

Behind China-Japan tensions

Washington fuels Japanese militarism

Part Two

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The following is the concluding part of a two-part series. Part One was published on April 25, 2005.

Two significant shifts in Japan's defence posture have been set out in recent documents. Last December the government released a comprehensive security statement—the National Defence Program Outline (NDPO)—which for the first time named China, along with North Korea, as a potential threat to Japan. “China... is attempting to expand its sphere of maritime activity while driving the modernisation of its nuclear and missile forces as well as naval and air forces. Japan needs to pay attention to these trends,” it declared.

The NDPO reflects similar US defence and intelligence reviews that also paint an overblown picture of the present and future Chinese defence capacities. It should be recalled that, while paying lip service to the pacifist clause of the constitution, Japan has, over the last five decades, built its “self-defence forces” into one of the best-equipped and largest military forces in the world. Japan's official military spending is more than double that of China.

In mid-February 2005, a top-level meeting of Japanese and US defence and foreign ministers marked a second decisive change. The joint statement specifically named Taiwan as a mutual security concern for the first time. While the reference was very tame—the need for “a peaceful resolution of issues concerning the Taiwan Strait”—the meaning was undeniable. It represented a shift from Tokyo's previous scrupulous support for the “One China” policy to Washington's ambiguous stance, which nominally recognises Taiwan as part of China, but is nevertheless committed to defending it against Beijing.

The significance of the statement was not lost on Beijing, which responded by angrily denouncing Japan for interfering in China's internal affairs. Beijing is justifiably concerned that the deepening collaboration between the US and Japan, the world's two largest economic powers, is the most dangerous element of a US strategy of encirclement. This fear has only been heightened since September 2001 by the establishment of US military bases in Afghanistan and Central Asia; closer US security relations with India and Nepal, as well as US efforts to reestablish its military presence in South East Asia.

Behind the scenes, a major reorganisation of US-Japan military relations is well underway as part of a broader global repositioning of the American military. The *Washington Times* noted on April 15 that over the coming months US and Japanese military officers and defence officials will hold meetings in Washington, Tokyo and the US Pacific Command headquarters in Hawaii “to determine ways to put muscle behind the swiftly maturing alliance between the United States and Japan”.

The object of this intense discussion is to prepare for a joint declaration later this year that will effect “the most fundamental and far-reaching revision of the alliance” since the US Japan Security Treaty was rewritten

in 1960. According to the *Washington Times*, the new relationship will be a partnership of “near equals” that will involve a more thorough cooperation on training, intelligence, war planning and operations.

The *Asahi Shimbun* reported on April 13 that the Japanese government has given approval in principle for one key element of the plans: the transfer of the command headquarters of the US army's 1st Corps from Washington state to Camp Zama near Yokohama, south of Tokyo. The move is aimed at reinforcing US-Japan military ties at the top-level, even as American forces in Japan and South Korea are cut, in line with the Pentagon's plans for a more flexible, mobile US military, capable of striking anywhere in the world.

Growing military collaboration between the US and Japan has generated new pressures for constitutional change in Japan. Article 9 has been stretched beyond recognition to allow Japanese troops to be deployed in an active overseas war zone in support of the US occupation of Iraq. Koizumi has used the subterfuge that Japanese military forces are simply engaged in humanitarian efforts—just like the pretext that was used to justify the dispatch of Japanese troops as “peace-keepers” to Cambodia and East Timor in the 1990s.

Article 9 nevertheless remains a legal obstacle to the dispatch of military forces to an overseas war, either as part of an alliance or directly by Japan. Even within the immediate North East Asian region, the constitution creates problems for joint planning and operations by US and Japanese forces. The Koizumi government has passed legislation allowing for the Japanese military to collaborate with the Pentagon, not only in the immediate defence of Japan, but in support of broader US operations in the region. Nevertheless, the difficulty of justifying Japanese involvement as “self-defence” in, say, the US military backing for Taiwan, remains.

The issue is particularly acute when it comes to US-Japanese collaboration on a ballistic missile defence shield. Koizumi has justified support for the US project on the grounds that Japan needs to be able to defend itself from a North Korean missile attack. This political ruse barely disguises the fact that the shield's primary purpose is to neutralise China's missile arsenal. But it does complicate the joint deployment of the anti-missile system for purposes other than the defence of Japan.

