

Japan seeks pre-emptive military strike capabilities

John Chan
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In another move that will further inflame regional tensions, the Japanese government issued a defence report last Friday calling for the country's military to acquire the ability to strike "enemy" missile sites, including potentially in China, as well as North Korea.

The defence ministry's midterm report is part of a review process leading up to the release of new National Defence Program Guidelines by the end of the year. The guidelines will reflect the militarist stance of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who was elected last December on a platform of building a "strong Japan" and a "strong military".

The existing defence guidelines published in 2010 by the previous Democratic Party government set the stage for the integration of the Japanese military into the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia to militarily encircle China. Former prime minister Nanto Kan shifted the Japanese military's longstanding focus on land forces in the country's north, to naval and air forces in the southwestern island chains, including the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands with China.

As far as Abe and his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government are concerned, the 2010 guidelines do not go far enough.

Last Friday's report did not explicitly use the term "strike capability", but called for "the need for enhancing comprehensive abilities" to counter ballistic missile attacks. The obvious implication is that Japan needs to be able to launch pre-emptive strikes to prevent such attacks. The vague wording is an attempt to evade the so-called pacifist clause of the country's constitution that nominally bars Japan from acquiring weapons that are offensive in character.

Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera claimed that there was "no change in our basic stance of defence-only policy". He then declared, however, that Japan needed

to be able to carry out pre-emptive strikes, saying: "If Japan faces various threats, we must prevent (an attack) by using our country's defence capabilities."

A defence ministry official told reporters that during the deliberations over the report there was agreement that the military had to acquire a range of capabilities, not only strike aircraft and missiles but the capacity to send troops to attack sites located deep in "enemy" territory.

Under Article 9 of the constitution, Japan is not permitted, strictly speaking, to have a military. Its "self-defence forces" or SDF, however, are among the largest and most advanced in the world. At present, the SDF possesses limited offensive weaponry—F-2 and F-15 fighter jets and mid-air refueling aircraft. But this is changing, with 42 F-35 stealth fighters ordered from the US, providing for the first four to be delivered by 2017.

The plan for pre-emptive strike capacities is the first step in the development of an offensive military capacity, requiring a huge increase in defence spending that is currently capped at 1 percent of GDP. With Japan's massive public debt standing at more than 200 percent of GDP, increased defence spending will mean a dramatic reduction in the living standards of the working class.

Last Friday's report also focused on the development of amphibious forces to "protect remote islands". The defence ministry is considering bolstering the existing Ground Self-Defense Force unit of just 700 to 800 men trained to defend islands to become a new Marine-style force. "To deploy units quickly in response to a situation, it is important ... to have an amphibious function that is similar to (the) US Marines," capable of landing operations on remote islands, it stated.

Defence Minister Onodera told reporters that Japan

has “some 6,800 islands and Japan stands at 6th place in the world in terms of interests it holds in the seas ... So protecting the islands is an enormous task, especially if it only relies on manned aircraft as we do currently.”

“Island warfare” and amphibious warfare is now central to US military strategy in the Pacific, which includes plans for a naval blockade of China by shutting down key “choke points” through South East Asia on which Chinese shipping depends. Such a blockade would cripple the Chinese economy that relies on imports of energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East.

Last month, Japanese military forces took part in joint drills in California with American troops to take an island. The US is also encouraging Australian and Philippines militaries to carry out similar exercises with American forces.

Over the weekend, Japanese Prime Minister Abe travelled to Philippines to cement a common front against China. Backed by Washington, Manila has been involved in a sharp dispute with Beijing over a number of islets and reefs in the South China Sea, leading to several naval confrontations since last year. Japan regards Philippines an important ally against China.

At a joint press conference with Philippine President Benigno Aquino, Abe declared: “For Japan, the Philippines is a strategic partner with whom we share fundamental values and many strategic interests.” To further reinforce this relationship, Abe said that Tokyo would provide assistance to “capacity building of the Philippines coast guard”, including the supply of 10 patrol ships from the Japanese Coast Guard.

The LDP government published the mid-term report last Friday amid sharpening tensions with China over the disputed islands and maritime borders in the East China Sea. Two days earlier, the Japanese air force scrambled fighter jets to shadow a Chinese early warning plane that flew over the Okinawa island chains.

For its part, China has sent four ships from its newly established coast guard to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands to confront their Japanese counterparts. Moreover, five Chinese warships that recently carried out a joint naval drill with Russia in the Sea of Japan arrived back in China on Friday after sailing around the entire Japanese archipelago in a show of force.

Japan’s call for its military to have pre-emptive strike capacities is another sign that the US “pivot” has unleashed forces that could plunge the Asia-Pacific region into conflict and war.



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