

# Japan's defence minister strikes an anti-US posture

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Just weeks after being installed as Japan's first post-war defence minister, Fumio Kyuma has openly criticised the US over the war in Iraq. The comments are at odds with Japan's previous wholehearted support for the Bush administration's "war on terror" and the deployment of Japanese troops to Iraq—a move that was deeply unpopular.

Kyuma made his remarks on January 24 just after US President Bush delivered his State of Union speech defending his plans to escalate the war. "President Bush's decision to enter the war against Iraq, based on the assumption that the weapons of mass destruction existed, was a mistake," the defence minister told Japan's National Press Club.

The US State Department immediately lodged a protest at the Japanese embassy in Washington declaring that the US took Kyuma's comments "very seriously". State Department official James Zumwalt warned that any further criticism from Kyuma would become an obstacle to the regular "two plus two" meetings in May between top foreign and defence officials of the two countries.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe quickly warned Kyuma to be careful about his words. Kyuma blamed the English translation for amplifying his criticism, but did not withdraw his comments. After noting that he had previously supported Japan's participation in the US occupation of Iraq, Kyuma added: "Personally, I felt at that time [of the US invasion in 2003] that something was amiss."

Kyuma's criticism is extremely limited, to say the least. It has been demonstrated that Bush lied to the world about Iraq's so-called weapons of mass destruction. Within Japan, a majority of people opposed the dispatch of troops in 2004 to bolster the US occupation of Iraq.

Although the troops were later withdrawn, the Japanese air force continues to provide support to the US military in Iraq. Abe's government was among the first to voice support for Bush's plan, announced on January 10, to bolster the number of US troops in Iraq by more than 20,000.

Kyuma's comments proved to be more than an isolated aberration. In a speech last Saturday in the prefecture of Nagasaki, he criticised Washington's "bossy" role over US military bases in Okinawa—home to two thirds of the 50,000 US troops based in Japan.

The Okinawa bases have been highly controversial among local residents. In October 2005, Tokyo and Washington agreed to relocate the Futenma air base used by US Marines to a less populated part of the island.

Kyuma, however, accused the US of failing to consult with Okinawa's governor. "The United States doesn't understand spadework. We've been telling [the US], 'Please don't say things that are too cocky. Let Japan handle matters in Japan'," he said.

Debate over the US-Japan alliance is likely to become more heated next month as the parliament discusses a bill to pay \$6 billion of the \$10 billion required for a separate relocation, involving the movement of 8,000 US marines from Okinawa to Guam. Critics are asking why Japan should pay for the removal of US troops from its soil.

Facing a potential diplomatic row with the US, Abe was compelled to make a public statement on Monday reaffirming Tokyo's "strong commitment" to the US alliance. He declared that Kyuma's comments were the minister's personal opinion. Cabinet secretary Yasuhisa Shiozaki told reporters that ministers could not say "whatever they like". Nevertheless, Kyuma has not been disciplined, at least publicly.

In fact, Kyuma's criticisms of the US reflect the sentiments of sections of the Japanese ruling elite who are seeking a more independent role for Japan on the international stage.

Abe himself has been pushing for Japan to become a "normal" nation, able to use its military to pursue its strategic interests unfettered by the country's postwar pacifist constitution. Since taking over as prime minister from Junichiro Koizumi last September, Abe has upgraded the country's defence agency to a full ministry, introduced an "education reform" to provide for nationalist indoctrination in Japanese schools and plans a bill in June for a referendum to rewrite the constitution.

"Now is the time for us to boldly revise this postwar regime and make a new start," Abe declared in a key policy speech to the Japanese parliament last week. Although he described the US-Japan alliance as the "foundation of peace in Asia", the planned constitutional reform will alter the political foundations of postwar relations between Japan and the US.

The constitution's present pacifist clause bars Tokyo from using armed force except in self-defence. As a result, while it built up large "self-defence" forces, Japan relied heavily on the US military might and largely deferred to the US in foreign policy. By reasserting its own military capacity, Tokyo will inevitably insist on a more equal partnership with Washington.

Under Koizumi, Tokyo fully supported the Bush administration's "war on terror" in order to dispatch Japanese military forces overseas. In 2001, Japan sent warships to assist the US-invasion of Afghanistan. In 2004, the dispatch of Japanese troops to Iraq was the first to a combat zone since World War II. Koizumi also inflamed tensions with China by more aggressively asserting Japan's interests in northeast Asia.

Since coming to power, Abe has sought to patch up relations with China to open the door for closer economic ties. Senior Japanese and Chinese ministers last week held three days of "strategic dialogue" in China and confirmed that Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao would visit Japan this spring—the first Chinese leader to do so since 2000.

While Abe distanced himself from Kyuma's comments, they may indicate that the government intends to steer a more independent course. The

defence minister's remarks could also be aimed at shoring up the government's support by accommodating to broad popular opposition to the Iraq war. The government is under siege over a number of corruption scandals as well as criticisms of its stacking of "town hall" meetings with government supporters.

According to a poll by the *Mainichi Daily* last weekend, public approval for Abe's cabinet fell another six points to just 40 percent compared to last month. Support for the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) dropped to just 25 percent. The opposition Democratic Party of Japan fared no better with a rating of just 13 percent. Nearly half of those polled—49 percent—declared that they supported none of the major political parties—an increase of 10 points.

Koizumi built up a personal following by posturing as an anti-establishment figure in order to push ahead with his agenda of remilitarisation and economic restructuring. Abe, an LDP blueblood, appears to be floundering as he tries to implement what are deeply unpopular policies.



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