

Japan's PM visits Papua New Guinea to promote militarist agenda

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe spent two full days in the resource-rich South Pacific nation of Papua New Guinea (PNG) last Friday and Saturday, underscoring the geo-strategic ambitions behind his government's decision to "re-interpret" Japan's constitution to enable the country's armed forces to engage in overseas military operations.

Abe was accompanied by a business delegation of more than 150 people on the first visit by a Japanese PM to the small country in three decades. Abe's tour, which also included New Zealand and Australia, came days after his announcement of a constitutional "reinterpretation" aimed at removing any obstacle to the re-emergence of Japanese militarism. A major component of that strategy means securing energy supplies.

Japan was the first buyer from ExxonMobil's just-completed \$US19 billion liquefied natural gas project in PNG, which is expected to produce 255 billion cubic metres of LNG over the next 30 years. Abe told the Port Moresby *Post-Courier* before his visit that "the government of Japan regards the LNG development project as one of the priority areas of our bilateral cooperation."

Another major Japanese business interest in PNG is a plan by Mitsubishi Corporation and Itochu to develop a \$1 billion petrochemical plant. According to the *Australian*, the Japanese business delegation accompanying Abe included the chairman of JX Holdings, the parent company of Nippon Oil, which owns 4.7 percent of PNG LNG. In addition to a \$197 million pledge of government aid, Japan is offering PNG low-interest loans from the Japan Oil, Gas and Metals National Corporation.

As the *Australian* noted, the prospect of ongoing LNG imports from PNG "holds special appeal for

Japan, since 60 percent of its gas imports presently have to traverse the increasingly disputed South China Sea." The South China Sea has been the stage of increasingly tense territorial disputes, fomented by the United States, between China and the Philippines and Vietnam.

While China was not publicly mentioned during Abe's PNG visit, commentators said the trip sent a message to Beijing. "This visit is a big signal to the region, and also to China, that Japan still has a stake in the region," Jenny Hayward-Jones, director of the Myer Melanesia Program at Australia's Lowy Institute, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. "Its trade and investment interests are strong, and it has a political interest if its prime minister is prepared to spend two days in PNG and bring a huge delegation with him."

Abe declared Japan's "determination to even more actively contribute to ensuring peace, stability and prosperity in the international community, including the Pacific regions." Washington has used similar words to justify its "pivot to Asia"—a systematic military, diplomatic and economic build-up aimed against China.

Well aware of the deep antiwar sentiment and opposition to the constitutional reinterpretation in the Japanese working class, Abe also sought to use the PNG visit as a platform to promote patriotism and reverence for Japanese soldiers killed in World War II.

Abe conducted a stage-managed trip to Wewak, where he visited the Brandi battlefield and a war memorial for Japanese troops. PNG, where about 200,000 Japanese soldiers died, was the scene of some of the most terrible fighting of World War II.

Abe vowed never to "repeat the horrors of war," telling reporters: "I pledged in front of the spirits of the war dead that Japan wants to be a country that thinks about world peace with its friends in Asia and around

the world.” Yet, he clearly glorified the military campaigns of World War II. According to the Japanese public broadcaster NHK World, Abe said Japan’s present-day prosperity was based on the troops who sacrificed their lives.

Abe also visited Cape Wom, the site of the Japanese army’s surrender in PNG, and reportedly secured an agreement with PNG Prime Minister Peter O’Neill for the return of soldiers’ remains to Japan. This will lay the basis for a series of militarist reburial ceremonies, designed to overcome popular hostility to preparations for another war.

Abe’s comments are in line with his administration’s efforts to whitewash the crimes of Japanese imperialism, including the Japanese army’s use of sex slaves, or “comfort women,” during World War II, and the Nanking Massacre of 1937, in which up to 300,000 Chinese civilians and soldiers were killed.

Because of its energy and mineral resources, and strategic location, PNG, a longtime Australian colony, is being drawn into the firing line of the mounting tensions between the US, China and Japan.

The strategic significance of the ExxonMobil LNP plant was highlighted in 2011, when then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton accused China of seeking to undermine the US grip over the project. She told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the project was an example of the competition underway between China and the US.

Referring to the gas supplies at stake, she asserted: “ExxonMobil is producing it. China is in there every day, in every way, trying to figure out how its going to come in behind us, come in under us.” She declared it would be “mistaken” to think the US would retreat from “the maintenance of our leadership in a world where we are competing with China.”

So far, Washington has encouraged the unshackling of Japanese militarism, as part of its build-up against China. But US and Japanese imperialism fought for control over PNG, and the entire Asia-Pacific region, in the last world war. The re-emergence of Japanese militarism and its quest to secure access to energy and other critical resources once again poses the question of which imperialist power will dominate the region and, in particular, subjugate China.

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