

Japan activates first Marine brigade since World War II

Peter Symonds
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The Japanese military activated its first marine unit since end of World War II on Saturday at a base near Sasebo on the southwestern island of Kyushu. The 2,100-strong Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade (ARDB) has been trained by the US Marines Corp as part of the US-led military build-up in the region against China.

After the ceremony, some 1,500 ARDB troops staged a 20-minute public exercise to simulate the recapture of a remote island from invaders. Tomohiro Yamamoto, vice defence minister, said that “defence of our islands had become a critical mandate,” given the difficult security situation surrounding Japan.

Japan’s focus on “island defence” takes place amid the continuing tense standoff between China and Japan in the East China Sea over the uninhabited islets named as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China. Repeated close encounters involving Japanese and Chinese aircraft and vessels have taken place over the past six years near the islands, which are currently controlled by Tokyo but claimed by Beijing.

The Japanese government of Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda stoked tensions with China in September 2012 by buying the islets from their private owner, or “nationalising” them. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who came to power in late 2012, further exacerbated the confrontation by declaring he would never negotiate over the sovereignty of the Senkakus.

In 2014, US President Barack Obama upped the ante by declaring that the US would back Japan militarily in the event of a war with China over the disputed islands.

The formation of the Marine brigade is part of the Abe government’s remilitarisation of Japan and the refocusing of its armed forces away from countering Russia to the north towards “island defence” in the south. Japan’s southwestern islands, including Okinawa, which is home to major US military bases, are directly adjacent to the

Chinese mainland.

The Japanese military also plans to put troops and long-range, surface-to-ship missiles on some of its southernmost islands. In 2016, it opened a radar station on Yonaguni-shima, from where it can monitor the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, some 150 kilometres to the north, as well as a vast sweep of ocean in the East China Sea.

The radar placement will work in tandem with missile batteries that are being installed on the island of Ishigaki. The *Independent* earlier this year reported that about 600 troops will be stationed on Ishigaki along with anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles. The anti-ship missiles are likely to have a range of around 150 kilometres, while the surface-to-air missiles may include Patriot batteries targeted against Chinese ballistic missiles.

Such installations are part of the Pentagon’s AirSea Battle strategy which envisages a massive air and missile attack on China from ships and bases off the Chinese mainland. Japan is part of the so-called first island chain that includes Taiwan and the Philippines, that could form a barrier in the event of war with China, preventing its war ships and submarines from entering the wider Pacific Ocean.

The new Marine brigade is not simply defensive in character but could be used during a Japanese war of aggression far from its shores. As well as Marines, the military is acquiring huge helicopter carriers, which could function as aircraft carriers, amphibious ships, Osprey tilt-rotor troop carriers and amphibious assault vehicles.

Activating the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade (ARDB) is another step towards establishing a military force similar to a US Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), which is capable of operating far from its home base.

Grant Newsham, a former US Marine colonel who helped train the ARDB troops, told Reuters that Japan had already “demonstrated the ability to put together an ad

hoc MEU,” but did not have a permanent unit. “If Japan put its mind to it, within a year or year-and-a-half it could have a reasonable capability,” he added.

The development of an offensive military capacity is a breach of Japan’s post World War II constitution, under which it renounced the right to wage war or to establish armed forces. Encouraged by Washington, successive Japanese governments have circumvented the constitution by claiming that its Self Defence Forces (SDF) are purely for self-defence.

Abe, however, openly breached the constitution by pushing through so-called collective self-defence legislation in 2015 that permits Japan to join in US-led wars of aggression. He is actively campaigning to refashion the constitution to remove all restraints on the use of the military to prosecute the economic and strategic interests of Japanese imperialism.

Since taking office, Abe has made concerted efforts to remilitarize Japan. Last December, the cabinet approved a record-high, draft defence budget of \$US46 billion which will include the purchase of two Aegis Ashore anti-ballistic missile batteries and Japan’s first long-range cruise missiles that can be mounted on fighter jets.

While the Japanese defence budget is substantially less than the \$177 billion spent by China on its armed forces, Japan can at present rely on its alliance with the United States, whose military spending dwarfs that of any other country. Moreover, Japan has a substantial high-tech industrial base that could be used to rapidly expand its military capabilities.

Amid growing geo-political tensions, fuelled in large measures by Washington’s aggressive policies around the world, Japan, along with Germany and other major powers, are rapidly building up military forces. In this highly tense situation, the danger is that a relatively minor incident in the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, on the Korean Peninsula, or at a flashpoint elsewhere in the globe could precipitate a catastrophic conflict.



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