

Japan issues new defence guidelines aimed at China

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In new National Defence Policy Guidelines, likely to be published this week, the Japanese government will undertake a major overhaul of the armed forces and shift in focus. Actively encouraged by the Obama administration, the military policy paper will be unmistakably oriented toward countering the rise of China.

Instead of concentrating on Hokkaido in the north—where Japanese tanks were sent to counter the Soviet Union during the Cold War—there will be increased maritime capabilities in Japan’s Nansei (southwest) islands, where Japan and China recently clashed over the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islets.

What is involved is a shift away from a land-based defence against an invasion of Japan to a more aggressive policy that will develop the naval and air capacity to project military forces beyond Japanese borders. The focus on strengthening Japan’s naval power is in line with US strategic efforts to maintain naval dominance in North East Asia and thus the potential to cut off China’s vital shipping routes. Like all nations, Japan prepares for war in the name of “defence”. However, in Japan’s case, the government’s efforts to camouflage the build-up are also designed to circumvent the so-called pacifist clause of the country’s constitution.

Senior Japanese officials have already elaborated the general lines of the document, which will set military policy for the next five years. Japan’s submarine fleet will be boosted from 16 to 22 and permanent army bases will be constructed on some small Nansei islands. Vice Defence Minister Jun Azumi, who will head the military restructuring team, summed up the basic thrust

in an interview with the *Financial Times* on Monday: “First and foremost, we must put priority on strengthening defence capability in the south and west, looking toward China.”

According to the *Financial Times*, while Azumi refused to provide specifics, analysts speculated that early steps would include building island radar stations, with troops to guard them. Anti-ship missiles would be deployed along the Nansei island chain to support Japanese naval forces in the region. The newspaper commented that China’s expanding submarine and advanced fighter forces are “seen as challenging US and Japanese military superiority in an area that includes sea lanes vital to the trade-dependent economy.”

Azumi declared that the shift was not simply a matter of stationing 500 or 1,000 men on an island. “As we know from our tough fight against the US in the (1941-45) Pacific war, it’s no use leaving them standing on their own. You need to have a lot of back-up and support.” The reference to the Pacific war indicates that what is being discussed in Tokyo—and also in Washington—is not simply minor incidents, but the preparation for full scale war.

The sharp rivalries in the region have already been demonstrated by the diplomatic row between Japan and China after the Japanese Coast Guard detained a Chinese fishing trawler captain in September near the Diaoyu/Senkaku islets. The islets are part of the Nansei archipelago and administered by the Japanese prefecture of Okinawa—home to the largest US military bases in Japan.

Prime Minister Naoto Kan exploited the incident to stoke tensions with China and justify the strengthening of the US-Japan alliance and an expansion of Japan's naval and air power. During and after the incident, the Obama administration twice declared that the US-Japan security treaty would oblige Washington to militarily assist Japan in any conflict with China over the islets. These assurances were followed last week by the biggest ever US-Japan joint military exercises, involving 40,000 personnel, 400 aircraft and 60 warships. Rather provocatively the theme of the war games was "island defence".

The Obama administration is also urging Japan to cooperate militarily with another US ally, South Korea. Following the artillery exchange between the two Koreas on November 23, Admiral Mike Mullen, the head of the American Joint Chiefs of Staffs, visited Seoul last week and expressed hopes that Japan would join US-South Korean military exercises in the future. To justify the step, Mullen pointed the finger at China. "Northeast Asia today is more volatile than it's been in much of the last 50 years," he said. "Much of that volatility is owed to the reckless behaviour of the North Korean regime, enabled by their friends in China."

Prime Minister Kan last week told relatives of Japanese nationals abducted by North Korean agents in the 1970s and 1980s that if the North Korean regime collapsed, Tokyo could send Japanese aircraft or troops there. The next day, he modified his remarks, saying that Japanese forces would mainly seek to evacuate Japanese nationals in an emergency situation in South Korea. His real concern was not, however, about Japanese nationals trapped in a war. Last Saturday he said he hoped for a discussion with South Korea to allow Japanese troops to be sent there, as part of "increasing cooperation on security" between the two countries.

Given the brutal Japanese colonial rule of Korea from 1910 to 1945, any suggestion of deploying Japanese troops is an extremely sensitive issue in Korea. On Monday, Japan's chief cabinet secretary, Yoshito Sengoku, insisted there was "absolutely no such plan" to send troops. Kan's remarks received a relatively muted response from Seoul. South Korean President

Lee Myung-bak's presidential office said Kan's comment may have been "a slip of the tongue". In line with Washington, Lee's conservative Grand National Party (GNP) government is also taking a more aggressive military policy toward North Korea.

Recent weeks have seen a conflict in Japan over increased military spending. Struggling with a huge public debt that is approaching 200 percent of the gross domestic product, Japan's finance ministry last month rejected the defence ministry's proposal to boost ground forces from 155,000 to 168,000 personnel. Instead, the finance ministry proposed a cut to under 140,000. Arguing for higher spending, Vice Defence Minister Azumi declared: "Before you can fight China, you have to go to war with the finance ministry."

Last Sunday, Finance Minister Yoshihiko Noda and Defence Minister Toshima Kitazawa agreed that the ground forces would be cut by 1,000, and the military budget trimmed to 23.49 trillion yen (US\$283 billion) for 2011 to 2015, 7.5 trillion yen less than for 2005-09.

Nevertheless the pressure from Washington for Japan to take "greater responsibility" for defence in North East Asia is certain to continue. Strengthening defence ties with Japan is part of a series of aggressive initiatives by the Obama administration to undermine growing Chinese influence in Asia. Over the past year Washington has intervened in territorial disputes between China and South East Asian countries in the South China Sea, engaged in naval exercises with South Korea in the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan, and boosted strategic cooperation with a string of other countries including Vietnam, Australia and India.



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