

New Zealand government backs Japan's militarist revival

Tom Peters
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During a one-day visit to New Zealand on Monday, Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told the media that his NZ counterpart John Key had "expressed support" for the Japanese cabinet's decision to "reinterpret" the constitution to end legal constraints on the use of military force.

A New Zealand government press release on Wednesday confirmed that Key "appreciated ... Japan's policy of 'Proactive Contribution to Peace,' based on the principle of international cooperation, including the recent updating of its framework for security." It said the two governments would consider "steps to develop the security and defence relationship," including "a possible acquisition and cross-servicing agreement."

Abe's visit was the first by a Japanese leader since 2002. It was part of a three-country trip, also covering Australia and Papua New Guinea, aimed at strengthening military ties and gaining support for his government's reinterpretation of the so-called pacifist clause in Japan's post-World War II constitution.

Under the banners of "collective self-defence" and "pro-active pacifism," Tokyo intends to use its military to prosecute Japanese imperialism's own strategic and economic interests throughout the Asia-Pacific region and on the world stage. The new interpretation—which faces widespread opposition within Japan—will allow the country's military to wage war alongside its allies.

The revival of Japanese militarism is aimed primarily at China. The US has encouraged Japanese remilitarisation as part of what Washington regards as a trilateral alliance against China. The Pentagon's war plans identify both Japan and Australia as crucial launching pads for any attack on China. But the Japanese ruling class is also pursuing its own strategic and economic interests throughout the region and

internationally.

New Zealand, like every other country in the Asia-Pacific, has been drawn into the gathering storm. The government previously attempted to balance between China, New Zealand's largest trading partner, and the US, its main military ally.

Now, however, amid the explosive tensions fuelled by Washington, the New Zealand government has concluded that neutrality is no longer viable, and has openly aligned with the US pivot. During a visit to Washington last month, Key issued a joint statement with Obama that attacked China over its maritime disputes with Vietnam and the Philippines.

The talks between Key and Abe provoked a degree of nervousness in New Zealand's ruling elite. Robert Ayson from Wellington's Centre for Strategic Studies wrote that it would be "a major test for New Zealand's diplomatic balancing act in Asia, given Japan's huge tensions with China." While Ayson favoured "a stronger Japan in Asia's changing power balance," he urged the government not to follow Australia in publicly endorsing Abe's moves to "relax constitutional restrictions on the role of Japan's armed forces."

Ayson worried that "the animosity between Japan and China and also between Japan and South Korea is at such a level that the rest of the region is at risk of being increasingly hostage to what is becoming a North Asian cold war." South Korea, like China, was subjected to Japanese occupation for decades and is strongly opposed to the Abe government's revival of militarism.

Such reservations did not deter Key from openly supporting Abe's military policy.

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However, efforts are being made to hide the

implications from the working class. While Japanese media outlets, as well as China's state-run Xinhua News Agency, highlighted Key's statement, New Zealand's media largely avoided mentioning it. Reports focused instead on the leaders' stated commitment to the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade negotiations, which are a component of Washington's drive to maintain US hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region.

Opposition Labour Party leader David Cunliffe held his own talks with Abe, telling the media they were "very positive." He made no public statement on the constitutional reinterpretation. Labour's allies—including the Greens, the Maori nationalist Mana Party and the Internet Party—also remained silent, with the Greens instead criticising Japan's whaling policy.

All these parties support the National Party government's de facto military alliance with the US and the moves to strengthen ties with Japanese imperialism. The 1999–2008 Labour government sent troops to both Iraq and Afghanistan, and both Labour and the Greens have indicated they would support further interventions in Iraq and Syria.

As New Zealand's September 20 election approaches, the entire political establishment is conspiring to prevent any discussion on the growing dangers of war in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia—the military encirclement of, and preparations for war against, China—has encouraged Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam to rearm and to press their territorial disputes with China, transforming the entire region into a tinderbox. President Obama has promised that the US will support Japan in the event of a war with China over the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in the East China Sea.



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