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Japanese prime minister pushes to end constitutional limits on the military

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Under conditions where US imperialism is resorting to war as an instrument of foreign policy in Ukraine, the Middle East and the Asia Pacific, other major powers are also seeking to remilitarise and remove any restraints on their use of military force. That is the significance of the call by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe for a fundamental revision of the country's post-war constitution.

Last week, in his first keynote policy speech to parliament since the December election, Abe formally put constitutional change on his government's agenda. He exhorted the "people of Japan" to "be confident," exclaiming: "Isn't it time to hold deep debate about revising the constitution? For the future of Japan, shouldn't we accomplish in this parliament, the biggest reform since the end of the war?"

Constitutional revision has been a longstanding ambition, not only of Abe. Substantial sections of the Japanese political establishment object in particular to Article 9 of the constitution, which renounced war forever and declared that land, air and sea forces would never be maintained. The constitution was drawn up by the post-war American occupation under General Douglas MacArthur, although from the 1950s the US encouraged Japan to establish its own substantial "self-defence forces" as part of their Cold War alliance.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Japanese ruling class has increasingly viewed the post-war constitution as an intolerable impediment to pursuing its own imperialist ambitions in Asia and internationally. Amid rising geo-political tensions, the Abe government has already expanded military spending, re-oriented defence strategy to fighting a war with China and is waging a propaganda campaign to whitewash the war crimes of the Japanese military during the 1930s and 1940s.

Last July, Abe took a further major step in undermining Article 9 by announcing a “constitutional reinterpretation” allowing for so-called “collective self-defence”—in other words, for Tokyo to militarily support the US and other potential allies, even if Japan was not directly threatened or under attack. A battery of legislation to give legal force to this “reinterpretation” has already been drawn up and will be pushed through the national parliament after local elections in April.

As part of its “pivot to Asia,” the Obama administration has actively encouraged Japan to take a more aggressive stance toward Beijing and play a greater role in “regional security”—that is, in supporting the US military build-up in the Indo-Pacific region against China. Washington welcomed the Abe government’s statement on “collective self-defence” as it opens the door for the closer integration of US and Japanese forces, including in Japan itself, where nearly 50,000 American military personnel are based.

Abe now plans to press ahead with his far broader objective of sweeping constitutional change, well aware that he faces major obstacles. Any constitutional amendment requires a two-thirds vote in both houses of parliament before being put to a popular referendum for ratification. More fundamentally, the government confronts deep-seated public opposition, especially in the working class, to any attempt to revive Japanese militarism or change the constitution.

In calling for a “deep debate,” Abe is preparing a lengthy ideological offensive. He has already seized on the barbaric execution of two Japanese hostages by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militias to argue for the removal of constitutional and legal restraints on the military’s ability to launch rescue operations. Undoubtedly, the government will exploit or manufacture a series of terrorist or war scares to try to stampede public opinion into supporting constitutional change sometime after upper house elections in mid-2016.

The driving force behind the revival of Japanese militarism is the deepening breakdown of global capitalism, which is fuelling geo-political rivalries and tensions around the globe—from the provocative intervention of the US and its allies in Ukraine, to the new US-led war in the Middle East and Washington’s “pivot” against China. Like Germany, Japan continues to pursue its objectives within the framework of the US alliance, but, at the same time, is rearming in order to pursue its own imperialist interests, which may come into conflict with those of the United States.

Having suffered what it regarded as a humiliating defeat in World War II, the Japanese ruling elites only reluctantly accepted the constitution foisted on them by the American occupation. Abe often speaks of “escaping the post-war regime,” by which he means not only removing the

constitutional shackles on the Japanese military but ending the country's post-war subordination to American interests.

In his 2006 book, *Towards a Beautiful Country: My Vision for Japan*, Abe declared that Article 9 of the constitution “failed to provide a necessary condition for an independent nation.” That reflected the US stance toward Japan, he wrote. “In order to protect national interests of its own and other Allied powers, the US ... drafted the constitution not to let Japan challenge the Western-centred world order again.”

Abe is determined to remove the restraints on Japanese imperialism's ability to aggressively prosecute its interests internationally. In just over two years since he came to power in December 2012, Abe has mounted a far-ranging diplomatic offensive to strengthen Tokyo's ties around the world, visiting more than 50 countries on five continents.

At the same time, the Liberal Democratic Party government is seeking to amend or abolish basic democratic rights contained in the post-war constitution. It is proposing to grant sweeping “emergency powers” to the prime minister, restore the emperor to his pre-war status as head of state and replace the “fundamental rights” of citizens with patriotic “duties,” including to respect the national flag and anthem. Above all, these anti-democratic measures will be used against the working class under conditions of mounting government attacks on living standards.

The re-emergence of Japanese militarism holds great dangers for the working class in Japan and internationally. Amid a mounting economic crisis and growing inter-imperialist rivalry, all the major powers are preparing for war. The US and Japan fought a bloody war between 1941 and 1945 that cost millions of lives in order to determine which power would dominate China and the Asia Pacific. While the US and Japan are currently allies, the unresolved questions of the last war continue to fester, threatening new tensions and conflict.

The sole social force capable of halting the accelerating drive to war in Europe, the Middle East and Asia is the international working class. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and its sections are the only organisations fighting to build a global anti-war movement of workers and youth on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective to abolish the root cause of war—the bankrupt capitalist system and its outmoded nation-state system.