

Japan establishes first postwar defence ministry

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In a step towards the revival of Japanese militarism, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government on January 9 set up the country's first defence ministry since the end of World War II. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the new defence minister, Fumio Kyuma, attended the official ceremony to rename the previous defence agency headquarters as the new defence ministry.

Abe declared in his speech that he was proud to be the Japanese leader to reestablish the defence ministry. "This is a big step towards building a new nation after emerging from the postwar regime," he said. While the change of name may appear to be minor, it is part of Abe's agenda to end the restrictions placed on Japan's use of the military following the end of World War II.

Under the pacifist clause of its postwar constitution, Japan renounced war and the use of military force in settling international disputes. Successive postwar governments skirted around the clause by designating Japan's substantial military as "self-defence forces". Now, however, Abe plans to rewrite the constitution so as to make Japan a "normal nation"—that is, able to use military aggression to further national interests.

Just four months after taking over from Junichiro Koizumi as prime minister, Abe has already passed a number of bills with far-reaching implications. Legislation to establish the defence ministry was enacted late last year—with the support of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). At the same time, a bill revising Japan's postwar education law authorised Tokyo to reintroduce "patriotic education" into schools.

In November, Abe launched a study group to investigate the formation of a National Security Council, similar to that of the US administration. Japan's pacifist clause also made the justification of a national spy agency difficult. A National Security Council would give legitimacy to and allow the expansion of Japan's intelligence network, which has until now been confined to separate

departments in different ministries.

Similarly, the establishment of a defence ministry will significantly raise the political profile of the Japanese military. For half a century, the prime minister directly controlled the defence agency as a secondary affiliate of the cabinet office. One of the state ministers served as its director general.

Unlike full ministries, the defence agency had no power to call a snap cabinet meeting over major decisions or to submit bills to parliament. The defence ministry can now submit a military budget, rather than depending on the allocation of funds by the ministry of finance.

Although constitutionally barred from having offensive weapons, such as long-range bombers, aircraft carriers or nuclear arms, Japan already has a formidable military. It is armed with sophisticated weaponry, some of which is believed to be more advanced than that of the US. With 260,000 personnel, Japan's Self-Defence Force (SDF) is already similar in size to most major European powers. The SDF has 350 combat aircrafts and 160 warships as well as 1,000 tanks and 1,300 armoured vehicles.

Japan's defence budget of more than \$45 billion in 2005 is one of the largest in the world—ahead of France, Germany and Russia. As a proportion of gross domestic product, its military spending is still less than one percent, compared to 2.7 percent for Britain and 1.93 percent for France, allowing for further expansion.

Tokyo has the highest ratio of officers to soldiers of any of the industrially developed countries. Some 20 percent of SDF personnel hold the rank of lieutenant or above, while 55 percent are non-commissioned officers. With a large command structure already in place, some military analysts estimate that Japan could rapidly expand its army to one million troops.

The prospect of a revival of Japanese militarism has provoked concern in other Asian countries, which were brutally invaded by Japan in the 1930s and 1940s. China

immediately criticised the upgrading of the Japanese defence agency as a disruption of the balance of power in the North East Asia, warning that it has raised doubts about the sincerity of Tokyo's promises to reflect on its wartime record.

Abe has been trying to improve relations with China and South Korea, which were strained by Koizumi's provocative visits to the Yasukuni shrine to Japan's war dead. While Abe shook hands with Chinese and South Korean leaders at the recent East Asia Summit in the Philippines, Tokyo's steps to upgrade its military could quickly heighten diplomatic tensions again.

Responding to criticisms by China and South Korea, Abe downplayed the significance of the name change. He declared that the renaming of the defence agency did not mean the Japanese military would pose a threat to other countries. "Rather this indicates our commitment to the contribution of peace and stability of the region," he said. His comments will do little to allay fears in Asia.

A few days after becoming Japan's defence minister, Fumio Kyuma called for the building of "more powerful" Japanese armed forces. Speaking at a military exercise in Chiba, he described the build-up as a necessary response to the changing security environment surrounding the country.

What the minister meant was outlined in the 2006 Japanese defence White Paper, which named China and North Korea as the main regional threats to Japan. It also provocatively declared a number of islands currently disputed with China, South Korea and Russia to be part of Japan's territory. In other words, a more powerful military is necessary to aggressively assert Japan's economic and strategic interests against those of its regional and international rivals.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, Japanese governments have consistently pressed for an end to the constitutional restrictions on the armed forces. During the first Gulf War in 1990-91, Japan paid a heavy price for being unable to dispatch troops to participate in the US-led operations. Until Koizumi came to power in 2001, however, little progress had been made in overcoming the strong anti-militarist sentiments of broad layers of the population.

Koizumi seized on the Bush administration's bogus "war on terrorism" as a means for ending restrictions on the dispatch of the Japanese military overseas. In 2001, he sent Japanese warships to support the US-led intervention in Afghanistan. In 2004, despite widespread popular opposition, Koizumi sent "non-combat" engineering units

as part of the US-led occupation of Iraq—the first time Japanese troops have been sent to an active war zone since the end of World War II.

According to an article in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* on January 14, the Abe government is considering a reinterpretation of the constitution to allow significant changes to the current rules of engagement for Japanese troops involved in international peacekeeping operations. At present, the use of weapons is strictly limited to self-defence. The changes would allow soldiers to fire "pre-emptively" for a variety of purposes, including the protection of UN property and preventing the escape of prisoners.

The US has actively encouraged Japan to play a more assertive role in the region, particularly against China, and internationally. The Japanese navy has increasingly flexed its muscles in neighbouring waters, including near disputed islands. Koizumi and Abe have both used North Korea's nuclear programs as the pretext for strengthening Japan's military infrastructure, including the launching of reconnaissance satellites and the joint development with the US of an anti-ballistic missile system.

Abe registered another significant first on January 12 when he became the first Japanese prime minister to address assembled NATO leaders at its headquarters in Brussels. "The Japanese will no longer shy away from carrying out overseas activities involving the SDF, if it is for the sake of international peace and stability," he declared.

Abe's statement is an open declaration that the Japanese ruling class is joining the other imperialist powers in the use of military might to achieve its economic and strategic ambitions. "Peace" and "stability" have, after all, always been standard pretexts for the launching of predatory wars of aggression.



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