

Japanese Government Pushes Militarist Legislation Amid Mass Protests

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The government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe passed sweeping laws through the Japanese lower house yesterday, allowing for the foreign deployment of Japanese troops under provisions for “collective defense” with its military allies, above all the United States.

The passage of the laws marks an escalation in the Abe government’s campaign, initiated when it came to office in December 2013, to revive Japanese militarism by “reinterpreting” the country’s nominally pacifist post-World War II constitution. It complements the agreement signed between Abe and US President Barack Obama in April, providing for Japan to participate in US military actions beyond its own shores.

The bills, which have been the subject of parliamentary debate for several months, were put to the security committee of the lower house on Wednesday. Opposition MP’s sought to block the vote, holding up placards against Abe’s legislation, and seeking to obstruct voting procedures. When the laws passed the committee, they boycotted the lower house vote on Thursday.

According to opinion polls, public opposition to the laws is as high as 80 percent. On Wednesday as many as 100,000 protesters gathered outside the Diet in Tokyo, while several thousand demonstrated again on Thursday, carrying placards such as “Scrap War Bills” and “Stop Abe’s Recklessness.”

The bills will now be put to the upper house, where Abe’s Liberal Democratic Party and its coalition partners hold an effective majority, and are expected to pass. The lower house can overrule any objections.

The laws may yet face legal challenges. On June 4, three constitutional scholars testified to a Diet sub-committee that the laws were unconstitutional. According to the *New York Times*, surveys have indicated that over 90 percent of Japanese experts view the laws as a violation of the so-called pacifist clauses of the charter.

The mass opposition to the legislation threatens to provoke a crisis for the Abe government, with numbers of commentaries drawing parallels with Abe’s grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, who was forced to resign as premier in June 1960, in the face of mass hostility to a US-Japan security pact he had signed.

The official opposition parties are above all concerned about the domestic and international implications of openly pursuing the same imperialist policies that led to the catastrophes of the Second World War.

Katsuya Okada, head of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), the main opposition party, summed up the fear of mass anti-war sentiment. He stated, before boycotting Thursday's vote, "It is a huge mistake to set aside a constitutional interpretation built up by governments for 70 years without sufficient public understanding and debate."

Abe's policies reflect the determination of the Japanese ruling elite to more aggressively assert their interests in the Asia-Pacific. They have been brought forward under the auspices of the US "pivot to Asia" and a military build-up against China in the region. As part of the "pivot," Washington has encouraged the revival of Japanese militarism.

The entire Japanese political establishment is implicated in supporting this program, including the opposition parties. The previous DPJ government deliberately ratcheted up tensions with China in 2012 by "nationalising" the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

Abe all but acknowledged that his government's legislation was primarily directed against China, telling reporters after Thursday's vote, "The security situation around Japan is getting tougher.... These bills are vital to protect the Japanese people's lives and prevent war."

Since Abe's trip to Washington in April, during which the new military agreement between the two nations was signed, Japan's integration into the provocations of the US and its allies has escalated.

At the G-7 summit in June, Abe played a central role in inserting a clause into the dialogue's communique, obliquely directed against China's activities in the South China Sea. The previous month, the US and its regional allies, including the Philippines and Australia, had carried out provocations against China, over long-standing disputes in the sea. Both the US and Australia are reported to be considering deploying aircraft and warships into Chinese-claimed territory in the area—an action that could trigger a military conflict.

In June, Japanese spy planes, acting in collaboration with the Philippine military flew near Chinese-claimed territory in the South China Sea, in a provocation mirroring similar actions by the US since the start of the year.

Yesterday, Japanese top military commander, Admiral Katsutoshi Kawano, on a visit to Washington, told reporters there had been "talk" of Japanese patrols and anti-submarine activities in the South China Sea. Echoing the talking points of the Obama administration, he sought to present China as an expansionist threat in the region.

This month, Japanese forces are also participating for the first time in the biennial Talisman Saber military exercise. Involving some 33,000 Australian and US military personnel, the war games, held in Northern Australia, are a rehearsal for a US-led war against China.

Over the past two weeks, Japan has also escalated tensions with China in the East China Sea, with Abe's cabinet denouncing a new Chinese gas field development in the region.

According to the Associated Press, US State Department spokesman John Kirby would not comment on the Abe government's legislation, but underscored Washington's support for the revival of Japanese militarism. Kirby said that the US welcomes, "Japan's ongoing efforts to strengthen the alliance and play a more active role in regional and international security activities."

China's foreign ministry spokesperson, Hua Chunying, issued a statement on the laws

yesterday, which declared, "It is fully justified to ask if Japan is going to give up its exclusively defense-oriented policy."

Hua pointed to the 70th anniversary of the ouster of Japanese forces from China at the end of World War II:

"We solemnly urge the Japanese side to draw hard lessons from history... and refrain from jeopardising China's sovereignty and security interests or crippling regional peace and stability."

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