

Japan's ruling party pushing to end constraints on military

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Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is preparing a draft revision of Article 9 of the constitution, which currently binds Japan to renouncing war, by the end of the month so as to have a finalized proposal for its convention on March 25.

While Article 9 has not prevented Japan from building a military, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is working to remove all legal and constitutional barriers to using the so-called Self Defense Forces to pursue the strategic and economic interests of Japanese imperialism. Abe's push takes place amid heightened tensions in Asia, generated above all by the US-led confrontation with North Korea and more broadly China and Russia.

On February 7, Hiroyuki Hosoda, chairman of the LDP's Constitutional Reform Promotion Headquarters, issued a directive to party lawmakers to submit within 10 days their own proposals for revising Article 9. "The most important aspect will be to gain public understanding and receive approval from a wide segment of the population," he stated.

Article 9, adopted after World War II, contains two paragraphs. The first says "the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation." The second declares that "war potential will never be maintained" and the "right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized."

While there is consensus within the LDP for changes, disputes remain over the extent of the revisions. Abe has stated he intends to leave the existing two paragraphs intact while adding a third paragraph that explicitly legalizes the SDF, the formal name of Japan's military.

Shigeru Ishiba, a former LDP secretary general and defense minister, has called for the party to stick to the LDP's 2012 draft constitution, which deleted the

second paragraph. It also added two new paragraphs that would establish a National Defense Force, with the prime minister as commander-in-chief, legalize its involvement in "peacekeeping" operations abroad, and allow the military to be deployed domestically to put down public unrest.

Ishiba has called for Japan to have the "right to belligerence," on the pretext that military aggression would be used defensively. This is essentially the same argument Japanese imperialism used to invade and colonize its neighbors in the past and mirrors the rationale Washington used to justify illegal wars in the Middle East in the name of combatting "terrorism."

A third proposal calls for keeping the current two paragraphs while adding a third that formally recognizes "collective self-defense," a euphemism for allowing the SDF to go to war, so long as it is done alongside an ally, namely the United States. This would legitimize legislation, passed by the Abe government in 2016, deemed by many lawyers as unconstitutional.

The caution with which Abe and some LDP lawmakers are proceeding reflects the deep anti-war sentiment among the Japanese working class and youth. Any changes to the constitution must not only be approved by a two-thirds majority of both houses of the Diet (parliament), but also by a majority in a national referendum. A Kyodo news agency poll last month showed 55 percent of voters opposed revising Article 9.

The prime minister is attempting to win over opposition lawmakers who will in turn try to sell the revisions to their constituents. In his first policy speech of the year on January 22, Abe stated in the Diet: "I hope all political parties will bring to the Diet a concrete proposal for the constitution and deepen discussions at the commissions on the constitution."

In a Diet session on January 30, the prime minister

tried to gloss over the potential for going to war, claiming Article 9's revision would not allow the SDF to act unrestrained while overseas.

Even if the public rejects constitutional changes at a referendum, Abe said last week: "The government has consistently maintained that the SDF is constitutional. This will not change, even if the idea to stipulate the existence of the SDF is voted down in a national referendum." In other words, the government will simply ignore a no vote.

The official opposition parties, such as the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) and its allies, the Japanese Communist Party and Social Democratic Party, are not opposed to the government's accelerating drive to remilitarize. Their posturing against constitutional change is aimed at confining widespread anti-war sentiment within the dead-end of parliamentary politics, by claiming a new parliamentary vote or Abe's removal from office would somehow halt the drive to war.

These opposition parties have not organized any significant protests, let alone a campaign, against constitutional revision or war, even as the government acquires offensive weaponry explicitly banned by Article 9. As the Abe government is making clear, Article 9 is no real barrier to the preparations of Japanese imperialism for new wars of aggression.

In December, Abe's cabinet approved the largest military budget ever to cover the costs of purchasing cruise missiles, amid discussion over the legality of launching a preemptive attack on North Korea. Tokyo also will purchase two Aegis Ashore missile batteries from the US, which Russia and China fear could be turned from ostensibly defensive into offensive weaponry.

Last May, the Maritime SDF vessel Izumo escorted a US naval supply ship through the Sea of Japan in a test of the 2015 military legislation. The Izumo and its sister ship, the Kaga, are helicopter carriers and the largest vessels in Japan's navy. In December, government sources told the media that the military is considering converting them into fully-fledged aircraft carriers capable of transporting F-35B fighter jets. While no concrete plans have emerged, if the ships were converted, they would be the first aircraft carriers in Japan's fleet since World War II.



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