

Japanese PM visits Pearl Harbor

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, accompanied by President Obama, made a highly symbolic visit yesterday to the site of the Japanese air attack at Pearl Harbor 75 years ago that marked the beginning of World War II in the Pacific. More than 2,400 American personnel were killed in what was a major blow against the US Pacific fleet.

Billed as a great show of reconciliation between wartime enemies, the wreath laying ceremony at the USS Arizona, the battleship sunk in the attack, was not about peace and goodwill but rather was in preparation for new wars amid rising tensions in the Asia Pacific with China.

In carefully crafted comments, Abe acknowledged those killed in the attack but made no formal apology. “I offer my sincere and everlasting condolences to the souls of those who lost their lives here,” he said, as well as to the spirits of those who lost their lives in the subsequent war in the Pacific.

Obama similarly made no apology in May for the tens of thousands of civilians killed in the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima when he became the first American president to visit that city.

Speaking yesterday, Obama declared that the US and Japan “chose friendship and they chose peace” after the war and described their post-war military alliance as “the cornerstone of peace and civility in the Asian-Pacific and a force for progress around the globe.”

Neither Obama nor Abe could speak of the inter-imperialist rivalry that gave rise to the Pacific War and to the atrocities on both sides that resulted.

For the United States, the Japanese raid on December 7 1941 on Pearl Harbor, the major US naval base in the Pacific, has always been described as an unprovoked sneak attack and featured strongly in wartime propaganda.

In reality, the path for war had been set months before as the US laid down ultimatums to Japan to pull out of

China in an intensifying struggle for domination in Asia. Japan, which had already colonised Korea in 1910, invaded Manchuria in 1931 and China in 1937.

To back up its demands, the US imposed a succession of economic sanctions on Japan culminating in an oil embargo in August 1941. Lacking access to oil, the militarist regime in Tokyo confronted the options of complete capitulation or going to war against a far more economically powerful adversary.

Japan launched the all-out attack on the US naval stronghold in the Pacific, followed by lightning offensives to seize British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, or Indonesia, in the hope of a short war and a quick peace.

The conflict in the Pacific was no surprise to Washington. By November 1941, the US had broken the code for the Japanese foreign ministry’s cables, was well aware that Japan would reject the ultimatum to leave China and that war was inevitable.

Moreover, at least one American historian, John Toland, has claimed that the US had broken the crucial Japanese naval codes and thus was aware of the impending attack on Pearl Harbor. The loss of American lives provided the necessary pretext for US President Roosevelt to silence domestic anti-war sentiment and declare war on Japan.

The United States emerged from the war as the unchallenged imperialist power in the Pacific, established massive military bases on Okinawa and in Japan and forged its Cold War alliance with Tokyo. Far from bringing “peace and civility” to Asia, Washington and its allies fought two bloody wars—in Korea and Vietnam—to ensure its hegemony as well as engineering coups and backing military dictatorships throughout the region.

Far from entering a new period of peace, today the region is wracked by intensifying tensions and rivalries that are similar to those of the 1930s. During his terms

in office, Obama has initiated and expanded his “pivot to Asia”—a diplomatic, economic and military strategy aimed at ensuring US domination over China, which, following capitalist restoration, has transformed into the world’s largest manufacturing hub and second largest economy.

The election of Donald Trump as president has heightened the uncertainty throughout the region. He has promised to pull out of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), the economic spearhead of the US “pivot,” to which Abe had been committed and threatened to abrogate the US-Japan Security Treaty unless Tokyo bears the full cost of American military bases.

At the same time, Trump is preparing trade war measures against China and has declared that he will not feel bound by the One China policy without concessions by Beijing on trade and other issues. Under the One China policy, which has been the linchpin of US-China relations for more than three decades, Washington recognised Beijing as the sole legitimate ruler of all China, including the island of Taiwan.

Beijing has responded by ramping up its military presence in the disputed waters of the South China Sea. Over the past week, the Chinese navy has deployed its only aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, along with five other war ships, to the dangerous flashpoint, claiming its right to “freedom of navigation” in response to the US naval build-up in the area.

Abe’s trip to Pearl Harbor, which was prepared months in advance, is certainly a signal to the incoming Trump administration that Tokyo is seeking to maintain its alliance with Washington. Abe was also the first major leader to meet Trump in the wake of his victory.

At the same time, Abe, who assumed office in 2012, has been remilitarising Japan by boosting military spending and loosening the constitutional and legal restraints on the Japanese armed forces. While nominally to strengthen Japan’s capacity to support the US militarily, the Abe government is intent on ensuring that Japanese imperialism is able to prosecute its own economic and strategic interests by force if needed.

No one should be taken in by the hypocritical pronouncements by Abe and Obama yesterday at Pearl Harbor. Under conditions of the breakdown of post-World War II structures, inter-imperialist tensions and rivalries are rapidly emerging again, in Asia in Europe.

The two present allies—the US and Japan—could once again find themselves at loggerheads over who is going to exercise dominion over Asia and unleash a war that would be far more devastating than the one that claimed the lives of millions seven decades ago.



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