

The re-emergence of Japanese militarism

John Chan
13 July 2013

The latest Japanese defence white paper, released on Tuesday, is another unmistakable sign of the resurgence of militarism under the Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's right-wing government. The paper adopts a belligerent tone toward China and places strong emphasis on expanding Japan's military capacities and ties with Washington.

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) won office last December in an election dominated by Japanese nationalism and militarism. Abe condemned the previous Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government of failing to take a tough stance toward China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, and promised to build a "strong nation" and a "strong military."

The Obama administration in the United States has deliberately fostered the re-emergence of Japanese militarism as part of its "pivot to Asia" aimed at encircling China. The White House has encouraged Japan to take a more aggressive stance in North East Asia, enhance its military capacities and free them from any restraints of the so-called pacifist clause of its constitution.

The white paper is the outcome of Abe's promise to realign Japanese defence policy. The document points to two measures with an overtly offensive character—firstly, the need for a pre-emptive strike capability against enemy bases abroad, and secondly, the creation of a Japanese force similar to the US Marine Corp.

In a bid to circumvent the constitution, which limits the country's "self-defence forces" to the protection of Japanese territory, Abe has justified pre-emptive strikes as "self-defence" against potential missile attacks. Likewise, a Japanese marine force is being developed on the pretext that the military must have a capacity for "island warfare" to defend its long island chain, in particular the islets disputed with China.

The construction of such Japanese military capacities

dovetails with US preparations for war against China. US bases in Japan already feature in the Pentagon's "Air/Sea Battle" plans to launch devastating air and missile strikes against Chinese military bases and communication networks, supplemented by a crippling naval blockade.

Unlike Japan's previous defence papers, the latest has shifted the focus from North Korea to the "threat" posed by China. It devotes 20 pages to China and the Chinese military, accusing Beijing for the first time of attempting "to change the status quo by force based on its own assertion, which is incompatible with the existing order of international law." In reality, the previous DPJ government deliberately inflamed the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute with China by "nationalising" the islands last year.

Abe has quickly taken steps to bolster the Japanese military. Earlier this year, he announced the first increase in defence spending in more than a decade. He is moving to modify the constitution to allow the "self-defence forces" to become a "normal military." On the ideological front, he has challenged established historical facts on Japan's wartime atrocities, such as the forcing of women into sex slavery.

The white paper was released amid rising tensions with China. Japanese forces, including a large helicopter carrier, were sent to the US West Coast to carry out joint landing exercises under a scenario that points to conflict with China. At the same time, China and Russia have just held their largest ever joint naval exercise in the Sea of Japan—a clear warning to Japan and the US.

China seized on the Japanese white paper to whip up nationalism at home, harking back to Japan's brutal occupation of China in the 1930s and 1940s. Beijing warned that Japan's "war preparations, military build-up and frequent military exercises" raised concerns about "its real intentions and its future directions."

Japan's white paper describes China as a resource-hungry country riven with internal crisis, including a widening wealth gap, ethnic discontent and corruption, that is driven to a more assertive foreign policy as a means of diverting social tensions at home.

The same could be said of Japanese capitalism. After two decades of economic stagnation, Abe is seeking to arrest Japan's decline at the expense of its rivals through more aggressive economic and military policies. He is stirring up nationalist sentiment to divert from the social divide between rich and poor that will inevitably worsen as his government implements austerity measures.

In response to the Great Depression of the 1930s, Japan's militarist regime turned to wars of conquest in Asia, and ruthlessly crushed opposition from the working class and rural poor at home. The Abe government is also seeking to undermine democratic rights as it prepares to suppress popular resistance to its right-wing, pro-business agenda.

The LDP's proposed draft constitution has deleted formal guarantees of basic democratic rights, emphasising instead Japan's "traditional values"—i.e., the duty of citizens to obey the state. Moreover, the prime minister would have the power to impose a "state of emergency" in the event of war, as well as "social disturbance due to internal strife."

The entire political establishment in Japan is lining up with Abe's preparations for war. In the course of last year's elections, all the major parties called for the defence of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands as part of Japan's territory. Former DPJ Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama has recently been denounced as "a traitor" for even suggesting that Japan should recognise that there is a dispute with China over the islands.

Among ordinary working people, there is deeply-felt hostility to the revival of Japanese militarism and war. But this finds no expression through any of the official political channels. Japan's alliance with the US has repeatedly provoked major protests, most recently against the decision to send troops to support the illegal US-led occupation of Iraq.

The danger of conflict is growing as the US "pivot" provokes an arms race in Asia and inflames longstanding flashpoints, such as the Korean peninsula, and creates dangerous new ones. The only way that workers and youth in Japan can oppose war is to unify

with their class brothers and sisters in China, the United States and internationally in a struggle to abolish capitalism, the root cause of war.

This means building a Japanese section of the International Committee of Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, which alone is fighting to mobilise the working class on the basis of socialist internationalism to end the universal drive by governments to war, austerity and dictatorship.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact