

US seeks Japanese government support for war on Iraq

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US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage arrived in Tokyo on August 27, seeking the open endorsement of the Japanese government of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi for US war plans against Iraq.

According to the *Japan Times*, Armitage told Japanese Defense Agency head Gen Nakatani that the Bush administration believed “close consultation with, and the understanding of, its allies will be necessary to strike Iraq”. During a meeting with the heads of the three Japanese government parties, Armitage requested Japan “consider how it can help the US efforts to eradicate terrorism” and assured them that the Bush administration would keep Koizumi closely advised of the timetable for a second Gulf War.

On August 28, Armitage held further “strategic dialogue talks” over Iraq and North Korea with Japan’s Vice Foreign Minister Yukio Takeuchi, and also with a senior representative of the Australian Foreign Affairs Department, Ashton Calvert. Later in the day, Armitage told a press conference: “It is our view that an Iraq left unattended is a threat to its neighbours and a threat to ourselves”. The US could make “a compelling case” for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime, he said.

Koizumi did not, however, provide Armitage with an unqualified endorsement for US plans and the indications of support remain relatively low key. A Japanese Defense Agency spokesman stated that Japan was considering a further extension to the tour of duty of three destroyers and two supply ships currently working with US naval forces in the Indian Ocean. Their continued presence would ensure that Tokyo has forces on hand to contribute to a war on Iraq.

The Japanese ships were deployed last November to provide logistical support in the war on Afghanistan—the first active role in a war by Japanese military personnel since World War II. An initial six-month time limit was extended in May until November 19, ostensibly due to the ongoing campaign against the remains of the Al Qaeda network.

Following September 11, the Koizumi government backed US military deployments in Central and South East Asia. Last October, it pushed emergency “anti-terror” legislation through the parliament that enabled Koizumi to bypass the country’s constitution and deploy naval and air units to assist with the invasion of Afghanistan. Japan’s postwar constitution, which

renounced the use of armed force as a “means of settling international disputes,” limits the military to territorial defence.

In February, during a visit to Japan by Bush, Koizumi proclaimed his “unconditional support” for the “war on terrorism”. Whereas European leaders have raised differences with any unilateral US attack on Iraq, Koizumi has publicly declared that such a war was a “legitimate option” for the Bush administration. Vice Foreign Minister Takeuchi reportedly told Armitage that “Japan won’t stint on cooperation” with Bush’s Iraq policy.

Koizumi’s support for Washington is bound up with Tokyo’s response to the conditions ushered in more than a decade ago by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening up of China to capitalist investment. Amid sharpening rivalry for markets and profit, a section of the Japanese ruling elite views a close alliance with Washington as the best means, at present, of securing strategic and economic advantages in the region and internationally.

Under Koizumi, Japan has backed the hardline stance of the Bush administration toward North Korea and China, assisting Washington to force concessions from Pyongyang and Beijing and undermining the efforts of Russia and the European powers to establish a greater influence in the region. In the Middle East and Central Asia, Tokyo is hoping to guarantee stable energy supplies and to secure lucrative contracts for Japanese firms in the exploitation of oil and gas resources. In the aftermath of the war on Afghanistan, Japanese companies are pursuing investments in a proposed gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan.

Of longer term significance, Koizumi has exploited the “war on terrorism” to legitimise the use of Japan’s military to pursue foreign policy objectives. In August, Tokyo announced it was eager for a greater role in UN peacekeeping operations and would seek the command of future operations in the Asia-Pacific. Some 700 Japanese troops are currently in East Timor.

The closeness of US-Japan ties is underlined by Koizumi’s planned visit to the US from September 9 to 14, to take part in ceremonies to mark the first anniversary of the September 11 attacks. He is scheduled to hold talks with Bush on September 12 and will deliver a speech to the UN General Assembly the following day. His main theme is expected to be Japan’s

support for the “war on terrorism”. Koizumi is then going to North Korea—the first visit by a Japanese prime minister—where, with Washington’s backing, it is anticipated he will seek major political concessions in Pyongyang.

