

Japanese government boosts military spending

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In office for less than a month, the right-wing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government in Japan has swiftly adopted an aggressive strategic posture against China. It announced last Friday the first increase in military spending in more than a decade, with an emphasis on strengthening Japanese control over islands in the East China Sea contested by China.

The defence ministry foreshadowed a request for a 2.2 percent boost to its budget, to a minimum of 4.7 trillion yen (\$US52.8 billion), for the next financial year, beginning in April. Japan already has the world's sixth largest defence budget, despite observing a semi-official limit on military spending of 1 percent of gross domestic product

The government had previously announced an additional 180 billion yen for military hardware this financial year, as part of an emergency economic stimulus package. The new equipment is likely to include upgrades for F-15 fighter jets and early warning aircraft, additional patrol helicopters and an expansion of anti-ballistic missile systems.

The Japanese military has held drills over the past week aimed at bolstering "island defence." Japanese and Chinese aircraft and vessels have been engaged in tense and dangerous manoeuvring near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands since the previous Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government "nationalised" the rocky outcrops last September.

On Sunday, some 300 troops, backed by 20 warplanes, held a military drill near Tokyo aimed at recapturing "a remote island invaded by an enemy force." Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera said Japan had to improve its border defence because China had infringed on Japanese waters and airspace around the disputed islets.

On January 5, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe ordered the

defence ministry to strengthen Japan's so-called border security. The military plans to deploy two extra coastguard patrol boats to the contested area and is considering stationing F-15 fighters on Shimojima Island—a move that would halve the current flying time to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

F-15s have been scrambled on several occasions over the past month to intercept Chinese maritime surveillance aircraft. Joint military exercises with the US this week included a drill involving Japanese and American warplanes off the east coast of Japan, on the same theme of border security.

Japan's more aggressive military stance has been directly encouraged by the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," which is aimed at strengthening US alliances and strategic ties throughout the region in order to contain China. The Abe government plans to revise the so-called pacifist clause in the Japanese constitution, thus permitting the transformation of the country's self-defence forces into a "normal" military—that is, one able to prosecute Japan's strategic interests in Asia.

The increased military spending has been accompanied by a more forceful diplomatic policy. Prime Minister Abe last Friday criticised China for allowing extensive anti-Japanese protests last year against his predecessor's decision to buy the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands from their private Japanese owner. It was wrong, he said, for China to allow Japanese businesses to be damaged to achieve "a political goal."

Abe's blunt comments came as he prepared for a four-day tour of South East Asia, which began yesterday in Vietnam and will include Thailand and Indonesia. He told Japan's NHK public television on Sunday that he wanted to strengthen Japan's relations with these

countries, citing their potential for economic growth. During his visit to Indonesia, he is expected to outline a new “Abe doctrine” for Japan’s Asian diplomacy.

Abe’s tour is part of a thrust into South East Asia by Japan, aimed at bolstering Japan’s economic and strategic ties at China’s expense. Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida has just completed a trip to the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei and Australia. Earlier this month, Finance Minister Taro Aso visited Burma [Myanmar] to bolster Japanese investment as the country opens up to international finance capital.

One implication of Abe’s comments last Friday is that Japanese companies could redirect investment to South East Asia if China cannot protect their interests. Japan is the second largest investor, after the European Union, in the countries comprising the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Japan is also ASEAN’s second largest trading partner, just behind China.

In Hanoi, Abe announced an additional \$500 million in aid for three infrastructure projects, bringing total Japanese aid during the 2012 financial year to \$1.7 billion. For the first 10 months of last year, some \$4.9 billion in Japanese investment was pledged in Vietnam—almost double the figure for all of 2011.

Abe’s first overseas trip is in marked contrast to his first term as prime minister in 2006, when he visited China to patch up relations that had frayed under his predecessor, Junichiro Koizumi. Koizumi had pursued an openly nationalist agenda, including visits to the controversial Yasukuni shrine to Japan’s war dead, and revisions to school textbooks to weaken or omit references to Japanese war crimes in the 1930s and 1940s.

During last month’s election campaign, Abe foreshadowed visiting the Yasukuni shrine and changing school texts, as well as modifying previous formal limited apologies for Japanese war crimes. These moves are certain to provoke protests from China, and potentially other Asian countries that suffered under Japanese military occupation.

The Abe government’s diplomatic offensive into South East Asia is not limited to economic issues, but includes strategic cooperation. During his visit to the Philippines, Foreign Minister Kishida signed an agreement to supply 10 coastguard vessels, which will be used to patrol the South China Sea, where the

Philippines is engaged in territorial disputes with China.

After Kishida’s visit, Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario reiterated his government’s support for a “militarily stronger Japan,” which would act “as a counter-balance in the region” against an “increasingly assertive China.” Coming from the government of a country that endured Japanese occupation during World War II, these comments can only assist the re-emergence of Japanese militarism.

Abe’s “doctrine” will closely follow that of the Obama administration, which claims to be encouraging Asia’s democracies against an unstated enemy—namely, undemocratic China. In his comments to NHK television on Sunday, Abe declared: “Japan’s path since the end of World War II has been to firmly protect democracy and basic human rights and stress the rule of law. I want to emphasise the importance of strengthening ties with countries that share these values.”

Abe’s claim to be protecting “democracy,” even as he denies Japan’s wartime atrocities and revives Japanese militarism, is completely cynical. Like Obama, Abe is using “democracy” as a pretext for forcefully pursuing the economic and strategic interests of Japanese imperialism. By directly encouraging the re-emergence of Japanese militarism, the Obama administration is recklessly raising regional tensions and setting the stage for military confrontation.



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