

Japanese ministers visit notorious war shrine

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Visits by Japanese ministers, including deputy prime minister Taro Aso, to the notorious Yasukuni Shrine to the country's war dead last weekend are another indication of the government's nationalist and militarist agenda.

Internal Affairs Minister Yoshitaka Shindo, National Public Safety Commission chief Keiji Furuya and deputy chief cabinet secretary Katsunobu Kato all made separate trips to the war shrine to take part in religious ceremonies associated with the spring festival.

While Prime Minister Shinzo Abe did not make a visit, he pointedly sent ritual offerings inscribed with his name and title to the shrine. As opposition leader, Abe made a trip to the Yasukuni Shrine last October prior to winning the December election and subsequently gave the green light for his ministers to make visits.

The shrine to Japan's war dead, including convicted war criminals, is a focus for right-wing nationalists who deny or dismiss the Japanese military's involvement in terrible war crimes in the 1930s and 1940s. An associated war museum makes no mention of the atrocities and repeats wartime propaganda depicting Japan as a liberator of Asia from Western colonialism.

Abe is promoting militarism as part of his aim of building a "strong Japan". He is a long-time supporter of the revision of school history books to remove "unjust" perceptions of the country's wartime record. Abe has also indicated that he intends to modify previous, limited formal apologies by Japanese leaders for war crimes in Asia.

The latest visits to the Yasukuni Shrine have provoked protests by the South Korean and Chinese governments, which are exploiting the issue to stir up nationalist sentiment at home. South Korea's foreign minister Yun Byung-se cancelled a trip to Tokyo and a foreign ministry spokesman expressed "deep concern and regret" over the visits to a shrine that "glorifies

Japan's wars of aggression."

The Chinese foreign ministry also sent a "stern message" to Tokyo. The state-run Xinhua news agency declared that the Yasukuni visits were "a major obstacle for Japan to mend its ties with neighbouring China and South Korea."

Since taking office, Abe has been cautious about expressing his nationalist views too openly, in large part to avoid alienating voters in the lead up to upper house elections in July. There is deep-rooted hostility in the working class to Japanese militarism, which was responsible for brutal repression at home as well as war crimes in Asia.

Abe and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) won the election last December, not because of widespread support for his right-wing agenda, but due to popular hostility towards the previous Democratic Party of Japan government, its broken promises and regressive social and economic policies.

At the same time, the LDP government is proceeding with its aim of transforming the Japanese armed forces into a "normal" military, unfettered by the so-called pacifist clause in the country's post war constitution. Abe has already announced an increase in the military budget—the first rise in more than a decade—and has taken a hard-line stance in the ongoing dispute with China over islands in the East China Sea.

Abe is planning to make constitutional change a feature of the upper house election, but has avoided targeting Article 9, which, formally at least, "renounces war" and "the threat of use of force as a means of settling international disputes". Article 9, which also prohibits "the maintenance of air, sea or land forces", has not prevented Japan from maintaining a sizeable military under the pretext of "self defence forces" or from providing military assistance to the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

As a first step, the LDP government is proposing to

modify the constitution to make future changes easier and thus open the door for more substantive alterations, including to Article 9. Currently any constitutional change requires a two-thirds majority in both parliamentary houses, followed by approval in a referendum. Abe is seeking to alter the constitution to require only a simple majority in the upper and lower houses.

Earlier this month, Abe met with officials of the extreme nationalist Japan Restoration Party (JRP), including Toru Hashimoto, to discuss cooperation on constitutional change. Hashimoto is JRP co-leader with Shintaro Ishihara, who until last year was Tokyo governor and a leading LDP member. Ishihara has called for a complete rewriting of the constitution and supports a major military expansion, even suggesting the development of Japanese nuclear weapons.

As part of his “pivot to Asia” aimed against China, US President Barack Obama called on Japan to play a greater regional “security role” and, in doing so, encouraged Tokyo to take a more aggressive stance towards Beijing. Ishihara re-ignited the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands last year by proposing to buy the islands from their private Japanese owner. Tensions with China flared after the DPJ government “nationalised” the islands and Chinese maritime vessels and aircraft began challenging Japanese control of the area.

Washington has backed Tokyo in any conflict with China over the islands. It is also tacitly supporting the push for constitutional revision to allow Japan to collaborate more closely in its war plans against China. The LDP government is proposing to modify the constitution to allow Japan to engage in “collective self-defence”—that is, to join military pacts and engage in joint military operations with the US and other powers. Japan’s involvement in the Iraq war, which provoked widespread protests at home, was limited to sending a battalion sized reconstruction unit, not combat troops.

At the same time, the re-emergence of Japanese militarism has also generated obstacles for the Obama administration’s strategy of building a web of strategic alliances throughout Asia. Despite US pressure for Japan and South Korea to work more closely together, the two countries remain at loggerheads over the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islands. Last year South Korea pulled out of an intelligence-sharing agreement

with Japan that had been pushed by Washington.

By deliberately inflaming tensions throughout the region, the Obama administration is recklessly setting in motion forces that it does not control. While Japan has relied on the American military alliance since the end of World War II, it is rearming to defend its own economic and strategic interests that can conflict with those of the US.



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