An article entitled “The revival of the US-Japanese Alliance” published in February/March by the influential right-wing US thinktank, the American Enterprise Institute, enthusiastically endorsed closer military ties between the two countries. However, author Dan Blumenthal noted the problems that would emerge when the US called on Japan to deploy naval assets to assist in missions not directly related to “self-defence”. “Given the short time frames involved in a decision to intercept a missile, drawn out security deliberations by policymakers will be impossible. Military personnel will have to make on-the-spot decisions to activate the system without necessarily deciphering whether the missile being

intercepted is targeted at Japan, another US ally, or at the US homeland,” he explained.

Plans for an overhaul of the Japanese constitution are already well advanced. A panel of the Diet’s lower house submitted its final report summing up five years of discussion on April 15. The report dealt with a number of different aspects of the constitution, but among the most controversial were proposed changes to Article 9. As the panel comprises representatives of all parliamentary parties, no clear-cut recommendation was made. However, the thrust of the proposals was to explicitly allow for “self-defence” and “collective defence”—a phrase that would clear the way for far more active defence alliances with the US, in particular. A similar upper house report is being prepared.

Koizumi is actively pushing for the constitutional amendments. An LDP committee is due to release draft constitutional amendments as early as next month. But the government faces major obstacles to constitutional change, which requires a two-thirds majority in both houses of parliament and the support of a majority of voters at a referendum. While the LDP, coalition partner New Komeito Party and the opposition Democratic Party of Japan have backed the report, the Social Democratic Party and the Japanese Communist Party have opposed it. On the crucial issue of “collective defence”, the panel was split three ways between opponents, supporters and those who supported a more limited amendment.

The parliamentary opposition and reservations about changing Article 9 reflect several concerns. For postwar governments, the pacifist clause has proven to be a convenient diplomatic device to deflect criticism from China and other countries over Japanese rearmament. More fundamentally, however, Japan’s brutal militarist regime of the 1930s and 1940s generated deeply felt antagonisms among working people to imperialist war. These sentiments remain, despite Koizumi’s efforts to whip up nationalist sentiment. They are reflected in the hostility to the deployment of Japanese troops to Iraq and changes to Article 9. A *Mainichi Shimbun* poll last May found that, while 78 percent of Japanese favoured constitutional change, 70 percent opposed changes to Article 9.

Some of the most strident support for amending Article 9 and rearming Japan is to be found in Washington, rather than Tokyo. In an interview last August, US Secretary of State Colin Powell warned that Tokyo must consider changing the clause if it wants a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. “If Japan is going to play a full role on the world stage and become a full active participating member of the Security Council, and have the kind of obligations that it would pick up as a member of the Security Council, Article Nine would have to be examined in that light,” he stated. His comments reflect the Bush administration’s alignment not simply with Japan, but with the most right wing, militarist sections of its political establishment.

During her trip to Asia last month, Powell’s successor Condoleezza Rice enthused: “Japan has earned its honorable place among the nations of the world by its own effort and by its own character. That is why the United States unambiguously supports a permanent seat for Japan on the United Nations Security Council.” Speaking at Sophia University in Tokyo, Rice lauded Japan as a model for “political and economic progress in all of East Asia” and a partner in the “global war on terrorism”. She declared that US alliances with Japan and other countries were “not against China” but then added, “we want to push, prod and persuade China on a positive course”. In South Korea, she brushed off comments from reporters questioning US support for Japanese rearmament and a UN Security seat by reiterating her praise for the US-Japan alliance.

In his recent American Enterprise Institute (AEI) article, Dan Blumenthal was not so reticent about the target of Washington’s strategy. After declaring that US policy makers should welcome and support Japan’s emergence as a strong American ally, he stated: “While the upgrading of the alliance serves a number of Tokyo’s strategic purposes, there is no mistaking the fact that Japan has decided to join the United

States in its grand strategy of checking China’s great-power ambitions. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, Tokyo has taken advantage of the US-led war on terrorism, Washington’s encouragement of Japanese efforts to bolster its defence capabilities, and the North Korean nuclear standoff to assert a defence posture commensurate to its stature in the international community.”

Blumenthal’s praise for Koizumi’s adroitness points to another feature of the US alignment with Tokyo: an increasingly open defence of the government’s efforts to stir up Japanese nationalism. Just as Bush is relying on extreme right-wing Christian fundamentalists in the US, so Koizumi is basing himself on militarist layers who regard Japan’s colonial adventures in Asia as “a war of liberation” from Western imperialism and, in the manner of the pro-Nazi holocaust deniers, flatly declare that atrocities like the Rape of Nanking are a Western fabrication. It is not surprising therefore that supporters of the Bush administration have no difficulty in joining the apologists for Japanese militarism—as long as it advances US interests.

