

Anti-militarism protester sets himself alight in Tokyo

Peter Symonds
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An unidentified man set himself on fire in central Tokyo on Sunday afternoon in protest against the Japanese government's plans to reinterpret the country's constitution to allow for "collective self-defence." The government's move is part of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's remilitarisation of Japan, which includes the removal of the current constitutional constraints on its armed forces.

According to the *Japan Times*, the man dressed in a black suit, who appeared to be in his 60s, climbed onto the girders of a footbridge near the crowded Shinjuku Station. He used a loud hailer for over an hour to denounce Abe's constitutional reinterpretation to a growing crowd of onlookers. When fire fighters began to scale the bridge to remove him, the man doused himself with petrol and set himself alight. The fire was quickly put out, the man taken away and treated for serious, but not life-threatening, burns.

The protest is a measure of the depth of popular opposition to Abe's reinterpretation of the post-war constitution. Article 9 formally renounced war and declared that land, air and sea forces would never be maintained. Successive governments have already substantially "reinterpreted" the constitution to allow for the establishment of substantial, well-equipped "self-defence" forces.

However, the government's statement on "collective self-defence," due to be announced today, will allow the Japanese military to be used in concert with allies, especially the United States. This will open the door for Japan to actively participate in US-led wars of aggression, such as its invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, in which the Japanese military played a limited non-combat role.

The US has strongly pressed Japan to remilitarise and end the constitutional limitations on its military. As part

of its "pivot to Asia" directed against China, the Obama administration has actively encouraged Tokyo to expand its strategic role in Asia and take a more aggressive stance toward Beijing. The result has been sharply increased tensions between China and Japan, especially over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea—currently administered by Tokyo, but also claimed by Beijing.

Since taking office in December 2012, Abe has boosted the Japanese military budget for the first time in more than a decade, established a US-style National Security Council, and accelerated the positioning of Japanese forces in the southern island chain, adjacent to China. In preparation for war, he has also launched an ideological campaign, directed particularly at young people, aimed at whitewashing the crimes of Japanese imperialism in the 1930s and 1940s.

Abe has been forced to resort to a "reinterpretation" of the constitution, rather than amending it, precisely because of the deep-seated opposition to remilitarisation. Japanese militarism not only produced atrocities abroad, such as the 1937 Nanjing massacre in China, but relied on a police-state apparatus at home to brutally suppress any opposition, especially from the working class.

All the opinion polls have reported that a substantial majority of people oppose the government's plans. In a *Kyodo News* survey last week, 55.4 percent of respondents opposed overturning the ban on collective self-defence and 62.1 percent were concerned that the scope of collective self-defence would expand once the ban was removed. Only 34.5 percent were in favour of the change.

A majority of people also bitterly oppose the anti-democratic method being employed by the government to circumvent the constitution through a

“reinterpretation” that is so obviously contrary to Article 9. If Abe were to try to amend the constitution, he would require a two-thirds majority in both houses of parliament, as well as a majority at a referendum—a move that would fail.

In recent weeks, protests against the planned changes have been mounting. On June 18, thousands of people took part in demonstrations and rallies in Tokyo, Yokohama, Osaka and other Japanese cities. An estimated 10,000 people joined a march in Tokyo yesterday, carrying banners such as “I don’t want to see our children and soldiers die” and “Protect the constitution.”

However, the widespread opposition finds no expression in the political establishment. Over the past week, New Komeito, the parliamentary ally of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), reached a deal to approve the statement after Abe agreed to cosmetic changes to the wording. Like the constitution itself, the formal language of the statement on collective self-defence will act as no barrier to Japan prosecuting wars of aggression in tandem with the US and other allies. New Komeito, which is the political arm of the Buddhist sect Soka Gakkai, postures as pacifist.

The opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has been divided on the issue. During a parliamentary debate in June, Abe ridiculed opposition leader Banri Kaieda for being unable to reach a party consensus. In April, DPJ deputy secretary-general Akihisa Nagashima told reporters that the right to a “limited” use of collective self-defence was “acceptable to many DPJ members.” The previous DPJ government was instrumental in stoking up tensions with China by “nationalising” the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

The Stalinist Japanese Communist Party (JCP), which is completely integrated into the political establishment, formally opposes the statement on collective self-defence and is critical of the Abe government’s remilitarisation. At the same time, however, the JCP has lined up against China, insisting that the disputed islands are part of Japan.

In a statement in May on sharp tensions between China and Vietnam over placement of a Chinese oil rig near the Paracel Islands, JCP chairman Kazuo Shii branded Beijing’s actions as “in contradiction with ... international principles for addressing territorial disputes.” The JCP’s position is fully in line with that

of the Abe government, as well as the Obama administration, which is waging a campaign to brand Beijing’s claims in the South China Sea as illegal.

While Japan is currently aligned with the US, Japanese imperialism has its own independent economic and strategic interests. For the LDP government, the statement on collective self-defence is just the first step in removing the constitutional shackles on using the Japanese military to prosecute those interests in Asia and beyond.



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