

Japan exploits Chinese balloon incident to justify war plans

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The Japanese government of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has seized on the so-called Chinese spy balloon incident in the United States to step up its own plans for war and remilitarization. In doing so, Tokyo is marching in lockstep with Washington, which is demonizing Beijing in order to carry out its imperialist agenda in East Asia.

On February 16, Japan's Defense Ministry announced it had altered a law to allow the Self-Defense Forces (SDF)—the formal name of Japan's military—to shoot down unmanned aerial vehicles, such as balloons. The Defense Ministry briefed lawmakers on the changes. Minoru Kihara of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) stated afterwards, “The rules currently cover manned aircraft or military aircraft. The change will add unmanned aircraft to those.”

The Self-Defense Forces law, specifically Article 84, states that the military can take “necessary measures” only in the event of “legitimate self-defense” or in emergency evacuations. A balloon, especially one of unknown origin not representing a public danger, does not fall within these parameters, despite claims from the ministry that militarily engaging such an object in the sky would be necessary to protect flight paths or people on the ground.

To justify these changes, the government and media are not only also backing Washington's claims that the balloon that drifted over the United States mainland was for espionage, but also alleging that balloons spotted over Japan in recent years were also Chinese “spy balloons.” Without any evidence, the Defense Ministry stated, “We will put more effort than ever into information gathering and surveillance activities against balloons, including unmanned ones for foreign espionage.”

The Japanese media began ramping up this

manufactured hysteria shortly after the US military shot down the balloon on February 4, claiming that Japan was similarly “at risk.” The media pointed to balloons seen in November 2019 over Kagoshima Prefecture, in June 2020 over Miyagi Prefecture, and in September 2021 over Aomori Prefecture. However, the government only announced that it “strongly suspected” the objects to be Chinese spy balloons on February 14, 2023. That the objects could simply be weather balloons or for some other civilian purpose is now being rejected out of hand.

In response to the US and Japanese accusations, China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin stated on February 15, “China has repeatedly shared information on the unintended entry of a Chinese civilian unmanned airship into US airspace. Japan should adopt an objective and just position, view this unexpected incident caused by *force majeure* in the right way, and stop following the US's suit in dramatizing it.”

The change in the law has broader significance. By removing the legal barriers to military action through government decree rather than by legislative change in the National Diet, Japan's parliament, the government is claiming the right to change or “reinterpret” other laws. As recently as 2014, this same tactic was used in regards to Article 9 of the constitution, known as the pacifist clause, which bans Japan from fielding a military or waging war overseas.

In a constitutional “reinterpretation,” Tokyo claimed it had the legal right to engage in “collective self-defense” alongside an ally, in the first instance the US, in conflicts abroad.

Fully conscience of the broad anti-war sentiment that exists in the working class and among youth, the Kishida administration and the LDP do not want to risk

putting military legislation to a vote. They are not concerned about the phony opposition of the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) or its allies in parliament, but fear the possibility that discussion in the Diet will spark an anti-war movement that spirals out of the control of the CDP.

The government is setting a precedent for future “reinterpretations” to laws, making it easier to circumvent not simply the National Diet, but the scrutiny and opposition of the population, and preparing for war behind the backs of the working class.

Tokyo will use the incident as a pretext to ramp up its war preparations against China. Tokyo has stated it is coordinating with Washington over the objects spotted over Japan in recent years, indicating greater collaboration with the US-led war drive against Beijing.

On February 13, officials from both Japan and South Korea backed the US response to the Chinese balloon issue as Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Takeo Mori and South Korea’s First Vice Foreign Minister Jo Hyeon-dong met with US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman in Washington. In Jo’s words, they were left to “trust what the United States officially stated” on the issue, meaning that Washington had not shared any actual information with its two allies demonstrating the balloon had been spying.

The LDP has also used the incident to call for intelligence sharing between Japan and Taiwan—a move that further undermines the “One China” policy and will increase tensions with Beijing. “We don’t have those bilateral relations with Taiwan, so we don’t cooperate on that, but Japan’s government will have to consider what it does next,” said Itsunori Onodera, a leading LDP Diet member and former defense minister. He has proposed sharing intelligence with Taipei through the US.

To date, Washington has still not made public any evidence to prove the Chinese balloon was engaged in espionage. In fact, a *Washington Post* report published on February 15 citing anonymous US officials, stated that in all likelihood the balloon had been blown off course, as Beijing has insisted, and was never intended to drift over the US mainland.

Tokyo is drastically increasing its military spending to 43 trillion yen (\$US320 billion) over the next five

years, more than doubling its previous military budget. Tokyo recently announced plans to purchase some 500 Tomahawk cruise missiles from the US, offensive weaponry allowing the SDF to strike a targeted country’s bases. Sections of the political establishment have also called for even greater military spending as a means for boosting the economy.

The ruling class is seeking to create a wartime atmosphere using concocted scares such as the “spy balloon” to suppress anti-war sentiment and justify its huge military expansion to prosecute Japanese imperialist interests.



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