

Chinese Reactions to Japan's Defence White Paper

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On 2 August 2011, Japanese Diet (Parliament) approved the 37th Defence White Paper titled "Defense of Japan 2011". In analysing the security environment around Japan, the 592page-long report seems to follow an identical line with Japan's National Defense Program Outline (NDPG) of December 2010. While urging caution against cyber attacks on government information networks and North Korea's persistent pursuit of nuclear and missile projects, the White Paper calls for strengthening Japan's national defense. It also praises Japan's long-standing alliance with the US, terming it as an "indispensable cornerstone" for peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific Region. However, what sets the latest White Paper apart from the previous ones is its unusually strong concern over China's increasingly assertive presence in the East and South China Seas. This has attracted strong opposition from the Chinese government. The latest report could further deteriorate the Sino-Japanese relationship which already took a plunge after both the countries broke off their defense exchanges following a collision involving a Chinese fishing boat in September 2010.

The White Paper expresses strong concern about China's increasing maritime activities and describes China's rapid military modernisation as an attempt to "strengthen its capacity to have its military potential reflected in distant locations."¹ The report takes a critical stance on China's opaque nature of defence policy. While alleging that China is not transparent about its defence spending, it says that the budget announced by the Chinese government "is widely seen as only part of what Beijing actually spends for military purposes."² The report also points out

that such opaqueness in China's defence policies and military movements "are concerns for the region, including Japan, and for the international community."³ While stressing on the necessity of analysing the situation, the White Paper also points out that China should "be aware of its responsibility as a major power and abide by international rules."⁴

The White Paper also talks about China's territorial disputes with various countries, including Japan, and describes China's stance on such issues as 'overbearing'. Interestingly, for the first time, a new section has been added to explain the situation in South China Sea where China has territorial disputes with Vietnam and few other countries in South East Asia. Recently tensions built up over the disputed Spratly and Paracel island chains, the sovereignty of which is contested between countries like China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei. The White Paper claims: "Given the modernisation of China's naval and air forces in recent years, its sphere of influence is likely to grow beyond its neighboring waters."⁵ The report further adds: "It is expected that China will keep expanding its area of activity and to make naval activity a routine practice in waters surrounding Japan, including the East China Sea and the Pacific Ocean, as well as in the South China Sea."⁶ China's action in the South China Sea region could possibly "affect the peace and stability of the region and international society."⁷ It further states: "When handling problems that involve a conflict of interest with neighbouring countries including Japan, China has responded in a way seen as coercive, stirring up worries about its future direction."⁸

The White Paper only briefly touches upon the collision between a Chinese fishing boat and two Japanese Coast Guard boats near the Senkaku Islands in September 2010 which subsequently led to the worst row in recent years between Asia's two biggest economies. However, while discussing Japan's growing concern over cyber security, the paper acknowledges that Japan is keeping an eye on China as there have been allegations that most of the cyber attacks on the websites of government around the world originate from China.⁹ The White Paper also includes a section on China's relations with countries in the Middle East, Africa, the Pacific island nations, Central and South America. According to the paper, China has been able to expand its influence over those regions because of the regular visits paid to these countries by China's naval vessels and China's active arms exports to them.¹⁰

As regards the future direction of Japan's capabilities, the new White Paper echoes similar sentiment expressed in the NDPG 2010 and strongly recommends that in order to deal with the perceived threat from China, Japan should

create a 'Dynamic Defense Force' separate from the existing 'Basic Defense Force' concept. The dynamic force concept is characterised by key words like 'multifunctional', 'flexible' and 'effective' and it would also possess preparedness, mobility, flexibility, sustainability and versatility based on the trends of levels of military technology and intelligence capabilities.¹¹ The White Paper also adds that the development of such a force will focus on strengthening the control of Japan's southwestern territories, particularly offshore islands, and Japan will "accordingly station coastal surveillance forces and transportation aircraft and reinforce military exercises to respond to attacks."¹²

The China factor cannot be discounted while reading the White Paper. If Japan's future defence policy is focused on strengthening the defence in island areas of southwestern Japan and to station military forces in those offshore islands which currently do not have much defence capabilities, one of the reasons for Japan to do so might be to prevent China's navy from gaining easy access to the Pacific. By raising issues like increasing maritime activity of China and its territorial disputes with various other Southeast Asian countries, Japan possibly indicates its willingness to work with those countries through institutional mechanisms like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries in dealing with China.

China reacted strongly to the White Paper. According to Foreign Ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxu, it contains "irresponsible comments" regarding China's national defense construction.¹³ China also alleged Japan of playing up a 'China threat theory' to achieve its own ulterior motives to go ahead with ambitious military build-up and to revise its pacifist constitution. It also accused Japan of "fanning the flames" over the South China Sea, and "attempting to internationalise the disputes, which China would never accept."¹⁴ The Chinese officials are also wary that the Defense White Paper would harm regional stability and jeopardise peace and development in the region. They state that China strongly believes in peaceful development and wants to develop partnerships with its neighbours, and pursue a defence policy that is defensive in nature. Many in Chinese academia claim that although Japan's uneasiness about China's military presence in the surrounding waters is evident in the White Paper, China has not violated international law and Tokyo's uneasiness stem from its failure to mentally adapt to China's growth. China perceived that Japan is also unwilling to accept the fact that it has overtaken Japan as the world's second largest economy. Chinese argue that Japan's speculations about threats from China, Russia as well as North Korea and its zero-sum mentality could lead to its isolation in the near future.¹⁵ It has

been alleged that the White Paper clearly reflects a strong 'Cold War mentality' and it attempts to obstruct China's peaceful rise through containment.¹⁶

Japan, however, rubbishes such charges. It has also been pointed out that while China's defense budget has grown nearly 70% over the past five years, Japan, with a public debt twice the size of its \$5 trillion economy has cut its military outlays by 3% during the same period.¹⁷

Such arguments and counterarguments might have damaging impact on Sino-Japan relationship. The public opinion poll conducted recently by Japanese organisation *Genron NPO* and the *China Daily* clearly suggested that the Japanese and Chinese publics view each other with the lowest opinions in years. While 78.3 per cent Japanese viewed China negatively, 65.9 per cent of Chinese had similar impression of Japan.¹⁸ The territorial dispute over Senkaku Islands heated up further following Japanese government's recent allegation that while trying to capitalise on Japan's domestic political preoccupations, China has attempted to exert pressure on Japan with the intrusion of two Chinese ships into Japanese waters near the disputed islands on 24 August 2011. Although Beijing denied the allegation and reasserted its sovereignty over that territory, it remains indisputably true that if the two countries continue to confront each other on such occasions, it would bound to have severe repercussion on their sound bilateral economic relationship.

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Notes

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