

# Shinzo Abe's Australian visit: Another step toward war

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's speech to a joint session of the Australian parliament yesterday marks another major step in the war preparations against China, in which Australia is assuming decisive strategic significance.

In November 2011, US President Barack Obama formally announced the anti-China US "pivot" to Asia from the floor of the Australian parliament, as the US and the then Labor government agreed to base US marines in Darwin—the first such arrangement since the end of World War II.

Nearly three years on, Abe chose the same venue to make his first substantial speech since last week's "reinterpretation" of the country's constitution to enable Japan to play an expanded military role.

Just as Obama's visit was accompanied by concrete military measures, Abe signed a defence co-operation agreement with Australia to share information, technology and equipment.

One of the most significant aspects of Abe's speech was the linking of the "reinterpretation" decision to what he called a "new" and "special relationship" with Australia.

Under the so-called pacifist clause of the Japanese constitution, Japanese military forces were formally prohibited from engaging in anything other than "self-defence." Now they can engage in joint action with allies in the region or anywhere else in the world.

The shift has been welcomed in Washington where Dennis Blair, the former admiral in charge of the US Pacific Command, said it had "come none too soon" and provided "tangible support for the pivot to Asia."

Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* on Monday, he said there would be "maritime jostling" in the region between Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines and China, with the possibility of "shooting incidents, with

casualties, between navies and air forces." Blair claimed a wider conflict was unlikely. In fact, is precisely such "incidents" that could trigger a rapid military escalation.

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott welcomed the "reinterpretation," telling the ceremonial parliamentary session yesterday that on national security matters, "Japan has been self-absorbed for a long time" and it was now "determined to do more to enhance peace."

The twisted logic of this assertion is based on the claim that increased Japanese military measures are needed to maintain the status quo in the face of stepped-up Chinese assertiveness. In fact, the reverse is the case. Regional tensions have been provoked by the aggressive US pivot to Asia. One of its components has been to elevate long-running disputes between China and its neighbours into potential military flashpoints.

While news reports of Abe's address in Australia pointed to the increased tensions with China that it would cause, editorial comment made clear that the corporate media establishment is backing both the re-militarisation of Japan and its closer strategic and military ties with Australia.

Today's *Australian Financial Review* editorial demonstrated its support by completely ignoring the military issue. It focused instead on the signing of a new Japan-Australia trade deal which "could add another dimension to what has been a hugely successful economic partnership."

An editorial in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* repeated Abbott's claim that the "once-militarist" Japan had become "an exemplary international citizen," helping to promote stability and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region.

The *Australian* cited a comment in the Chinese state-run news agency Xinhua, which accused Abe of using

Australia to “build a network against China” and said his visit would “create new instability.” The *Australian* said that while such claims may play well at home, “they do not cut the mustard on a broader stage.”

This offhand dismissal was aimed at covering up the turn to militarism initiated under Abe’s prime ministership and the circumstances in which he has pushed through the constitutional reinterpretation.

Last month, the Abe government released a report casting doubt on the Japanese government’s 1993 apology for the army’s World War II exploitation of women as sex slaves. A government-appointed panel of five “experts” claimed it was “not possible” to confirm that the women had been “forcefully recruited.”

Since taking office, Abe’s government has sought to ensure that the media promotes militarism and nationalism. Naoki Hyatuka, one of Abe’s appointees to the board of NHK, the national broadcaster, is an open supporter of the ultra-right wing Japanese Restorationist Party.

Hyatuka has denied the Nanking Massacre of 1937, in which up to 300,000 Chinese civilians and soldiers were killed in an orgy of murder, rape and destruction lasting weeks—an assertion equivalent to Holocaust denial.

Abe himself sought to strengthen his ties with extreme-right forces by visiting the Yasukuni Shrine to Japan’s war dead, including convicted war criminals, last December. In April, he sent a religious offering to the shrine on the eve of a visit by Obama to Japan.

This record did not prevent gushing praise in the media for Abe’s “most sincere condolences” to the Australian soldiers who lost their lives at Japanese hands in World War II. In a speech carefully prepared by his advisers, Abe specially mentioned Kokoda, the scene of ferocious conflict in Papua New Guinea, and Sandakan, the name given to an infamous death march of prisoners of war. His overtures achieved the desired result.

“Sandakan. The greatest atrocity of the Asia-Pacific war,” wrote *Sydney Morning Herald* columnist Tony Wright. “Here was a Japanese prime minister using the name of that place, offering condolences in the Australian legislature. In a world moved on, it was a moment to stop time.”

The world has certainly moved on since World War II, but all the contradictions that led to the conflict have

returned and China is again the focus of rising Japanese militarism, as it was more than eight decades ago. Last January, while attending the World Economic Forum Summit in Davos, Abe, in a bid to win international support for his government’s stand, likened the tensions between China and Japan to the rivalry between Britain and Germany on the eve of World War I.

Writing in the *Australian Financial Review*, Rory Metcalf, the director of the international security program at the Lowy Institute, linked Abe’s decision to “send a message” from Canberra to the wider world with Obama’s speech of 2011. Metcalf hailed the “historic reinterpretation” as a step toward a “normalised security posture” for Japan. He noted that the reinterpretation was “controversial,” not least “because it side-stepped the impossible path of a plebiscite and formal constitutional change.” In other words, it was completely undemocratic and imposed in defiance of mass opposition in the Japanese working class and across Asia.

In other circumstances, where it suited their policy agenda, Metcalf and others would have denounced Abe’s actions as a “coup” or a “step toward dictatorship.” Abe’s stance, however, is in line with the ever-more aggressive and militarist orientation of the Australian political establishment. That is why it has been passed over in silence by media pundits who are working to conceal its implications and the disasters being prepared for the people of Australia, Japan and the entire region.



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