

Amid ongoing protests, Japan's upper house to discuss military bills

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Despite widespread public opposition, the upper house of the Japanese parliament, or Diet, is due to begin deliberations this week on military legislation rammed through the lower chamber on July 16 by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its junior partner Komeito. The laws will allow the Japanese military to engage in “collective self-defense,” backing the wars of aggression of its allies, primarily the United States.

The upper house, where the LDP and Komeito hold a majority, has less than 60 days to vote on the legislation. Even if the bills failed to pass, they would return to the lower house, where a two-thirds majority could pass them before the Diet session ends on September 27. The LDP and Komeito possess the necessary numbers in the lower house to override the upper house.

The legislation has two parts—one new law and revisions to 10 existing laws. The bills correspond to joint military guidelines agreed between Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and US President Obama during the former's trip to Washington in April. These measures are directed in particular against Beijing, as part of Washington's “pivot to Asia” aimed at subordinating China to US hegemony in Asia.

The legislation formalizes the Abe government's “constitutional reinterpretation” allowing “collective self-defense.” In reality, the “reinterpretation” negates Article 9 of the post-World War II constitution, which formally renounced war forever and declared that Japan would never maintain land, air and sea forces. Abe chose to “reinterpret” the constitution, because any amendment would require a referendum, and would almost certainly be defeated.

The latest opinion polls show that 80 percent of the Japanese public are critical of the government's failure

to explain the legislation and that more than 60 percent are outright opposed to the bills. Protests outside the Diet building have become weekly and at times daily occurrences, with the larger demonstrations attracting tens of thousands of people, including high school and university students, workers and retirees.

The opposition reflects widespread fears that the Abe government will drag Japan into US-led wars as well as hostility to the anti-democratic manner in which the legislation effectively overturns the constitution without a referendum vote. Many legal and constitutional experts have declared that the security legislation is unconstitutional.

Newer organizations, in which youth and students play prominent roles, have staged many of these protests. One such group, Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy (SEALDs), organized a protest at the Diet on July 15 attracting 100,000 people. SEALDs was formed in response to the passage of the state secrecy law in December 2013. Many of its signs and posters carry slogans such as “Peace Not War” and “We will really stop war.” Young people are also taking to social media to organize and disseminate information in opposition to the Abe government.

However, SEALDs and other citizen groups leading the anti-military legislation drive remain tied to elements within the political establishment that seek to exploit the mass anti-war sentiment in Japan for their own political ends. The opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) have postured as opponents of the bills. A genuine anti-war movement will find no allies in these establishment parties.

The DPJ provocatively “nationalized” the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2012, raising tensions with China, which also claims the islands. The party

nominally opposed the state secrecy law, but after its passage, simply called for more oversight of the law and not its repeal, thereby legitimizing the legislation.

The JCP backed the purchase of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands while criticizing the DPJ for not asserting the Japanese territorial claims more aggressively. The JCP has also taken a critical stance toward China, laying the blame for tensions in the region at Beijing's feet. The Stalinist organization has long ago been integrated into establishment politics and lines up with sections of the ruling class that want a more independent stance from Washington.

Concerns have been raised in the US over the new security legislation. A July 20 *New York Times* editorial supported a greater military role for Japan “especially in Asia, where China is becoming more assertive,” but criticised the way in which Abe was circumventing the Japanese constitution.

These criticisms reflect fears about that Abe is not simply establishing the basis for assisting US imperialism in its wars but wants Japan to become “a normal nation” that uses its military to prosecute its own strategic and economic interests. The *New York Times* editorial tentatively pointed to Abe's association with extreme right-wing nationalists and his downplaying of wartime atrocities in the 1930s and 1940s—a war that brought the US and Japan into direct conflict.

Article 9 of the constitution is at the centre of the debate in Japan. A recent poll conducted by the Kyodo agency found that 60 percent of respondents opposed any alteration of the constitution, which has been a longtime goal of Japanese conservatives. Among those, 88 percent stated that Article 9—the war-renouncing clause—was the most important aspect of the document.

First adopted in 1947, the constitution was imposed on Japan during the US occupation of the country following World War II. The document was written to ensure that Japanese imperialism would no longer represent a challenge to the US imperialist interests in Asia.

At the same time, the US military occupation led by General Douglas MacArthur protected the Japanese political establishment and Emperor Hirohito, in order to create a junior partner in Asia to assist the US in its goal of dominating the region. Japan would serve as an important base of operations for US wars of aggression

in Korea and Indochina.

With the eruption of the Cold War, the United States encouraged Japan to remilitarize. In 1954, the Self-Defense Forces—the official name of the Japanese military—was established as part of the US/Japan Security Treaty. This treaty was revised in 1960 under the government of Nobusuke Kishi, Abe's maternal grandfather, triggering mass protests.

Today's large protests reflect continuing deep opposition to the revival of Japanese militarism, which was not only responsible for atrocities in Asian countries under its wartime occupation, but police-state measure in Japan to suppress opposition to the militarist regime.



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