

Japan's defence white paper targets China

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The Japanese government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe released its latest defence white paper this week, setting the stage for further boosting Japan's military capacities, directed unmistakably against China.

The annual report followed the government's announcement last month of its "reinterpretation" of the Japanese constitution to allow for "collective self-defence" and end legal restraints on participation in US-led wars. Since 2010, successive Japanese governments have integrated closely in the US "pivot to Asia," aimed at undermining China's influence in the region and encircling it militarily.

As part of the "pivot," the Obama administration has encouraged Tokyo to take a more aggressive diplomatic and military stance in Asia, leading to a rapid escalation of tensions over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. The previous Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government unilaterally "nationalised" the rocky outcrops, provoking condemnations from Beijing and increasingly dangerous encounters between Chinese and Japanese ships and aircraft in the area.

The latest white paper begins by declaring: "The security environment surrounding Japan has become increasingly severe, being encompassed by various challenges and destabilising factors, which are becoming more tangible and acute." While the report identifies North Korea and also Russia as potential threats, its focus is centred on China, which it blames for the heightened tensions over the islands.

Referring to China's declaration last November of an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, the document states that Japan is "deeply concerned about such measures, which are profoundly dangerous acts that unilaterally change the status quo in the East China Sea, escalating the situation, and that may cause unintended consequences."

While not spelled out, the "unintended

consequences" can only refer to military conflict or war. Last year, Japan scrambled jet fighters 810 times, the highest number in 24 years, mainly in response to Chinese maritime surveillance aircraft approaching or entering Japan's own longstanding ADIZ or airspace. In May, China responded to the entry of Japanese military surveillance aircraft into its ADIZ by scrambling fighters, reportedly bringing the planes within 30 metres of each other.

A miscalculation or error on either side could provoke a clash that spirals into a full-blown conflict. Similar tense confrontations are taking place regularly between Japanese and Chinese naval and coast guard vessels in the waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

The white paper accuses China of adopting "assertive measures, including attempts to alter the status quo by coercive measures ... which is incompatible with the existing international law and order." In reality, Prime Minister Abe has flatly ruled out any negotiation with China over the islands, by refusing to recognise that a dispute even exists.

The white paper focuses great attention on the large increases in China's defence spending and its acquisition of new weapons systems. It repeats the demand for "greater transparency," which has become a mantra in Washington and Tokyo.

The alleged "threat" posed by China is the pretext for the US "pivot," which will station 60 percent of US naval and air force assets in the Indo-Pacific. Abe is using the same justification for the remilitarisation of Japan. In the less than two years, since coming to power in December 2012, his government has increased military spending for the first time in a decade, established a US-style National Security Council and revised the interpretation of the constitution.

The white paper includes new National Defence Program Guidelines that were adopted last December,

in line with Abe's election promises to establish "a strong Japan" with "a strong military." The guidelines, building on those adopted under the previous DPJ-led government in 2010, continue the shift away from a Cold War stance in the north against the former Soviet Union, toward "island defence" in the south aimed at China.

In the name of "island defence," the Abe government has pressed ahead with the formation of a Japanese amphibious force modelled on, and in collaboration with, the US Marines. *Stars and Stripes*, the American military's press, reported this week that Japan aims to have a 3,000-strong army unit backed by helicopter carriers and landing craft.

"As part of that buildup, more than 200 Japanese soldiers practiced amphibious landings at Camp Pendleton, California, with US Marines in the Iron Fist exercise in January. Then, Japanese troops stormed beaches in Hawaii during last month's RIMPAC exercises," the article explained.

Japan is modifying naval vessels to enhance their amphibious capabilities, has purchased four amphibious assault vehicles and plans to buy another two this year, to eventually build the number to 52. "We hope to establish the amphibious force as soon as possible," Japan's defence minister Itsunori Onodera declared during a visit to the regiment's headquarters in March.

The publication of Japan's defence white paper provoked sharp criticisms by China. The state-run Xinhua news agency accused the Abe government of "hyping up the China threat" in order to "justify its military expansion." It continued: "Instead of China becoming a real threat, we have witnessed an increasingly aggressive Japan, a country that has broken its post-war pacifist pledges and looks poised to assert its military presence over the Asia Pacific."

Japan, with US backing, is certainly remilitarising. However, the response of the Chinese regime—whipping up anti-Japanese sentiment at home and pursuing its own military expansion—only plays into the hands of Washington and Tokyo. At the same time, the Chinese leadership is seeking to improve relations with the US, in a futile bid to undermine Washington's strategic alliance with Japan.

During his visit to Japan in April, President Obama affirmed that the US "commitment to Japan's security

is absolute," including over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. These comments amount to a blank cheque to Tokyo to further ratchet up a confrontation with Beijing, secure in the knowledge that the US would join Japan in waging war against China.



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