

Japanese PM calls for a “strong Japan”

Peter Symonds
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In his policy speech to the Japanese parliament on Thursday, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called for a “strong Japan” and ominously drew a parallel between the current tense standoff with China over disputed islands in the South China Sea and the Falklands war in 1982 between Britain and Argentina.

Abe cited former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who declared that “the rule of international law must triumph over the exertion of force” to justify sending the British army, air force and navy to seize the Falklands back from Argentina. Casting China as an aggressor, Abe declared: “I want to appeal to international society that, in modern times, changes to the status quo by the use of force will justify nothing.”

Tensions over the small rocky outcrops, known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China, have escalated sharply since last September when the previous government bought several of the islands from their private Japanese owners. China has dispatched maritime surveillance vessels and aircraft to challenge Japanese administration of the islands. Japan has responded with a build-up of coast guard vessels near the island and by scrambling air force F-15 fighter jets—most recently on Thursday.

In the world of Japanese politics, in which points are often made indirectly or by allusion, Abe’s reference to the Falklands war has a definite meaning: like the British conservatives in 1982, his government is prepared to go to war with China over the tiny, uninhabited islets in the East China Sea. The Falklands War lasted several months and cost some 1,000 lives, but the consequences of a conflict between China and Japan are far greater. American officials have declared that the US would side with Japan in any war over the islands.

The Obama administration has inflamed tensions throughout the region with its “pivot to Asia” aimed at encircling China. By encouraging allies such as Japan

and the Philippines to adopt a more aggressive stance towards China, Obama is responsible for stoking up territorial disputes not only over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, but also in the South China Sea.

Abe, a right-wing nationalist, took office in December after his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) won lower house elections. Abe met with Obama in Washington last week and reaffirmed his government’s unequivocal commitment to the US alliance and pledged to strengthen the Japanese military.

Abe has already increased the Japanese military budget for the first time in a decade and is calling for a national debate over the country’s so-called pacifist constitution. The LDP is pressing for a “normal military” that can defend the interests of Japanese imperialism, unfettered by constitutional restraints.

In his speech on Thursday, Abe warned against complacency, declaring: “I am determined to ... protect our sovereignty and our people’s lives. The threats to our national security are not ‘someone else’s’ problem. It is a ‘clear and present danger.’” His choice of words was deliberate: “a clear and present danger” would be the justification for Japanese military action.

In a clear appeal to Japanese militarism, Abe called for all parties to rally around the Japanese coast guard and military. “Not fearing high waves, riding over turbulence, withstanding high degree of tension, they are serving with a strong sense of pride. I call on both the ruling and opposition parties to put aside their differences and show our appreciation to them,” he said.

While declaring that “my door to dialogue is always open,” Abe put the onus on China to improve relations and ensure “that individual issues don’t affect our overall relations”. The Chinese regime, which has also been whipping up nationalist sentiment to deflect from social tensions at home, accused Japan on Thursday of escalating tensions by interfering with Chinese vessels

and aircraft. Chinese defence ministry spokesman Geng Yansheng accused Abe of repeatedly making “provocative statements” and “intentionally provoking military confrontation”.

Abe’s economic policy parallels his foreign policy. In his speech, the prime minister called for the building of “a strong economy”, declaring: “Let’s aim to become No.1 in the world.” He made an unabashed appeal for a sweeping program of restructuring and deregulation. “I aim to build a country where the enterprises are the most free in the world to do business,” he said.

What has rapidly become known as “Abenomics” consists of an aggressive drive to lower the value of the yen combined with fiscal stimulus measures and restructuring aimed at boosting big business at the expense of the working class. Far from acting from a position of strength, the Abe government is engaged in a desperate effort to end two decades of economic stagnation and deflation, reflected currently in three consecutive quarters of negative growth.

The government announced its nominations on Thursday for the country’s central bank, the Bank of Japan (BoJ)—Haruhiko Kuroda as the BoJ president, and Kikuo Iwata and Hiroshi Nakaso as the two deputy presidents. Kuroda and Iwata are both well known as critics of the Bank of Japan and advocates of Abe’s monetary policies to promote inflation and devalue the yen.

Kuroda was deputy to Eisuke Sakakibara, vice-minister for finance for international affairs, also known as “Mr. Yen” and took over Sakakibara’s position in 1999. In 2005, he wrote a book that attacked the BoJ’s “failure” to end deflation. In line with the US Fed policy of “quantitative easing”, in effect, printing money, Kuroda has in recent weeks been advocating the purchase of “hundreds of trillions” of yen-denominated assets by the BoJ.

The value of the yen has already fallen sharply and Japanese shares, especially of exporters, have risen in anticipation of the shift in monetary policy, prompting warnings of a global “currency war” as central banks engage in competitive devaluation. So marked is the shift at the BoJ that the British-based *Economist* commented that Abe’s appointments were “akin to a hostile takeover of the central bank, a conservative bastion that has long had mixed feelings about the

merits of unorthodox monetary policies it pioneered.”

Abe, however, has no misgivings. In his speech, he declared: “To compete in an ever more competitive global economy, Japan cannot stick with its current ways. Japan’s economic growth depends on our will and courage to venture out into the rough seas that is global competition.”

In other words, like its rivals in Asia, Europe and the Americas, the new Japanese government is setting aggressive “beggar thy neighbour” economic policies in parallel with military rearmament and the assertion of Japanese imperialist interests. For the working class in Japan and around the world this can end only in disaster: a social counterrevolution combined with the slide towards conflict and war.



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