

The Izumo, Japan militarization program and international reactions

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Japan raises eyebrows by unveiling largest warship since World War II

YOKOHAMA/SEOUL — Japan on Tuesday unveiled its biggest warship since the end of World War II, a huge flat-top « destroyer » that has raised eyebrows in China and elsewhere because of its strong resemblance to a conventional aircraft carrier.

The vessel, which has a flight deck that is nearly 250 meters long, is designed to carry up to 14 helicopters.

Japanese officials say it will be used in national defense – particularly in anti-submarine warfare and border surveillance missions – and to bolster the nation’s ability to transport personnel and supplies in response to large-scale natural disasters, such as the earthquake and tsunami of 2011.

Though the ship, named the Izumo, has been in the works since 2009, its unveiling comes as Japan and China are locked in a bitter dispute over the Senkaku Islands, which are held by Tokyo but claimed by Beijing. For months, ships from both countries have been conducting patrols around the islet chain.

Tensions over the Senkakus, along with China’s heavy spending on defense and military modernization, have heightened calls in Japan for beefed-up naval and air forces. China recently began operating an aircraft carrier that it refurbished after purchasing overseas, and is reportedly moving forward with the construction of another that will be domestically built.

Though technically a « destroyer, » some experts believe the Izumo could potentially be used in the future to launch fighter jets or other aircraft that have the ability to take off vertically. That would be a departure for Japan, which has one of the best equipped and best trained naval forces in the Pacific but which has not sought to build aircraft carriers of its own because of constitutional restrictions that limit its military forces to a defensive role.

Japan says it has no plans to use the ship in that manner.

The Izumo does not have catapults for launching fighters, nor does it have a « ski-jump » ramp on its flight deck for fixed-wing aircraft launches.

On Wednesday, North Korea warned that Japan was following a militarization program that had already crossed « the danger line. »

A commentary by the official Korean Central News Agency highlighted a Japanese Defense Ministry paper published last month that stressed the need to boost the strength and range of forces required to protect Japan's far-flung territories. The paper specifically called for a « comprehensive containment capability » to counter ballistic missile threats from North Korea.

« This is nothing but a broad hoax by Japan to justify its moves to turn it into a military giant which have gone beyond the danger line, » KCNA said.

The commentary argued that « loudmouth » warnings about the missile and nuclear threat from Pyongyang were aimed at diverting international attention from efforts by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's conservative government to ditch the nation's pacifist Constitution.

« Japan's assertions are too unreasonable and illogical to justify its sinister aim, » KCNA said.

« Japan would be well advised to behave with reason, aware that to do so would be beneficial to its security. »

AP, AFP-JIJI, Bloomberg, August 7, 2013

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/08/07/national/japan-raises-eyebrows-by-unveiling-largest-warship-since-world-war-ii/#.UgxFGNgSrlc>

U.S. worried by aggressive military posture — Visiting official relays warning about angering regional community by acquiring strike ability

The United States has expressed concern about Japan's desire to acquire the ability to attack enemy bases in an overhaul of defense policies pursued by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, a government source said in Tokyo.

One of the American officials attending bilateral talks on foreign and defense policy cooperation late last month in Tokyo asked the Japanese side to consider the possible negative fallout on neighboring countries if the Abe administration embarks on such a policy shift, the source said Tuesday.

The U.S. official conveyed Washington's message that Tokyo should not further worsen relations with China and South Korea, which have been plagued for months by territorial rows, as well as the issue of Japan's wartime aggression.

The government is currently compiling new defense guidelines, and an interim last month stated that Japan should take on a greater regional security role and reinforce its defense capabilities, including enabling the Self-Defense Forces to attack enemy bases.

The proposal comes as Japan faces North Korea's missile and nuclear threats. The government is planning to agree within the year on the long-term guidelines, which would also mention the need to counter China's increasing military assertiveness.

At the working-level talks July 25, Japanese officials briefed their American counterparts on the interim report. The U.S. officials called for further explanation on what countries and measures Japan is considering while seeking to acquire the ability to strike enemy targets, the source said.

The U.S. side also said that Japan must carefully work to obtain understanding for the policy from neighboring countries, and the Japanese officials replied they will make efforts to that end, the source said.

« Japan needs to enhance its ability to respond to ballistic missile attacks in a comprehensive manner, » the interim report said in reference to the option of attacking enemy bases.

Some officials in Tokyo have said such an attack could possibly use U.S.-made Tomahawk cruise missiles. But other officials say difficulties remain in introducing such a measure, including the need to clarify what would be considered self-defense.

Kyodo News, August 7, 2013

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/08/07/national/u-s-fretting-over-japans-desire-to-militarily-strike-enemy-bases/#.UgyIodgSrc>
