

Japanese government exploits hostage crisis to push remilitarisation

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28 January 2015

The Japanese government has announced that it will use the current parliamentary session to push through a raft of legislation to codify its “re-interpretation” of the country’s constitution to allow for “collective self-defense.” Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is exploiting the current hostage crisis, in which Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has killed one Japanese citizen and continues to hold another, in a bid to overcome public opposition to remilitarisation.

The regular 150-day session of the Japanese parliament or Diet that began on Monday is the first since the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) won reelection in December. Among some 80 bills expected to be submitted are 10 to remove restrictions on the Self-Defense Forces (SDF), Japan’s military. The LDP will begin negotiations with its coalition partner Komeito in early February and plans to submit the bills for a vote following April’s local elections.

Speaking to Japan’s NHK public broadcaster on Sunday, Abe declared: “The legislation is aimed at protecting the lives and well-being of the people by structuring a seamless legal security structure. For example, if Japanese abroad come under harm’s way, as in the recent case, the Self-Defense Forces currently aren’t able to fully utilize their abilities.”

These new laws are being drawn up not to protect Japanese citizens, but to facilitate the Japanese military’s involvement in US wars of aggression, in particular its war preparations against China as part the US “pivot to Asia.” The legislation is in line with new defense guidelines that Washington and Tokyo agreed to last October.

The legislation will allow Abe to dispatch the SDF overseas without seeking the Diet’s approval. Currently, each time the military is sent abroad, a new law must be passed authorizing the mission, as was the

case in Japan’s military support for the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The proposed laws will ensure that Japan is more closely integrated into US war planning in Asia against China. The Pentagon regards its military bases in Japan as crucial components of its “AirSea Battle” strategy, which envisages a massive missile and air attack on Chinese mainland bases, missile sites, command centers and communications. Japan is also critical to another element of US military planning, for an economic blockade of China.

Other laws are specifically directed against China. These include allowing the prime minister to dispatch the SDF if foreign ships or people enter the waters around Japanese islands or land on the islands themselves. The disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea have been at the centre of sharp tensions with China since the Japanese government provocatively nationalised them in 2012 by purchasing three of the islands from their private owner.

A particularly insidious bill will allow the government to restrict the rights of Japanese citizens if Japan is attacked or threatened with an attack. The legislation will give the government broad scope to crack down on anti-war protests or opposition to remilitarization in Japan, on the pretext, for example, of a supposed threat from North Korea.

The Abe government is clearly considering measures that go beyond its proposals for “collective self-defense.” Reuters reported that at Abe’s request Japanese officials drafted a briefing paper last Friday to consider a series of questions, including whether the planned legal changes would allow Japan to launch a military attack on ISIS to secure the release of the hostages. The paper’s conclusion that there was no legal basis for such action could well be used by Abe to

press for further legislative changes.

However, the briefing paper did conclude that the new legislation would permit Japan to give military support to the US-led war in Iraq and Syria. “We are proceeding with consideration of a legal framework to implement support activities necessary to support other militaries in contributing to Japan’s peace and safety and the peace and stability of the international community,” it stated, without directly referring to ISIS.

The current hostage crisis began on January 20 when ISIS released a video featuring two Japanese men, Haruna Yukawa and Kenji Goto, and demanding \$200 million for their release. Yukawa was captured last August. Goto attempted to intercede for Yukawa in October but was also captured. In the video, ISIS gave a 72-hour deadline for Japan to pay the ransom or the two men would be killed.

The deadline expired Friday afternoon but it was not until late Saturday evening that a second video was released featuring Goto holding a picture of Yukawa, who had been beheaded. ISIS also changed its demand from a ransom to a prisoner exchange. The organization is seeking the release of Sajida al-Rishawi, a woman condemned to death in Jordan for her role in a 2005 terrorist attack at hotels in the Jordanian capital, Amman. ISIS issued a new threat saying Goto would be killed along with a Jordanian pilot on Wednesday if its demands were not met.

In 2013, Abe seized on a hostage crisis in Algeria, which resulted in the deaths of 10 Japanese citizens, to pass a new law watering down restrictions on the Japanese military. The law overturned a ban on Japan sending SDF vehicles, including armored vehicles, into a conflict zone.

The widespread public opposition to the government’s constitutional reinterpretation and the planned legislation finds no expression in the political establishment. The LDP’s coalition partner, Komeito, which is nominally pacifist, backed Abe’s constitutional reinterpretation last year and is looking for cosmetic changes to the new legislation. In relation to providing logistical support for US wars, spokesman Natsuo Yamaguchi said on Sunday: “As a basic rule, rear-line support should be to back the response of the international community based on a UN Security Council resolution.”

The opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has yet to formulate a coherent stance on the government’s planned laws. Newly-installed DPJ leader Katsuya Okada tentatively pointed out that the legislation would mean Japan would be drawn into US wars. “If the United States requests more direct involvement, can the Japanese government refuse it by saying, ‘we only conduct humanitarian aid?’” However, he did not oppose the legislation, or involvement in US-led conflicts, outright.



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