

# Scrapping Japan's Pacifist Constitution? Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Ongoing Militarization Campaign

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*The efforts of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to change Japan's pacifist Constitution has received much attention overseas. This attention is very justified, and one hopes it will continue. However, most foreign media outlets fail to convey just how dramatically, and how rapidly, the public debate in Japan is heading in the wrong direction. Abe has essentially declared war on all aspects of Japan's pacifism, and the results can only be disastrous – for the country and for the world.*

An [early September feature in the influential Japanese weekly Bungei Shunju](#) shows how dramatically public debate in Japan has changed in recent years. Ruka Miura, a young conservative academic with close ties to the current government, argues openly for a return to conscription in Japan, saying that “sharing the cost of blood” is the only way to link democracy and pacifism. Astoundingly, Miura puts forward Israel as a good example, where an “advanced level of democracy” ensures that the citizenry, well acquainted with the reality of war, leads pacifist movements. Clearly Miura didn't get the memo about the latest Israeli offensive in Gaza, where brutal attacks that lead to over 2100 Palestinian deaths (at least 70% of whom, [according to the UN](#), were non combatants) were supported by orgiastic mobs throughout Israel, chanting “death to the Arabs” and [attacking antiwar demonstrations](#). On the other hand, the reference to Israel of a shining example of democracy is indicative of the climate in the current government – Israeli PM Netanyahu visited Japan in May 2014, and he and Abe [agreed to strengthen “defence” relations](#).

Pacifism has long been the main pillar of Japanese post-war democracy, both abroad and at home. However, successive right wing governments, and in particular the current Abe government, have been remarkably successful at advancing a right wing agenda that, collectively, could lead to an end to pacifist Japan as we know it. The question of the reintroduction of conscription goes far beyond just one article in a conservative magazine. Leading politicians in several parties, including (but not confined to) the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, now talk openly about the desirability of [conscription](#) – a topic that would have been political suicide only ten years ago. Economic leaders, for their part, have proposed military “internships” for students having difficulties in repaying heavy university fee [debts](#). Crudely put, attempts are being made at creating the façade of a public [consensus](#).

The LDP has always wanted to change the pacifist Japanese constitution, which in its famed Article 9 “forever [renounces] war as a sovereign right of the nation”. Indeed, the LDP has published a [draft revised constitution](#) that would finally do away with its hated Article 9, replacing it with broader, more expansive provisions. The LDP's draft constitution also reads

like something suited for a despot dictatorial regime, with sweeping restrictions on fundamental rights, an obligation to respect the flag and the national anthem, and a free hand for the government to torture criminal suspects.

Nevertheless, there are major hurdles to changing the constitution in Japan, including a 2/3 majority in both houses of parliament and majority public support in a referendum. Seeing that this would take too much time, in July 2014, the Abe cabinet [simply changed the government interpretation of Article 9](#), to allow the exercise of collective self defence - i.e. to enable Japanese forces to engage in battle if the forces of an allied country are attacked. Successive governments had always stated that collective self defence was prohibited by the constitution, because of the clear "slippery slope" that such a situation would entail. Abe has done away with decades of policy in one fell swoop, effectively engaging in a backdoor constitution change.

The government published examples of how the new policy would work in real life situations, [many of which have been noted by experts as both legally and logically questionable](#). More tellingly, all of the examples are positive, i.e. all of them show situations where the use of Japanese military forces would be allowed, with no examples of when this would remain legally prohibited. At the same time, the government has also stated that a [steady flow of oil to the country is vital for the "survival of the nation"](#), and therefore that Japanese military forces could be sent to the Middle East for this purpose. It is clear that the government wants a carte blanche to engage in military interventions abroad with the United States - and the arbitrarily designed [Designated Secrets Act](#), which was adopted in December 2013 amid howls of protest within the country and by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, will ensure a shutdown of public debate on any military "secrets".

Abe has also scrapped the longstanding Japanese government policy against the export of weapons, again without adequate explanation or democratic process. A little over a month after this announcement, it was announced that the Vice Minister for Defence would accompany [Japanese military industry manufacturers at the Paris Weapons Fair](#) in June. In early July, the [first weapons deal](#) was announced, with Mitsubishi Heavy Industry would provide high tech parts for the American PAC-2 missile (which will in turn be exported by the US to Qatar, and wherever else it may see fit). It is difficult not to conclude that much of this had been in the works for a long time. The new global merchant of death has arrived.

Military intervention abroad, weapons export, and conscription are the next step. Japan is clearly moving towards scrapping its pacifist principles, and returning back to its militaristic past. Though many in the country (on both sides of the political camp) cite rising security tensions with a more assertive China as the cause of Japan's dramatic shifts, that is merely a trigger - and frankly a dubious one at that, since the thought of a shooting war with China at any point in the future lacks credibility.

At the core lies the refusal of Japan to recognise, and to deal with, the social structures that were behind the rise of militarism in the 1930s. This can be seen in the ongoing visits by cabinet members to the Yasukuni shrine and persistent efforts to deny the government's role in the enslavement of the "comfort women" - but it goes far beyond that, and requires a national effort at soul searching and at changing century old power structures. Reasoned public debate on this point, unfortunately, is almost nonexistent. In a few years, it may be too late.

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