

Japan gives green light to shoot down North Korean missiles

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In a provocative move that will further inflame the already unstable situation in East Asia, Japanese Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera last Thursday ordered the military to destroy any North Korean ballistic missiles deemed a threat to Japan. The order is in force until April 25.

Over recent weeks, North Korea has test-fired a number of rockets, including two medium-range ballistic missiles late last month. Just over a week ago, an artillery exchange took place between North and South Korea, and tensions flared again on the peninsula, which is just one of a number of flashpoints that could trigger a catastrophic war in Asia.

While the US, and its allies Japan and South Korea, regularly denounce North Korea's actions as dangerous or provocative, the main responsibility for the tensions lies with Washington. The US is currently holding major annual military exercises with South Korea, known as "Key Resolve" and "Foal Eagle," which began in February and continue until April 18.

Whenever North Korea responds to such provocative manoeuvres off its coast, the US exploits it to dramatically escalate the situation. This was the case a year ago when the same joint exercises provoked bellicose but empty threats from Pyongyang, and the US answered by deploying nuclear capable B-52 and B-2 bombers to the Korean peninsula.

Further underscoring the reckless nature of the latest order by Onodera, reports have emerged that the Japanese side was told in advance by North Korean officials of their intent to conduct artillery and missile drills on the eastern side of the Korean peninsula by April 17. The drills were in direct response to major US-South Korean military exercises.

According to yesterday's *Mainichi Shimbun*, North Korean officials told their Chinese counterparts on

March 31, the last day of recent bilateral talks in Beijing, that they had informed Tokyo in order to "minimise the negative impact of its drills on Japan-North Korea talks." Unnamed Japanese government sources told *Mainichi* that North Korean "diplomatic officials are requiring the military to use short-range missiles... suggesting that North Korea had taken Japan's position into consideration."

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's right-wing administration, no doubt after consulting Washington, has chosen to exploit the missile launches to ratchet up regional tensions. Three days after receiving the information on the possible missile launching, Onodera dispatched the Aegis destroyer *Kirishima* to the Sea of Japan, with orders to shoot down any North Korean missile that could hit Japan.

According to Reuters: "Japanese Aegis destroyers in the Sea of Japan are equipped with advanced radar equipment able to track multiple targets and carry missiles designed to take out targets at the edge of space." Japan currently has four Aegis-equipped destroyers, with another two undergoing renovation and expected to be operational soon. According to the latest 10-year National Defense Guidelines and the increased defense budget unveiled in December, two additional Aegis destroyers will be purchased from the US at about \$2 billion a piece.

The US Navy has five of its own Aegis destroyers based in Japan. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, disingenuously citing North Korea's actions, promised on the weekend to deploy two more such ships by 2017. "These steps will greatly enhance our ability to defend both Japan and the US homeland from North Korea's ballistic missile threats," Hagel stated at a joint news conference with Onodera on Sunday in Tokyo.

Writing in *Diplomatic Courier* last August, Archer of the US Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) admitted that “regional powers will view the new Aegis-equipped destroyers as a part of the US missile defense infrastructure as much as they will perceive them to be Japanese.” He added that “the Chinese government will view the expansion of Japan’s Aegis-equipped fleet as a countermeasure to its own missiles.”

Archer’s comments highlight the fact that the US and Japan are hypocritically using the current North Korean missile launches—which were provoked by the US and of which Japan was politely informed beforehand—as a pretext to accelerate the re-militarisation of Japan, whose real target is not North Korea’s rudimentary missile program, but China and Russia.

The US is actively encouraging an aggressive military posture by Japan as part of Washington’s “pivot to Asia,” a comprehensive effort aimed at militarily, diplomatically and economically isolating and undermining China.

During his visit to Tokyo, Hagel emphasized the US support for Abe’s agenda. He declared: “The United States welcomes Japan’s efforts to play a more proactive role, contributing to global and regional peace and stability, including re-examining the interpretation of its Constitution relating to the right of collective self-defense.”

Abe’s government is seeking to change the longstanding interpretation of the constitution, according to which Japan is only allowed to act militarily in strict self-defense. It wants to legitimise the formation of military alliances to justify the deployment of Japanese military forces overseas under the guise of “collective self-defense.”

According to the *Asahi Shimbun* on April 4, the Abe administration has cited a crisis on the Korean peninsula as a case where war could be fought alongside the US, under the banner of “collective self-defense.” It is also seeking to form alliances with South East Asian countries to counter China in the South China Sea, as well as secure crucial sea lanes such as the Strait of Hormuz near Iran, through which some 80 percent of Japanese crude oil imports pass.

As with other imperialist powers, the militaristic foreign policy of Abe is closely connected to its domestic policies. Empty North Korean posturing plays

right into Abe’s hands in helping him justify a booming defense budget amid savage social spending cuts and tax increases. It also provides a much-needed safety valve for defusing class tensions along reactionary lines, by focusing them on a fabricated foreign foe and diverting social discontent away from the real class enemy at home.



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