

Japan expands military operations in Asia

By Peter Symonds
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As the Trump administration ramps up its confrontation with North Korea and heightens tensions, especially with China, throughout the region, the Japanese government is significantly extending the activities of its military. While operating under the umbrella of its strategic alliance with the US, Tokyo is exploiting the opportunity to rearm militarily so as to pursue its own imperialist ambitions.

In another menacing warning to Pyongyang, a Japanese guided-missile destroyer yesterday began two days of joint exercises with similar vessels from South Korea and the US. The warships, all equipped with Aegis anti-ballistic missile systems, are operating in the area where four North Korean test missiles landed last week.

The Trump administration is reviewing US strategy toward North Korea and, according to media leaks, considering “regime change” and military strikes to deal with the Pyongyang regime. South Korea and the US are currently engaged in huge annual war games that include the rehearsal of “decapitation raids” by special forces units to assassinate the North Korean leadership.

The joint naval exercises by Japan, the US and South Korea are part of preparations for war, not only with North Korea, but also China. Beijing condemned the Pentagon’s decision last week to begin the deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile battery in South Korea. The THAAD installation is part of a broader anti-missile network, including the Aegis system, for fighting war with nuclear-armed powers.

The US has been pressing for closer military collaboration between Japan and South Korea, particularly on anti-missile systems. Hostility in South Korea toward Japan, its former colonial ruler, resulted in a 2012 intelligence-sharing agreement between Tokyo and Seoul being postponed until 2014. The US

navy noted that the current exercises would “employ tactical data link systems to trade communications, intelligence and other data among the ships.”

The Chinese foreign ministry called on all sides to end “a vicious cycle that could spiral out of control,” adding: “North Korea has violated UN Security Council resolutions banning its ballistic missile launches; on the other hand, South Korea, the US—and now Japan—insist on conducting super-large-scale military drills.”

Pyongyang accused the US of preparing a “preemptive strike” and threatened “merciless ultra-precision strikes from the ground, air, sea and underwater” if its territory were attacked. Such reckless rhetoric, along with the expansion of its nuclear arsenal and missile capabilities, only plays directly into the hands of the US and its allies and provides a pretext for war.

As well as collaborating with the US and South Korean navies, the Japanese military plans to dispatch its largest warship, the JS Izumo, for three months of operations, including in another dangerous flashpoint—the disputed waters of the South China Sea, where it will engage in joint exercises with the US navy.

The presence of a Japanese warship in the South China Sea is certain to heighten tensions with China. The two countries are already involved in a dangerous stand-off in the East China Sea over the disputed Senkaku islets, known as Diaoyu in China. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who is due to arrive in Japan today, has threatened to block China’s access to its islets in the South China Sea—a reckless act that could provoke war.

The Izumo, which is nominally termed a helicopter carrier and designed for anti-submarine warfare, is also capable of carrying the American Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft. Thus, in reality, it is an aircraft carrier, larger

than those operated by many other countries. Tokyo has deliberately not termed the warship an aircraft carrier. To acknowledge the carrier as an offensive weapon would further breach Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, which “renounces war” as a means of settling international disputes and vows never to maintain military forces.

Japan’s military is designated as Self-Defence Forces to maintain the illusion that its operations are not in breach of the constitution. The current right-wing government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, however, is determined to rearm Japan and remove all legal and constitutional restraints on its military. He wants to make Japan a “normal” nation with a strong military, to ensure that Japanese imperialism can use military might in pursuit of its economic and strategic interests.

In 2015, defying mass protests, the Abe government rammed through legislation to allow the Japanese military to engage in “collective self-defence”—in other words, US-led wars of aggression. Now, senior government figures are exploiting the alleged threat posed by Pyongyang to argue that the Japanese military must be able to conduct “pre-emptive” strikes against North Korea—that is, to have offensive weapons such as ballistic missiles and/or long-range bombers.

Speaking last week after the North Korean missile tests, Japanese Defence Minister Tomomi refused to rule out acquiring the capacity for pre-emptive military strikes. “I do not rule out any method and we will consider various options, consistent with international law and the constitution of our country.”

Her comments are part of a broader discussion taking place in the Japanese political establishment. The *Nikkei Asian Weekly* reported last month that the “national security panel of Japan’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) planned to recommend that the country acquire the ability to strike enemy bases in the case of an imminent threat.” LDP vice president Masahiko Komura claimed such a capacity “would not violate the constitution.” In fact, the LDP is pushing for a complete revision of the constitution that would substantially modify Article 9 or remove it altogether.

The dispatch of the *Izumo* is fully in line with US strategic planning for war with China—to strengthen military ties and collaboration between allies and strategic partners in Asia, as well as with the US. The Japanese warship will make port calls in Singapore,

Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka before joining the Malabar joint naval exercise with Indian and US naval vessels in the Indian Ocean in July.

While falling into line with US plans at present, the Abe government is intent on extending Japanese influence and interests in Asia and overcoming the memories of the crimes of Japanese militarism during the 1930s and 1940s.

Amid a worsening global economic crisis and rising geo-political tensions, a confrontation between the US and Japan could also emerge as the two imperialist powers compete for dominance in Asia—as occurred in the 1930s and led to a horrific war in the Pacific in which millions died.

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