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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe Pushes to Remove Constitutional Constraints on Military

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In the lead up to this summer's parliamentary upper house election, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe intends to make constitutional revision a major feature of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) campaign. The proposed changes would formally remove any barriers to Japan's ability to wage war to further its strategic and economic interests, as well as deepen the attack on democratic rights at home.

Abe has made explicit calls in recent weeks for the revision of the constitution. On February 3, he stated before a parliamentary budget committee: "There is the view that [Japan should] address the situation in which 70 percent of constitutional scholars suspect the SDF (Self-Defense Forces) is in violation of the Constitution."

Abe was responding to a question from Tomomi Inada, chairwoman of the LDP's Policy Research Council and supporter of constitutional change, who claimed that Article 9 of the post-World War II constitution "no longer fits reality at all." Article 9 declares that "the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes."

Successive post-war governments in Japan have tacitly breached Article 9 and built up a large military under the guise of "self defense," despite the constitution's declaration that "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained." Over the past two decades, the Japanese military has been deployed overseas, including in support of the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Increasingly, however, the Japanese ruling class wants to cast off the constitutional restraints. Last summer, the LDP-led government, in the face of widespread opposition and protests, rammed through military legislation to allow Tokyo to engage in "collective self-defense," which in reality means taking part in predatory wars alongside an ally, namely the United States.

The new laws are in clear violation of the constitution, as many constitutional scholars have stated. Far from backtracking from this unconstitutional legislation, Abe is now cynically using the lack of constitutional authority to press forward with the LDP's long-held plans for a wholesale revision of the constitution.

In the budget committee, Abe continued: "Given the view that we should change this with our own hands, the LDP has announced a draft revised constitution." The draft, proposed in April 2012, not only alters Article 9, but also makes numerous other changes that limit

democratic rights and strengthen the state.

First, the draft would turn the SDF, the official name of Japan's military, into a "National Defense Force" with the prime minister as commander-in-chief. This force could be deployed abroad under the guise of international peace-keeping operations, as well as domestically to suppress opposition to the government.

The proposal would also impose "duties" on the Japanese population, including to "respect" the national flag, anthem and the new constitution. It further states that "engaging in activities with the purpose of damaging public interest or public order, or associating with others for such purposes, shall not be recognized." In other words, the freedom to criticize the government would effectively be banned.

The LDP's draft alters the role of the emperor, making him "head of state," while removing the emperor's or a regent's obligation to respect and uphold the constitution. This would concentrate more power in the anachronistic and backward institution, moving to return the emperor to the position he held before World War II.

The government, however, confronts significant barriers to constitutional revision, which must be approved by two-thirds of both houses of parliament, as well as by a majority of the voting population at a referendum. While the LDP and its ally Komeito hold a two-thirds majority in the Lower House, they have only a simple majority in the Upper House and need 86 additional seats.

Speaking at a New Year's press conference on January 4, Abe said the LDP "will appeal for [constitutional revision] strongly during the House of Councillors (Upper House) election campaign, just as we have thus far." Abe claimed there was "unshakeable" support for the SDF in Japan to support his decision.

In reality, there is widespread opposition to remilitarization. Last summer, mass protests took place throughout the country opposing the security legislation to expand the role of the SDF internationally in support of allies like the United States. These protests culminated in an August 30 demonstration of 120,000 people denouncing the bills in front of the parliament building in Tokyo.

In order to obtain the seats needed, the LDP is seeking additional coalition partners. Last month, Abe acknowledged that winning the necessary seats in the upcoming election would be difficult. In response, Nobuyuki Baba, secretary-general of the right-wing Osaka Ishin no Kai, said his party would "cooperate positively" with the LDP and Komeito's efforts to change the constitution.

Since his February 3 remarks though, Abe has toned down his calls for constitutional revision. While not facing outright opposition, some within the LDP are clearly concerned that anti-war sentiment could result in an unwanted electoral backlash. "An appropriate approach would be to proceed [with the constitutional revision] while winning the understanding of the largest opposition party," LDP secretary general Sadakazu Tanigaki said.

The main opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), however, is attempting to exploit the anti-war sentiment for electoral purposes. DPJ leader Katsuya Okada said last month: "If the prime minister secures a two-thirds majority, he will surely amend the Constitution. As his

deepest wish is to revise Article 9, we must block him from achieving the two-thirds majority by all means."

While in power from September 2009 to December 2012, the DPJ supported constitutional revision to allow Japan's military to be used in a far greater capacity, often attaching the necessity of a UN resolution to provide a veneer of legitimacy. A 2012 report from a prime ministerial committee stated: "Related interpretations [of laws] should be changed to allow collective defense in order to uphold proactive pacifism in the long-term."

Significantly, Abe has seized on "proactive pacifism" as the banner for his accelerating remilitarization of Japan.

Furthermore, the DPJ governments deepened Japan's aggressive stance toward China. In 2012, under Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, Tokyo provocatively purchased three of the five disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands from their private owner, provoking sharp tensions with China.

For all its posturing as an opponent of Abe's constitutional change, the DPJ, which also represents the interests of Japanese imperialism, has no principled opposition to removing legal and constitutional restraints on the military.

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