

# Tokyo considers long-range missiles for use in first strikes

By Ben McGrath  
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The Japanese government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is continuing its remilitarization drive, recently stating it was considering acquiring long-range missiles capable of striking targets in China and North Korea. Doing so would be a clear violation of the country's constitution, which explicitly bars Tokyo from waging war overseas or maintaining war material.

The purpose of acquiring such weaponry is to have the ability to launch a first strike on an enemy on the pretext that it was preparing to attack Japan. In other words, Tokyo wants the ability to be able to launch an illegal pre-emptive war.

In an interview with the *New York Times* on August 16, Defense Minister Taro Kono evaded the question of long-range missiles, no doubt fearing that being too open about the government's plans could trigger anti-war protests. "Logically speaking, I won't say it's a zero percent (chance). The government hasn't really decided anything yet," he declared.

On July 31, a ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) committee comprised of senior party officials approved a proposal to acquire long-range, offensive missiles. It is now under discussion by the government's National Security Council (NSC), which will finalize new military plans by the end of September. The proposal stated, "Our country needs to consider ways to strengthen deterrence, including having the capability to halt ballistic missile attacks within the territory of our adversaries."

The committee that approved the proposal included Abe's former Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera. He paid lip service to the constitution, saying Japan would "stay within the bounds of the Constitution and comply with international law." Onodera, however, was defense minister in July 2014 when Tokyo announced a "reinterpretation" of the constitution to justify going to

war with allies in the name of "collective self-defense." He also served as defense minister from August 2017 to October 2018, assuming office shortly after Abe pledged to re-write the constitution by 2020.

The LDP raised the possibility of acquiring long-range missiles after the government announced in June it would cancel the construction of two sites to station Aegis Ashore anti-ballistic missile batteries from the United States, citing cost and the potential danger of detached rocket boosters falling on inhabited areas. As is clear from the current discussions, this decision did not represent a retreat from Tokyo's war preparations, but a reconsideration of how to pursue its agenda.

Acquisition of long-range missiles is only one part of Tokyo's broader agenda to remilitarize to enable Japanese imperialism to aggressively assert its interests overseas. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the LDP has temporarily slowed its push to revise Article 9 of the constitution that bars Japan from waging war. Abe's goal is to insert a paragraph in Article 9 that explicitly recognizes the Japanese military. The prime minister still hopes to push the changes through by September 2021 when his term as LDP president, and therefore as prime minister, is set to end.

In May, Abe exploited the pandemic to call for a debate in the National Diet to revise the constitution so as to expand the powers of the Cabinet in the event it declares a national emergency, allowing the government to restrict democratic rights. This revision was one of four proposed in March 2018 that also included changes to Article 9.

New security guidelines approved by Abe's cabinet in 2018 called for a vast expansion of Japan's offensive military capability. This includes converting its Izumo-class helicopter carriers into aircraft carriers

capable of carrying and launching F-35 fighter jets as well as the procurement of cruise missiles with ranges up to 1,000 kilometers to facilitate striking targets on “enemy” territory. Under the Abe government, annual military spending has reached record levels each year, including another all-time high this year of 5.31 trillion yen (\$US48.5 billion).

The acquisition of long-range missiles is not the only move currently under examination. The National Security Council is also considering different land-based locations for the Aegis Ashore batteries or placing them on naval vessels. It is also contemplating purchasing the SPY-6 radar system from US defense company Raytheon, which would provide three times the range of the radars currently in use. Japan would need to further update its radar and tracking systems to enhance its first-strike capabilities.

Tokyo claims that the military build-up is necessary in the face of threats from China and North Korea. In particular, Japan has accused China of becoming more aggressive as other nations are distracted by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is the US, backed by Japan, that has sharply and dangerously ratcheted up tensions with Beijing, accusing the latter of being responsible for the pandemic and staging provocative war games in the region. All of this is an attempt to deflect growing internal tensions outwards, particularly in the face of worsening economic conditions and anger over the handling of the pandemic.

Another aspect of Tokyo’s decision to acquire its own weaponry is in part driven by uncertainty over Washington’s agenda. Under the Trump administration, the US has threatened to withdraw troops from Japan and South Korea if both countries do not pay more for hosting US troops. This has generated fears in Tokyo that Japan will be unable to rely on the US in the event of war. “[Trump] sees alliances as a business relationship, in very transactional terms,” Bruce Klingner, of the rightwing Heritage Foundation said recently in *Foreign Policy*. “He’s seeking to make a profit off of stationing US troops overseas.”

This aggressive US policy, however, is not driven primarily by the short-sighted irrationality of Trump or his administration, but by the sharpening conflicts between nation states. Washington is increasingly coming into conflict with its traditional allies as the same global divisions that led to World War I and II

reemerge. While the primary target of US and Japanese imperialism today is China, Washington and Tokyo could just as easily find themselves opponents in the future. The Japanese ruling class is no doubt keenly aware of this danger.

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