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US and Japanese troops train for war against China

Peter Symonds

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A prominent article in the *New York Times* last weekend left no doubt about US-Japanese preparations for war or the intended target. Entitled “In Japan’s drill with the US, a message for Beijing”, the article covered US Marines training Japan’s newly-formed amphibious force in “how to invade and retake an island captured by hostile forces.”

While the joint exercise, codenamed Iron Fist, is an annual event, Marine Lieutenant Colonel John O’Neal declared that the Japanese troops came this year with “a new sense of purpose.” The 250-strong unit—up from just 25 soldiers in 2006—arrived with “their own “Humvees, gear and paraphernalia for retaking islands—or, in Marine parlance, ‘amphibious assault with the intent to seize objectives inland’.” O’Neill explained that the month-long exercise at Camp Pendleton in southern California was the “largest and most involved operation so far.”

The joint exercise was dressed up as defensive in character—a response to what the *Times* termed the shared “alarm” in US and Japanese military circles “over China’s flexing of military muscle.” In a speech earlier this month, Captain James Fanell, director of naval intelligence for the US Pacific Fleet, accused the Chinese military of preparing for “a short, sharp war to destroy Japanese forces in the East China Sea” followed by the seizure of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

Fanell's comments are just the most inflammatory in a steady drumbeat from the Obama administration and the US military blaming an "assertive" China for sharply rising tensions in Asia. In reality, under the guise of preserving peace and stability, US imperialism, following a decade of wars of aggression in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, is preparing for a new and more terrible conflict against nuclear-armed China.

As part of Obama's "pivot to Asia", the Pentagon is shifting 60 percent of its naval and air assets to the Indo-Pacific, establishing new basing arrangements throughout the region, and restructuring existing forces in Japan and South Korea. By encouraging military allies like Japan to adopt a more aggressive posture towards China, Obama has transformed territorial disputes in the South China and East China Sea that barely registered in world politics five years ago into dangerous flash points for war.

Obama's "pivot" has nurtured militarist layers in Japanese ruling circles and directly assisted the rise to power of the most right-wing government since the end of World War II—headed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. In his 14 months in office, Abe has increased the country's military budget for the first time in a decade, moved to end legal and constitutional constraints on the Japanese military and unveiled a new strategic orientation focussed on the country's south-western islands opposite the Chinese mainland.

Last March, just months after coming to office, Abe signalled a belligerent and uncompromising stance towards China over the disputed Senkakus by citing the rationale of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in waging the Falklands War against Argentina in 1982. In the name of "island defence", Abe put the establishment of an amphibious force akin to the US Marines high on the agenda for the Japanese military along with a naval, air force and coast guard build-up.

Abe's remilitarisation has gone hand-in-hand with the revival of the reactionary traditions of Japanese militarism from the 1930s and 1940s—symbolised particularly by his visit in December to the notorious Yasukuni Shrine to Japan's war dead, including class A war criminals. A *Wall Street Journal* article this week noted "the rise of a more vocal nationalist minority in Japan", including young MPs from ruling Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), that not only expressed hostility to China and South Korea, but also towards the US for its mild criticism of Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine.

The US "pivot" is unleashing political forces in Japan and elsewhere in Asia over which it has no control. Under the impact of the deepening global slump, Washington is using US military might to assure its continued hegemony in Asia, which now plays a central role in the world economy. While a US ally, the Abe government is above all intent on prosecuting the interests of Japanese imperialism—with or without Washington's backing. One hawkish LDP parliament member, Takaya Muto, told the *Wall Street Journal*: "We need to be able to protect ourselves," including through "nuclear armament."

The rising and relentless pressure of the US and its allies is exposing the inherent weakness of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership, which, after three decades of capitalist restoration, sits precariously atop a society wracked by a profound divide between rich and poor. Organically incapable of making any class appeal to the working class in China, let alone internationally, the CCP regime seeks to appease the US while at the same time building up the Chinese military and whipping up reactionary Chinese nationalism to shore up its own social base.

The Obama administration in turn exploits Beijing's posturing over territorial disputes with Japan and military expansion to justify a further acceleration of the "pivot"—of which the latest joint US-Japanese exercise is just a small component. Over the past five years, the US has transformed the whole region into a dangerous tinderbox where a miscalculation or error in any of the region's many flash points threatens to trigger an escalating conflict that would be a calamity for humanity as a whole.

This relentless drive to war can only be halted through the independent mobilisation of the international working class—the only social force capable of abolishing the fundamental cause of war that lies in the profit system and its outmoded division of the world into competing nation states. Workers in China, Japan, the United States and internationally share a common class interest in abolishing capitalism and restructuring society along socialist lines to meet the pressing needs of humanity, not the profits of the ultra-rich.