

Japanese PM pushes for new military powers

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has seized on the brutal murder of two citizens—Kenji Goto and Haruna Yukawa—by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to press for new legislation to further extend the government’s powers to dispatch military forces overseas. A video of Goto’s execution was released by ISIS last weekend, and followed the Islamist organisation’s beheading of Yukawa a week before.

Speaking to a parliamentary committee on Monday, Abe declared that he wanted to discuss ways in which Japan’s Self Defence Forces (SDF) could be deployed to conduct rescue operations in the future. “At this stage, even if Japanese nationals, including members of non-government organisations, are in danger overseas, [the SDF] can’t rescue them, even with the consent from countries involved,” he said.

Abe made clear that he was speaking about the use of military force. “We will consider the possibility of using arms to eliminate danger and to rescue [hostages],” he said. The government is already in the process of introducing a batch of laws into this session of the Japanese Diet or parliament to give effect to the constitutional “reinterpretation” announced last year to allow for “collective self-defence.”

Article 9 of Japan’s post-war constitution formally renounced war and declared that land, air and sea forces would never be maintained. Successive Japanese governments have significantly undermined the clause to allow for large, well-equipped “self-defence” forces that have already provided military support for the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Abe government is seeking to go far further. Abe himself has made clear that he backs the rewriting of the constitution to remove Article 9, but confronts widespread public opposition any attempt to push through such a revision. Any constitutional amendment not only requires a two-thirds vote of both parliamentary houses but must be approved by a

referendum.

Last year’s constitutional reinterpretation, which directly contradicts Article 9, allows for the dispatch of Japanese military forces “in response to an armed attack against a foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan.” The move, which was strongly encouraged by the Obama administration, opens the door for Japan to participate in US-led wars of aggression, on the pretext of defending an ally, and, in particular, to integrate the Japanese military more closely into Washington’s military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific against China.

The criminal actions of ISIS in killing Goto and Yukawa has played directly into the hands of the Abe government, which since its election in 2012 has dramatically accelerated Japan’s remilitarisation. Abe’s latest proposal to allow the SDF to mount rescue operations goes well beyond “collective self-defence.” In the midst of the hostage crisis, a briefing paper, drawn up by top officials at the government’s request, concluded that a military rescue mission would not be legal even under the proposed legislation.

Legislation allowing such operations would give the green light for Japanese governments to unilaterally send its armed forces anywhere in the world. The United States and other imperialist powers have repeatedly used the protection of citizens as the pretext for dispatching troops to foreign countries. Japanese imperialism would do the same.

Such is the depth of public opposition to Japanese involvement in foreign wars and military interventions that the government is proceeding cautiously. Former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi confronted widespread opposition and protests when he sent a battalion of mainly engineers to Iraq in 2004 as part of the US occupation.

While opening up a discussion on the rescue of hostages, Abe has ruled out any military involvement in

the new US-led war in Iraq and Syria. “Participation [in the coalition against ISIS] is impossible and rear-area support is not something we are thinking about,” he said.

At the same time, Abe is determined to press ahead with his militarist agenda under the banner of “proactive pacifism.” In parliament on Monday, he rejected suggestions by opposition MPs that his aggressive diplomacy, including his pledge of \$200 million in non-military aid to Middle Eastern countries fighting ISIS, was endangering Japanese lives. The opposition Democratic Party of Japan has voiced only limited tactical differences with the government’s “collective self-defence” and military build-up.

Former diplomat Kunihiro Miyake, who has advised Abe on foreign policy, made clear that the government should fully exploit the hostage crisis. “This is 9/11 for Japan,” he told the *New York Times*. “It is time for Japan to stop daydreaming that its good will and noble intentions would be enough to shield it from the dangerous world out there. Americans have faced this harsh reality, the French have faced it, and now we are, too.”

In his initial response to Goto’s execution, Abe used unusually blunt language for a Japanese politician, declaring that he would “make the terrorists pay the price.” He pledged to continue and expand non-military aid to countries in the Middle East combating ISIS.

Like the US, Japanese imperialism is intervening in the Middle East, not to combat “terrorism” but to secure its economic and strategic interests in the energy-rich region. In the 2012 fiscal year, more than 80 percent of Japan’s crude oil was imported from seven Middle Eastern countries with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates accounting for over half. Four Middle Eastern countries provided 28.6 percent of Japan’s natural gas imports.

The Middle East is just one area of the globe where the Abe government is pursuing greater political influence. After just over two years in office, Abe has visited more than 50 countries including in Asia, North and South America, Europe and Africa. His diplomacy, particularly in Asia, is in line with the US “pivot to Asia” which is aimed at undermining Chinese influence as well as encircling it militarily.

However, Abe’s foreign policy, like his efforts to remilitarise, is directed above all at promoting the

interests of Japanese imperialism even if they conflict with those of Washington.



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