

Secrecy: Japan's lower house passes bill to set up U.S.-style National Security Council

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Japan's lower house passes bill to set up U.S.-style NSC

TOKYO (Kyodo) — A government bill to establish a U.S.-style National Security Council in Japan cleared the House of Representatives Thursday in a step Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sees as vital to better respond to the changing security environment in Asia.

The bill, designed to empower the prime minister's office to take the lead in crafting foreign and defense policy, was sent to the House of Councillors, with the government seeking its passage before the Dec. 6 end of the current extraordinary Diet session.

Despite criticism that the government's tighter controls on information will compromise the public's right to know, the planned council is a policy centerpiece for Abe, who is aiming to strengthen Japan's security infrastructure amid China's maritime assertiveness and North Korea's nuclear and missile development.

Under the framework, the prime minister, the chief Cabinet secretary and the foreign and defense ministers will meet twice a month to discuss security issues based on information gathered from various ministries and agencies.

The NSC's head office will be set up within the Cabinet Secretariat to streamline policy planning and bolster coordination among different government entities, with Abe's foreign policy advisor Shotaro Yachi floated as a candidate to lead the body.

To ensure passage of the bill in the Diet, the ruling bloc of the Liberal Democratic Party and the New Komeito party has agreed with the opposition camp to attach a resolution to "consider" that minutes of NSC meetings be compiled which would be available to the public later.

Speaking at a Diet committee earlier in the month, however, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga sounded cautious about keeping records of such meetings, citing the sensitivity of information the NSC will deal with.

To make full use of the NSC, the government is also seeking passage of another bill to toughen penalties for leakers of "special secrets," or sensitive information related to diplomacy, defense, terrorism and espionage.

Prime Minister Abe said Thursday it is a "pressing issue" for Japan to prepare a legal framework for exchanging sensitive information with foreign countries while noting the importance of ensuring the public's right to know.

"We need to consider striking a balance between the need to protect secrets and the obligation of the government to explain what we do to the public," Abe told members of the lower house as it started deliberating the secrecy bill.

Abe said the bill for the secrecy law is not aimed at “turning Japan into a country that goes to war abroad by strengthening its military role” or keeping a tighter lid on information control.

The government will set criteria for designating special secrets after hearing opinions from outside experts. But Abe said it is “not appropriate” to expand the scope of people authorized to decide what special secrets are to outside the government’s executive branch.

Under the envisaged law, sensitive information will remain classified for up to 30 years once designated as special secrets by Cabinet members and any administrative chiefs. Cabinet approval will be necessary if the duration has to be extended after 30 years.

The prime minister said as an example that information that would provoke “counter action” from foreign countries will remain classified even after 30 years, but that the government will reveal the number of special secrets on a regular basis.

The LDP announced Thursday a set of examples that could be designated as “special secrets” in an apparent effort to dispel uncertainty over what constitutes such secrets and ease public concerns about the legitimacy of the legislation.

Special secrets include cable codes, Tokyo’s negotiation guidelines for territorial issues and North Korea’s past abductions of Japanese nationals, and its communications on the North’s nuclear and missile development programs. Information from foreign intelligence agencies about terrorist activities is also among them.

But details about the ongoing negotiations for the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade pact and the nuclear crisis at Tokyo Electric Power Co.’s Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant are not included, according to the LDP.

Tokyo has over 400,000 national secrets currently under government guidelines set in 2007 to protect national security and interests. Under the new secrecy law, they could remain classified as special secrets.

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* <http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20131107p2g00m0dm009000c.html>