Blumenthal pays tribute to Koizumi’s cleverness in playing what he terms “the history card”—that is, visiting the notorious Yasakuni Shrine and defending the publication of history texts that whitewash Japan’s war record. “In fashioning his China strategy, Koizumi had to both build public support and overcome Chinese pressure. Koizumi has accomplished these dual goals by skillfully turning the Achilles heel of Japan’s China policy—the ‘history card’—into a political advantage.”

According to Blumenthal, Koizumi’s great skill, along with sharply polarising public opinion in Japan, has been to inflame regional tensions by promoting the symbols of wartime Japanese imperialism as a cover for his more fundamental objective of Japanese rearmament. “Because the Chinese leadership continues to emphasise this symbolic issue, Koizumi’s substantive reforms of Japan’s defence posture have received far less criticism than they otherwise would. Indeed, China has overplayed its hand by allowing Japan-bashing to boil over within the Chinese populace.”

In a comment in the *Wall Street Journal* on April 13, James Lilley, one of Blumenthal’s colleagues at the American Heritage Institute, makes a similar point about the latest anti-Japanese protests in China. Lilley notes that regional reactions to Japan’s territorial claims and controversial textbooks “reflect deep historic animosities and distrust” but then openly defends Koizumi’s actions, stating: “Japan has been bludgeoned unmercifully by China and Korea for its brutality during its invasions and occupations of the 20th century. Some of this represents genuine emotion, but it also reflects an attempt to put Japan on the defensive while at the same time gobbling up its goods and superior technology.”

China and South Korea clearly exploit nationalist sentiment for their own political purposes. The Beijing bureaucracy, which has presided over two decades of free market restructuring and is integrating itself into the emerging capitalist class, has all but given up its past socialist pretences. The Chinese leaders, like their counterparts in Japan, are deliberating whipping up nationalism to divert widespread and deepening hostility over poverty and unemployment as well as to push for a greater role for China in the region and internationally.

At the same time, however, there is an understandable fear among broad layers of the population in Asia, that the justifications being advanced for the past crimes of Japanese imperialism are aimed at preparing for new ones. As in the 1930s, Japan is heavily dependent on the import of raw materials, particularly oil, to feed its huge manufacturing base. After a decade and a half of economic slump and crisis, sections of Tokyo’s ruling elite support a more aggressive and expansionist strategy to secure access to cheap commodities, labour and markets. It is no accident that its territorial conflicts with China, Russia and South Korea all involve areas in the surrounding seas that are potential sources of oil and gas. To back its ambitions, Japan needs to be able to exert its military muscle.

Not all sections of the US ruling elite welcome the reemergence of Japanese militarism. Some can still recall a time when US imperialism was compelled to fight a devastating war in the Pacific to defend its economic and strategic interests in Asia. They regard the present foreign policy of the Bush administration as shortsighted and reckless. At present, Tokyo may be prepared to play second fiddle to Washington as the means for rearming and asserting its status as “a normal nation”. But alignments can change. Japanese interests not only conflict with those of China, but, more fundamentally, with Washington’s long-term plans to establish US control over the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. These were the seeds of the Pacific war that erupted in December 1941. They could also become the trigger for another bloody conflagration.

In a scathing recent attack on current US policy towards Japan entitled “The real ‘China threat’”, academic Chalmers Johnson made the following observations:

“I recall 40 years ago, when I was a new professor working in the field of Chinese and Japanese international relations that Edwin O Reischauer once commented, ‘The great payoff from our victory of 1945 was a permanently disarmed Japan.’ Born in Japan and a Japanese historian at Harvard, Reischauer served as US ambassador to Tokyo in the administrations of presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. Strange to say, since the end of the Cold War in 1991 and particularly under the administration of George W Bush, the United States has been doing everything in its power to encourage and even accelerate Japanese rearmament.

“Such a development promotes hostility between China and Japan, the two superpowers of East Asia, sabotages possible peaceful solutions in those two problem areas, Taiwan and North Korea, left over from the Chinese and Korean civil wars, and lays the foundation for a possible future Sino-Japanese conflict that the United States would almost surely lose. It is unclear whether the ideologues and war lovers of Washington understand what they are unleashing—a possible confrontation between the world’s fastest industrial economy, China, and the world’s second-most-productive, albeit declining, economy, Japan; a confrontation that the United States would have caused and in which it might well be consumed.”

Washington’s reaction to the latest tensions between Japan and China, along with the record of the last five years not only in North East Asia but internationally, makes clear that, whether they understand what they are unleashing or not, the warmongers of the Bush administration are intent on pursuing a military alliance with Japan, regardless of its potentially catastrophic consequences.

Concluded



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