Koizumi has not yet given explicit support for a US war on Iraq as he faces opposition at home, including inside the ruling LDP. While his basic agenda of remilitarisation and a more assertive foreign policy is broadly supported in the Japanese political establishment, there is widespread disquiet over the consequences of being too closely linked with the reckless policies of the Bush administration.

Koizumi’s pro-Bush foreign policy provoked sharp ruptures within his cabinet last year. In order to align Japan with the war on Afghanistan he was compelled to wage a factional struggle within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to politically defeat Makiko Tanaka—formerly one of his key allies. Last year, her backing was a critical factor in Koizumi winning the post of prime minister. Tanaka, however, used her position as foreign minister to promote an orientation away from Washington and toward stronger independent relations in Asia, particularly with China. On the basis of factionally-motivated allegations, she was removed from cabinet in January and then in May barred from contesting the party leadership for two years. Last month, she resigned from parliament.

Concerns over the US-Japanese alliance go beyond Tanaka and have been heightened by Washington’s preparations for a preemptive strike against Iraq—without UN support or any evidence backing its allegations against Baghdad. Two former prime ministers, leading LDP members, opposition parties and major newspapers have publicly advised Koizumi not to back the US without the sanction of the UN and the European powers, and at least some support from Middle Eastern states.

A major fear in Tokyo is that a war in Iraq may end up being a military debacle or could inflame and destabilise the Middle East—the source of 85 percent of Japan’s oil imports. According to press reports, an LDP advisory panel warned Koizumi before Armitage’s visit that backing the US could antagonise Arab states and “make it difficult for Japan to secure its energy from those countries”. LDP secretary-general Yasu Yamasaki commented on August 28: “I believe an independent decision by the US would create international distrust of the US, and Japan as an alliance partner.”

Naoto Kan, the secretary general of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), stated on August 15 that his party would not support any attack on Iraq without “concrete evidence” that Baghdad had assisted terrorist groups. An editorial in the *Mainichi Shimbun* on August 28 declared: “If the US surges ahead on the basis of its own particular reading of international law, believing the rest of the world will clean up after it performs the dirty work, it should be aware that neither Japan nor any other country is prepared to follow its lead”.

The Stalinist Japanese Communist Party (JCP), which bases

its criticisms of Koizumi on crude anti-Americanism, is one of the most vociferous advocates of a break with the US alliance. In the party’s official statement on August 15, the anniversary of Japan’s surrender in World War II, JCP secretary Ichida Tadayoshi denounced the cabinet for “its extraordinary submission to US foreign policy and a complete lack of independence and autonomy”.

Unease within the LDP and its coalition partner New Komeito over the US war plans has already forced Koizumi to repeatedly delay a second round of “anti-terror” legislation. Its purpose is to remove an array of restrictions on the use of the Japanese military in direct combat roles and thus to provide the legal basis for participation in a war on Iraq.

The other major concern in ruling circles is that Japan’s support for a US invasion of Iraq could provoke widespread domestic opposition. Koizumi’s advisors warned on August 24 that it was “not known whether the support of the Japanese people could be obtained”. The *Asahi Shimbun* editorialised along similar lines on August 29, declaring that “Koizumi should learn to say ‘no’ to Bush” as the “division of domestic opinion in Japan will be incomparably greater than it was during the bombardment of Afghanistan”.

The fear is that opposition to war could become the outlet for the long pent-up social discontent. For over a decade, Japanese working people have borne the brunt of the country’s economic stagnation in the form of collapsed real estate values, declining real wages and record levels of unemployment. The political establishment, especially the LDP, is seen as corrupt and incompetent. Popular illusions in Koizumi, who was promoted by the media in May 2001 as a reformer who would transform Japanese politics, have evaporated and support for his cabinet has slumped to 45 percent, compared with 80 percent a year ago.

Despite the risks, Koizumi is giving every indication he will push for his government to participate in any war on Iraq. In doing so, he rests on the fact that, whatever their fears, the dominant sections of the Japanese ruling class do not believe at this point that an alignment with the European Union, or with regional powers such as China, provides a viable alternative to pursuing their interests through an alliance with US imperialism.



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