

Japanese PM calls for constitutional change in keynote speech

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In a keynote policy speech on Thursday to the Japanese parliament or Diet, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe laid out his agenda of militarism, austerity and pro-market restructuring. “A rocky road lies ahead of all of these goals—the greatest reform effort since the end of the war,” he declared. “However, we must undauntedly make progress in carrying out these reforms.”

Central to Abe’s “reforms” is the revision of the country’s constitution, especially Article 9 that places constraints on the use of the military to prosecute the economic and strategic interests of Japanese imperialism overseas. Abe used his speech to launch a public campaign for constitutional change, exploiting the recent barbaric killing of two Japanese hostages by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militias.

The *New York Times* highlighted Abe’s “impassioned plea for change” explaining that at times he seemed “to shout at the chamber.” He exclaimed: “People of Japan, be confident! Isn’t it time to hold deep debate about revising the constitution? For the future of Japan, shouldn’t we accomplish in this parliament, the biggest reform since the end of the war?”

Since coming to power in December 2012, Abe’s right-wing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government has, under the fraudulent banner of “pro-active pacifism,” taken far-reaching steps to remilitarise. With the encouragement of the United States, it has expanded the military budget, adopted a more confrontational posture towards China, established a national security committee and last July “reinterpreted” the constitution to allow for so-called “collective self-defence”—that is, Japan’s participation in US-led wars and military operations. At the same time, Abe is waging an ideological campaign to whitewash the crimes of the Japanese military during

the 1930s and 1940s.

The constitutional “reinterpretation” is an outright negation of Article 9, which formally renounced war and declared that land, air and sea forces would never be maintained. Since the 1950s, successive Japanese governments have subverted the post-war constitution by establishing substantial “self-defence” forces that have been deployed to support the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Abe has long regarded Article 9 as an intolerable restriction on the ambitions of Japanese imperialism and called for an end to the “post-World War II regime” and Japan’s transformation into a “normal nation.” However, the chief political obstacle to constitutional revision is the deep-seated hostility of the working class to war and militarism, which is reflected in consistent opinion polling showing a majority of voters oppose any changes to Article 9. While the LDP won a snap election called by Abe last December to consolidate his hold on office, a Kyodo News opinion poll, taken just days later, found 55 percent of respondents did not support Abe’s military and security policies.

Under the existing constitution, any amendment requires a two-thirds majority in both houses of the Diet as well as a majority vote at a subsequent referendum. Since its adoption in 1947, no amendments have been made to the Japanese constitution. The LDP and its coalition partner New Komeito have a two-thirds majority in the lower house, but not in the upper house where the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) is likely to block changes.

Nevertheless, the Abe government is determined to press ahead. The LDP’s sweeping plans for constitutional change have already been presented in 2013 in the form of a new draft constitution that

eliminates key democratic rights, restores the emperor as head of state and drastically modifies Article 9.

Since winning last December's election, Abe has repeatedly made statements calling for changes to the constitution. Following the execution of two Japanese hostages, he told an upper house committee on February 3 that amending Article 9 was necessary "to carry out our duty of protecting the lives and assets of Japanese citizens." He has foreshadowed changes to allow the Japanese military to carry out rescue operations of hostages, including through the use of force.

A day later, Abe met with Hajime Funada, head of the LDP's Headquarters for the Promotion of Revision to the Constitution, to discuss plans for constitutional revision. Funada reportedly recommended that concrete amendments be timed to take place after upper house elections due in mid-2016. He also suggested that the LDP propose amendments on "environmental rights," "a provision to deal with emergency situations" and "a provision to maintain fiscal discipline" to garner wider support from opposition parties, before pressing ahead with deeply unpopular changes to Article 9.

While the opposition DPJ, Japanese Communist Party as well as the LDP's New Komeito ally declare themselves formally opposed to changes to Article 9, all of these parties have joined in the government's confrontational stance towards China, particularly over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. The previous DPJ government was responsible for dramatically escalating tensions with Beijing by "nationalising" the rocky outcrops in 2012.

Abe's speech to the parliament on Thursday not only threw down the challenge on constitutional revision, but foreshadowed legislation to give legal force to last year's constitutional "reinterpretation" and laid out an extensive domestic agenda aimed at carrying through pro-market restructuring. These measures included changes to labour laws that will undermine working conditions and jobs, and "all-encompassing agricultural reform" that will impact heavily on the LDP's own base of support in rural areas.

Abe's speech was covered in markedly different ways in the media. While the Japanese press paid little attention to Abe's remarks on the constitution, they were centrally featured in the report in the *New York Times*, which in recent months has been paying more

attention to the Japanese government's military policies. While not critical of Abe's militarist orientation, the articles do suggest a growing unease in American ruling circles over its implications for US interests.

As part of its "pivot to Asia," the Obama administration has been actively encouraging Japan to take a more aggressive approach to China, to expand its military capacities and to end legal and constitutional restrictions on taking part in US-led wars. In its preparations for war against China, the Pentagon envisages Japan as one of its key allies. While it is fully committed to the US alliance at present, the Abe government is pressing ahead with remilitarisation in order to prosecute the interests of Japanese imperialism, which could, in the future, come into conflict with those of the United States.



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