

The Re-emergence of Japanese Militarism

By [Peter Symonds](#)

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The July 1st decision by the Japanese cabinet to endorse a statement “reinterpreting” the country’s constitution to authorise “collective self-defence” marks a sharp turning point in the revival of Japanese militarism. Under the pretext of coming to the aid of other nations, the statement is a major step toward ending constitutional restraints on the use of military force, allowing Japanese imperialism to forge new military ties and wage wars of aggression in concert with its allies.

No one should be deceived by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s claims that the vaguely worded statement will ensure that the Japanese military will be a force for peace. Successive Japanese governments have already reinterpreted the constitution’s so-called pacifist clause, which formally renounced war and declared that armed forces would never be maintained, to enable Japan to build one of the world’s most formidable militaries. Now Abe is free to pursue what he terms “pro-active pacifism,” which is nothing other than the prosecution of Tokyo’s strategic and economic interests through diplomatic provocations and military means.

The Japanese announcement takes place in the context of a deepening world economic crisis that is fuelling geo-political rivalries and tensions across the globe. The immediate effect of the Abe government’s decision will be to give the green light for even closer Japanese collaboration in the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” and its preparations for war against China. The Pentagon’s strategic planners regard the US military bases in Japan as an essential component of any war with China.

Obama’s “pivot” has already turned East Asia into a tinderbox. Over the past four years, with Washington’s encouragement, Tokyo has transformed the dispute with Beijing over the Senkoku/Diaoyu islets—uninhabited, rocky outcrops in the East China Sea—from a minor issue that has been simmering for four decades into a dangerous flashpoint. Japanese and Chinese ships and aircraft today routinely engage in risky manoeuvres at close quarters that raise the prospect of an accident or miscalculation precipitating open conflict.

While Japan is currently pursuing its own objectives under the umbrella of the US alliance, there is no guarantee that will continue. In actively urging Japan’s remilitarisation for its own shortsighted aims, Washington appears to have forgotten that the two imperialist powers—the US and Japan—fought a bloody war from 1941 to 1945 that claimed the lives of tens of millions, precisely for domination over China and the Asia Pacific region. The Obama administration has applauded the Abe government’s reinterpretation of the very constitution that was drawn up by the post-war American occupation in an attempt to curb Japanese militarism.

Amid the worsening global economic breakdown, the Japanese ruling class is acutely aware of its weakness and vulnerability after two decades of economic stagnation. From its beginnings in the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japanese imperialism has been compelled to resort to militarism to assert its interests against more powerful established rivals. Abe is rearming and strengthening ties throughout the region and internationally, primarily in order to further the aims of the Japanese ruling elite—whether that is in league with the US, independently or against it.

Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January, Abe likened the current situation in Asia to that in Europe before World War I. Drawing a false comparison between China today and German imperialism in 1914, Abe sought to brand Beijing as “aggressive” and “expansionist” in order to justify his government’s agenda of remilitarisation.

Nevertheless, the parallels to the world a century ago that are being made by many commentators do point to a basic truth. The fundamental contradictions of capitalism that erupted in two world wars during the 20th Century are again hurtling humanity inexorably toward a terrible conflagration. The remilitarisation of Japan is a warning to workers and young people everywhere that this drive to war is intensifying.

Like its counterparts around the world, the Abe government’s preparations for war go hand in hand with an ideological campaign to whitewash the horrific crimes of Japanese imperialism in the 1930s and 1940s. These historical falsifications are aimed at creating a social constituency for war. But the depredations of Japanese militarism and its police-state methods also left an indelible mark on the consciousness of the Japanese working class. That is why Abe resorted to the anti-democratic method of issuing a “reinterpretation.” Any attempt to formally amend the constitution would fail due to the overwhelming opposition of working people.

There is no doubt that the revival of Japanese militarism will greatly exacerbate tensions with China and throughout Asia. The Japanese armies carried out horrific atrocities, from Korea and China to Malaya, Indonesia and most of South East Asia. The Chinese and South Korean governments are exploiting these memories to whip up nationalism and chauvinism at home in a bid to shore up their own narrow bases of support and justify their own military build-ups. In the Philippines, the Aquino administration is seeking to bury the memories of the wartime Japanese occupation as it aligns itself with the war drive of Tokyo and Washington against Beijing. None of these regimes is capable of halting the slide to war. Rather their actions will accelerate it.

In Japan, China, the United States and around the world, there is broad popular opposition to the rising dangers of war and militarism, but those sentiments find no expression in the political establishment in any country. The only means for preventing a new world war is through the building of a unified movement of the working class in Japan, China, the US, throughout Asia and internationally to abolish capitalism and establish socialism globally.

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Articles by: **Peter Symonds**

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