

Japanese PM drops pledge to renounce war

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe exploited the 68th anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II on August 15 to make even more explicit his restoration of Japanese militarism. For the first time in nearly two decades, he deliberately omitted the pledge made by every prime minister that Japan would never again go to war.

Abe was attending the annual ceremony, together with the Japanese emperor and empress, to commemorate the war dead. At this event, every prime minister since Tomiichi Murayama in 1994, including Abe during his first term in 2007, has expressed “profound remorse” and “sincere mourning” for the suffering in Asian countries occupied by the Japanese military, and pledged never to go to war again.

This year Abe did not include these phrases in his speech to the gathering of 5,000 relatives of war dead at the Nippon Budokan Hall. He declared instead: “We will carve out the future of this country as one full of hope, as we face history with humility and engrave deeply into our hearts the lessons that we should learn.”

The omission was not accidental. In April, Abe declared that he was not bound by Murayama's 1995 statement, which acknowledged that Japan had waged wars of aggression. Abe claimed that “aggression” was judged differently, depending on which side one stood. In the face of protest at home and abroad, he softened the remark, saying the interpretation should be left up to scholars.

Abe's latest remarks provoked opposition even among the select audience at the ceremony. Michiko Toya, whose husband was killed just five months before Japan's defeat, declared: “Wars are gruesome and cruel. I do not want anybody to have to go through the sorrow and predicament that we experienced.”

Among the wider population, anti-war sentiment remains strong, above all in the working class. Japan's militarist regime in the 1930s and 1940s suppressed

any independent, organised labour movement at home, just as ruthlessly as it imposed its rule in South Korea, China and throughout Asia. The US air war against Japan, including the fire-bombing of Tokyo and atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, inflicted huge civilian casualties.

In the end, Abe did not visit the notorious Yasukuni Shrine to Japan's war dead on Thursday. Just days earlier he left open the question of a visit, hinting that a “strong” national leader would not bow to pressure from China or South Korea—two countries occupied by Japan until 1945.

Abe did, however, send one of his special aides to make a ritual offering at the Yasukuni Shrine, instructing him to tell the media that the prime minister offered an “apology” to the war dead for his personal absence. Abe himself told reporters that the aide had conveyed to the war dead “a feeling of gratitude and respect for those who fought and gave their precious lives for their country.”

Three cabinet ministers—Yoshitaka Shindo, minister of internal affairs, Keiji Furuya, chairman of the National Public Security Commission, and Tomomi Inada, minister in charge of administrative reform—did visit the shrine. In all, 89 lawmakers, mainly from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), as well as the representatives of another 101 lawmakers, paid homage at the shrine.

The privately-run Yasukuni Shrine, financed by right-wing nationalist organisations, is a symbol of Japanese wartime militarism. It symbolically inters many of Japan's war dead, including 14 “Class A” war criminals convicted by an Allied tribunal. The attached museum whitewashes Japan's military atrocities, portraying the so-called “Great East Asian War” as the “liberation” of Asia from “White” colonial powers.

Abe, who has only been in power since December, is not only rapidly reviving the symbols of Japanese

militarism. He has already boosted defence spending and begun to revise national military strategy. The ruling LDP is also pressing for changes to the country's post-war constitution, including a watering down of the so-called pacifist clause that renounces war as an instrument of state policy.

The Abe government's moves have provoked criticism from China and South Korea, which both suffered under Japanese wartime occupation. Beijing issued a formal protest over Thursday's visit by ministers to the Yasukuni Shrine. Both governments are stirring up anti-Japanese sentiment to divert from growing social tensions at home.

The US "pivot to Asia" aimed against China has directly encouraged the revival of Japanese militarism. The previous Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government took an aggressive stance on Japan's longstanding territorial dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. Tensions flared in 2010, and again in 2012 when the DPJ "nationalised" the islands.

The implications of President Barack Obama's reckless "pivot" were underscored by two military manoeuvres marking the World War II anniversary. Russia sent 16 warships through the La Perouse Strait, north of the Japanese island of Hokkaido on August 14, while China announced a 10-day live-fire naval drill in the East China Sea from August 15. Both exercises were meant as a warning against Japanese military ambitions.

The Obama administration is seeking to strengthen Japan as a military ally as part of US plans to undermine China as a potential rival. However, relations between South Korea and Japan have deteriorated as a result, creating an obstacle to Washington's plans for a "trilateral" alliance with South Korea and Japan against China.

The Obama administration appears to have intervened to press Abe to refrain from personally visiting the Yasukuni Shrine. Robert Menendez, chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, met Abe and told reporters in Tokyo: "I think his decision today is one that's very clear, very thoughtful and looking toward the future."

There are broader concerns in ruling circles in the US and Europe that the revival of Japanese militarism could be a two-edged sword. While the Abe

government continues to express its full support for the US alliance, Japanese imperialism has its own independent interests. As in the 1930s, it will, if necessary, prosecute its aims by military means, even if they clash with those of the US.

In a comment this week, *Financial Times* columnist Gideon Rachman underlined the nervousness in Europe. After stating that he used to regard Chinese and South Korean reactions to Abe's revival of the symbols of Japanese militarism as "paranoia," Rachman added: "But now I am not quite so sure." He cited a government source in Tokyo who told him that "some of those in Mr. Abe's circle give the impression that 'the only thing wrong with the Second World War was that Japan lost'."

The last remark accurately sums up the attitude in significant sections of the Japanese ruling classes, which grudgingly accepted a subordinate role to the US after World War II, but have never abandoned their aspirations to be the dominant power in Asia.



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