

Japan's Response to China Threat

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In assessing its medium-term defence and security environment, Tokyo has identified China as a 'concern for the regional and global community'. While noting North Korea's nuclear and missile capability as grave and destabilising, Japan's new National Defence Program Guidelines (NDPG) issued in December regard China's military modernization and its lack of transparency, as a matter of concern. According to the English language daily *Japan Times*, 'it is the strongest language the guideline has ever used for China. The previous version, crafted in 2004, said Japan should "remain attentive" to Beijing's future actions.'

Why has Tokyo expressed its China concern in such explicit terms? And what steps has it decided to take to protect its territory and national interest?

At first glance, it would appear that Japan and China have become much more interdependent now than at any time in the past. Today China is Japan's largest trading partner. There are thousands of Chinese nationals studying and working in Japan. Similarly, a large number of Japanese and Chinese business people travel to each other's country regularly. Japan has spent billions of dollars in foreign aid in China for

developmental purposes and to generate bilateral goodwill.

And yet, the level of trust between the two nations is at its lowest as periodically confirmed in opinion polls both in Japan and China. More than 80 percent of Chinese and Japanese dislike each other. This distrust also prevails between the governments of the two countries. The New Defence Guidelines express that distrust publicly for the first time in strategic terms.

In order to deal with the changed security circumstances, especially arising from the increasing military muscle of China and its support for the belligerent North Korean regime, the new guidelines declare that Japan would adopt the concept of 'dynamic' defence force against its previous policy of 'basic' defence force. The defence guidelines call for faster mobilization and greater importance of Maritime and Air Self Defence Forces, while reducing the capacity of Ground Self Defence Forces.

In the new guidelines that come into force in 2011 and define Japan's basic defence policy for the next ten years, Tokyo has declared to shift its strategic focus from Northern Japan to Southwest Japan between Kyushu and Taiwan, around the East China Sea. In other words, Japan sees a possible threat coming from China and not from Russia, as was the case in the Cold War period and until very recently.

The recent episode in the East China Sea, when a Chinese trawler collided with a Japan Coast Guard patrol vessel and pressure from China on Japan to release the

detained captain of the trawler unconditionally, is a trigger to Japan's new thinking on China.

Even before this incident, many Japanese policy makers and security strategists have been quietly expressing concerns about the exponential increase in China's military spending and its naval expansion and questioning the country's strategic designs for the region. Furthermore, China's declaration of the South China Sea as part of its 'core interests' that in the past only included Taiwan and Tibet, has also made regional powers a little nervous, including Japan.

In order to deal with the new security environment as perceived by its strategists, Tokyo will enhance its cooperation with countries such as South Korea, Australia, ASEAN and India and 'further enhance and develop its indispensable alliance' with the United States.

What is noteworthy here is that this is the first major defence paper under the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) currently led by Prime Minister Naoto Kan. When the DPJ replaced the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in mid-2009, many expected that relations with China would improve under the Centre-left government, especially when Junichiro Koizumi was Japan's prime minister between 2001 and 2006.

China has expressed its disappointment and a foreign ministry official remarked that 'a certain country has no right to act as a representative of the international

community and make irresponsible remarks on China's development', and that 'China follows the path of peaceful development, and its defence policy is defensive in nature'.

Northeast Asia, while a zone of great prosperity and economically interdependent, is also a most fragile region with an unstable and nuclear-capable North Korean regime, aided and abetted by China whose power, both economic and military, is rising to superpower status. China and Japan, the world's number two and three economies, one on the fast trajectory of ascendancy and the other on the relative trajectory of decline, need to come to terms with their changed power status and cooperate at the strategic level to maintain and manage peace in the region and the world at large.

Japan no longer is a quiet state. Japan is shifting its gear from that of a passive pacifist to an active strategist nation. Tokyo's new stance may serve as a wake-up call for Beijing that it cannot take Japan for granted and expand its military influence unchecked.

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Chinese trawler v. Japanese Coast Guard Vessel
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