Asia in 2013

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The working class and oppressed masses of Asia confront a deepening economic and social crisis and the rising danger of war. As the ruling classes resort to the poison of nationalism and militarism, the unification of workers on the basis of socialist internationalism takes on an urgent necessity.

The fault lines of a new world war are nowhere more apparent than in Asia. The Obama administration's "pivot to the Asia Pacific" has heightened geo-political tensions across the region as it strengthens old military alliances, forms new strategic partnerships, establishes new basing arrangements and repositions military assets—all aimed at containing China.

By encouraging allies to aggressively assert their interests, the US has inflamed flashpoints across the region. Spurred on by Washington, the Philippines and Vietnam are seeking to forge a front of South East Asian countries to bolster their position in territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. South Korea, with US support, ended the previous Sunshine Policy aimed at opening up relations with North Korea, ensuring tensions remain high on the Korean Peninsula.

The recklessness of US foreign policy is especially evident in the frictions that have erupted between Japan and China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. Since September, when Tokyo "nationalised" the rocky outcrops, Japanese and Chinese maritime vessels and now aircraft have been engaged in risky moves and counter-moves in nearby waters and airspace. Any incident threatens to escalate into a confrontation involving the world's three largest economies—the US, China and Japan.

The Obama administration's hypocrisy knows no bounds. US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell yesterday called for "cooler heads to prevail" in the island dispute, even as the US is holding joint exercises with Japan to strengthen its "island defence". While declaring Washington's "neutrality" in the territorial controversy, American officials have repeatedly affirmed that the US would side militarily with Japan in any conflict over the islands.

By pushing Tokyo to confront Beijing, the US has helped fuel the revival of Japanese nationalism and militarism, which dominated last month's elections and resulted in a right-wing government headed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Within weeks of taking office, this government has announced the first increase in military spending in a decade, beefed up Japanese forces around the disputed islands and embarked on a diplomatic offensive to strengthen economic and strategic ties in South East Asia.

Abe intends to modify the so-called pacifist clause of Japan's post-war constitution, to transform its Self Defence Forces into "a normal military" capable of prosecuting the interests of Japanese imperialism. The re-emergence of Japanese militarism is already shifting regional alignments, with the Philippine government announcing closer cooperation with Tokyo and publicly supporting a "militarily stronger Japan" as a counterbalance to China.

The driving force behind Obama's "pivot" to Asia is the worsening global economic crisis. The US is seeking to counteract its economic decline by using military power to maintain its global dominance, particularly in Asia, which is central to globalised production. The Asian economies, however, far from being an independent motor for economic growth, are now being hit by the slump in their European and American export markets. The growth rate in China fell sharply in 2012 from 10.4 to 7.7 percent, and in India, from 8.9 to 5.5 percent. Japan is once again in recession.

Like their counterparts in Europe and America, the ruling classes in Asia have only one solution to their mounting economic problems: to attempt to shift the economic burden onto the working class at home and

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their rivals abroad. The noxious fumes of nationalism are rising throughout the region as governments seek to project the mounting social tensions generated by their austerity measures outward against a foreign “enemy”.

The nationalist clamour being whipped up by the ruling elites in Japan and China is rooted in their fear of social upheaval as their economies contract. Similarly, the border dispute in Kashmir between India and Pakistan, which has already led to two wars, has again flared up as New Delhi and Islamabad stir up communal animosities to deflect attention from their internal crises.

The outpouring of nationalism is accompanied by a developing arms race. While Washington chooses to highlight China’s defence budget, military spending is expanding across the region. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Asia was set to overtake Europe in military spending last year. The 2011 defence budgets of China, Japan and India were $US89.9 billion, $58.2 billion and $37 billion, respectively. South East Asian countries collectively increased their spending by 13.5 percent to $24.5 billion. The US defence budget, at some $670 billion, still dwarfed all potential rivals.

While there are obvious differences, the present situation does have resonances with the pre-war period of the 1930s, when Japanese imperialism sought to extricate itself from economic depression through colonial conquest. Its military occupation of China put Japan on a collision course with US imperialism that led to war throughout Asia and the Pacific. Over the past two decades, the collapse of the Soviet Union, capitalist restoration in China and India’s turn to pro-market policies have created ambitious capitalist elites seeking their own place in the imperialist order, greatly heightening regional rivalry and the danger of a catastrophic nuclear conflict.

The same processes have also led to a vast expansion of the working class in Asia—home to half the world’s population. Along with its class brothers and sisters around the world, this is the only social force capable of halting the worsening social misery and slide into the barbarism of war by abolishing its root cause—capitalism—and establishing a world-planned socialist economy. Above all, that requires a political fight against all forms of nationalism and communalism to unite workers internationally. In turn, the working class must settle political accounts with Stalinism, especially its Maoist variant, which, by subordinating the proletariat to the national bourgeoisie, is responsible for one devastating betrayal after another.

This means drawing the necessary lessons from the protracted struggle of the international Trotskyist movement against Stalinism in the course of the 20th century, and building sections of the International Committee of Fourth International throughout Asia to lead the revolutionary struggles ahead.

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