

Japanese defence ministry calls for substantial budget increase

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Japan's defence ministry has requested a 3 percent increase in its 2014 budget, the largest rise in 22 years, to 4.82 trillion yen (\$48.97 billion). The increased budget is in line with the turn by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to the remilitarisation of Japan following its return to office in December.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe campaigned on the basis of making Japan "a strong nation" with "a strong military," including the revision of the country's so-called pacifist constitution to allow Tokyo to once again use the military to advance Japan's imperialist interests. The latest request for a higher defence budget comes on top of an increase in military spending earlier this year.

The focus of the spending increases is to boost air and naval capacities, as Japan is locked in a dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. "In order to respond effectively to attacks on islands, it is indispensable to securely maintain superiority in the air as well as on the sea," the defence ministry's release stated.

Defence minister Itsunori Onodera declared that Japan could not afford to be complacent over "significant security issues in the region" and had to counter a "more assertive Chinese military amid territorial disputes." Finance Minister Taro Aso also stated in a recent speech that higher military spending would be "a clear signal of our determination to defend the Senkaku Islands."

Already, the Abe government has dangerously escalated the physical confrontation with China over the disputed islets. The latest incidents involved scrambling fighters against Chinese bombers and a drone that appeared in the vicinity around September 11, the anniversary of Japan's provocative "nationalisation" of the islands in 2012. Last week,

Abe's cabinet went further, threatening to shoot down any Chinese drone that entered Japanese airspace.

The guidelines for the expanded military budget were outlined in the National Defence Program Guidelines interim report released in July. It recommended that the military develop "preemptive strike capability." This "preemptive" capacity was justified in the name of "self-defence"—in an effort not to openly breach the constitution's "pacifist clause."

Part of the increased spending is to study acquiring unmanned drones and tilt-rotor aircraft, with actual purchases planned for the following year. In other words, the defence budget will continue to grow in the coming years.

The Japanese military is particularly interested in American-made vertical takeoff, tilt-rotor MV-22 Osprey transport planes to provide for the rapid forward deployment of troops, including to remote islands. The defence ministry is planning to acquire an undisclosed number of these aircraft at 10 billion yen (\$US101 million) apiece.

During an 18-day joint drill with the US to improve the Japanese military's amphibious capabilities, an Osprey landed on a Japanese navy ship in June. Next month, the US Marine Corps will use the Osprey, 23 of which are deployed in Okinawa, in joint exercises in western and southern Japan.

Japan launched the first of two 27,000-tonne helicopter carriers, Izumo, last month. Although officially a "helicopter destroyer," it is larger than the aircraft carriers of the Italian and Indian navies and can base vertical takeoff aircraft such as the Osprey.

None of the expanded spending has included the ordering of 42 F-35A stealth fighters from the US at a total cost of \$10 billion, to ensure that Japan possesses air superiority over the fighters used by China or

Russia. The Japanese government is also considering buying Global Hawk unmanned drones to strengthen maritime surveillance.

The government is further boosting the Japanese Coast Guard, which is not part of the defence ministry, in order to step up patrols around the Senkakus. A request for a 13 percent increase in funding to 196.3 billion yen has been made for the next fiscal year in order to build new patrol ships and boost the staff by 528 people—the largest expansion in decades.

As part of its military build-up in Asia against China, the Obama administration has encouraged Japan to take a more aggressive stance toward Beijing and assume “greater responsibility” in the US-Japan alliance. All Japan’s military purchases complement the Pentagon’s “Air/Sea Battle” doctrine for war against China, which includes devastating air attacks on the Chinese mainland, as well as a naval blockade of vital shipping lanes. Japan already provides \$2 billion annually to finance the dozens of US bases in the country, including the Seventh Fleet based in Yokosuka.

Like Washington, the Abe government views a strong military as a means for offsetting the country’s economic decline. China overtook Japan as the world’s second largest economy in 2010, and this had definite strategic implications. In 1995, Japan’s military spending was seven times higher than that of China. Now China’s is 2.5 times that of Japan.

Tokyo’s higher military spending will mean further inroads into the living standards of the working class, which will be forced to foot the bill. Public debt surpassed 1 quadrillion yen at the end of June for the first time, or \$US10.46 trillion—the result of two decades of stagnation and failed stimulus spending. The debt level is more than twice Japan’s gross domestic product (GDP).

Abe is seeking to double the country’s regressive sales tax to 10 percent over the next two years, and impose welfare cuts of 6.5 percent over the next three years. At the same time, the Bank of Japan is pumping money into the coffers of the banks and financial institutions to the tune of 70 trillion yen (\$700 billion) annually. The resulting devaluation of the yen has boosted exports, but is also raising trade tensions, particularly with South Korea and China.

The government’s austerity measures and remilitarisation will provoke public opposition. The

decision by Abe’s mentor—former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi—to dispatch troops in 2004 to boost the US occupation of Iraq provoked mass anti-war protests. Abe’s ambition to build Japan’s military might well lead to a much broader confrontation with the working class.



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