

US, Japan strengthen military ties against China

Peter Symonds
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A bilateral summit between US President Barack Obama and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda in Washington has confirmed steps by the two countries to strengthen their strategic alliance and upgrade joint military activities in Asia. Despite denials by both leaders, the moves are clearly aimed against China.

Their joint statement pledged to “further enhance our bilateral security and defence cooperation.” It also affirmed a commitment to “US strategic rebalancing to the Asia Pacific”, to establish “a more geographically distributed and operationally resilient force posture in the region.”

Obama announced his administration’s “strategic rebalancing” or “pivot” to Asia last November, confirming what had been underway since mid-2009—comprehensive US diplomatic-military efforts to undercut Chinese influence throughout the region. Strengthening US alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines as well as military partnerships with India, Indonesia and other countries is central to Washington’s strategy.

In comments prior to the summit, Noda told the *Wall Street Journal*: “Japan will promote... enhancement of its defence posture in the area, including the Southwestern Islands, in coordination with the US strategy of focusing on the Asia-Pacific region.” The “Southwestern Islands” includes the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands over which China and Japan clashed diplomatically in 2010. Japan revised its defence guidelines in late 2010 to stress maritime and air surveillance, island defence and greater defence cooperation, particularly with the US.

While the Noda-Obama talks were low-key, Japan’s promise to enhance its regional defence posture in conjunction with the US is significant. Nominally the Japanese government is bound by the so-called pacifist clause of its post-war constitution that has limited the activities of its military to “self defence.” Under pressure from the US to play a greater role, Japan has over the past decade deployed military forces to support the American-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. It has also recently established its first overseas military base since the end of World War II—in Djibouti, a country on the strategically important Horn of Africa, supposedly to combat piracy.

Strengthening the US alliance with Japan is central to Obama’s strategy of containing China. Japan is the third largest economy in the world and more technologically advanced than China. Its defence budget last year was \$59.3 billion—the sixth largest in the world and the second largest in Asia after China. Despite its defensive posture, Japan’s military has always been equipped with hi-tech hardware and is organised so it can be rapidly expanded.

Within Japan, there are divisions within the ruling elite, including within Noda’s own Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), over closer military ties with the US. Former Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, who led the Democrats to power for the first time in 2009, advocated a more independent Japanese foreign policy and closer regional relations, especially with China, on which Japan is heavily dependent economically.

Hatoyama was forced to step down in June 2010, in part because the Obama administration refused to

renegotiate the relocation of the Futenma Marine Corps airbase off the island of Okinawa—a key DPJ election promise. He was replaced by Naoto Kan, who pledged closer military ties with the US, a promise that Noda maintained after Kan was compelled to resign last year. Huge protests on Okinawa in early 2010, culminating in a rally of 90,000 people, demonstrated not only popular hostility on the island to the Futenma airbase, but broader opposition throughout Japan to any revival of militarism.

The US and Japan announced steps last week to move 9,000 US Marines off Okinawa. About 5,000 will transfer to the US territory of Guam that is to be transformed into “a strategic hub” for the American military in the Pacific. The remainder will be relocated to Hawaii, as well as to Darwin in northern Australia, where up to 2,500 Marines will be stationed on a rotating basis as part an agreement announced last year.

The relocation does not lessen the strategic significance of Okinawa, which will still house 10,000 Marines as well as other US military forces. The move has not resolved the still contentious issue of the relocation of the Futenma base, currently in a densely populated urban area, to another part of Okinawa. But the build up of Guam, which Japan will pay \$3.1 billion towards, will now proceed before a final decision on Futenma.

Last week’s meeting of the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee also announced the possible establishment of joint training facilities on Guam and the North Mariana Islands. The reference to “training” is to sidestep the Japanese constitution and blunt domestic opposition in Japan. If these plans proceed, it would mark the first ever permanent Japanese military presence on US territory.

The repositioning of US forces to Guam and northern Australia is part of the Pentagon’s greater focus on South East Asia, especially on controlling the vital sea lanes that China relies upon for energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East. US domination of choke points such as the Malacca Strait threatens China with an economic blockade in the event of conflict. The US Navy is preparing to station new

littoral warships in Singapore, adjacent to the Malacca Strait.

On Monday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta met with their Philippine counterparts in Manila for top level security talks. Washington has been encouraging the Philippines and other South East Asian countries to take a tougher stance in relation to their territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. The US has bolstered the Philippine navy and is discussing the use by American forces of Philippine military bases on a rotational basis—a sensitive political issue in the former American colony.

While not taking sides in the current standoff between China and the Philippines over the disputed Scarborough Shoal, Clinton noted: “We oppose the threat or use of force... and we remain in close contact with our ally.” Asked if the US would support the Philippines in a conflict with China, Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario said that the US had expressed the intention “to honour their obligations under the Mutual Defence Treaty.”

The standoff over the Scarborough Shoal underscores the recklessness of the Obama administration’s “pivot” to the Asia Pacific. By deliberately ratchetting up tensions, the US risks a disastrous conflict with China that could be triggered by any one of the many flashpoints in the region.



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