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Amid South China Sea spat, Japan foreign aid white paper stresses importance of sea lanes

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The government renewed its commitment to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in its annual report on foreign aid released Friday, with Tokyo stressing the importance of ensuring the safety of sea lanes in the region amid China's growing maritime assertiveness.

In the latest white paper on the country's official development assistance, the Foreign Ministry said ASEAN countries are extremely important "from both political and economic perspectives" as they lie along key sea lanes and have strong economic ties with many Japanese firms operating in those nations.

The paper also listed strengthening the rule of law, maritime security, cybersecurity and peace-building measures, among others, as ways of boosting Japan's ties with Southeast Asia.

Japan has been aiding infrastructure-building in Asia for years, but the white paper emphasized that it will now seek "not only quality but quantity" in terms of outcome.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe last year announced that the country, together with the Asian Development Bank, will make a \$110 billion investment in the Asian nations by 2020. The paper also said that Japan will make drastic reforms to the Japan Bank for International Cooperation and Nippon Export and Investment Insurance in order to promote infrastructure investment.

The latest white paper differs little from last year's, which also underscored the importance of sea lanes, likely an oblique reference to the South China Sea, experts said.

The new paper also reiterated that Japan seeks to engender "an order based on universal values" in East Asia.

Yet experts say Japan's pledge to help secure sea lanes — especially those in the South China Sea — reflects its intention to shore up regional alliances as a bulwark against an increasingly bellicose China.

Those contested waters are also the site of massive land-reclamation projects by Beijing, which has also been accused by the U.S. and some nations in Southeast Asia of militarizing some of the islands and man-made features it claims.

“Japan is clearly using transfers like patrol boats to help reinforce its overall strategy of trying to maintain maritime security, which, of course, it is also backing up with efforts through cooperation between the Japan Coast Guard and individual ASEAN states, and Japan’s assertion of a Maritime Self-Defense Force presence in Southeast Asia through humanitarian and disaster relief missions,” said Christopher Hughes, a professor of international politics and Japanese studies at the University of Warwick in England.

“So there is definitely more of an attempt at an integrated approach to counter China’s influence in the South China Sea — and ODA provision is part of this.”

Last year, Japan approved a new ODA Development Cooperation Charter that allows it to transfer military equipment if used for nonmilitary purposes.

Japan last year signed a deal with the Philippines to provide 10 high-speed patrol vessels to Manila under the ODA framework.

Despite specifically outlawing the transfer of weapons for military purposes, the future of Tokyo’s ODA program could also lay further groundwork for Southeast Asia to become a kind of testing ground for arms exports, especially those linked to disaster relief and maritime security capacity-building assistance, experts say.

Yet such moves by Japan could cripple the bilateral relationship with China, which has shown signs of improvement since late 2014, when Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping met on the sidelines of the APEC Forum in Beijing.

High-level talks have resumed and Tokyo expects to see foreign ministerial meetings in both countries this Spring. Yet the recent gains in improving relations could be easily erased, especially if China is further unnerved by potential Japanese involvement in the South China Sea.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said at an annual news conference Tuesday that he believes Japan’s government is “double dealing,” causing trouble for Beijing even as Tokyo says it wants to improve relations. Wang went on to say that Japan is entirely responsible for the delay in improving bilateral ties.

Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida on Friday responded to Wang’s comments, saying both sides must continue to work toward improving the relationship.

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