

The Danger of War in Asia

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An editorial in the *Financial Times* last week, entitled “End drift to war in the East China Sea,” highlighted the growing alarm in ruling circles about the prospect of a conflict between Japan and China. “The possibility of war,” it declared, “is rapidly emerging as one of the biggest security risks facing the world,” and the two governments “are doing nothing to make conflict less likely.”

The FT focussed on comments by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in which he explicitly drew the comparison between the current rivalry in East Asia and that between Britain and Germany prior to World War I. “For Japan’s prime minister to allow any comparison with 1914 in Europe is chilling and inflammatory,” it stated.

The immediate source of tensions is the territorial dispute over rocky outcrops in the East China Sea, known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China. However, the chief responsibility for inflaming this dangerous flashpoint, along with others throughout the region, lies with the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia”—a strategy aimed at isolating China economically and diplomatically, and encircling it militarily.

While hypocritically claiming to be “neutral” on the territorial dispute, Washington has repeatedly declared that, in the event of a war over the islands, the US would support its ally Japan. Moreover, as part of the “pivot,” the Obama administration has been restructuring its military bases in Japan and encouraging Japan to remilitarise.

Asia in 2014 does bear a chilling resemblance to Europe in 1914. World War I arose over the intractable competition for spheres of influence between the major powers. As Lenin and Trotsky, the great Marxists of that period explained, it marked the opening of the imperialist epoch—the epoch of the death agony of capitalism.

The global financial crisis that erupted in 2008, the worsening world economic slump and rising geo-political tensions make clear that capitalism has resolved none of the fundamental contradictions that produced the horrors of a century ago.

Over the past decade, US imperialism has plunged into one war of aggression after another—Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya—as well as numerous intrigues and provocations, in a desperate bid to offset its relative economic decline through its military predominance. The installation of Obama as president and his “pivot” to Asia reflected deep concerns in the American establishment that the Bush administration’s focus on the Middle East undermined US hegemony in Asia, including over its cheap labour platforms, above all China, that had become central to corporate profit.

Under Obama, the US has encouraged allies such as Japan and the Philippines to take a more assertive stance in their disputes with China; begun to “rebalance” 60 percent of US air and naval forces to the Indo-Pacific; and is establishing new basing arrangements with Australia and other Asia-Pacific countries as part of its war preparations.

In Japan, the US “pivot” has helped foster the emergence of the right-wing Abe government that, in the space of a year, has increased military spending for the first time in a decade and moved to end constitutional restrictions on the Japanese armed forces. Last month, Abe provocatively visited the notorious Yasukuni Shrine to the country’s war dead—a potent symbol of Japanese militarism in the 1930s and 1940s.

Abe is being driven by the interests of Japanese imperialism, which is not prepared to relinquish its position as a leading power in Asia. In his speech at Davos, Abe dismissed pundits who “called Japan the land of the setting sun” and declared that “a new dawn” was breaking. The two themes of his speech were equally aggressive—thinly-disguised criticisms of China, alongside cut-throat economic measures designed to undermine rivals and turn Japan into one of the “most business-friendly places in the world.”

By likening China to Germany in 1914, Abe is seeking to portray Beijing as a dangerous new menace. Unlike Germany, however, China is not an imperialist power. Despite the size of its economy, it continues to function as a cheap labour platform, completely dependent on foreign corporate investment and technology, as well as the existing centres of finance capital. In the military sphere, the US has an overwhelming preponderance, and a global network of bases and alliances that can threaten Chinese interests anywhere in the world.

Backed into a corner by the US over the past four years, the Chinese leadership has responded by offering further economic concessions to the major powers, on the one hand, while boosting military spending and asserting its claims in waters immediately adjacent to the Chinese mainland, on the other. The Beijing regime is whipping up anti-Japanese chauvinism both to justify its military build-up and to divert attention from the extreme social tensions produced by three decades of capitalist restoration.

While drawing attention to the rising danger of war, the *Financial Times* editorial offered no solution, other than an impotent appeal for “both sides to stop rattling sabres and start talking to one another.” Ignoring the fact that the US “pivot” has stoked the present confrontation, the editorial appealed for Washington to intervene as the voice of peace and reason. Both Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping “should look for a route away from Armageddon before it is too late,” it concluded.

However, as in 1914, the drive to war is being fuelled by the inherent contradictions of capitalism—between global economy and the outmoded nation state system, and private ownership of the means of production and socialised production—that have erupted with full force in the wake of the 2008 global breakdown. The only means of averting the catastrophe being prepared for humanity is the abolition of the bankrupt profit system and the socialist reorganisation of society to meet the social needs of vast majority, not the super-profits of a tiny wealthy elite. The dangers of another world war underscore the necessity of rejecting all forms of nationalism and patriotism and building a unified international anti-war movement of workers and youth in China, Japan, the US and around the world to carry out this urgent task.

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