

Japan's ruling party calls for military to have offensive weapons

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Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has called on the government to boost the country's anti-ballistic missile systems and to consider acquiring, for the first time, weapons capable of carrying out attacks on enemy bases. The recommendations are another step towards the remilitarisation of Japan pressed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe that is adding to sharp regional tensions.

The LDP's defence policy council handed a report to Abe on Thursday which claimed that North Korea represented a "new level of threat" after it test fired four ballistic missiles last month towards Japan. The launches took place as the US and South Korea engaged in massive annual military drills involving more than 320,000 troops, stealth warplanes and an entire aircraft carrier battle group.

"North Korea's provocative acts have reached a level that Japan absolutely cannot overlook," the council stated. "We should not waste any time to strengthen our ballistic missile defense."

The body, which is headed by former Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera, suggested that Japan acquire weapons such as the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system that the US is currently installing in South Korea as well as a shore-based Aegis anti-ballistic missile system.

The LDP defence policy council also proposed that Japan consider possessing "our own capability of striking back at an enemy base, with cruise missiles for instance, to further improve deterrence and response as part of the Japan-U.S. alliance."

Successive Japanese governments have balked at possessing offensive weapons such as cruise missiles, long-range bombers and aircraft carriers. Not only would such weapons openly flout the country's constitution but would also provoke widespread

opposition from workers and young people.

In a bid to head off opposition, Onodera couched the proposal as acquiring a "counter-attack" capability. "Our proposal," he said, "is about how we can fight back and stop the other party from firing a second missile, instead of making a pre-emptive strike." Having such weaponry, however, means that the Japanese armed forces would be able to carry out "pre-emptive" acts of aggression.

Abe's remilitarisation of Japan is primarily aimed against China, not North Korea. China defense ministry spokesman Wu Qian on Thursday criticised the LDP panel's recommendations, saying: "China is opposed to any actions by other countries to take the [North Korean] nuclear issue as an excuse to compromise the security of other countries."

Beijing has repeatedly opposed the US installation of a THAAD anti-missile battery in South Korea saying that its powerful associated radar would be able to spy on the Chinese military and give advanced warning of any Chinese missile launches. The THAAD system is not "defensive" but is part of the Pentagon's planning for war with China.

Abe fully supported the LDP panel's report, declaring, at a ceremony to hand it over, that "we intend to grasp today's proposal firmly." Since coming to office in 2012, he has taken major steps towards rearming Japan and freeing its military apparatus from legal and constitutional restrictions. His program of making Japan "a normal nation" with "a strong military" is nothing less than ensuring that it can assert its imperialist interests through military means.

The Abe government has boosted the military budget, established a US-style National Security Council and passed legislation allowing for so-called "collective self defence"—that is, participation US-led wars—in clear

breach of the constitution.

In a highly significant, but little publicised, move on March 3, Abe announced in the Diet or parliament that his government would no longer abide by the restriction on military spending to less than one percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). While not enshrined in legislation, the limit has been in place since 1976 and has always been touted as evidence that Japan is not remilitarising.

Under Abe, the Japanese military, termed Self Defence Forces, has pressed ahead with building up its weaponry. These include F35A advanced fighter aircraft, V-22 Osprey vertical take-off and landing aircraft, amphibious assault vehicles, and Global Hawk long-range drones.

Last week, the huge helicopter carrier, the JS Kaga was officially commissioned by the Japanese navy, joining the JS Izumo, which is a similar vessel. The military deliberately did not build aircraft carriers so as to avoid opposition to the acquiring of weapons that are offensive in character. The two warships, however, are larger than the aircraft carriers of many countries, capable of carrying V-22 Osprey aircraft and could be modified to accommodate fighter aircraft.

The helicopter carriers could also potentially carry Marine-type ground forces that Japan is in the process of training, with US assistance. US Marines practiced landing Ospreys on the helicopter destroyer JS Izumo during an exercise last July. The Japanese navy is provocatively sending the Izumo on three-months of operations, including in the South China Sea which has become a dangerous flash point between the US and China.

In the wake of “collective self-defence” legislation, the US and Japan have deepened their military collaboration and integration. In the first instance, the change will allow Japanese warships to act together with their US counterparts in combat situations. As of last December, the Japanese defence minister can respond to a US military request and authorise the Japanese navy to provide protection for a US destroyer equipped with the Aegis anti-ballistic missile system.

The US and Japan also signed a new acquisition and cross-servicing agreement in September 2016 that will enable Japan to provide logistical support, including ammunition and fuel, to the US military. The government is now pressing for its ratification in the

current parliamentary session.

The rapid build-up of the Japanese military over the past four years has nominally taken place under the umbrella of the US-Japan Security Treaty. However, amid sharpening geo-political tensions globally, the Abe government is determined to be able to prosecute Japanese economic and strategic interests by all means, including military.



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