

Japan's ruling party calls for a doubling of military expenditure

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Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) last month called for a doubling of the nation's military spending from its traditional post-World War II cap of 1 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). If achieved, this would sharply accelerate the acquisition of offensive hardware and the overall drive toward remilitarization, risking the danger of war abroad and the suppression of democratic rights at home.

Japan already ranks eighth in global military spending, with its budget reaching record-highs for six straight years heading into 2018. The latest budget of 5.2 trillion yen (\$45.9 billion) is currently 0.9 percent of GDP. Doubling this would make Japan the third largest military spender in the world, behind only the United States and China.

While presenting this spending as defensive, in order to comply with Japan's post-war constitution, the LDP and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government are finalizing plans to give Tokyo the ability to launch attacks on targets in foreign countries. On May 25, an LDP panel submitted a proposal to Abe that includes acquiring F-35B stealth fighter jets and other means of projecting its military power abroad.

Last December, Tokyo already said it planned to purchase cruise missiles, from both the US and Norway, with ranges between 500 and 1,000 kilometres. Japan is examining purchasing Joint Air to Surface Standoff Missiles (JASSMs) from Lockheed Martin, the same used by the United States in its attack on Syria in April. These would be fitted on Japan's military aircraft.

To deploy the F-35Bs, the panel also proposed refitting Japan's Izumo helicopter carrier into a full-fledged aircraft carrier, the country's first since World War II. The LDP suggested calling it a "mother ship" to provide a thin veil over the true nature of such a vessel. The government will review these proposals as part of its National Defense Program Guidelines and the Midterm Defense Program at the end of this year.

In addition, the proposal calls for the country's military to target cruise missile bases, a clear reference to China and potentially Russia and their armaments of long-range missiles. This reflects the integration of Japan's military into US war plans in the Asia-Pacific, directed chiefly against Beijing, in line with the recent US National Defense Strategy, which accused China of seeking to displace the US as the hegemonic power in the Indo-Pacific region.

The panel called the current situation in Asia "the most critical" since World War II. In that war, the imperialist ambitions of Japan, the United States, and Europe clashed to determine which would control the region. Once again, these conflicts have re-emerged.

In the current defense budget beginning April 1, ballistic missile systems comprise the single largest category of spending, at 136.5 billion yen (\$1.25 billion). Last December, Japan announced it would purchase two Aegis Ashore ballistic missile systems (at \$1 billion each) from the United States.

Coupled with the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery in South Korea, these armaments have drastically raised tensions in the region with China and Russia, which fear the accompanying X-band radar systems will be used to spy on their territory or be converted into offensive weaponry.

The scale of Japan's military expansion belies the government's claim to be simply responding to the supposed North Korean ballistic missile threat. Japan's military budget is clearly disproportionate to the size of the impoverished North Korean economy, with an approximate GDP of \$20 billion.

Japanese imperialism has used North Korea as the rationale for remilitarization and its war drive against China. For this reason, it has concerns about any rapprochement between Washington and Pyongyang, which would cut across this campaign in the eyes of the

Japanese public.

Seeking to placate concerns over the obvious offensive nature of these proposals, the LDP said the capability to strike foreign missile bases was “based on the concept that clearly separates action from a pre-emptive attack that is not allowed under the constitution and international law.”

Not a word of this should be taken at face value. High-ranking LDP officials, including Prime Minister Abe, have previously insisted Japan has the legal ability to launch pre-emptive attacks in “self-defense.” Lawmaker Hiroshi Imazu said last year during discussion over acquiring cruise missiles: “It’s legally possible for Japan to strike an enemy base that’s launching a missile at us, but we don’t have the equipment or the capability.”

The Abe cabinet’s third “Basic Plan on Ocean Policy,” approved in May, called for stepped-up radar coverage, surveillance, and military operations around the uninhabited Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, which are disputed with China, and other islands claimed by Tokyo, including the Northern Territories/Kuril Islands currently in Russia’s possession.

Despite strong popular anti-war sentiment, Abe and the far-right nationalists in Japan are attempting to rewrite Japan’s constitution, in particular the so-called pacifist clause Article 9 which states “land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained” and “[t]he right of belligerency of the state will not be recognised.”

The proposed revisions are not limited to Article 9. In the LDP’s 2012 draft constitution, the party called for the government to be permitted to mobilise the military to put down domestic protests or unrest. Any military buildup will contribute to this end.

The placement of Japan’s military on an increasingly offensive footing can only further inflame tensions with China and Russia, further heightening the danger of a major arms race and war in the region.



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