

Japan to erect new radar base close to China

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Just days before US President Obama's arrival today in Tokyo, the Japanese government provocatively announced the establishment of a new radar base on the southwestern island of Yonaguni—a move calculated to further raise tensions with China.

Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera attended a ceremony last Saturday marking the start of construction of a military base that will host radar installations and 100 to 150 troops when completed next year. Yonaguni island is part of the Nansei or southwest islands, administrated by the Okinawa prefecture. It is Japan's westernmost island, some 150 kilometres from the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, which are claimed by China. Yonaguni is about the same distance from Taiwan, and the closest point to the Chinese mainland.

Defense Minister Onodera underlined the significance of the new base, saying: "This is the first [military] deployment since the US returned Okinawa [to Japanese jurisdiction in 1972] and calls for us to be more on guard are growing. I want to build an operation able to properly defend islands that are part of Japan's territory." He also suggested Japan's military presence could be expanded to other nearby Nansei islands.

Heigo Sato, a former researcher at the Defense Ministry's National Institute for Defense Studies, told the media that the base "should give Japan the ability to expand surveillance to near the Chinese mainland. It will allow early warning of missiles and supplement the monitoring of Chinese military movements."

Japan announced on Monday it will also transfer four of its 13 E-2C early warning planes from their Misawa base in northern Japan to Naha in Okinawa. This is the first time such planes have been based there. According to Kyodo News, Onodera, speaking at an inauguration ceremony in Naha, said Japan faced a "dangerous situation." He accused China of continual attempts to "change the 'status quo' by force and threaten the rule of law" that "could trigger emergencies."

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying criticised Japan over the radar base, saying: "Due to

historical reasons, any of Japan's military moves will raise concern among Asian countries. Japan has been hyping up regional threats and accelerating its military buildup over the recent period of time. Japan should give a serious explanation for its real intention to build military muscle in the relevant region."

The Japanese government announced the military deployments on the eve of Obama's visit, both to demonstrate its commitment to his "pivot to Asia" and to ensure Washington's support for Tokyo's increasingly aggressive stance against China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. While the US has declared itself "neutral" in the territorial dispute, American officials have time and again declared that the US would back Japan militarily in any war with China over the islands.

Obama's "pivot," which was begun in 2009 and was formally announced in 2011, is a comprehensive strategy for militarily encircling and diplomatically isolating China throughout the region. The US has deliberately encouraged allies, like Japan, to assert their territorial claims against China more strongly, inflaming dangerous flashpoints throughout the Asia Pacific region.

Japan made a fundamental shift in its defense policy in the National Defense Policy Guidelines published in December 2010, which set a strategic orientation for the following five years. From a largely defensive, land-based posture against an invasion from the north by the former Soviet Union—maintained throughout the Cold War—the focus was shifted to southwest against China. This more aggressive policy is based on strengthening naval and air capacities, as indicated by the latest military moves.

The shift in defense policy came less than six months after Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama resigned under pressure from the US. Hatoyama, while never questioning the US-Japan alliance, called for closer Japan-China relations right at the point when Obama was intent on confronting Beijing. He also came into conflict with the Obama administration over the US military bases in Okinawa.

Since taking office in December 2012, the right-wing

government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has raised military spending for the first time in a decade. In accordance with the Defense Policy Guidelines, the government is budgeting for a new amphibious unit modeled on the US Marines, along with amphibious assault vehicles, helicopter carriers, vertical take-off planes and other offensive capabilities.

The decision to establish a radar base on Yonaguni island provoked local opposition. On Saturday, some 50 protesters tried to block Onodera from accessing the construction site. The island has a population of just 1,500.

“Opinion is split down the middle,” Tetsuo Funamichi, the head of the Japan Agricultural Association’s local branch told Reuters. “It’s good for the economy if they [the military] come, but some people worry that we could be attacked in an emergency.” An unnamed protester told the news agency: “Becoming a target is frightening. They won’t talk to us about it. We haven’t discussed it.”

The radar installation in Yonaguni is yet another step in the effort by the US and its allies to contain China militarily within the “first-island chain,” which encompasses the Japanese archipelago, Taiwan and the Philippines. Every link in the “first island chain” is controlled by an American military ally or a country with long-standing military ties to the US. Collectively, the chain acts as a potential barrier to Chinese naval operations in the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

The moves to strengthen the Japanese military posture in Okinawa send a message to Beijing that Japan and the US intend to exploit the territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas to put more pressure on China, and ultimately act militarily against it, if need be.



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