

Abe administration seeks to revise ODA Charter to assist militaries

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The government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is looking to revise the Official Development Assistance Charter to allow the program to provide aid to foreign militaries for the first time.

The Abe administration launched the review process for the policy changes, which if authorized, would mark a major turning point in the charter. Until now, that covenant mandated that aid and support provided by the program to developing countries go only toward civilian assistance projects.

The government believes the changes are needed so ODA can “play a role” in advancing national defense.

“In order to promote such universal values as freedom, democracy and human rights, ODA will play a role in security-related fields,” Vice Foreign Minister Seiji Kihara said March 31 during the first meeting of the Foreign Ministry’s expert panel put together to review the charter.

While the Abe administration has pursued a sweeping review of Japan’s national security policy by relaxing restrictions on arms exports and seeking to allow the exercise of the right to collective defense further, the review of ODA policy is likely to draw a further backlash at home and abroad.

The current ODA Charter, approved by the Cabinet in 1992, stipulates “any use of ODA for military purposes or for aggravation of international conflicts should be avoided.”

It bans, in principle, the use of Japan’s ODA by foreign militaries, whether in the form of material goods and even the use of roads and airports constructed as part of ODA projects.

The charter also excludes military personnel from its human resources development programs.

The prohibition of military use was also retained after the revision of the ODA Charter in 2002. As such, when Japan supplied armored patrol craft to Indonesia through the ODA program in

2006, it stipulated that the boats were to be used for counter-piracy measures only and not for military purposes.

In 2012, the Defense Ministry started providing noncombat technical assistance, without the use of ODA funds, to defense ministries and militaries in some countries in Southeast Asia. But recently, and in response to China's expanding diplomatic presence and efforts to provide aid to developing countries, the Japanese government has sought to utilize portions of ODA funding, which has declined in recent years, to bolster its security initiatives.

The National Security Strategy, approved by the Cabinet in December last year, stipulates "strategic utilization of ODA" by Japan, which must make a "proactive contribution to peace."

Once the use of ODA assistance for military purposes is permitted, Japan will be able to construct or upgrade seaports and airports that can be used for military purposes in the Philippines and Vietnam, both of which have territorial disputes with China.

The Foreign Ministry panel plans to submit its report to Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida as early as June. After consulting with nongovernmental organizations and business groups, the Abe Cabinet plans to approve the new ODA Charter before the end of the year.

"It will require quite a bit of consultation with nongovernmental organizations in order to convince them that the change is necessary," a senior Foreign Ministry official said.

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