

Australian PM embraces Japanese remilitarisation

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In the course of diplomatic summits held last week in Bali and Brunei, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott signalled his support for the resurgence of Japanese militarism under the right-wing government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Closer defence ties between US allies such as Japan and Australia are central to the Obama administration's aggressive moves to contain China militarily, as part of the US "pivot to Asia."

Abbott, whose Liberal-National Coalition defeated the previous Labor government in the September 7 election, met with Abe on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit in Brunei. Abbott proclaimed Japan to be Australia's "closest friend in Asia," emphasising that Japan was "a fellow member of the US alliance network." He added: "As Japan puts the wounds and scars of World War II behind it ... Japan is going to play a more important part and, dare I say it, a more normal part in the life of the world, and that's encouraging."

Abbott's reference to Japan becoming a "normal" country has a definite meaning. Abe came to power last December after campaigning in the election for Japan to become "a strong nation" with a "strong military." He has pledged to "normalise" the Japanese military by ending the constraints imposed by the country's post-war constitution on engaging in "pre-emptive action" and "collective self-defence"—that is, forging military pacts to wage wars of aggression.

Since coming to office, Abe has boosted Japan's military spending and taken a tough stance in the worsening territorial dispute with China over the Senkaku islands (known in China as Diaoyu). He has also sought to strengthen defence ties with South East Asian countries, including the Philippines. Responding to Abbott, Abe stressed the importance of the two

countries' relationship, and referred to Australia's shared "strategic interests with Japan." Abbott intends to visit Japan next year and has invited Abe to make a trip to Australia, including an address to the parliament.

Abbott's embrace of Japan's remilitarisation is underscored by his appointment of Andrew Shearer as one of his two foreign affairs advisers. Shearer functioned in the same role under former Coalition prime minister John Howard. In comments to the *Australian*, Latrobe University international relations professor Nick Bisley commented: "Andrew is very well connected in conservative circles in Japan. He is someone who is reasonably hawkish on China and a really strong supporter of Abe."

Abbott's orientation to Tokyo marks a stepping up of US-Japan-Australia defence arrangements. In 2007, the Howard government signed the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation with Japan to formalise closer strategic ties. Abe, who was Japan's prime minister at the time, also proposed the formation of a "quadrilateral" defence arrangement involving the US, Japan, Australia and India. The proposal was effectively scuttled the following year by the incoming Labor prime minister Kevin Rudd, who was seeking to ease tensions with China.

Abe has effectively put the "quadrilateral" back on the agenda. In an essay, "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond," published last November before he became prime minister, Abe stated his intention to "expand the country's strategic horizons." He explained: "I envisage a strategy whereby Australia, India, Japan and the US state of Hawaii form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific. I am prepared to invest, to the greatest possible extent, Japan's capabilities in this security diamond."

Abe's plan for a "security diamond" is fully in line with the Obama administration's "pivot," within which Australia and Japan, as well as the US strategic partnership with India, are central to the military encirclement of China. Both Abe and Abbott held discussions with India's prime minister Manmohan Singh in Brunei over closer military ties. Arriving back in Darwin, Australia last Friday, Abbott promised to provide the infrastructure necessary to base a full 2,500-strong US Marine Air Ground Task Force in the Northern Territory by 2016.

Like Australia, the US is pressing Japan to circumvent or amend its constitution to allow for fully fledged military alliances. Secretary of State John Kerry and Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel met with their Japanese counterparts on October 3 and outlined a major build-up of sophisticated US military hardware in Japan. The following day Kerry met with Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida in Bali as part of the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) between the three countries.

In a pointed reference to China and the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, the TSD statement declared: "Ministers opposed any coercive or unilateral actions that could change the status quo in the East China Sea." Over the past year, Chinese maritime surveillance vessels and planes have been challenging Japanese claims over the islands, leading to potentially dangerous clashes with Japan's military. Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying responded last week by warning: "The US, Japan and Australia are allies but this should not become an excuse to interfere in territorial disputes."

Beijing's critical comments only highlight the fundamental dilemma confronting the Australian political establishment as a whole: while strategically reliant on its military alliance with the US, Australian capitalism is heavily economically dependent on China, its largest trade partner. Even as Abbott indicated his government's support for the US "pivot" and Japanese remilitarisation, he announced his intention to finalise a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China, as well as Japan and South Korea, within a year.

Abbott's push for new agreements to boost Australian exports is driven by a sharp economic downturn as the Chinese economy slows and the Australian mineral export boom collapses. All three

trade deals are fraught with difficulties, not least on the issue of foreign investment in Australia, which has provoked opposition from Abbott's Coalition partner, the National Party. China, South Korea and Japan are all likely to demand a lifting of the threshold that would trigger the Foreign Investment Review Board (FIRB) screening of an investment deal to \$1 billion—the figure contained in the Australia-US FTA.

Trade negotiations with China have already dragged on since 2005 without resolution. Now Abbott expects to obtain a FTA agreement with Beijing when his government is accelerating Australia's military engagement with Japan and the US that is transparently directed against China. This precarious balancing act can rapidly come undone as the Obama administration presses ahead with its military build-up in Asia that has inflamed dangerous regional flashpoints, threatening to draw in not only the US but allies such as Australia.



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