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Japanese government ramps up tensions with China

By Peter Symonds

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The Japanese government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has deliberately heightened tensions with Beijing by insisting that the Defence Ministry's annual white paper, released on Tuesday, include more strident criticisms of China, particularly its activities in the South China and East China Seas. The paper was delayed for more than a week after government parliamentarians branded it as too soft on China and demanded its revision.

The release of the modified defence report came just days after the government rammed contentious new security legislation through the lower house of the Japanese Diet. By raising fears over the supposed Chinese threat, Abe is clearly aimed at trying to blunt widespread opposition to the laws.

The 429-page white paper devoted a third of its chapter on global security trends to China, declaring that Japan was “strongly concerned” about Beijing’s actions. “China, particularly over conflicting maritime issues, continues to act in an assertive manner, including coercive attempts to change the status quo, and is poised to fulfill its unilateral demands high-handedly without compromise,” it stated.

In a particularly provocative move, the document demanded a halt to China’s construction of oil-and-gas exploration platforms in the East China Sea. “We have confirmed that China has started

construction of new ocean platforms and we repeat our opposition to unilateral development by China,” it stated.

The Japanese foreign ministry followed up the report by posting photographs of the exploration on its web site and issuing a further statement. While acknowledging that all the platforms were on the Chinese side of a median line delineating the exclusive economic zones of the two countries, the statement again criticised China’s “unilateral development” and called on Beijing to return to talks about a 2008 agreement on the joint development of maritime resources.

In recent comments in the Japanese parliament, Defence Minister Gen Nakatani claimed that one of the platforms could be used to “deploy a radar system” or “as an operating base for helicopters or drones conducting air patrols.” In a comment on the *Diplomat* website entitled “A new Chinese threat in the East China Sea? Not so fast,” analyst Ankit Panda dismissed the alleged threat, pointing out that there would be no advantage for China in shifting existing surveillance operations to the platforms.

By demanding a halt to the exploration platforms, the Abe government is adding another potential flashpoint for conflict with China. Tensions between the two countries are already high after the previous Japanese government unilaterally “nationalised” islets in the East China Sea known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China. The white paper reported that the Japanese military scrambled fighter jets on 464 occasions during 2014 to intercept Chinese military aircraft close to Japan’s claimed airspace.

The white paper repeated the litany of accusations against China that has become standard fare for the United States and all its close allies, including Japan. In particular, it branded China’s land reclamation activities in the South China Sea as a threat to regional security and criticised the “opaqueness” of the Chinese military budget.

The Chinese defence ministry hit back against the Japanese white paper, declaring that it “maliciously hyped up the issues of the East China Sea, South China Sea, Internet security and military transparency.” Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang called on Japan “to stop stoking tensions” and “instead undertake more activities that are conducive to regional peace and stability.”

By heightening tensions with China, Abe is hoping to deflect widespread public opposition to his government’s security legislation, which will allow the military to engage in “collective self defence”—in other words, to increase Japanese involvement in US-led wars of aggression around the world.

Many Japanese legal experts have branded the laws as unconstitutional. Article 9 of Japan’s post-war constitution renounced war forever and declared that land, air and sea forces would never be maintained.

The legislation, which still has to pass the upper house, has provoked large protests and a slump in support for the government. A Kyodo news agency poll released on Saturday put Abe’s

disapproval rating greater than 50 percent for the first time since his government was elected in 2012.

The Abe government's increasingly aggressive stance toward Beijing has been encouraged at every step by the Obama administration as part of its "pivot to Asia" against China. In April last year, Obama publicly affirmed that the US would back Japan in a war against China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Washington, which has encouraged Tokyo to play a greater security role in Asia, has welcomed the Abe government's new security legislation.

In recent months, the Pentagon has recklessly inflamed tensions with China in the South China Sea by flying military aircraft close to Chinese-controlled atolls and reefs. On Saturday, Admiral Scott Swift, commander of the US Pacific Fleet, provocatively joined a seven-hour surveillance flight on a Boeing P-8 surveillance plane in the South China Sea.

Admiral Swift is on a tour of Asia, including the Philippines, South Korea and Japan. In Manila last Friday, he declared that he was "very interested" in expanding existing bilateral war games with allies in the region into a multi-national exercise. He praised Philippine efforts to hold military readiness exercises with other US allies, such as Japan. For the first time, Japan held search and rescue drills last month with Philippine naval personnel on board a Japanese surveillance flight over the South China Sea.

China yesterday announced its own major military and naval exercise in the South China Sea near Hainan Island, warning other military vessels to avoid the area. Major General Zhu Chenghu played down any connection to Japan's white paper, saying that a military drill of this scale took months to prepare.

Nevertheless, by heightening tensions with China, the US and Japan have created a dangerous powder keg where any incident or accident involving military aircraft or naval vessels in the South China or East China Sea threatens to trigger an escalating conflict between nuclear powers that could spiral out of control.