

Japan's Shinzo Abe cloaks militarism in “peace” pledges to Australian parliament

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Today's address to the Australian parliament by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has underscored the militarist agenda behind his government's decision to “reinterpret” the so-called pacifist clause in Japan's constitution and enable the country's armed forces to take part in combat action alongside its allies if they are attacked.

Abe's first major speech since the reinterpretation was announced a week ago was couched in avowals of “peace,” “democracy” and the “rule of law.” But the essential content, as revealed both in Abe's explicit commitments and in the various code words he employed, was clear. Japan will forcefully assert its interests in the region and on the world stage, both in collaboration with Australia and the United States, and independently.

Pointing on several occasions to what he called a “new special relationship” between Australia and Japan, Abe said the two countries would move like a “rugby scrum” to address common “areas of security.”

The words were backed with action. Besides signing a free trade deal—the first between Japan and an advanced economy—the two countries are also signing an agreement for the transfer of defence equipment and technology. A key aspect of the military collaboration is expected to be the joint production of a new submarine fleet for the Australian Navy, based on Japan's Soryu-class diesel-powered vessels, the largest and most advanced conventional submarines in the world.

Abe asserted that his government's reinterpretation of the constitution, which is widely opposed in Japan, was a “proactive contribution to peace.” In fact, it is aimed at legitimising Japanese military operations throughout the Indian and Pacific Oceans, utilising the Obama administration's anti-China pivot to Asia as the pretext.

“We want to make Japan a country that will work to build an international order that upholds the rule of law,” Abe declared, “to make the vast seas from the Pacific

Ocean to the Indian, and those skies, open and free.”

Abe's statements echoed the euphemisms used by Washington to justify its military build-up in Asia against China, on the grounds that Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea are a threat to “freedom of navigation” and the “rule of law.”

To explain the constitutional re-interpretation, Abe said Japan had been “self-absorbed” for a long time but was now determined to play a more active role to act for peace in the world. The relationship with Australia would also involve the two countries “joining hands with the United States, an ally for both our nations.”

Hailing the trade deal between Australia and Japan, which he signed with Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott following the parliamentary address, Abe said it was a step toward implementing the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), which the United States regards as an integral economic component of the “pivot.”

Apart from these two references, however, there was not another mention of the United States. While Japan is proceeding at this stage within the framework of the pivot, Abe's speech signalled that Tokyo is seeking to advance its own economic and strategic interests.

Another significant aspect of Abe's speech was the connection it established between militarism abroad and the attacks on the working class at home.

In spite of the difficulties in delivering only his third major speech in English, Abe became most animated when referring to his domestic economic agenda. He described himself as a “drill bit” which would cut through “vested interests.” The “third arrow” of his so-called Abenomics is aimed at dismantling regulations covering entire areas of business and opening the way for attacks on workers' conditions.

Welcoming Abe, Abbott said the trade connections between the two countries had contributed to economic prosperity. His speech had a definite militarist slant,

however. He recalled that 100 years ago a Japanese warship was part of the naval escort that took Australian troops to the Middle East after the outbreak of World War I.

After pointing to the “rare courage” that it takes to tackle entrenched ideas—a clear reference to the overturning of the previous interpretation of the Japanese constitution—Abbott said he welcomed Japan’s decision to become a “more capable strategic partner in our region.”

Underscoring his government’s commitment to Washington’s “pivot,” Abbott declared that the vast economic transformation in Asia over the past 50 years was due to the role of the United States in guaranteeing “peace and stability” in the region.

Given that this was Abe’s first substantial speech since the constitutional reinterpretation, it provided an opportunity for him to allay fears in China that the decision marked the return of Japanese militarism. He chose not to take it.

Whereas Abbott offered the Chinese a token diplomatic olive branch in his welcome to Abe, saying that Australia’s partnership with Japan was “not aimed against anyone,” Abe made no such claim.

The silence on China spoke volumes. The territorial dispute between Japan and China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, a group of uninhabited rocks in the East China Sea, has threatened on several occasions during the past year to trigger an open military clash. Japanese and Chinese military aircraft and warships have come within moments of engaging one another.

The brinkmanship between Japan and China exposes the empty “vow for peace” with which Abe commenced his speech. Referring unmistakably to World War II, he declared there would be no repeat of the “follies” of the past century. In reality, Japan is at the very centre of the flashpoints in Asia that could unleash another catastrophic war.



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