

Japan: New laws to loosen restrictions on the military

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New laws to allow Japan to bypass its constitution and take part in wars of aggression are being prepared by the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to submit to the Diet when its regular session convenes in the spring. If passed, the legislation will give the government far broader scope to go to war in the name of “collective self-defense.”

The laws would allow the prime minister to directly dispatch the Self Defense Force (SDF), Japan’s military, against foreign ships entering waters or people landing on islands claimed by Japan or in the event that a Japanese ship is attacked in international waters. Currently, soldiers or the navy can only be deployed in such situations by the defense minister following a Cabinet decision.

These changes, aimed primarily at China, heighten the risk of military conflict. Tokyo and Beijing are currently locked in a territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. China has sent vessels into the region to stake its claim to the islands. On December 30, three Chinese coast guard vessels entered the waters claimed by Japan around the Senkakus—the latest in 32 similar incidents last year. From January to September last year, there were also 208 incursions by Chinese fishing vessels.

Dispatching the military rather than the coast guard would be another dangerous and provocative escalation by Tokyo. In 2012, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government heightened tensions over the Senkakus by “nationalizing” three of the five islands by buying them from their private Japanese owner.

Another law in preparation would allow the prime minister to send the SDF overseas without consulting parliament. Currently, the Diet must enact a new law each time the military is deployed. Abe’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its coalition partner

Komeito (formerly New Komeito) are to begin formal discussions on the bill in January.

The legislation follows the government’s “reinterpretation” of the constitution last year to allow for so-called “collective self-defence”—in effect, to permit Japanese military forces to take part in US-led wars of aggression. Currently, the SDF can only be deployed to regions where there is a low probability that its troops will come under attack. Tokyo backed US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, where it sent naval vessels and 600 non-combat troops.

Abe has cited the need to take part in mine-sweeping operations in the Strait of Hormuz as an example of how the SDF could be deployed. This focus on the Middle East, where the US has renewed its military intervention in Iraq and extended it to Syria, highlights the energy-rich region’s importance to Japanese imperialism. In 2013, Abe pledged \$2.2 billion to the Middle East—the source of 83 percent of Japan’s imported oil that supplies about half of its energy needs.

Washington is also demanding Japan make these new legislative changes to facilitate its part in the US “pivot to Asia” which is aimed at militarily and economically undermining China. New military guidelines between the US and Japan were drawn up in October but have been put on hold until the Japanese government passes the new laws. These guidelines set forth the joint roles of the US and Japanese militaries and were first established in 1978 then revised in 1997.

The LDP’s coalition partner New Komeito, which postures as a pacifist party, has expressed concern over these new military bills. However, the party has effectively backed Abe’s plans, stating last month that the government must “proceed carefully (with security legislation) in order to win the understanding of the

public.” New Komeito also signaled its support when it backed Abe’s constitutional “reinterpretation” last year.

Abe called an early snap election last month in order to consolidate the LDP’s grip on power and to press ahead with his agenda of economic austerity and the remilitarisation of Japan. After coming to power in December 2012, he expanded the military budget, refocused the Japanese strategic doctrine against the “threat” posed by China, and loosened the legal and constitutional restrictions on the military.

Abe’s determination to revive Japanese militarism is signalled by his appointment of Gen Nakatani as the new defence minister. Nakatani is a leading advocate of changing Japan’s military from a “self-defense force” to a full-fledged army. He served as head of the Defense Agency under Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in 2001-2002 before it gained status as the Ministry of Defense in 2007 during Abe’s first term as prime minister.

Like many other members of Abe’s cabinet, Nakatani is a member of Nippon Kaigi, or Japan Conference. Nippon Kaigi is a collection of ultra right-wing political and military officials who falsely portray World War II as a war for the liberation of Asia from Western imperialism, deny the atrocities committed by the Imperial Army, and advocate the teaching of “patriotic values” in schools.

Nakatani’s selection as defense minister is likely to inflame tensions with China and North Korea. He supports authorizing the Japanese military to carry out pre-emptive attacks. He stated earlier this year, “If you think what would happen if the United States withdrew, we must consider (acquiring) the ability to respond, because we cannot just sit idly and await death.”

More explicitly in 2009, Nakatani stated, “North Korea poses a serious and realistic threat to Japan. We must look at active missile defense such as attacking an enemy’s territory and bases.” The US has already used the doctrine of “pre-emptive war” to wage wars of aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq. Nakatani advocates the same pretext for Japanese imperialism to pursue its predatory aims.

During his first stint as head of the Japanese military, Nakatani supported the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Tetsuo Kotani of the Japan Institute of International Affairs said of Nakatani, “For America,

he is an old friend,” an indication that Washington’s and Tokyo’s militarist agendas will be more easily aligned in the future.”

In fact, the Abe government is exploiting the alliance with the US to justify remilitarisation as the means of pursuing Japan’s strategic and economic interests which could in the future clash with those of Washington.



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