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New right wing Japanese government installed

By Peter Symonds

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The Japanese parliament yesterday formally installed Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leader Shinzo Abe as prime minister following the landslide defeat of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) at the December 16 poll.

The LDP won 294 seats in the 480-seat lower house and, together with its coalition partner New Komeito, commands the two-thirds majority needed to override an upper house veto. The LDP is looking to secure a majority in upper house elections due next year.

Abe has not chosen known rightwing nationalists for the posts of foreign minister and defence minister. Fumio Kishida, who was state minister in charge of issues related to Okinawa, is the new foreign minister. Itsunori Onodera, who was senior vice-minister for foreign affairs, becomes the new defence minister.

Moreover, Abe has announced his intention to dispatch LDP vice-president Masahiko Komura as a special envoy to China to improve relations. Last Saturday Abe said that the Japan-China relationship was “one of [the country’s] extremely important bilateral ties”. Since the election, he has played down, but not ruled out, stationing Japanese officials on the disputed islands, known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China.

Abe has not resiled, however, from the aggressive nationalist policies that he promoted during the election campaign. He has already indicated that closer ties with the US will be central to his government's policies and again declared on Wednesday that he would protect "the people's lives, Japanese territory and its beautiful seas."

The reference to the defence of Japan's seas reflects the LDP's tough stance in the course of the election campaign. Abe was critical of the DPJ for failing to prevent Chinese maritime vessels from entering waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. The LDP has not only called for building permanent structures on the uninhabited islets, but for boosting the country's coast guard that patrols the area.

The previous DPJ government had aligned itself with the Obama administration's so-called pivot to Asia—an aggressive diplomatic and strategic push designed to counter Chinese influence throughout the region. It provided what was in effect military aid to several countries to strengthen their coast guards, including the Philippines which has its own dispute with China over territory in the South China Sea.

Abe will extend these policies and also pursue his longstanding ambition to modify Japan's post-war constitution, which currently impedes the formation of military alliances and joint military action. Japan has a large military, known as the Self Defence Forces, that has already been deployed to support the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

As education minister, Abe has installed Hakubun Shimomura, who shares Abe's views that Japan's school history books have to be rewritten to remove references to the horrific war crimes carried out by the Japanese military in the 1930s and 1940s. Public Security Commission chairman Keiji Furuya and administrative reform minister Tomomi Inada are also known for right wing nationalist outlooks.

Nobutera Ishihara, who has been appointed the new environment minister, is the son of former Tokyo governor, Shintaro Ishihara, who quit the LDP earlier this year and is currently head of the right wing Japan Restoration Party. Shintaro Ishihara, an advocate of Japanese militarism, has suggested that the country should acquire nuclear weapons.

The government's immediate focus is on the Japanese economy, which is officially in recession after two consecutive quarters of negative growth. During the election campaign, Abe insisted that the Bank of Japan had to implement a policy of open-ended quantitative easing—in effect, printing money—to end deflation, weaken the yen and boost exports. Abe has hinted that his government might legislate to end the central bank's independence if it fails to follow the LDP's prescriptions, including an inflation target of 2 percent.

Abe has appointed Shigeru Ishiba, his rival for party leader in September, as LDP Secretary General, the party's no. 2 position. Last Friday Ishiba indicated that he thought an appropriate

range for the yen would be 85-90 to the US dollar. On Sunday Abe declared that 90 yen to the \$US would support Japanese exporters. The currency has already significantly weakened since November on the expectation that Abe would win the election.

As finance minister, Abe has installed former prime minister Taro Aso, who led the LDP to defeat in the 2009 election. Aso, who implemented stimulus measures following the eruption of the 2008 global economic crisis, has been tasked with drawing up a new stimulus package to try to boost economic growth. Financial analysts are expecting a supplementary budget, including public works projects, of about \$118 billion in late January.

The stimulus package will only exacerbate Japan's massive public debt, which currently stands at more than 220 percent of gross domestic product. Aso has declared that the new government will not adhere to the limit on public borrowing for this financial year put in place by the DPJ. Ultimately these huge debts will be imposed on working people. The LDP has already supported legislation passed by the previous government to double the country's deeply unpopular sales tax.

Big business has generally been supportive of the new government. However, Keidanren, the biggest corporate lobby group, has urged the government to take part in the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership. During the campaign, the LDP was reluctant to commit to the new free trade grouping as it would inevitably hit the heavily-subsidised agricultural section, and thus the party's rural base, hard.

The new government's foreign and domestic policies are closely linked. Two decades of economic stagnation have generated deep frustration in Japanese ruling circles that was compounded last year when China overtook Japan as the world's second largest economy. The Abe government represents layers of the ruling elite that are pressing for a more aggressive diplomatic and military stance in a bid to offset the country's economic slide.

The continuing standoff between China and Japan over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands underscores the danger that tensions between the world's second and third largest economies could rapidly worsen, leading to a devastating conflict.