

Japanese PM plans to remove constitutional shackles on the military by 2020

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced a timetable last week for the revision of the country's post-war constitution by 2020—a long-held ambition of the ruling right-wing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

The Abe government is seeking above all to significantly modify Article 9 of the constitution that nominally renounces war as a means of settling international disputes and vows never to maintain military forces. By removing the legal shackles on Japan's already substantial armed forces, the constitutional revision would be another major step toward Japanese remilitarisation.

Speaking last Wednesday on the 70th anniversary of Japan's constitution, Abe declared: "2020 is the year when a new Japan will kick off, and I strongly hope the year will see the constitution come into force." Well aware of widespread public opposition to militarism, Abe said the country "must hold fast to the idea of pacifism."

In reality, under the smokescreen of "pro-active pacifism," the Abe government has already boosted military expenditure, including lifting the ceiling of 1 percent of gross domestic product, established a US-style National Security Council to concentrate power in the hands of the prime minister and enacted unconstitutional legislation in 2015 allowing for "collective self-defence"—that is, to go to war with its ally, the United States.

Abe wants to remove any doubt about the legitimacy of the Japanese military—the Self Defence Force (SDF), so named in order to manoeuvre around Article 9. "We need to make sure, at least within our generation, that the argument that 'the SDF may be unconstitutional' will no longer be made," he said.

Any constitutional amendment requires a two-thirds vote in the Japanese Diet, or parliament, followed by its

support in a subsequent referendum. Abe's concerted push for constitutional change is the first in 70 years. Having acquired a two-thirds majority in the Diet as a result of last July's upper house election, he is exploiting the danger of war with North Korea, and rising tensions with China, to try to overcome long-standing opposition.

In his comments, Abe warned that Japan faces a "deteriorating security situation." Authorities have heightened a sense of alarm over North Korean missile tests by warning there will be just 10 minutes to respond to any attack. Late last month, the entire Tokyo subway system was shut down briefly following a failed North Korean test.

The LDP is using the North Korean threat to push for what would be another breach of the constitution—the ability of the Japanese military to acquire offensive weapons and to carry out "pre-emptive" strikes against an enemy, such as North Korea. The party's policy council announced in March it would present a proposal during the current parliamentary sitting, to be included in the next five-year defence plan (see: "Japanese imperialism rearms").

The government's underlying militarist agenda was underscored by the fact that Abe's remarks last week were released in a pre-recorded video at a gathering of parliamentarians affiliated to the ultra-nationalist Nippon Kaigi organisation.

Nippon Kaigi represents significant layers of the Japanese ruling elite who have never accepted what they term the "occupiers' constitution"—that is drafted under the post-war US occupation of Japan—and regard it as an intolerable impediment to Japanese imperialism's ability to pursue its interests by military means if necessary.

Nippon Kaigi also calls for the promotion of

patriotism among young people, the boosting of military forces and the defence of national interests, reputation and sovereignty. By defending “national reputation,” the organisation seeks to whitewash the war crimes of Japanese militarism throughout Asia in the 1930s and 1940s and to legitimise paying homage at the notorious Yasukuni Shrine to Japan’s war dead, including class A war criminals.

While not widely publicised, Nippon Kaigi has some 38,000 members and its associated parliamentary grouping has 280 members out of the 717 parliamentarians in both houses. Abe is a special adviser to the extreme right-wing organisation and, as of last year, 16 of his 20-member cabinet belonged to it.

The LDP has already signalled sweeping constitutional changes in a draft released in 2013 that substantially modifies Article 9 and makes deep inroads into basic democratic rights. These include moves to restore the emperor as head of state, granting the power to the prime minister to declare an emergency and assume “emergency powers,” curtailing freedom of speech and assembly and imposing duties on citizens, such as to respect the national flag and national anthem. While the LDP has shelved its highly controversial draft, the document still animates its aims (see: “Constitutional amendments prepare authoritarian rule in Japan”).

Japan’s wartime military regime in the 1930s and 1940s, headed by the emperor, not only ruthlessly prosecuted the invasion of China and war with the US and its allies. It imposed extensive police-state measures at home. Abe’s call for a “new Japan” is in reality the revival of militarism to pursue the economic and strategic interests of Japanese imperialism. He said last month: “Now is precisely the time to unchain ourselves from the post-World War II regime, and that includes rewriting the constitution.”

The opposition to this reactionary agenda was highlighted by a rally in Tokyo last Wednesday, estimated at 55,000 people, to protest against the government’s plans to revise the constitution. The organisers, however, invited leaders of the main opposition parties—the Democratic Party, the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and the Social Democratic Party—all of which are part of the political establishment.

The opposition parties promote the myth that pacifist phrase-mongering, along with the current constitution, will halt the growing danger of war. While critical of the Abe government, they all join in the demonising of North Korea as the US and its allies, including Japan, step up war preparations against Pyongyang.

Speaking at the rally, Kazuo Shii, leader of the Stalinist JCP, attacked North Korea’s development of nuclear missiles as “absolutely unacceptable” and appealed for a diplomatic solution to the present tense stand-off. He berated the government for dispatching navy vessels for joint exercises with US warships off the Korean Peninsula, saying it showed Japan’s military was “subordinate” to the US.

The JCP’s promotion of Japanese “independence” from the US, far from being at odds with the government’s agenda, meets up with Abe’s push for Tokyo to press for its own interests, even if they come into conflict with Washington. While adhering to the US alliance, Abe has carried out extensive diplomatic efforts since coming to office in 2012 to extend Japanese influence throughout Asia and the world.



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