

# Tokyo extends troop deployment in Iraq

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The Japanese government earlier this month approved plans to extend its deployment of troops in Iraq for a further 12 months. As a result, 550 Japan Self Defence Force soldiers will remain stationed in the southern Iraqi city of Samawah until the end of 2005.

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, an ardent supporter of the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, justified the government's decision by saying that the troops were needed to help stabilise the country and continue the fight against "terrorism". The deployment is the first time since World War II that Japanese soldiers have been sent to an active war zone.

In order to sidestep the pacifist clause in the Japanese constitution, Koizumi maintains the pretence that the troops are in Iraq solely for humanitarian purposes. While they have been assigned to non-combat duties, the soldiers are armed and authorised to use deadly force. Japanese troops are more likely to be thrown into combat situations after the Dutch forces currently protecting them leave Iraq in March 2005.

If troops are killed or injured, it will only fuel already widespread opposition in Japan to the deployment. According to a poll in the *Mainichi* newspaper taken after the government's decision to keep troops in Iraq was announced, Koizumi's approval rating had plummeted to just 37 percent, its lowest since he took office in April 2001. The poll found that 62 percent of respondents opposed the extended deployment outright, while 84 percent believed that Koizumi had not offered enough information to justify the decision.

The *Asahi Shimbun* published a warning by an Islamic cleric linked to Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr. Abd al-Razaq called on Japanese forces to leave Iraq, saying: "We will continue our peaceful resistance against the [Japan] SDF. If they do not withdraw, the peaceful resistance will change to a different kind of resistance... In the beginning, we heard it was for just a year. Since they are part of a multinational force, they

are occupying forces and should withdraw from this city."

The dispatch of Japanese troops to Iraq has nothing to do with humanitarian concerns about the plight of the Iraqi people. By actively participating in Washington's "global war on terrorism", Koizumi is seeking to strengthen his alliance with the Bush administration. At the same time, he is using the war in Iraq to press ahead with the long-held ambitions in Japanese ruling circles to remove the present restraints on the activities of the country's military.

Since the first Gulf War in 1990-91, sections of the ruling elite have been pushing to remove or render ineffective Article 9 of the Japanese constitution prohibiting the use of the military except for self-defence. As tensions between the major powers have risen through the 1990s, so has the pressure in Tokyo to be able to use the armed forces to pursue Japan's economic and strategic interests.

Under a variety of pretexts, Japan has over the last decade sent troops to take part in UN peace-keeping operations in Cambodia, Mozambique and East Timor. As far as Koizumi is concerned, the Bush administration's "war on terrorism" and the invasion of Iraq is the ideal opportunity for legitimising a more aggressive role for the Japanese military in the Asia Pacific and internationally.

For Japan, the Middle East is a vital strategic region—the source of 90 percent of its oil imports. Despite US opposition Tokyo signed a \$2 billion agreement with the Iranian government earlier this year to develop the large Azadegan oil fields. The base for the Japanese troops in Iraq is conveniently located near the substantial Al Gharaf oilfield in southern Iraq which Japanese corporations are seeking rights to develop.

The day after Koizumi announced the extended troop deployment in Iraq, Japan's defence ministry released a

policy statement which foreshadows a more belligerent military stance in North East Asia. The document, to be formally presented to the Japanese parliament in January, names China and North Korea for the first time as security threats and calls for an end to the current ban on arms exports, initially to enable Japan to collaborate with the US in developing a missile defence shield.

Japan's annual defence spending is around \$46 billion, one of the largest military budgets of any country other than the US. The new policy statement calls for the defence budget to be cut by 3.5 percent annually for five years. The Self Defence Forces, however, are to be revamped and refocused so as to play a role in global security that better matches Japan's economic strength.

US based thinktank Stratfor described Japan's new military policy as the first major departure from its pacifist stance since World War II. "Having Japan as a reinvigorated military power will significantly alter Asia's political and security environment and give other regional powers something else to consider in their own planning," it commented.

In relation to China, the Japanese defence ministry outline states: "China is pushing forward its nuclear and missile capabilities and modernisation of its navy and air force. It is also trying to expand its scope of naval activities and attention must be paid to these developments."

The statement refers to last month's incident during which a Chinese submarine strayed into Japanese waters and was chased out by the Japanese navy. The media and politicians in Tokyo seized on the episode to whip up fears over the threat posed by China and to justify a more aggressive military posture in North East Asia. The new defence policy specifically mentions a long-running dispute between the two countries over gas and oil deposits in the East China Sea.

Beijing responded angrily to the Japanese defence policy. China's foreign ministry issued a statement declaring: "It is extremely irresponsible for an official Japanese document to embellish the so-called China threat without any factual basis whatsoever. The Chinese side expresses its dissatisfaction."

There is no doubt that the reemergence of Japan as a military power will provoke concerns throughout Asia where there are still bitter memories of Japanese

colonial rule during the first half of the twentieth century. More broadly, whatever the current alliances, the resurrection of Japanese militarism only heightens the danger of a conflict between the major powers as rivalry over economic and strategic interests intensifies.



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