



NEW JAPANESE LEADER LOOKS TO EXPAND NATION'S MILITARY

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Japan's next prime minister, Shinzo Abe, plans to expand the military and redraw the country's pacifist constitution, which was created during America's occupation following World War II.

Shinzo Abe was elected Wednesday to a three-year term as the president of Japan's leading Liberal Democratic Party. He is all but guaranteed to become the Asian country's next prime minister in next week's elections.

"I want to make Japan a country that is trusted and loved by the countries of the world, and one that asserts leadership," Abe, the current chief Cabinet secretary, said after winning, according to The New York Times.

Time to change the constitution?

At 51 years old, Abe, son of a foreign minister and grandson of a prime minister, will be Japan's youngest prime minister in 100 years.

While most policies under Abe are expected to remain the same, he has expressed a desire to encourage schools to teach more Japanese patriotism and to amend Japan's pacifist constitution.

The current constitution, which was written with the guidance of U.S. occupation forces after World War II, rejects war as a means of solving international disputes.

"I want to realize a new constitution that is written by our own hands," Abe said when announcing his candidacy for prime minister, the Weekend Australian newspaper reported.

Abe wrote a book this past year, "Toward a Beautiful Country," in which he outlines a Japan that would have greater military powers.

"Even if a spy ship loaded with weapons of mass destruction were to come into the Tokyo Bay to attack Japan, we cannot eliminate the ship unless it attacks us," Abe wrote. "It is obvious that we are reaching the limit in narrowing down differences between Japan's security and the interpretation of our constitution."

Article 9

The part of the constitution in question is Article 9, which prevents Japan from using force, or warfare, except strictly in self-defense.

Article 9 also prohibits the nation from maintaining an army, navy, or air force. Japan does have Self Defense Forces, but they are considered an extension of the national police force.

In addition to this revision, Abe is expected to push for permanent legislation that would allow the Self Defense Forces to be sent overseas as part of international peace-keeping missions and to improve the country's missile defense system as a response to threats from North Korea, the Japan Times reported.

Changing Japan's constitution is politically difficult; any change would require two-thirds support in both legislative chambers, known as the Diet.

Neighbors do not want the change

Regional neighbors fear that such a revision will fuel Japanese nationalism.

"Abe's advocacy of constitutional revision is a pre-announcement of the beginning of Japanese power diplomacy," according to an editorial in the South Korean newspaper Chosun Ilbo.

North Korea also objected to the plan.

"In essence, the present Japan is trying to turn itself into the old Japan, which invaded Asian countries and provoked war," Minju Joson, the official Korean Central News Agency, reported. "And Abe is in the forefront."

Japan's neighbors also are upset by visits Japanese leaders, including Abe, have made to a controversial war shrine.

Controversial shrine visits

The Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo honors more than 2.5 million people who died in wartime, including convicted war criminals from WWII.

The shrine also contains a museum that some say distorts Japan's role in WWII, stating the country was forced into war with the United States and that its invasion of Asia was intended to liberate the region from colonial rule, Bloomberg News reported.

For Japan's neighbors, the shrine symbolizes Japan's militarism and extreme nationalism.

Leaders from China and South Korea refused to hold summit meetings with the outgoing prime minister, Junichiro Koizumi, after he visited the shrine.

South Korean officials formally have asked Abe to stop the visits.

"It's regrettable that our recent bilateral ties have entered a difficult phase. I hope Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe will play a role [in easing the tension] by paying special attention to the problem in the future," said South Korean Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Ban Ki Moon, Tokyo's Daily Yomiuri newspaper reported.

Some American lawmakers also have spoken out about the controversial shrine visits.

"Paying one's respect to war criminals is morally bankrupt and unworthy of a great nation such as Japan," said Representative Tom Lantos, a California Democrat on the International Relations Committee, and himself a refugee of the Holocaust in Europe.

"This practice must end."

-- *Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra*

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