

Japanese premier signals military buildup during US visit

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In a February 21-22 visit to Washington, newly-elected Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe pledged to escalate Japanese military collaboration with US imperialism and participate in Washington's planned Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) free-trade zone project. This is a commitment to deep attacks on the working class and a global escalation of imperialist war and intrigue.

Abe, a right-wing nationalist politician who took office in December, told the *Washington Post* in an interview before his trip that he aimed to restore "trust and confidence between Japan and the United States." He stressed both the US-Japan security alliance and the role of US-Japanese trade to revive Japan's economy. In particular, Abe cited the crisis over the strategically-located Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu Islands in Chinese), which Japan administers but China claims.

Far-right Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara deliberately inflamed the dispute over the islands last year. While visiting the right-wing Heritage Foundation in the US, he called for Japan to buy them from private Japanese citizens. The conflict has escalated into a dangerous military standoff, amid reactionary chauvinist appeals from Chinese and Japanese officials and the deployment of maritime vessels and warplanes from both countries to the islands.

US officials have indicated that under the terms of the US-Japan alliance, the US would intervene to support Japan, should fighting break out over the islands.

Abe's visit included an interview with US President Barack Obama, followed by a short joint photo-op, and then a talk at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). The CSIS, an influential Washington think-tank on military issues, issued a report last August demanding a closer US-Japanese military cooperation. Without that, it said, Japan would cease to be a "Tier-One" nation.

After their talks, Abe and Obama issued a statement

announcing that Japan would "participate in the TPP negotiations." The statement also recognized "bilateral trade sensitivities, such as certain agricultural products for Japan and certain manufactured products for the United States." That concession is aimed at placating opposition to the TPP from Japan's farm lobby, which is a major political base of Abe's right-wing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

Obama declined to address relations with China, however. Abe briefly remarked that, after the death of 10 Japanese citizens last month in the Amenas hostage standoff in Algeria, Japan was more committed to participating in the US "war on terror."

At the CSIS, Abe laid out his US-aligned foreign policy in greater detail. Explicitly referring to the 2012 CSIS report on the US-Japanese alliance, he promised: "Japan is not, and will never be, a Tier-Two country. I should repeat it by saying, I am back, and so shall Japan be."

Abe pledged that Japan would promote "rules" like patent and labor rights, help the US military secure "the global commons" (a euphemism for control of shipping lanes, international air space, and other strategic assets), and be a more "robust partner" in the US "war on terror."

Abe emphasised that "Japan must stay strong" and noted Japan's defence budget had been increased "to do just that." In fact, the Abe government has authorised the first increase in military spending in more than a decade and is moving to revise the country's so-called pacifist constitution to allow the Japanese and US militaries to collaborate more closely in Asia and around the world.

Abe provocatively claimed that the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands were Japanese sovereign territory. "We simply cannot tolerate any challenge now or in the future. No nation should make any miscalculation about [the] firmness of our resolve," he warned.

The prime minister also briefly outlined his right-wing economic policy, dubbed "Abe-onomics" by the financial

press. It combines aggressive government spending and money-printing—seeking to drive down the value of the yen and make Japanese exports more competitive—with “structural reforms.” Though he did not raise it in Washington, these include deeply unpopular plans, supported by the entire Japanese political elite, to cut pensions and social spending for Japan’s aging population.

Washington supports the TPP and Abe’s reactionary, anti-working class social policies, and it has consistently sought to promote Japanese militarism—especially as a part of a broad Asian alliance, including India and Australia, aimed at containing China. It is somewhat divided, however, over how aggressively to support Abe’s entire agenda for ensuring Japanese imperialism remains a “Tier One country.”

Commenting on Abe’s trip, the *Wall Street Journal* noted that Abe “was unable to draw from Mr. Obama as strong a public commitment as Japanese officials had sought that the US would defend Japan if the continuing tussles over [the Senkaku Islands] turn violent.” The *Journal* speculated that this might reflect “reluctance to cozy up to yet another Japanese premier, who may not survive more than a year of the country’s notorious political instability.”

Abe’s broader policies have provoked opposition from other imperialist powers. His call to drive down the value of the yen has stoked fears of a global currency war, in which each country would try to make its exports competitive at others’ expense, by lowering the value of its currency.

The bourgeois press has also raised concerns that US support for a hardline Japanese position on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands could embolden Japan into provoking war with China, which could draw in the US, escalating into World War III (see: “The danger of war in Asia”). *Financial Times* columnist Gideon Rachman compared the situation in the Asia-Pacific to that in 1914, at the beginning of World War I.

Even if it does not produce all-out war, however, Japan’s policy alienates South Korea, a former Japanese colony that is a key US ally in the region. South Korea also has a territorial dispute with Japan, over the Takeshima Islands (Dokdo Islands in Korea). At the CSIS, Abe received one question specifically on how he would maintain good relations with South Korea and its incoming right-wing president, Park Geun-hye.

Abe ducked the question, claiming he would handle the differences and maintain good personal relations with

Park. She is the daughter of Park Cheung-hee, the US-backed dictator of South Korea from 1961 until his assassination in 1979, who was a good friend of Abe’s grandfather, Japanese Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi. Kishi, a top official in Japanese-occupied China in the 1930s who was briefly held by American occupation troops on war crimes charges after World War II, became a key architect of the LDP’s dominance in post-war Japanese politics and of the unpopular US-Japan security treaty of 1960.

Despite Washington’s differences with Abe, however, in the final analysis Abe’s visit testifies primarily to the rottenness and bankruptcy of US imperialist policy in the region, as well as its right-wing allies in Tokyo and Seoul.

While Obama shies away from fully endorsing Abe’s aggressive confrontation with China, this confrontation is the logical consequence of his administration’s “pivot to Asia.” A key part of Washington’s policy has been to encourage Japan to play a greater role in Asian security—that is, to promote Japanese rearmament and competition with China.

This is the policy of a ruling class that has entirely lost its head. As the bourgeois press is compelled to admit, it inevitably leads in the direction of warfare between the major powers in Asia and worldwide. Nevertheless, the imperialist ruling elites on both sides of the Pacific are rushing headlong in this direction. In encouraging Japanese imperialism to extend its operations, including to the Middle East and to policing operations on the world’s sea lanes, Washington is simply sowing the seeds of wider and more devastating conflicts.



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