

Massive US-Japanese display of naval force

Peter Symonds
20 October 2015

Amid growing tensions with China over disputed territory in the East China and South China Seas, the United States and Japan, along with India, Australia, South Korea and France, mounted a massive show of naval force on Sunday involving 50 vessels and 61 aircraft.

The fleet review, which is hosted by Japan every three years, involved an armada of carriers, destroyers, submarines and other warships in the seas near Tokyo. The nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan, which is based in Japan, was joined by the newly commissioned Japanese helicopter carrier, Izumo, which is the largest vessel in the country's naval forces since the end of World War II.

In a speech on board the destroyer Kurama, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared: "By highly hoisting the flag of 'proactive pacifism,' I'm determined to contribute more than ever to world peace and prosperity." He told the sailors to gird themselves for future missions and "to continue to guard the nation's peace."

Abe's slogan of "proactive pacifism" is a threadbare disguise for his government's program of remilitarisation. Encouraged by Washington, Abe has, since coming to power in 2012, boosted Japan's defence budget, taken a more aggressive stance against China, established a US-style national security council and sought to revive the reactionary traditions of Japanese imperialism by whitewashing its war crimes in the 1930s and 1940s.

Last month, the Abe government rammed through legislation to give effect to its "reinterpretation" of the country's constitution to allow for "collective self-defence"—that is, to join the US in its wars of aggression in Asia and around the world. The laws negate Article 9 of the country's post-war constitution, which formally renounces war and declares that Japan will never maintain land, air and sea forces.

The legislation not only opens the door for closer Japanese collaboration with the US military, but also the other countries with a naval presence in Sunday's fleet review. As part of its military build-up against China, Washington has been pressing for military cooperation not only with, but also between, its allies and strategic partners.

The involvement of India and Australia, as well as the US and Japan, in last weekend's naval display underlines the centrality of this group of four to the Pentagon's war planning. The fleet review coincided with the six-day-long annual Malabar exercises in the Bay of Bengal that involved the Indian, US and, for the first time, Japanese navies.

The US navy described the drills as a "complex, high-end warfighting exercise" that included a wide range of naval manoeuvres, including military-to-military coordination and anti-submarine warfare. Captain Craig Clapperton, commanding officer of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, enthused: "India and Japan both are fantastic partners of the United States ... We certainly have very strong economic, military and political relationships [with them]."

The war games provoked a sharp reaction in Beijing. After noting that India and China had beneficial relations, the state-run *Global Times* warned India to be "vigilant to any intentions of roping it into an anti-China camp."

The fact that a South Korean destroyer joined Sunday's fleet review off Tokyo for the first time since 2002 is also significant. The US has been pressing Japan and South Korea to establish closer diplomatic and military relations and to set aside tensions generated by Abe's denial of past Japanese war crimes, including in Korea.

In Washington last week, South Korean President Park Geun-hye indicated that the door was open to the first full meeting with Abe next month. Frictions

remain, however. South Korea's foreign ministry issued a statement on Sunday criticising Japanese cabinet ministers for visiting the notorious Yasukuni Shrine—a potent symbol of Japanese militarism that commemorates millions of war dead including convicted Class A war criminals.

The joint naval exercises took place amid growing indications that the US and its allies intend to stage a provocative “freedom of navigation” operation within the 12-mile territorial limit surrounding Chinese-controlled islets in the South China Sea. For months, American officials have been condemning China's land reclamation activities and declaring that Washington does not recognise Chinese territorial rights.

Speaking at the Shangri-La strategic dialogue in Singapore in May, US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter denounced China's “unprecedented” land reclamation for regional tensions. He warned: “There should be no mistake. The United States will fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows, as US forces do around the world.”

The US already routinely patrols the air and sea close to Chinese administered atolls, but is now threatening to enter the 12-mile territorial limit, risking a military confrontation with Chinese forces. The *Financial Times* reported earlier this month that the White House, which is under pressure from the US military and hawkish sections of the political establishment to act, had decided to give the green light for the so-called “freedom of navigation” patrols.

In June, Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper revealed that the Australian government was “actively considering” a military challenge to China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, unquestionably with US backing. The article even provided details of how such an operation could be mounted either using a military reconnaissance aircraft or a war ship.

In comments to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) today, former Labor foreign minister Gareth Evans urged the Australian government to proceed. “I think it's important that there be push-back against some of the more indefensible aspects of Chinese policy, which are first of all to make large, ill-defined historical claims to effectively the whole area of the South China Sea.” The ABC confirmed that the Australian navy already currently has three warships in the South China Sea region.

Defence Minister Gen Nakatani, who accompanied Prime Minister Abe to Sunday's fleet review, underlined Japan's support for the US-led campaign against China, saying that Japan would “continue to watch China's activities in the South China Sea with interest.”

There is nothing innocent or peaceful about the naval displays over the past week in seas near Japan and also in the Bay of Bengal. These are part of the preparations for the conflict between nuclear-armed powers that could be triggered by the US provocations being planned against China in the South China Sea.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact