

Japan's defence report takes tough line against China

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In another sign of growing tensions in Asia, Japan's annual defence report last week issued strident warnings about China's military build-up. Prime Minister Yoshiro Noda will use the report to seek to justify aligning Japan even more closely with the Obama administration's confrontational "pivot" aimed at undermining Chinese influence throughout Asia.

First published in 2008, Japan's defence white papers have always expressed "concern" about the Chinese military. "Defence of Japan 2012," however, contains alarmist statements, warning of China's "plans to expand the sphere of its maritime activities" in the Pacific, including in the East and South China Seas, and to step up "surveillance operations near Japan."

The report echoed the Pentagon's annual reports on the Chinese military, accusing Beijing of understating its actual military spending and "lacking transparency" over its strategic intentions. It expressed fear that the Chinese leadership could be losing control over the army, and portrayed China as becoming an aggressive power, hungry for resources.

"Factors that could destabilise the management of the government are expanding and diversifying (due to the spread of the Internet and other reasons)," the report stated. It commented that the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the army had become "complicated," with the military exerting greater influence over foreign policy.

Japan's newly appointed defence minister, Satoshi Morimoto, highlighted China's naval activities, saying the report sought to "explain to our people as impartially as possible, China's moves in the ocean."

In fact, China's naval activities are largely in response to the provocative actions of the US and its allies, including joint exercises, in waters that are strategically sensitive for Beijing.

Morimoto met with US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta in Washington last Friday to discuss the planned deployment of MV-22 Osprey vertical takeoff-and-landing aircraft in Okinawa, despite widespread local opposition to US military bases. Okinawa remains a key staging base for US and Japanese forces in the event of conflict with China.

Prime Minister Noda installed Morimoto as defence minister as part of a recent cabinet reshuffle because of his well-known support for the US-Japan alliance. Morimoto has reaffirmed the 2010 National Defence Program Outline produced under Noda's predecessor, Nanto Kan, who shifted Japan's strategic policy more firmly behind Washington. Kan replaced Yukio Hatoyama, who had proposed a foreign policy less dependent on the US, and aimed at improving relations with China.

Under the 2010 paper, Japan shifted its traditional post-war defence posture from Russia in the north to the southwest island chains in the East China Sea. Late in 2010, Japan, with tacit US support, provoked a diplomatic row near the disputed Senkaku islands by detaining the captain of a Chinese fishing boat allegedly involved in a collision with a Japanese vessel.

Noda has gone further than Kan by cultivating closer military ties with Vietnam and the Philippines—both of which are taking a more aggressive stance in their territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea.

Japan has agreed to sell 10 patrol boats to the Philippines, amid a tense standoff with China over the disputed Scarborough Shoal.

Noda has also indicated that his government could purchase the Senkaku islands from its private Japanese owner—a move that has prompted an angry response from Beijing. Intensifying maritime patrols near the islets have increased tensions between the two countries.

Under the 2010 guideline, Japan is expanding its submarine fleet. Noda's government has also ordered sophisticated US-built F-35 stealth fighters to strengthen the Japanese air force. Last year, Japan established its first foreign military base since the end of World War II, in Djibouti, on the pretext of countering piracy in the Gulf of Aden.

China rejected the latest Japanese document. Defence ministry spokesman Geng Yansheng stated: "China strongly opposes the groundless criticisms of its national defence development and military activity, as well as irresponsible remarks regarding China's internal affairs, made in Japan's defence white paper."

Li Wei, director of the Institute of Japanese Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, told the *China Daily*: "Japan's diplomatic and security strategy could never have been clearer. It has appeared to follow Washington's strategy to balance China's military development. But Japan aims to realise its own military independence."

The so-called pacifist clause of Japan's constitution supposedly bans its military, known as Self-Defence Forces (SDF), from conducting offensive operations, developing offensive weapons such as aircraft carriers or deploying its forces overseas. Over the past decade, however, Japanese governments have exploited the US "war on terror" to send naval ships to support the US occupation of Afghanistan, and troops to join the US war in Iraq.

After two decades of economic stagnation, Japan's defence budget fell for the 10th straight year to 4.65 trillion yen (\$US59 billion) this year, reflecting the

constraints of the country's huge public debt. By contrast, China's military budget has nearly doubled to 650 billion yuan (\$102 billion) over the past five years.

Nevertheless, as an industrial country, Japan can quickly expand and arm its military with advanced weaponry. Its auto industry, for instance, could produce 10,000 tanks a year. Japan currently spends less than 1 percent of its GDP on the military—a figure that could be rapidly increased.

The defence white paper made no secret of Japan's determination to make no concessions over its disputed maritime claims with Russia, South Korea and China. South Korea last week issued a "strong protest" over the report's reference to Japan's claim to the Takeshima islands (known as Dokdo in Korea). Seoul urged Tokyo to "take immediate corrective measures."

Japan's more aggressive strategic posture raises the spectre of its militarist past. In 1910, it occupied Korea. During the 1930s and 1940s, it took over China and much of South East Asia. The Chinese and South Korean governments exploit the memories of Japanese atrocities for definite purposes: to justify their own military expansion and deflect attention from social tensions at home.

There is no doubt, however, that by encouraging Japan and its other allies to take a more confrontational stand against China, the US has raised tensions throughout the region that are fuelling a developing and dangerous arms race.



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