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The revival of Japanese militarism

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The right-wing government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe took a further step towards rearmament and the revival of Japanese militarism with the release of a Defence Ministry report last week that for the first time proposed that Japan acquire offensive strike capabilities.

Since winning office last December, Abe has moved rapidly to implement his platform of building “a strong Japan” with “a strong military”. His Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government has expanded defence spending for the first time in a decade and has continued to fuel tensions with China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islets in the East China Sea. A defence white paper released last month for the first time focussed on China, rather than North Korea, as the main “threat”.

The rise of Japanese militarism has been deliberately encouraged by the Obama administration as part of its “pivot to Asia”, aimed at encircling China militarily. Washington has repeatedly called on Tokyo to play a greater “strategic role” and backed the previous Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government in its standoff with China over the disputed islands last year. Abe is now exploiting the “pivot” to expand the Japanese military and end the constraints imposed by the so-called “pacifist” clause of the country’s post-World War II Constitution.

Although still justified as “self-defence”, last week’s report called for “comprehensive abilities” to counter ballistic missile attacks that would necessarily include air force and missile

capabilities able to strike at enemy missile bases. Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera suggested that the Japanese military could carry out pre-emptive attacks if Japan was under threat. To boost “island defence”, the report also proposed the creation of a Marine-style force capable of amphibious landings.

In the name of “defence”, the LDP government is preparing to create offensive military capabilities to aggressively prosecute the strategic interests of Japanese imperialism, either in league with US imperialism or on its own. Abe, who is known for his right-wing nationalist views, has made no secret of his determination to amend the Constitution to express “Japanese-ness” and “traditional values”—code words for the wartime military regime of the 1930s and 1940s, its symbols and record of brutality and aggression.

Deeply frustrated by widespread public opposition to constitutional change and the revival of Japanese militarism, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Taro Aso told the right-wing extremist Japan Institute for National Fundamentals on Monday that the government should learn from the German Nazi regime. “We should proceed quietly. One day, people realised that the Weimar Constitution had changed to the Nazi Constitution. No one had noticed. Why don’t we learn from that approach?”

While he later “retracted” the remark, Aso unquestionably meant what he said. The LDP represents the dominant sections of the Japanese ruling class, which have always regarded the post-war Constitution and parliamentary democracy as impediments to its interests. Amid the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression, the government, like its counterparts internationally, is aggressively turning to shift the burden onto its rivals abroad, including by military means, and onto the working class at home.

Aso’s comments are a sharp warning of the anti-democratic methods that the Abe government will use to ram through constitutional change. The LDP released a proposed draft constitution in April that not only neutralises the present “pacifist clause”, but undermines basic democratic rights by deleting references to constitutional “rights” and imposing “duties” towards the state, creating the conditions for emergency rule and reinstalling the emperor to his pre-war position as head of state.

The rapid move to the right by the Abe government is a desperate attempt to restore Japan’s position as the dominant imperialist power in Asia after two decades of economic stagnation and the rise of China to overtake Japan as the world’s second largest economy. The turn to militarism is paralleled by Abe’s economic agenda, or “Abenomics”, based on devaluing the yen to undermine its trade rivals, especially China and South Korea, and the imposition of savage austerity measures on working people.

The policies of the Abe government echo the response of the Japanese bourgeoisie to the 1929 Wall Street crash and the onset of the Great Depression in the 1930s. As Japanese exports

collapsed and economic growth plummeted, the military, backed by the emperor, sought to overcome the crisis by rearming, invading Manchuria in 1931 and China as a whole in 1937—moves that collided with the interests of US imperialism and led to war in 1941.

The rise of militarism was accompanied by the savage repression of any opposition in the working class. The assassination of Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi in May 1932 by right-wing extremists—junior naval officers and army cadets—marked the end of already stunted parliamentary democracy and the emergence of a regime dominated by the military, which abolished remaining democratic rights and ultimately subordinated all parties and organisations to the state.

The restabilisation of Japanese capitalism after World War II under the US occupation depended on the crushing of the resurgent working class, above all through the betrayals of the Japanese Communist Party (JCP). The post-war constitution drawn up by the American occupiers was designed to appease widespread public hostility to the war-time militarist regime and to ensure that Japan would not return to war against the US. But the LDP, which ruled Japan almost continuously from 1955 to 2009, never broke from the militarist past and has long harboured ambitions to restore wartime “traditions”.

The deep-seated hostility of the Japanese working class to war, militarism and authoritarian forms of rule finds no expression in the political establishment, including the Stalinist Japanese Communist Party, which is mired in nationalism. As in the 1930s, governments in Japan and around the world are seeking to extricate themselves from the global economic crisis through policies that will end in war, austerity and dictatorship. The burning necessity for Japanese workers and youth is to build a genuinely revolutionary party as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, as part of the struggle by the international working class to abolish the bankrupt capitalist system.