

# Japanese parliament votes for military role in Afghan war

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The Japanese government of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has exploited public fears over the September 11 attacks to bypass the country's post-war pacifist constitution and allow, for the first time since World War II, the military to take part in a war. Legislation passed by the Diet or parliament on October 29 permits the deployment of the Japanese Self-Defence Force (SDF) to provide "logistical support" to US military operations against "terrorism".

Article 9 of Japan's 1947 constitution prohibits war or the use of force as a "means of settling international disputes". Throughout the postwar period, the Japanese military, one of the largest and most sophisticated in the world, has been restricted to territorial self-defence. Just as the Bush administration justified its "war against terrorism" as an act of self-defence, so Koizumi has extended "self-defence" to include the SDF's participation in the war in Afghanistan and, theoretically, anywhere in the world.

Koizumi told the media during his September visit to New York and Washington: "There is no such thing as a safe place anymore. It is not safe even in Japan. It is not safe in the workplace. It is not safe anywhere. That is why past arguments are not viable. Since September 11, we cannot say the SDF should not be sent to a dangerous place."

According to a *Yomiuri Shimbun* opinion poll, some 83 percent of the population "accepted the need" for US military action, while 57 percent support Japanese participation. This follows weeks of scare-mongering by Koizumi and the press over the terrorist threats to Japan. A *Yomiuri* editorial writer, for instance, described Japan as a "tempting target" because of its global financial clout.

While still proscribed from active combat missions, the SDF is now authorised to provide vital military

services, such as field hospitals, mine clearance, search-and-rescue operations and security for supply bases and airfields. The government has volunteered Japanese troops to police refugee camps in Pakistan or Afghanistan in the war's aftermath and offered Japan's navy to transport equipment and fuel to US forces. Up to four ships, including a destroyer, may be deployed to the US naval base at Diego Garcia, in the Indian Ocean.

Any Japanese military forces assigned to the US war will operate under new rules of engagement. They will be permitted to use deadly force to protect not only themselves, but "those under their care". There is also discussion that the Koizumi doctrine permits their utilisation in overt combat missions. Takeshi Uemura, an editorial writer for the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, wrote on October 16: "The military action renounced by the constitution refers to a war of aggression. Joint operations to eradicate terrorism, which threatens international peace and security, should never be regarded as a war of aggression."

The current moves to deploy the SDF are also being used to justify inroads into democratic rights. A defence secrets bill is now before the upper house of parliament, curtailing public access to information on the activities of the military. The police are seeking to monitor private e-mail messages, using a modified version of the US FBI's controversial "Cannibal" system. "Cannibal" is connected to servers at Internet Service Providers and searches all incoming and outgoing mail for particular keywords.

The new SDF legislation is not driven by threats of terrorism. Throughout the 1990s, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has made a concerted attempt to legitimise the use of military power in pursuit of Japanese strategic and economic interests. The ruling class chaffed at the constraints imposed on the military

throughout the post-war period, but the end of the Cold War made the abolition or reinterpretation of the pacifist clause a matter of urgency.

The constitution prevented the Japanese government from contributing militarily to the 1990-91 Gulf War against Iraq. While it handed over \$US13 billion to Washington to pay for the war, Japan was largely excluded from the negotiations over the future of the Middle East—where most of the country’s oil is purchased—and lost ground commercially in the region. Politicians subsequently complained that Japan’s interests had been compromised by the failure to deploy troops and that the White House was treating its relations with China as more important than those with Tokyo.

In 1992, legislation was passed permitting Japanese troops to play support roles in UN peace-keeping forces and Japanese military units served in Cambodia. In 1999, further legislation allowed the SDF to support US forces in “areas surrounding Japan”, theoretically enabling a Japanese military role in any clash between the US and China over Taiwan or a war on the Korean peninsula.

Now, with the Bush administration utilising September 11 as the pretext to deploy troops into Central Asia, Koizumi is determined Japan will not be sidelined as it was in 1991. His government is actively seeking a seat at the table when the future of Central Asia and its vast reserves of oil and gas are discussed. It has offered to play a major role in financing whatever regime is ultimately established in Afghanistan.

Koizumi, who assumed office in April, has encouraged the revival of Japanese militarist and nationalist sentiment. He campaigned for the LDP leadership as an advocate of eliminating Article 9 from the constitution. His government rejected Chinese and South Korean demands that it block the publication of nationalist textbooks that justified Japanese imperialism in the first half of the century. In August, Koizumi worshipped at the Yasukuni Shrine to Japan’s war dead, despite intense opposition at home and in the region.

His efforts to involve Japan in the US war against Afghanistan have received support within the political establishment. The *Yomiuri Shimbun* has campaigned in its editorials for Japan to “learn a lesson from the Gulf War” and do away with “one-country pacifism”.

The LDP’s coalition partner, the New Komeito Party, which has always defended the pacifist constitution, voted for the anti-terrorist legislation. The main opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) supported sending troops and only voted against the legislation on the grounds that the LDP refused to make military deployment conditional on parliamentary approval.

The Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) voted against the legislation so as to uphold the constitution. Throughout the post-war period, both parties sought to appeal to deeply felt anti-militarist sentiment among workers who were subject to brutal repression prior to and during World War II. Invariably, however, the JCP and SDP have attempted to channel the opposition in a nationalist direction.

The JCP’s criticisms of Koizumi have largely consisted of accusing him of subservience to the US. Its newspaper *Akahata* on September 30 attributed the rush to deploy military forces to government concern that “Japan may fail to ‘show the flag’ and fail to meet US expectations”.

In fact, the legislative moves in Japan have little to do with US pressure. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage called for Tokyo to “show the flag” in support of the US but the Bush administration has downplayed any need for Japanese troops. In an interview in mid-October, Bush said only that the US was “open-minded to talk about a way for Japan to contribute” and expressed far more concern that the bad debt in the Japanese banking system be eradicated.

Koizumi’s push for the dispatch of troops is bound up with the strategic and economic aspirations of Japanese capitalism. The ruling elites are seeking a place in the US-led war in order to establish a precedent for Japan’s independent use of military forces in the future.



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