



Japan's Abe sets course for constitutional revision

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has told lawmakers that he intends to change the constitution to make amendments easier, a move that, if approved, would likely lead to modifications to its anti-war provisions.

"I will start with amending Article 96 of the constitution, a move that many factions [inside the Liberal Democratic Party - LDP] support," Abe told the upper house of the Diet on 31 January in Tokyo.

Article 96 governs constitutional amendments, which currently require a majority of two-thirds in both houses of the Diet before being submitted to a referendum. Abe wants to reduce this to a simple majority in both houses.

The LDP won December's general election in a landslide and, with junior coalition partner New Komeito, has a more than two-thirds majority in the lower house of representatives. Elections for half of the seats in the upper house of councillors are scheduled to be held later in 2013. The opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) currently holds the most seats in that house.

If passed, the new law would lead the way for further amendments. Abe has made no secret of his desire to revise Article 9, which prohibits Japan from using "war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes" and also states that, "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained".

The LDP published a draft constitution in April 2012 when it was still in opposition. The draft maintains Japan's commitment to pacifism but deletes the provision regarding the existence of armed forces and other war potential, and in its place states that a "National Defence Force" would be set up and the prime minister would be its commander in chief.

The National Defence Force, which would replace the Japan Self-Defence Forces, would be allowed to defend Japanese territory from a foreign attack, participate in international peacekeeping operations, and be mobilised to maintain domestic public order or protect individual rights.

ANALYSIS





Abe's statement to the Diet comes as little surprise, but whether he has the political capital to force through what would be major constitutional change depends on how successful he is at managing Japan's domestic problems, dominant among which is a moribund economy and concerns over a rapidly ageing population.

Abe's announcement is the latest step in a process that goes back at least to 2005, when the LDP first published a draft constitution - the April 2012 draft is revision of that document. Both codify what Christopher Hughes, professor of International Politics and Japanese Studies at Warwick University, described as Abe's dislike of "what he would call the 'post-war settlement'".

"For people like Abe, their foreign policy doctrine is based on the idea that Japan since 1945 has lost its identity as a state and a nation, which has been subverted by the Constitution," Hughes told *IHS Jane's*. "Abe hates it because [in his mind] it has demilitarised Japan, it has kept Japan down, it has made Japan think small, it has made Japan cowardly."

Abe and other LDP figures believe that, "the only way that Japan can really blossom again and live up to its international stature and responsibilities as an ally is to get rid of these horrible, post-war restrictions that inhibit the Japanese psyche", Hughes said, "so constitutional revision is a big deal for these guys".

Abe's call for constitutional revision follows the first defence budget increase in 11 years, announced on 29 January, and an opinion piece published by the Project Syndicate agency on 27 December in which he called for a "a strategy whereby Australia, India, Japan, and the US state of Hawaii form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific".

The inclusion of India in Japanese strategic thinking echoes Abe's attempts to build stronger relations with New Delhi in his first stint as prime minister in 2006-07. "One of the interesting things about Abe is that he does have a doctrine," said Hughes. "In particular, he has a quite clearly articulated view on how he would like to change elements of Japanese foreign policy, which for a Japanese leader is quite interesting, given that one of the criticisms levelled at Japanese foreign policy is that it is reactive, disjointed, low profile - that it sort of lacks any kind of ideological appeal."

While 'normalisation' of Japan's armed forces and closer ties with India are major ambitions for Abe, Hughes pointed out that the US security alliance remains key, and in many ways, Abe's policies were not too different from those followed by the DPJ when it was in power.

"The priorities are the same, the resources are about the same, and Japan can't defend itself without the United States," Hughes said. "The basic course of Japanese defence policy is set."

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