

Upgrades transforming US military bases on Guam

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As part of Washington's strategic anti-China "pivot" to East Asia, expensive upgrades to US Navy and Air Force facilities on Guam are underway in preparation for the deployment of the military's most advanced warships and aircraft, as well as the relocation of thousands of US Marines from the Japanese island of Okinawa.

According to a report on the McClatchyDC website on November 22, the cost of the infrastructure upgrade alone will exceed \$US8.7 billion. The US military newspaper *Stars and Stripes* noted that the restructuring will "elevate the tiny Pacific island into a maritime strategic hub, a key element laid out by the Pentagon in the Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy." Some 5,000 American military personnel are expected to be deployed over the next several years, along with advanced aircraft, drones, submarines and patrol boats.

The Pentagon's far-reaching plans for war against China, known as "AirSea Battle," rely on regional bases and "warfighting platforms"—including aircraft carriers, ballistic missile capable ships, submarines and reconnaissance aircraft—to mount a devastating air and missile attack on the Chinese mainland. In the next five years, two-thirds of the US Navy's 300 ships will be operating in the Pacific. Existing military facilities in South Korea, Japan, the Philippines and Singapore are being upgraded, along with the expanded use of Australian ports and bases, including at the northernmost city of Darwin.

Guam and the adjacent Northern Mariana Islands, US colonial possessions since 1898, occupy a particular strategic and historic significance in US imperialism's thrust into the western Pacific. Late in World War II, after American forces retook Guam from the Japanese, the island was converted into a massive supply depot to support invasions of the Philippines, Iwo Jima,

Okinawa and, it was then expected, Japan. Thousands of B-29 bombing raids flew from Guam's Andersen Air Force Base in operations over Japan.

In August 1945, the airfield on the nearby island of Tinian became the staging post for the devastating nuclear attacks on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. US military forces have maintained a presence on Guam ever since. During the Vietnam War, 150 B-52s were amassed at Andersen Base for the intensive bombing of North Vietnam. Andersen remained a strategic B-52 base until the collapse of the USSR in 1991, after which it remained in service but was downgraded.

Guam is now being transformed. Patrick M. Cronin, senior director of the Asia-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security, a Washington-based think tank, pointed out that Guam is the only strategic US territory within the Asian time zone. "Every other contingency requires reinforcement from Hawaii, Alaska or the West Coast of the United States, or it depends on the politically precarious and expensive forward-basing in host countries" such as Japan and South Korea, Cronin told *Stars and Stripes*.

This has been a particular concern for military planners since the Philippines government forced the closure of the major US bases of Subic Bay and the Clark Airfield in 1992. Guam's strategic location gives the US "persistent engagement and presence" that is intended as a deterrence to North Korea, and "to China's rising power," Cronin declared.

Beijing's actions in the region, however, are in response to Washington's mounting interventions which are designed to militarily encircle and isolate China. On November 8 and 9, two nuclear-capable B-52 bombers operating from Guam conducted missions close to Chinese-claimed islets in the South

China Sea. The provocation came just two weeks after the guided missile destroyer USS Lassen deliberately intruded within territorial waters administered by China.

The US Navy and Air Force operate adjoining bases on Guam. The naval group includes a squadron of four attack submarines. The Air Force hosts a rotational unit of B-52 bombers and a squadron of remotely-piloted aircraft. Extensive training ranges on the Mariana Islands have been the site of three major Valiant Shield joint exercises in recent years.

More than a third of the estimated cost of the restructure is being funded by Japan, based on US promises to relocate 5,000 troops to Guam from Okinawa. Okinawa residents have protested for decades about the presence of some 25,000 US troops and military hardware, particularly in the heart of the island's major city.

While the US will continue to maintain bases on Okinawa, Japan's support for the Guam upgrade stems from the intended use of the Marianas as a joint training facility, integrating both sea and land warfare, with US forces. As part of its remilitarisation program, Japan last year began training an amphibious fighting unit modelled on the US Marines to be focussed on islands adjacent to the Chinese mainland.

Preparations for large-scale military conflict are clearly involved. Steven Wolborsky, director of plans, program and readiness at Anderson told *Stars and Stripes* that a rebuilding program for the base's two 11,000-foot concrete runways is now complete. Over 19 million pounds of explosives are stored across the facility's 4,400 acres. "We have enough parking for more than 155 aircraft, with a robust in-ground refuelling infrastructure," Wolborsky declared. "We have the largest capacity of jet fuel in the Air Force at 66 million gallons"—coupled with an equal amount at the nearby Naval base.

Construction has begun on two hangars which will enable fighter jets to remain running as they take on fuel. Work is also under way for a hangar to lodge the Navy's MQ-4C Triton surveillance drones, with the first of four expected to arrive in 2017. The high-altitude Tritons have a range of 2,300 miles, allowing them to easily reach the Chinese mainland.

At the naval base, the Pentagon and Japan are spending hundreds of millions of dollars to improve the

harbour so it can handle more ships and Marines. Victor Wharf, the longest in the Pacific, has been renovated, along with a second wharf to support heavy vehicles with tank-track capabilities. There is space to support an amphibious readiness group, which includes a transport dock, amphibious assault ships and support vessels.

An example of the new equipment to be stationed at the base is the "state of the art" Mark VI patrol boat, described by one Navy spokesman as a "game changer." With the capacity to operate in both the high seas and shallow waters of inshore islands in support of major combat operations, the boats are described as having the "versatility" of the PT boats used throughout the Pacific island chains during World War II.

According to McClatchy DC, there is growing opposition among Guam's population of 160,000 to the US military presence. The Northern Marianas tourism industry, which has been developing commercial links with China, has also objected. An opposition group called We Are Guahan recently filed a lawsuit that forced the Pentagon to scale back some of its plans. Many local people, however, said their preference for no new Marines on Guam was "never considered."

Whatever popular opposition is voiced to US imperialism's vast military expansion, the ongoing preparations for all-out war are proceeding apace. Washington's "pivot to Asia" involves not only the consolidation of alliances throughout Asia directed against China, but the build-up and use of overwhelming military power to establish unchallenged American domination.



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