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# Abe Sprints Toward Expanding Japan's Military Posture

By PAUL KALLENDER-UMEZU

**TOKYO** — Following a May 15 report by a key advisory panel that Japan must reinterpret its constitution to enable it to engage in collective self-defense, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe launched a highly public drive to push ahead with the historic change.

The 60-page "Report of the Advisory Panel on Reconstruction of the Legal Basis for Security," chaired by former ambassador to the US Shunji Yanai, urges Japan to drop its current interpretation of Article 9 of its US-drafted constitution, which makes Japan the only country in the world to deny itself the right of collective self-defense. That right, which allows countries to defend other nations under certain circumstances, is enshrined in Article 51 of the UN charter.

Japan's posture is due to change as quickly as Abe, who has been pressing for such a move for a decade, can push it. The Japanese premier hit the ground running, launching an emotive appeal to the Japanese people in an address to the nation almost as soon as the report was made public.

Standing in front of an illustration showing a force from an un-

named aggressor country — clearly China — attacking a US ship carrying Japanese children, Abe asked: "We, the Japanese government, can't do a thing to help them. Do you really think that's good?"

"This is the reality. Just think, they could be your children, and grandchildren," Abe said.

"In the South China Sea — right now as we speak — confronta-

tions are continuing because of unilateral action backed by force," he said.

Abe was referring to a protracted standoff between Vietnam and China in the South China Sea following the May 7 Chinese ramming of a Vietnamese Coast Guard ship, an action that has also brought criticism from the US, and one that echoes a similar incident in 2010 against a Japanese Coast Guard ship in the East China Sea.

In an interview with Defense News, Shinichi Kitaoka, deputy chairman of the advisory panel, said Abe will now press his administration's junior coalition partner, the pacifist-oriented, Buddhist-backed New Komeito Party, to agree to pass the reinterpretation, which is essential before legislation can be proposed.

New Komeito leaders argue that

the constitution already permits Japanese forces to come to other countries' aid even without the need of collective self-defense. Kitaoka said Abe will work hard and compromise if necessary to gain approval before the Diet session ends June 22 to hasten legislation.

"A change in the [peacekeeping operations] law ahead of other legislation is very urgent because the South Sudan situation is fluid, the government is very fragile, and as you know the Self-Defense Force cannot even help civilians who are under attack, including Japanese people," Kitaoka said. "We cannot even help our own citizens yet expect other militaries to come to aid us. It's ridiculous."

Another early target is changing the Shuohen Jitaiho, or laws relating to security in areas and situa-

tions surrounding Japan, so Japan can aid US ships in foreign waters, Kitaoka said.

The report places six conditions before Japan can exercise the right, but also contains an expansive list of scenarios that it says Japan should consider. For example, along with recommending Japan be able to legally shoot down a missile fired over the country and toward the US by North Korea and

the right to rescue its aid workers abroad, Japan should be allowed to join UN-authorized military actions. Other recommendations include considering allowing mine-sweeping and the right to board and inspect ships in foreign waters.

"[C]learly this ... really could be the final tipping point for Japan overturning its postwar security policy," said Christopher Hughes, a Japan military expert and professor of international politics and Japanese studies at the [University of Warwick](#). "It would ... mean that Japan could do an awful lot more militarily in support of the US and other partners in the East Asia region and beyond, and it will set precedents and set Japan on the way to further expansion of military activities in the future."

"As to whether Abe can actually get it all through, that is the key question," Hughes said. "Komeito is digging its heels in hard as collective self-defense questions the party's very *raison d'être* ... The next couple of months could be crucial."

Corey Wallace, a Japan security policy expert at New Zealand's University of Auckland, estimated



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that 10 to 18 laws will be required.

**New Posture:** Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, addressing reporters May 15, raises the specter of Japanese children being killed aboard a US ship and Japan, under the current interpretation of its constitution, unable to help them.

"Abe would like a collective Cabinet decision in the books before the end of the year as the US-Japan Revised Guidelines will be revised again," he said. The entire legislative process could take up to one to two years.

But the reinterpretation is sorely needed, said Grant Newsham, a senior research fellow at the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies, who called the guidelines "sensible and flexible."

"Opponents [of the change] appear to be quite happy to have Americans go slaughter whoever is threatening Japan. Kind of brings the expression 'faux pacifism' to mind," Newsham said. "Meanwhile, the idea that Japan would sit by while Americans were attacked, or that Americans would die on behalf of Japan without Japan lifting a finger in its own defense, is not exactly a vote-getter in Washington." □

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