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Refurbishing the 'USS Japan'

By Jamie Miyazaki

OSAKA - Much has been made about the current global redeployment plans of the United States armed forces. With a preponderance of bases in Germany, South Korea and Japan, the present positioning of the 197,000 US military personnel stationed overseas reflects more accurately the Cold War landscape than today's strategic realities.

Pointedly troop numbers in both Germany and South Korea have borne most of the brunt of the realignment, with the US Army being subject to the bulk of the current shuffling.

But Japan, often called the "Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier" for the US, in effect the USS Japan, may be refurbished, so to speak, and engaged in weightier missions.

Judging from the reactions of some sections of South Korea's media one would almost be forgiven for thinking that Washington had forsaken its ally, was in the process of totally disengaging from North Asia and/or readying itself for a potential strike on Pyongyang. The reality however is more nuanced and raises significant questions for the role of Japan in America's global military jigsaw puzzle.

The Pentagon has argued for some time, and demonstrated in Iraq and Afghanistan, that the new generation of military engagements requires more mobile forces and a reliance on air power, advanced naval platforms and special-forces. As Douglas Feith, undersecretary of defense for policy, put it, "Key premises underlying our forward posture have changed fundamentally ~{!~} their purpose is to project power into theaters that may be distant from their bases."

Both Germany and South Korea are home to a large US Army presence: 56,000 and 28,000 troops respectively. This is noteworthy. US Forces in Korea is essentially primed for one mission alone: a heavy ground-based artillery, tank and infantry-style assault against North Korea. Nobody in the Pentagon is seriously talking about leaving South Korea unprotected, but stationing large numbers of US forces - especially heavy Army units - on bases far from the location of likely future conflicts is neither an economic nor efficient use of US military power in today's world.

US military personnel in Japan total about 42,000, including just 2,000 Army personnel - an unusually small number. It is tasked primarily with logistical and support roles for US Forces Korea. More pertinently the Army presence also includes the current darlings of recent US military exploits: one special-forces battalion. The rest of the 40,000-strong US Forces Japan is composed of Navy, Air Force and Marine personnel: services far more in sync with the Pentagon's vision of a "Revolution in Military Affairs".

In a recent interview Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld stated cryptically that upcoming talks between Washington and Tokyo about the US military's redeployment will be "completely satisfactory to Japan, as well as the United States". What this satisfactory arrangement will be, nobody is quite sure of yet. However, with a reduced presence on the Korean Peninsula, the US presence in Japan is likely to be of increased importance in America's global military posture.

A favorable environment

Despite (rapidly eroding) constitutional restraints on use of military force, Japan is perceived as a solid US military ally, having contributed to operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Japan is thus perceived to be a favorable environment for a continued forward-based US military presence.

Revealingly, Douglas Feith stated last December in a speech to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a US think-tank, that

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alongside Australia "we are developing a more robust US-Japanese alliance", while Washington was focused on developing "an up-to-date US-South Korean alliance". It is no coincidence that US military cooperation and presence in both Australia and Japan are increasing, while a not uncommon Pentagon view is that Seoul is an increasingly unreliable ally.

One of the central tenets of current revisions in America's overseas military presence has been ease of deployment to new and unforeseen trouble spots across the globe. The Pentagon has thus put a premium on US forces being able to move in and out of host nations with ease. Japan certainly appears to fall into this category with its generous host nation support and participation in developing a missile defense shield. Moreover, the recent enactment of a raft of new military contingency bills by the Japanese Diet further contributes to the favorable operational climate for the US military. Crucially, one of the new bills updated the acquisition and cross-servicing agreement, allowing Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to provide not only water, fuel and food to US Forces Japan, but also ammunition.

Okinawa "a very helpful base"

A downsizing of US Forces Korea has also led to expectations in Okinawa that US military installations on the island will also be scaled back. Okinawans have long shouldered a disproportionate burden of the US military presence in Japan and unsurprisingly are keen for a more equitable redistribution of the American footprint. Prefectural Governor Keiichi Inamine has been particularly vociferous, calling for 15-year time limits on the use of new facilities.

What is most likely though is that Okinawa will remain a key US military installation for some time to come. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld already said as much when he also called it "a very helpful base". US military bases in Okinawa allow for quick deployment to the Korean Peninsula as well as to the Taiwan Strait, Southeast Asia and Afghanistan.

In fact, most Okinawans are reluctant to see a total pull-out of US forces from the island; the local economy is dependant not only on the bases but also government subsidies to compensate islanders for the burden of having military installations eat up 20% of the island's land. Moreover, many Okinawans's appreciation of the US presence acts as a good guarantor of stability in the nearby Taiwan Straits.

This is not to say that no realignment of the US military presence on the island is neither being considered nor warranted. There has been speculation that the Marines may redeploy some units from their base at Camp Butler in Okinawa to Hokkaido to ease the burden on Okinawans. A partial relocation to Hokkaido would give the Marines more room to train and allow for a quicker deployment to the Korean Peninsula in the event of a Korean contingency.

In fact, speculation that some relocation of the 16,000-strong Marine presence on the island is in the cards has reached a fever pitch over the past few days. Unconfirmed reports over the weekend suggested that Washington was considering shifting around 2,600 Marines from Okinawa to Camp Fuji and Camp Zama - the US Army's Japan headquarters. Both bases are located on the main island of Honshu.

Two of the apparent motives behind this proposal are that shifting some Marines to Camp Fuji would forge stronger relations between the Marine Corps and Japan's SDF, whilst a Camp Zama move would foster greater service interoperability between the Marines and Army. Even if the redeployment of Marines to Camp Zama fails to go ahead the base looks set to become a nerve center for the US military in Asia. The US Army is lobbying for Camp Zama to become the US Army's command center in Asia and the headquarters of the Army I Corps once it finishes its tour in Iraq.

Not just Okinawa ~{!~}

For all its strategic significance, Okinawa is not the only major US military installation in Japan. With around 20,000 personnel in Japan, both the Air Force and Navy maintain significant presence in the country.

The US Air Force bases at Misawa and Kadena are the largest installations of their kind in Asia, with a combined value of US\$9 billion. In fact, of the 67 US Air Force installations in Asia, 44 are located in Japan compared with 19 in South Korea. The naval base at Yokosuka, home to the Seventh Fleet and the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk, is the US Navy's largest overseas installation. The Navy also maintains a base at Sasebo, which hosts an amphibious squadron, and a naval air facility at Atsugi, southwest of Tokyo.

The increasing emphasis on mobility and "lily pads" to be used as logistics and routing hubs for US forces in the event of contingencies means Air Force and Navy installations in Japan will remain or increase in strategic significance over the years. However, like US plans to consolidate bases in Korea, there is speculation that some of the smaller naval and air force facilities in Japan may be closed down and rolled into larger bases. The Atsugi naval air facility and Yokota air force base in western Tokyo are said to be potential candidates for closure.

With American officials mulling over changes to US deployments in Japan, we can expect some changes in the positioning of US forces. However, with the lack of Japan-based heavy army units, currently out of favor with Pentagon strategists, massive cuts on the scale of Korea and Germany combined with the favorable political climate will most likely mean that Japan will continue to be America's "unsinkable aircraft carrier" in the Far East for some time to come.

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