanaka made little attempt to hide her contempt for the Bush administration.

By unambiguously stamping his own imprint on foreign policy, Koizumi cleared the way to cement relations with the Washington. His determination to adhere to this political course was underscored by his government's decision to dispatch Japanese troops to Iraq early last year in the face of overwhelming popular opposition. Under the flimsy guise of carrying out humanitarian work in Iraq, 800 military engineers and other soldiers have been sent for the first time since World War II to an active war zone. The glaring discrepancies between the enabling legislation and the constitution have intensified the government's push for the modification or outright abolition of Article 9.

*To be continued*



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