

Japan militarisation accelerates after sinking of alleged North Korean spy ship

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9 January 2002

The Japanese Coast Guard's sinking of an alleged North Korean spy ship last month has accelerated Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi administration's push for an end to the postwar limitations on Japan's use of military power.

Though scarcely reported in the United States or Europe, the incident dominated the Japanese media. On December 22, Japan's military launched a major operation to intercept an unidentified ship near the Amami-Oshima islands, which are in the East China Sea to the north of Okinawa, the location of one of the largest US military bases in the region. When first detected on December 18, the ship was within Japan's 200 kilometre exclusive economic zone (EEZ)—an area of fishing and mineral rights.

According to various media accounts, the ship was a 100-ton Chinese-type squid-fishing boat, but did not have fishing equipment. It was marked with Chinese characters, flying a Chinese-style flag and painted in Chinese fashion. Its design was unusual, in that its engine was located under the foredeck toward the front of the vessel. Normally, ships' engines are toward the aft or rear of the ship. The Japanese media insinuated that the ship was built to carry special equipment on its aftdeck, such as small landing craft, and claimed the design was the hallmark of North Korean ships.

After a protracted air and sea chase by at least 25 Coast Guard ships and 14 aircraft, during which the unidentified vessel was repeatedly shot at and set alight at one point, four Japanese patrol boats surrounded it in Chinese-claimed waters over 400 km from the Amami-Oshima islands. The Japanese government alleged that two-and-half hours later the crew of the vessel, in attempt to break out of the encirclement, fired automatic rifles and rocket launchers at its ships. On the grounds of "self-defence", the Japanese patrol boats fired 20mm machine guns directly into the ship, which exploded and sank at 10.13

pm. No attempt was made to rescue the crew, believed to number 15, despite a group of them being seen alive in the water. The bodies of two Asian men wearing Korean-marked life-vests were recovered and autopsies confirmed that they had drowned.

The sinking is the first time since World War II that any arm of the Japanese Self-Defence Force (SDF) has used deadly force and inflicted casualties. In the most high-profile previous military incident, in March 1999, the Coast Guard pursued and shot across the bows of two suspected North Korean spy ships in the Sea of Japan but did not pursue them out of Japanese waters. By its own admission, the Coast Guard has sent ships to investigate at least 20 other recent intrusions into Japan's waters but has not fired upon them. This time, however, a decision was taken by the Koizumi administration to turn what could have been a routine operation into a military precedent.

Koizumi, a member of the most right-wing faction of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), assumed office last April as unemployment reached its highest level in 55 years and Japan slumped toward its third recession in 10 years. His administration has called for Japan to play an international military role commensurate with its economic clout and used nationalist demagoguery to divert public attention from the country's growing social tensions.

Koizumi's response to the sinking has been to make unsubstantiated allegations that North Korea was attempting to smuggle drugs or deploy terrorist operatives into Japan, and call for even greater powers to be given to the military. Significant sections of the media have backed him.

Summing up the anti-Korean propaganda, the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Japan's major conservative daily newspaper, editorialised on January 7: "The terrorist attacks on the United States and the confrontation with an armed spy

ship believed to come from North Korea have forced Japan to fundamentally change its Cold War perception of its own security... People increasingly take it for granted that laws are needed to deal with contingencies and that restrictions on the use of weapons by the SDF must be loosened.”

There is a history in Japan of exploiting an exaggerated threat from North Korea—an economically devastated country that is incapable of feeding its own population—to increase the SDF’s powers. In August 1998, North Korea’s firing of a long-range missile was used to justify Japanese participation with the US in developing a proposed theatre missile defense system. In 1999, the government used media hysteria about North Korean espionage to push through legislation allowing the SDF to actively support US forces during a crisis within the region.

Tensions are rising between the major political and economic powers in East Asia. While North Korea has denied any connection to the alleged spy vessel, if it were conducting a spying operation it would not be alone. The region is one of the most militarised in the world, where the US, Japan, China, Russia, Taiwan and the Koreas all have competing strategic interests and certainly spy on one another. Just last April, a US spy plane collided with a Chinese fighter in the South China Sea.

The Bush administration’s installation has served to heighten regional suspicions. Washington has made threatening statements against North Korea, recently naming it alongside Iraq and other Middle Eastern states as a potential target in the “war on terrorism”. While US-China relations currently appear relaxed, the Republican stance that China is a “strategic competitor” has not changed. The Bush administration has also offered to sell Taiwan modern conventional submarines and other advanced military hardware, despite Beijing’s opposition.

This tense atmosphere makes Japan’s December 22 action all the more provocative, particularly against China, in whose territory it took place. China has clashed diplomatically with the Koizumi administration on several occasions last year—over Koizumi’s tolerance of right-wing revisionist history textbooks and his nationalist visit to the Yasukuni Shrine to Japan’s war dead. Following the Koizumi’s dispatch of warships to take part in the “war on terrorism” Beijing issued carefully worded warnings against Japanese remilitarisation.

In response to the December 22 incident, the Chinese government has expressed “concerns over Japan’s use of force in waters in the East China Sea”. The Chinese

military’s newspaper, the *Peoples Liberation Army Daily*, declared in an editorial: “In order to realise the dream of becoming a regional military power and to increase and expand the space for its self-defence forces into the high seas, Japan could well continue to create similar incidents in the future.”

The Koizumi administration is wasting no time in taking advantage of the political climate to advance its remilitarisation agenda. It has prepared new legislation that would permit the military and coast guard to launch pre-emptive attacks on “suspicious” ships or aircraft, both within and outside Japanese territory. Cabinet secretary Yasuo Fukuda attacked the self-defence limitations on the military, declaring in late December: “If we don’t suffer casualties when we are shot at, does this mean we can’t do anything?” The legislation is expected to go before parliament on January 21.

Koizumi is also drafting “crisis legislation”, which would enable a type of state of emergency to be declared that suspends constitutional limitations on the military’s actions within Japan itself. Details that have been reported include granting the armed forces the power to utilise property without the owner’s consent and control civilian movements. The law would concentrate emergency powers in the hands of a Security Council, headed by the prime minister, which could bypass parliament.

Another piece of legislation is being drawn up to facilitate holding a referendum on the revision of the Japanese constitution. The main clause being targeted is Article 9, which prohibits war or the use of force as a “means of settling international disputes”. While legislation passed on October 29 permitted the SDF to give logistical support to US forces involved in the war against Afghanistan, the constitution only permits the SDF to engage in offensive operations within Japan’s air, land and sea territory.

The drive by Japan to bolster its armed forces parallels similar moves in Europe and elsewhere. With the US utilising unilateral military might in Afghanistan to secure economic and strategic advantages in Central Asia and the Middle East, Koizumi is seeking to prepare the legal and ideological basis for an equally aggressive assertion of Japanese interests.



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