

Japan prepares to expand military role abroad

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Japan is set to announce that it will begin training its Self-Defense Forces (SDF) under new legislation passed last September enabling the military to take part in wars overseas. The first troops to undergo this program are to be sent to South Sudan in November, officially as part of the UN Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS).

By this step, Japan also aims to further stake its claim in the new imperialist scramble for Africa. While conducted under the banner of the UN, nominally as a “peacekeeping” operation, the stepped-up multinational force in South Sudan marks another stage in a protracted US-led political and military intervention in Sudan. This has particularly focused on the country’s south, now a separate state, the location of most of the country’s oil wealth, previously controlled largely by Chinese firms.

Under Japan’s new military laws, which went into effect in March, the SDF is able to join combat operations alongside troops from other nations, so long as it supposedly involves “protecting” allies or civilians. This followed the reinterpretation of the constitution by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s cabinet in July 2014 to allow such “collective self-defense.”

The SDF operations in South Sudan represent a test case for how the legislation will be implemented. The troops to be trained will replace the contingent of 350 who are already stationed in the African country, ostensibly to aid in construction projects as part of UNMISS.

The pretext for doing so is the escalation of violence that has erupted in South Sudan in recent weeks. In July, Tokyo dispatched three military C-130 transport planes to evacuate Japanese citizens, mostly Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) personnel, from the country. While many left on a chartered

aircraft, four embassy officials were taken out of the country on one of the planes, which had initially stopped at Japan’s military base in Djibouti.

Tokyo regularly exploits rescue missions to expand and justify the use of its military. Last September’s legislation was first introduced following the hostage crisis involving two Japanese men kidnapped and murdered by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). With July’s Upper House election concluded, the Abe government and ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) are pushing ahead with the remilitarization agenda more forcefully.

Japan’s interests in Africa and the region are related to energy needs. Last year, approximately 82 percent of Japanese oil imports came from the Middle East. As a result, Tokyo is seeking to expand its energy sources into countries like South Sudan, where China still has a substantial foothold. China’s National Petroleum Corporation owns a 40 percent stake in a joint venture to operate South Sudan’s oil fields.

Japan’s presence in Africa has been steadily growing in recent years. Having first sent troops to Djibouti in 2009 under the guise of combatting piracy, Tokyo established its first military base abroad since World War II in the tiny nation on the Horn of Africa in July 2011. The base is currently home to 600 Maritime SDF troops. From there, Japan has extended its influence to other parts of the continent, including Ghana during the Ebola outbreak.

In November 2011, the Democratic Party of Japan government of Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda first approved dispatching the SDF to South Sudan. It followed Sudan’s carve-up by the US and European powers earlier that year as part of a drive to undercut Beijing’s activities in the region.

Stratfor, the private intelligence firm, wrote at the

time: “The move into South Sudan may also signal a renewed effort to gradually reintroduce JSDF operations into strategic foreign policy initiatives—in this case, energy security. If it manages to secure a stronger foothold in South Sudan, Japan will be better positioned to deal with Chinese influence in the tumultuous Sudanese-South Sudanese oil industry framework.”

In February 2015, Abe’s cabinet revised Japan’s Official Development Assistance charter while establishing a Development Cooperation Charter to integrate its “aid and development” organizations, such as JICA, with the SDF. This was in conjunction with the National Security Strategy issued in December 2013 and overseen by the new National Security Council (NSC) established the same month. The NSC centralizes foreign and defense policy under the prime minister, while its work is kept hidden from the public by anti-democratic state secrecy laws.

The cabinet decision on the development charters stated: “In this new era, Japan must strongly lead the international community, as a nation that contributes even more proactively to securing peace, stability and prosperity of the international community from the perspective of ‘Proactive Contribution to Peace’.”

References to “proactive contribution to peace”—a phrase Abe has regularly used to justify unconstitutional legal changes—are in fact justifications for increased military operations internationally.

Last year, the Tokyo Foundation, a think-tank with connections to the Japanese government, released a report calling for enhanced cooperation between JICA and the SDF. One of the authors, Ippeita Nishida, responded to a question about the use of the SDF in an interview, titled “Tapping the Potential of Japan’s Self-Defense Forces,” with *Nikkei Business Online* in May 2015.

While making perfunctory statements about adhering to Japan’s so-called pacifist constitution, Nishida stated: “The general perception of Japan’s stature and influence in the international community is slipping in relative terms. Under the circumstances, we need to give serious thought to crafting a strategy that makes optimum use of the instruments we have at our disposal. One of those instruments is foreign aid, which Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida has called ‘our most important foreign policy tool.’ Another is the Self-

Defense Forces, which can help enhance our influence and stature in the international community by contributing to international security.”

“Humanitarian” missions are simply the excuse the Abe government and LDP are using to further remilitarize Japan. This policy has met with widespread hostility among Japanese workers and youth. The Democratic Party has posed as an opponent of Abe, but it proposed legislation in February to also allow the SDF to be deployed abroad, so long as the operation had the fig leaf of UN approval, which is not required by Abe’s laws.



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