

Japan's new naval carrier heightens regional tensions

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The launch of the DDH183 Izumo, Japan's largest warship since World War II, on August 6—the anniversary of US atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945—has heightened political tensions in North East Asia.

While Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was in Hiroshima on August 6 assuring a memorial ceremony that “the horror and devastation caused by nuclear weapons” would not be repeated, his deputy, Taro Aso, was presiding in Yokohama over the launch of the Izumo.

The entire ceremony reeked of Japanese militarism. With the official “Gunkan March” of the old Imperial Japanese Navy anthem playing in the background, Aso launched the new warship. The navy's World War II “Rising Sun” flag was hung along with the current national flag.

The Izumo is named after a Japanese cruiser involved in the 1905 Russo-Japanese War and more notoriously as the flagship spearheading Japan's invasion of Shanghai in the 1930s. The ship was bombed and sunk in July 1945 by American warplanes just before Japan's surrender.

While the new \$1.14 billion DDH Izumo is officially designated as a “helicopter destroyer,” the warship has a full displacement of 27,000 tonnes and at 248 metres long is larger than aircraft carriers belonging to the Thai and Indian navies. According to the Japanese media, it is only slightly shorter than the Yamato, Japan's largest World War II battleship, which was the pride of the Imperial Japanese Navy.

The Izumo's long flat deck can be used not only for anti-submarine and amphibious warfare helicopters, but also by US-made F-35B vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) stealth fighters. Japan has already deployed two similar, but much smaller Hyuga-class “helicopter carriers” in recent years. With Izumo's sister ship to be

launched in three years, the country is poised to have a sizeable de-facto carrier fleet.

Chinese military analysts have noted that even without warplanes, the Izumo—with its helicopters loaded with anti-ship missiles—can have a combat radius of 400 kilometres. The ship also significantly enhances Japan's anti-submarine capabilities against China in the East China Sea, where the two countries are locked in a standoff over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

Japanese defence officials have indicated that the Izumo is also useful for operations in “remote islands,” with the advanced US-made V-22 VTOL transport plane an ideal means for rapid deployment of troops. The landing of V-22 on a Japanese helicopter carrier in June during a joint US-Japan amphibious drill in California triggered particular concern in China's defence circles.

The Izumo is the Japanese government's latest attempt to circumvent the so-called pacifist clause in the country's constitution, which nominally bans Japan from having offensive weapons such as aircraft carriers. By presenting an aircraft carrier as a “destroyer,” Abe is seeking to lay the basis for more offensive weapons in the future.

Sending Deputy Prime Minister Aso to launch the Izumo was a political message that the government is determined to change the constitution to allow unfettered rearmament. Just days earlier, Aso provoked outrage by telling an ultra-nationalist organisation that the government should learn from the way the German Nazi regime changed its constitution in the 1930s.

The Izumo launch is being used to whip up Japanese nationalism and divert attention from the deeply unpopular consumption tax, which under current plans will be increased by 3 percent next April, to 8 percent

then to 10 percent in October 2015.

Abe's government is reportedly divided over the tax. His economic adviser Etsuro Honda told the *Wall Street Journal* on August 9 that he feared the tax hike would dampen the consumer sentiment and send the country's limited economic recovery into a tailspin. The International Monetary Fund, however, is openly backing Abe's tax plans stating that "raising the consumption tax rate is an essential first step" to contain Tokyo's large budget deficit.

With public debts now over 200 percent of Japan's gross domestic product and half of current spending dependent on new borrowings, a hugely expensive rearmament agenda can only be financed by forcing the working class to pay.

The Chinese media angrily reacted to the Izumo launch declaring that Japan was attempting to "restore former imperial glory" when its navy had two dozen aircraft carriers. A statement from the Chinese defence ministry said, "We are concerned over Japan's constant expansion of its military equipment. Japan's Asian neighbours and the international community need to be highly vigilant about this trend."

Beijing's denunciations mirrors the political processes underway in Tokyo. The whipping up of anti-Japanese nationalism is aimed at diverting mounting social tensions in the face of China's slowing economic growth. It is also directed at preventing a unified struggle of the Chinese and Japanese working class against militarism and war.

China's state-run *Global Times* wasted no time in promoting anti-Japanese racism in an editorial that slandered the entire Japanese population as warmongers to justify Beijing's own naval expansion. In fact, there is a deeply rooted hostility in the Japanese working class to militarism stemming from its bitter wartime experiences.

"Japan's history lacks the tradition of 'moral rule' and worship armed might," the newspaper declared. "Unless the whole nation undergoes a complete historical and cultural construction to get rid of their aggressiveness and sense of crisis, Japan must be restrained in its actions."

"Japan is indulging in mania and worship for power," the editorial concluded, insisting that China should react to the Izumo launch by developing its "own real aircraft carriers."

In response to the Obama administration's military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific aimed against China, Beijing is readying the Liaoning, a refurbished former Soviet aircraft carrier, for combat. The Liaoning can carry 30 warplanes and 24 helicopters and fully loaded its displacement is nearly 2.5 times that of the Izumo.

The revival of Japanese militarism is another explosive product of the Obama administration's reckless "pivot" to Asia, which has encouraged allies such as Japan to take a more aggressive stance against China. Pitting Japan against China is threatening to plunge the Asia-Pacific region into the same sort of catastrophic conflicts that erupted in the 1930s and 40s.



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