

# Japanese parliament gives green light for troops to Iraq

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The Japanese Diet passed legislation late last month allowing the government to proceed with plans to dispatch up 1,000 troops to bolster the US-led occupation of Iraq. The deployment will be the first time Japanese soldiers have been stationed in a combat zone since the end of World War II and the first without a UN mandate.

The law is designed to circumvent the so-called pacifist clause in Japan's constitution that eschews war as "a means of settling international disputes" and prohibits the use of military force except in self-defence. Previously, Japan has only participated in UN peace-keeping missions in Mozambique, Cambodia and most recently East Timor.

The Diet was the scene of bitter debate as Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi used ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) numbers to ram through the legislation 136 votes to 102 on July 26. In an upper house committee meeting, scuffles broke out as legislators tried to get to the committee's chairman to prevent him cutting short the debate.

The bill authorises the government to provide non-combat support to US forces in Iraq but Japanese soldiers will be armed and authorised to use deadly force in self-defence. The LDP has foreshadowed further legislation that would enable the government to commit Japanese troops to future multilateral operations—with or without UN backing—without requiring specific parliamentary approval on each occasion.

Koizumi, who faces reelection as LDP leader in September and a possible general election later in the year, has delayed making any final decision on the troop deployment until October or November. There is considerable public opposition in Japan to the US-led occupation of Iraq and to any revival of Japanese militarism in general.

A recent opinion poll in the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper indicated that 55 percent opposed sending Japanese troops to Iraq against only 33 percent in favour. The figures

contrast to an earlier survey in June when results were far closer—46 percent and 43 percent respectively. Significantly, the latest poll revealed that 60 percent believed that the US-led invasion of Iraq was unjustified.

Analyst Keiko Higuchi commented to Associated Press: "For more than 50 years, our soldiers have never been killed or killed anyone. It's a military we can be proud of. We can't accept our prime minister's decision, which is more about his desire to be on good terms with the US president than about national interest."

Koizumi has attempted to play down the dangers to Japanese troops, insisting that they will be engaged simply in reconstruction and support activities. But the Pentagon has requested that the soldiers be stationed at Balad, 90 km north of Baghdad, where a number of attacks on US troops have taken place. Tokyo, however, remains reluctant to place Japanese forces in obvious danger.

The decision to press ahead with the deployment despite the potential political dangers is bound up with a definite agenda. Faced with a decade of economic stagnation at home and growing competition from Japan's rivals, sections of the ruling class regard the "pacifist clause" as an intolerable impediment to the deployment of the military in the pursuit of their strategic and economic interests.

Certain conclusions were drawn from the 1990-91 Gulf War. While Japan contributed \$13 billion to pay for the US-led war, Tokyo was largely left out of the negotiations over the future of the Middle East—the source of 80 percent of its oil—and lost ground in commercial investments and projects in the region. As a result, successive LDP governments over the past decade have made concerted efforts to legitimise the use of the military abroad and ensure that Japan has a stake in future operations.

At this stage, Koizumi regards Japan's interests as

bound up with maintaining close ties to the US. He supported the US invasion of Afghanistan following the September 11 terrorist attacks and dispatched Japanese naval vessels to the region to assist the US navy in providing logistical support. The Koizumi government also enlisted in Washington's "coalition of the willing" for the subjugation of Iraq, while pointing out that it was unable to commit troops because of the constitutional barrier.

An article in the British-based *Guardian* entitled "Koizumi ready to risk Japanese lives for closer ties with the US," commented: "Tokyo's place in the world is undergoing a fundamental shift. Instead of a pacifist economic superpower Japan is gradually moving to join Britain in riding side-saddle to the US. It is a riskier role, but one with potentially huge rewards in an increasingly unipolar world."

"A global order already seems to be emerging with the US on top of a pyramid just above its most committed allies in Europe and Asia: Britain and Japan. Koizumi appears ready to bet Japanese blood that the pyramid will get stronger as a result of the Iraqi invasion, but it is far from certain that the rest of the world will happily take their place in the lower ranks."

There has been at least one immediate pay-off. A recent article in the *Financial Times* noted a deal signed by Mitsubishi to purchase crude oil from Iraq, commenting that it was "a sign that Japanese companies may reap commercial rewards for their country's backing of the war". The agreement signed with Iraq's State Oil Marketing Organisation, which is effectively under Washington's control, will see the company import 40,000 barrels of Basra Light crude a day, 7 percent of its requirements.

Hajime Furuya, an analyst at UBS investment bank, told the *Financial Times*: "This transaction by itself has a small impact in business terms but it may have a greater impact politically and strategically. It may be the signal for Mitsubishi to enter into other businesses in Iraq, such as pipeline or gas plant construction. It could also open the way for other Japanese companies to go into Iraq."

Japan currently imports most of its oil from the Middle East, relying heavily on Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates. Japanese business will no doubt welcome the chance to secure access to Iraqi oil reserves. But the potential for sharp disagreement between the US and Japan is all too evident in neighbouring Iran. The Bush administration has been pressuring Japan to abandon a lucrative oil project in Iran so as to intensify pressure on

Tehran over its nuclear programs.

Over the past two years, Tokyo has been negotiating a \$2 billion agreement with the Iranian government to develop the Azadegan oil field, reportedly one of the world's largest untapped oil fields. In June, however, US national security adviser Condoleezza Rice and Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage abruptly summoned the Japanese Ambassador Ryozi Kato to tell him to advise the Japanese government to "give up" the deal.

According an article in the *Asahi Shimbun*: "Washington has objected to Tokyo's commitment to the Azadegan oil project and suggested that it may take sanctions against the Japanese companies under ILSA (the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act) in the event the government-backed consortium takes part."

As an editorial in the same newspaper made clear, the threat of economic retaliation has provoked a sharp reaction in Japanese ruling circles. After noting that Japan had deliberately cultivated close relations with Iran since the 1980s, it commented: "Because of that, it is more important for Japan to try and solve the problem of nuclear development by taking advantage of the relationship established over the years, rather than simply marching to the beat of the United States."

The editorial called for the nuclear issue to be resolved diplomatically if possible, adding: "Actions such as economic sanctions, if imposed at all, should be discussed in the United Nations, and should not be based solely upon a decision by the United States."

"Japan does need to reassess whether being involved in developing the Azadegan oil field is wise in the context of its oil and energy strategy. The overriding concern in this issue, however, is that Japan should make its own decisions about where and to what extent it should be engaged in developing an oil field."

The dispute over the Iranian oil field has indicated just how fragile the relationship between the two major powers is. While Koizumi's decision to send troops to Iraq may in the short term be aimed at securing the alliance with Washington, in the longer term it allows the Japanese ruling elite to deploy the military to defend its own interests, which may conflict sharply with those of the US.



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