

Japanese government exploits Korean crisis to whip up war scares

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The intensifying tensions over the Korean Peninsula are being utilised by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Japanese government to accelerate the overturn of key restraints on militarism embodied in the country's post-World War II constitution. It is also whipping up war scares in the population to justify the acquisition of military hardware designed for offensive warfare.

With the US applying intense pressure on the North Korean government to abandon its primitive nuclear weapons program, under threat of a possible pre-emptive strike, the political situation in North-East Asia has become increasingly chaotic and volatile.

Key sections of the Japanese bourgeoisie, represented by Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), who have long sought to acquire the military means to secure their imperialist interests, see an opportunity to re-arm.

Already, the government has attempted to acquire cruise missiles and advanced F-35 fighters for pre-emptive strikes. Recently, it declared its intention to revise—by 2020—Article 9, a pillar of the “pacifist constitution” ratified by Japan under US dictates following World War II. While re-badging Japan's military as the Self-Defence Forces (SDF), Article 9 renounces war and threats or use of force, and declares that “land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained.”

Proposed revisions are being justified with the claim that an effective “deterrent” to supposed North Korean aggression is needed. LDP chairman of security policy, Hiroshi Imazu, told the *Washington Post*: “Japan can't just wait until it's destroyed.”

The Japanese public has been bombarded with official and media propaganda regarding the threat that North Korea, an impoverished isolated nation with a limited and largely backward military, poses to the country.

Ignoring the reckless provocations from the United States, which include sending a nuclear-powered naval battle group to the Korean Peninsula, and flying B-1B

bombers near the Korean De-Militarized Zone (DMZ), North Korea is being portrayed as the unilateral aggressor. The media has repeated the government line that North Korean missiles could hit Tokyo in less than 10 minutes, accompanied by unsubstantiated claims about possible sarin nerve gas attacks.

Japanese authorities have been conducting evacuation drills involving entire towns and regions, ostensibly in response to North Korean missile tests, which have been largely ignored in the past. The first drill occurred in late March in the coastal town of Oga, roughly 500 kilometres north of Tokyo. Such drills, which have been in planning for months, will apparently be repeated in a number of selected municipalities, as noted by a brief article in the *Nikkei Asian Review*.

Additional measures have seen the unannounced temporary shutdown of the Tokyo Metro on April 29, as a “safety precaution” following a North Korean missile test. This drew widespread criticism as 130,000 passengers were affected.

One effect of the drills and war scares can be seen in the increased visits to the Japanese civil defence website. One of its documents, *Protecting Ourselves against Armed Attacks and Terrorism*, was viewed by over 5.7 million people in the first 23 days of April, a roughly 14-fold increase in comparison to previous months.

Following the most recent ballistic missile test on May 14, this war-scare campaign is being intensified. Abe released a statement within hours of the test, claiming that “North Korea's missile launch is a serious threat to Japan and clearly violates the UN resolution.”

The reality is that the Japanese ruling class's drive to re-militarise predates the current situation with North Korea. Post-war governments have attempted for decades to find ways around the limitations on military force set in place by the constitution. This included labelling deployments overseas in participation with the illegal US-led invasions

of Afghanistan and Iraq as “humanitarian missions.”

Abe, a member of the ultra-right nationalist group Nippon Kaigi, has accelerated this process of militarisation. Since returning to office in 2012, he has increased the military budget, which reached about 5 trillion yen (\$US44 billion) this year. He has centralised military-intelligence power via a National Security Council and introduced legislation allowing for Japanese participation in wars under the guise of aiding allies, such as the US, in “collective self-defence.”

This legislation, a flagrant violation of the constitution’s prohibition on the use of military force, encountered widespread opposition from the population when it was rammed through the Japanese Diet (parliament) in 2015.

The legislation was not limited to conducting foreign wars against the will of the Japanese people. It included measures that increase the authority and power of the Emperor, and severely curtail the ability for people to protest against the government. These measures have nothing to do with protecting the populace from foreign aggression, and everything to do with suppressing dissent to the austerity policies and pursuit of war championed by the ruling elite.

Now, as then, the government faces widespread opposition to its aims, with a protest called on May 4—the day of Abe’s announcement—opposing revisions to Article 9 drawing roughly 55,000 people, a substantial number for an initial protest.

Despite the government-media barrage, polls conducted by national broadcaster NHK, along with major newspapers *Kyodo News* and *Asahi Shimbun*, indicate the majority of people are opposed to any changes to Article 9.

In an *Asahi Shimbun* poll, 47 percent said they did not support Abe’s latest initiative to change the constitution, compared with the 35 percent who welcomed the move. When asked what policy areas they wanted the prime minister to focus on, 29 percent of those polled cited social security, while 22 percent chose “economy and employment.” Only 5 percent picked amendments to the constitution.

The majority of those polled rejected one of the government’s latest pretexts for making amendments to Article 9, namely that the revisions would be tied to a proposed “basic law” in the constitution ending tuition fees for colleges and universities.

Abe has also sought to blunt the opposition to his proposals. He told the daily *Yomiuri Shimbun* on May 3

that he wanted to add a paragraph to Article 9 to legitimise the SDF but keep the remaining paragraphs unchanged, which ostensibly retains the ban on going to war or resorting to military force. This ambiguity and duplicity has only fuelled popular concern.

Contributing to the anti-war sentiment is the Abe government’s increasing unpopularity. The alienation has been deepened by recent financial scandals linked to the prime minister and his wife over a cash donation to an ultra-nationalist private kindergarten that indoctrinates children in Japanese patriotism. It is precisely this disaffection that the Japanese ruling class aims to overcome through its fear-mongering tactics regarding North Korea.

The main official opposition parties, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and Japanese Communist Party (JCP), have postured as opponents of Abe’s militarism, and some of their representatives were invited to address the May 4 protest. However, the record of both parties exposes them as willing servants of the corporate elite, providing both tacit and open support of Japanese militarism.

When in office between 2009 and 2012, the DPJ supported constitutional reforms allowing for an increased role of the military in foreign conflicts, only with the thin veneer of requiring a UN resolution. In so far as the DPJ and JCP differentiate themselves from Abe’s LDP on military policy, it is on the basis of legitimising any foreign interventions abroad with UN declarations.

The JCP also promotes Japanese “independence” from the US, which dovetails with Abe’s push for Tokyo to press for its own military, strategic and geo-political interests, even if they come into conflict with Washington.



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