Japan using North Korea as pretext to acquire offensive weapons

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Japan is using the recent test launch of a North Korean long-range missile to drastically step up its remilitarization drive and cast off the constitutional restrictions on its military. This longstanding goal of Japanese imperialism is being dressed up in the language of self-defense even as Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government seeks the capability to launch "pre-emptive" attacks on North Korea.

The Abe government is working in close coordination with the US administration under the banner of "collective self-defense." On Wednesday, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga stated, without elaborating, that Japan and the US had agreed to take "specific actions to improve our defense systems and our ability to deter North Korea."

After a meeting of the US, Japanese and South Korean leaders the day before the G20 summit in Hamburg, Japanese foreign ministry spokesman Norio Maruyama said: "North Korea now constitutes a new level of threat to Japan and a clear provocation to Japan and also to the international community."

Tokyo is in the process of acquiring cruise missiles, including Tomahawks, from the US. Citing an American official involved in talks with Japan, the *New York Times* reported on July 5 that the purchase of these missiles was being discussed. Japan's defense ministry denied it, conscious of public opposition.

However, the *Japan Times* similarly reported at the beginning of May that the Abe government was interested in buying Tomahawk missiles and was considering setting aside money in the draft 2018 defense budget in preparation. These missiles would be deployed on naval vessels and could attack any part of North Korea from the Sea of Japan.

Japan is looking also at purchasing the Joint Strike Missile (JSM), another type of cruise missile jointly produced by US and Norwegian companies. It would be fitted on newly acquired F-35A stealth fighter jets, obtained through the US Foreign Military Sales Program. Japan is slated to receive 42 F-35As but will likely purchase additional fighters in the near future.

Other plans include buying ballistic missile systems from the US, either the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) or more likely the land-based Aegis Ashore. This would further integrate Japan into Washington's anti-ballistic missile system and war plans in the region. Japan already has naval versions of Aegis fully deployed on four warships, with upgrades to two more in the works, as well as plans for another two Aegis vessels.

The acquisition of cruise missiles would be a major step in Japan's remilitarization. Until now, Tokyo has been cautious in obtaining offensive weaponry for waging overseas wars, such as aircraft carriers and long-range bombers.

The actions of the North Korean regime, however, enable Abe and his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to whip up a climate of fear to try to overcome widespread opposition to remilitarization. The government wants to avoid the mass protests that occurred during the summer of 2015 against new military legislation allowing "collective self-defense." At their height, some 120,000 people demonstrated in front of the National Diet building in Tokyo, with tens of thousands of others joining in around the country.

Plans for conducting "pre-emptive" attacks on North Korea are not new. Abe stated at the end of January that Japan had the right to attack North Korea in "self-defense." In March, the LDP's defense policy council proposed obtaining cruise missiles "to further improve deterrence and response as part of the Japan-US alliance."

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Hiroshi Imazu, the head of the LDP's security committee, declared in the same month: "Japan can't just wait until it's destroyed. It's legally possible for Japan to strike an enemy base that's launching a missile at us, but we don't have the equipment or the capability."

Imazu also claimed the right to launch an attack if an ally was supposedly being targeted. A war with North Korea or even China, instigated by the US, could provide the pretext for a Japanese assault on either country. This is the reality of the Abe government's "collective self-defense," first announced in July 2014 and codified in the military legislation passed in September 2015.

"Pre-emptive" self-defense directly contradicts Japan's constitution. Article 9 specifically states that "the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes," and "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained." With US support, this article is being cast aside.

US President Donald Trump spoke with Abe by phone last Sunday. They agreed to apply even more pressure on China, which undoubtedly includes flexing their combined military might. Trump, Abe and South Korean President Moon Jae-in released a joint statement Friday emphasizing their intention "to continue to cooperate to apply maximum pressure on the DPRK [North Korea] to change its path, refrain from provocative and threatening actions, and take steps necessary to return to serious denuclearization dialogue."

They "also called on the nations that border the DPRK [i.e. China and Russia] to make further efforts to convince the DPRK regime to abandon its current threatening and provocative path and immediately take steps to denuclearize and to halt its ballistic missile program."

Ultimately, as Washington pursues its policy of applying "maximum pressure" on Pyongyang while increasingly denouncing China for not doing more, the risk of a catastrophic war on the Korean Peninsula and in the region becomes more likely. Japan is rapidly expanding its military so it can once again assert its imperialist interests in Asia and internationally.

The Japanese bourgeoisie has never reconciled itself to the constitution imposed by the US after World War II. Abe and the LDP have not only sought remilitarization, but the rewriting of the country's constitution and laws to strip away democratic rights, while building up the power of the state, including the emperor.

The Japanese bourgeoisie is not satisfied playing second fiddle in the region to the US. Japan's remilitarization will intensify the danger of war between Tokyo and Washington just as conflicting interests between the two powers led to the outbreak of World War II in the Pacific more than 75 years ago.

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