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The "Pivot to Asia": The 21st Century Tinderbox for War. "The Dangers of Another Global Catastrophe"

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Writing in *Foreign Policy* a year ago, former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd warned: "These are no ordinary times in East Asia. With tensions rising from conflicting territorial claims in the East China and South China seas, the region increasingly resembles a 21st century maritime redux of the Balkans a century ago—a tinderbox on water."

A year later, as the world marks 100 years since the outbreak of World War I, the dangers of another global catastrophe erupting in Asia have not diminished, but become increasingly acute. None of the feeble diplomatic palliatives suggested by Rudd in his essay have been taken up. The tensions to which he pointed—especially between China and Japan—have deteriorated markedly. Above all, the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," directed at undermining China diplomatically, economically and militarily, has further inflamed the Asian tinderbox.

Relations between Tokyo and Beijing have all but broken down as the right-wing Japanese government of Shinzo Abe, encouraged by Washington, has turned toward remilitarisation, increasing military spending for the first time in a decade. Abe's visit, late last month, to the notorious Yasukuni Shrine prompted China's ambassador to the US to comment in yesterday's *Washington Post* that the Japanese prime minister "risks ties with China" by paying homage to war criminals.

Rising tensions over disputed islands in the East China Sea reached a dangerous point last month when China announced an air defence identification zone in the area. The US immediately challenged Chinese authority by flying nuclear-capable B-52 bombers into the zone unannounced, raising the danger of an error or miscalculation leading to a clash. Tokyo further exacerbated the situation by announcing its intention this week to register 280 outlying islands as "state property." Japan's decision in September 2012 to "nationalise" the Senkaku/Diaoyu islets dramatically escalated the territorial dispute with China.

South East Asia has become a diplomatic battleground as the US, Japan and India vie with China for influence. Abe has made a point of visiting every member of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). President Obama failed to take part in this year's ASEAN summit, but US officials again exploited maritime disputes in the South China Sea to drive a wedge between China and its neighbours. Just this week, the US intervened once more in the South China Sea tinderbox, backing Vietnam and the Philippines, by denouncing newly announced Chinese fishing regulations as "provocative and potentially dangerous."

While not mentioned in Rudd's essay, the Korean Peninsula remains an explosive regional flashpoint. Last April, war tensions reached fever pitch after the North Korean regime

responded to new US-led sanctions with belligerent, but largely empty threats. Far from easing tensions, the US took a series of intimidating steps, including the dispatch of B-52 and B-2 bombers to South Korea, aimed at forcing Pyongyang to back down or risk war. Washington's relentless isolation of North Korea is destabilising the regime—as evidenced by last month's bloody purge—and bringing the country to the brink of collapse. This utterly reckless policy has unpredictable and dangerous consequences in a strategic region of the globe where the interests of China, Russia, Japan and the US intersect.

The driving force behind the rising danger of war is the deepening global crisis of capitalism. Five years after the 2008–09 financial meltdown, the world economy remains mired in slump and the policy of "quantitative easing" has set the stage for a new financial crisis. Global capitalism remains ensnared in the same fundamental contractions—between private ownership of the means of production and socially organised production; and between world economy and the outmoded nation state system—that fuelled the eruption of World War I.

The Obama administration's "pivot" reflects the rise of Asia, above all China, as the prime cheap labour platform for the globalised production that has emerged over the past three decades. Those commentators who claim that the close international economic integration make war impossible ignore the fact that the same integration has greatly heightened geo-political rivalry.

The most explosive factor in world politics is US imperialism's attempt to offset its relative decline through the use of military might. The US "pivot" is above all aimed at ensuring continued American dominance over the Asian economic powerhouse in order to dictate terms not only to China, but to its European and Asian rivals. If China is the chief target, it is not because China has become an imperialist power akin to 20th century Germany, but because its rapid economic expansion and demands for energy and raw materials are disrupting a long-established imperialist order dominated by the US.

In arguing for the overriding importance of the "pivot" for American imperialism, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton explained in *Foreign Policy* in 2011 that "the Asia-Pacific has become a key driver of global politics." She insisted that "just as our post-World War II commitment to building a comprehensive and lasting transatlantic network of institutions has paid off many times over … the time has come for the United States to make similar investments as a Pacific power." In other words, the maintenance of US dominance in Asia is as imperative for American imperialism today as US interventions in post-war Europe, such as the Marshall Plan, were more than half a century ago.

American diplomacy and economic initiatives in Asia are underwritten by a rapid military build-up and restructuring of US forces and bases in preparation for a war against China. Over the past four years, the US "pivot" has led to a strengthening of alliances and strategic partnerships across Asia, with particular focus on Japan, Australia and India as the linchpins of an anti-China bloc. To tighten the noose around China, the Obama administration has also encouraged its chief allies to forge close military relations with each other. In doing so, it has given free rein to the ambitions of Japanese imperialism, which is embarking on its own diplomatic campaign, most recently with the visits of its defence minister to India and France to forge closer strategic ties.

The complex diplomatic machinations, secret agreements and military arrangements of the early 21st century bear an uncanny resemblance to those of the early 20th century. As tensions and rivalries continue to rise, the great danger is that a miscalculation by a

Japanese or China pilot in the East China Sea, or a minor incident on the border dividing the Koreas, can lead to a clash that rapidly draws the entire world into a catastrophe of far greater proportions than a century ago.

The only social force capable of halting the drive to war is the international working class. Workers in China, the US, Japan and throughout Asia and the world share a common class interest in putting an end to the capitalist system and its outmoded nation-state system, and constructing a world-planned socialist economy to meet the pressing social needs of humanity, not the massive profits of a tiny financial oligarchy.

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