

Japan rewrites foreign aid rules to include military assistance

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The Japanese government announced last week that it would provide aid for the first time to foreign militaries through its Official Development Assistance (ODA) program. The move is part of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's aggressive diplomatic efforts to build Japanese influence and ties, particularly in Asia, on all levels, including military.

To implement such measures, the cabinet re-wrote Japan's foreign aid policy for the first time in more than a decade. "Based on the new framework, we will promote more strategic development assistance and further contribute to the peace, stability and prosperity of the international community," said Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida.

Far from contributing to international "peace" and "instability," the change to foreign aid policy is aimed at forging new military partnerships as part of Abe's so-called "pro-active pacifism." The previous foreign aid policy explicitly banned the use of the ODA budget to assist foreign militaries.

Japan has in the past provided aid to foreign militaries but never through its official aid program. The military assistance will be taken out of what is a shrinking foreign aid budget. The total aid budget was set as 542 billion yen (\$4.5 billion) for the upcoming fiscal year—the 16th consecutive annual cutback. The figure is less than half of the peak level of 1.2 trillion yen in 1997.

Kishida justified the cabinet's decision by saying, "Given that militaries now play an important role in non-military activities such as post-conflict rebuilding and reconstruction, as well as disaster relief, we've clarified our policy of non-military cooperation."

The government's claims that such assistance will only be used for non-military purposes are completely fraudulent. Firstly, the line between military and non-

military equipment and aid is an elastic one. Secondly, any assistance to foreign militaries will increase their overall resources.

Commentators have already questioned vague wording of the re-written ODA charter which declares, "Where military forces or personnel are involved in development assistance for civil or nonmilitary purposes such as disaster relief, each case is studied specifically with a focus on practical significance."

Eiichi Sadamatsu, the director general of Japan's Center for International Cooperation, remarked, "The sentence is quite vague. What does 'practical significance' point to? What are the criteria for studying each case?"

The Abe government is already using Japan's military, or Self-Defense Forces (SDF), as an instrument of foreign policy, including through interventions in natural disasters. In 2013, it dispatched 1,180 SDF personnel to the Philippines following the devastating typhoon Haiyan—one of the largest military deployments in a relief mission.

Its real purpose was to enhance Japanese standing in the Philippines and to undermine Chinese influence. A government source told the *Asahi Shimbun* at the time, "That response is aimed at holding China in check as well."

In announcing the new ODA charter, Abe took a thinly veiled swipe at China, declaring that this new "non-combat" aid would also assist in protecting the "rule of law." The Abe government has repeatedly accused Beijing of failing to abide by international law in its maritime disputes with Japan and other neighboring countries.

In reality, Japan, backed by the United States, has taken an aggressive stance in its dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.

Tensions with China sharply escalated in September 2012 after the Japanese government unilaterally changed the status quo by “nationalizing” the rocky outcrops.

Japan recently announced the possibility of Japanese air and naval patrols in the South China Sea where China is engaged in territorial disputes with South East Asian neighbors, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam. Last year, a standoff between China and Vietnam took place after a Chinese state-owned company placed an oilrig in waters claimed by both countries. During the tense month-long standoff, Chinese and Vietnamese vessels rammed each other threatening to trigger a wider conflict.

Japan has already agreed to provide patrol boats to the Philippines, Vietnam and Sri Lanka in a move that will only compound tensions with China. Ten vessels are to be sent to the Philippines later this year and six will be delivered to Vietnam. Tokyo has also raised the possibility of providing patrol boats to Indonesia.

Abe has made Japan’s relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) a key part of his foreign policy. Since coming to office in December 2012, he has visited all ten ASEAN countries, the first Japanese prime minister to do so.

The Japanese government is pursuing this foreign policy agenda as part of the US “pivot to Asia”—a comprehensive diplomatic offensive and military build-up by the US and its allies directed against China. Within this context, Abe is remilitarizing Japan and strengthening its influence in the region in order to further its economic and strategic interests.

Last July, Abe announced a controversial “reinterpretation” of Japan’s constitution that formally bars the country from waging war. The decision to allow so-called “collective self-defense” opens the door for Japan to take part in wars of aggression so long as it is in alliance with the US or other nations.

This month, Abe has placed the revision of the constitution as a whole on the government agenda—most likely in the aftermath of upper house elections in mid-2016. He is exploiting the recent murders of two Japanese citizens by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to try to whip up support for deeply unpopular constitutional amendments, including the lifting of all restraints on the use of the military in wars.

The recent decision to allow ODA assistance to be provided to foreign militaries is one aspect of this militarist agenda.



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