

New warnings of war in Asia

By Peter Symonds
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While media attention has been focussed on the new US-led war in the Middle East, and Washington's confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, tensions have continued to sharpen in the Asia-Pacific region as a result of the American "pivot to Asia" against China.

A significant report released Monday in Australia entitled "Conflict in the East China Sea: Would ANZUS apply?" points to the risks that the country could be drawn into a war over the disputed Senkoku/Diaoyu islands, pitting China against Japan, backed by the US. ANZUS refers to the 1951 security treaty signed between Australia, New Zealand and the US in the wake of the Pacific War with Japan.

The paper reflects ongoing disagreements within the Australian political and strategic establishment over the wisdom of unambiguously aligning with the US "pivot." The economic costs to Australian capitalism were underscored late last month when the Obama administration, on security grounds, pressured the Prime Minister Tony Abbott's government to reverse an in-principle cabinet decision to join a new Chinese-backed infrastructure bank.

The report draws attention to the real and immediate dangers of war by detailing scenarios that could trigger a conflict in the East China Sea: a clash between Chinese and Japanese aircraft, a collision between a Chinese submarine and a US warship, and a confrontation between the Japanese coast guard and a Chinese tour ship. In each scenario, events rapidly spiralled out of control and posed the issue of an Australian government joining a war against China.

At the report's launch, one of its authors, Professor Nick Bisley from La Trobe Asia declared: "It [conflict] is something that we think is very plausible. This is not some imaginary risk." As the paper notes, Japan's military scrambled fighter jets more than 230 times in the first half of this year in response to alleged Chinese incursions into its airspace.

The paper cites the comments of Defence Minister David Johnston in June, saying he did not believe that the ANZUS treaty would commit Australia to joining the US in a war with Japan against China. But Bisley and co-author Professor Brendon Taylor from the Australian National University (ANU) Strategic and Defence Studies Centre pointed out in yesterday's *Australian* that the government would have little choice.

"Canberra has committed itself militarily every time the US has asked for support. Forget the legalities of the ambiguous alliance treaty [ANZUS] signed between Australia and the US in 1951. If conflict erupted in ways that brought an expectation from Washington that Australia should be involved, staying on the sidelines would not be an option," they wrote.

Bisley and Taylor also warned that the government would face pressure from Japan to take part in a war with China. "While both sides of politics have long supported deeper security ties to Tokyo, these have been ramped up decisively by the Abbott government. The Canberra-Tokyo link is described by policy elites, both in and around government in Japan, as a quasi-alliance."

Writing in yesterday's *Sydney Morning Herald*, former Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr, who commissioned the report, warned against any alliance with Japan. "We are warm to Japan and its values," he stated, "but have reservations about nationalist currents in its politics. We are not an ally."

Carr advised: "With deft diplomacy, Australia should let the US know it is not in our interests to slide into war with our major trading partner if there's a flare-up about uninhabited islands that, in an ideal world, would be part of a maritime national park." In a thinly disguised jab at Tokyo, he said the disputed islands had slumbered "under benign neglect ... until Japan unilaterally change their status by nationalising them in

2012.”

Neither Carr nor the report elaborated on the “nationalist currents” in Japanese politics, nor the role of the US in fuelling them. The more aggressive Japanese stance over the Senkaku islands followed the resignation in June 2010 of Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama whose orientation to closer relations with China set him at odds with President Obama’s confrontational “pivot” and military build-up against China.

Hatoyama was forced out, with Washington’s assistance, and replaced by Naoto Kan who adopted a far tougher policy toward Beijing. The first diplomatic row over the disputed islands erupted in September 2010 when Japan arrested a Chinese fishing boat captain and threatened to put him on trial. Tensions dramatically escalated after the Japanese government bought the islands in September 2012 from their private owner.

The right-wing Liberal Democratic Party government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, which won office in December 2012, adopted an uncompromising stance on the Senkaku islands, refusing to even acknowledge a dispute with China over their status. Abe has boosted the military budget, accelerated the country’s strategic orientation to “island defence,” established a US-style National Security Committee and sought to revive Japanese militarist traditions—all of which has heightened hostility between the two countries. Visiting Tokyo in April, Obama added fuel to the fire by declaring that the disputed islands were covered by the US-Japan Security Treaty.

At the report’s launch on Monday, Professor Taylor declared: “For me a deeper concern is less the deepening of the relationship between the US and Australia, and more the, in some ways, alarming deepening of the Australia-Japan relationship over the last 12 months.” Since coming to office a year ago, Prime Minister Abbott has forged far closer security relations with the Abe government, describing Japan as Australia’s “best friend in Asia.” The Abbott government signed a defence technology deal with Japan this year and appears poised to purchase Japanese submarines.

The public resurfacing of war fears in the Australian political establishment points to the sharpening of geo-political tensions in Asia, as in the rest of the

world. Canberra’s support for the “pivot” was settled in a manner that paralleled the processes in Tokyo. Just weeks after Hatoyama was forced to resign, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was ousted in an inner-party coup by a handful of union and factional heavyweights with close ties to the US embassy. Like Hatoyama, Rudd had proposed an accommodation between the US and China, right at the point that Obama was determined to confront Beijing.

Rudd’s replacement, Julia Gillard, swung behind US plans, turning the Australian parliament into a stage for Obama to formally announce the “pivot” in November 2011. Since then, critics of Washington’s aggressive policies in Asia have been largely marginalised. Carr, who took over from Rudd as foreign minister in March 2012, had previously criticised Gillard’s decision to open up Australian military bases to US forces, declaring that Australia was a treaty partner to the US, “not an aircraft carrier.” While in office, Carr shelved his misgivings, but appears, amid signs of deepening economic and geopolitical crises, to be renewing his criticisms.

The East China Sea is just one of the flashpoints in Asia, as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Lateline” program on Monday on territorial disputes in the South China Sea made clear. Asked about a war in Asia, another critic Hugh White, ANU Professor of Strategic Studies, drew a comparison with the outbreak of World War I, saying: “It is a bit like what happened in 1914 and a series of miscalculations by either or both sides could produce a situation where both sides push forward into crisis expecting the other to step back and surrender and they end in a fight that neither side really wants. That is the kind of possibility that we really do face in Asia today and that’s one of the reasons why I think Asia is much more dangerous at the moment than most of us realise.”

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