

Guam central to Pacific military operations

By Paul C. Barton - Gannett Washington Bureau
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WASHINGTON — Among the news media tracking the U.S. military buildup on Guam is the People's Daily Online, an organ of the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing.

On its "People Forum" earlier this month was a discussion of how facilities at Andersen Air Force Base on the island were being hardened and air defense systems were being moved in to protect against Chinese attack.

"The American island of Guam is getting bomb proof shelters for aircraft, fuel and ammo supplies and vital equipment," said one entry, which also pictured American B-52s sitting on a runway.

Guam would be central to American operations if the United States and China go to war because of miscalculations by either regarding Taiwan, developments on the Korean peninsula or access to the South China Sea, many defense and foreign analysts say.

"In the event of a conflict with (China), the United States will find a large portion of its relevant force structure located on Guam," said a May 2009 paper from the Naval War College in Rhode Island.

The South China Sea is the newest flashpoint in Sino-American relations that could cause both countries to "stumble" into a war if not careful, said John Pike, a defense and military expert who runs the website GlobalSecurity.org.

As the world's two largest economies and monumental trading partners, the incentives for the United States and China to avoid conflict remain considerable.

But there is no doubting a new bellicosity on China's part, experts say.

Earlier this month, for instance, The Global Times, another publication of the Chinese Communist Party, declared: "The time to use force has arrived in the South China Sea. Let's wage wars on the Philippines and Vietnam to avoid more wars."

It was a reference to its recent spats with those countries over rights to develop the South China Sea's oil and mineral resources, which are considered substantial.

And if an American company, such as ExxonMobil, were to announce new oil finds there, the Chinese "would not be happy," said Joshua Kurlantzick of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Indeed, the Global Times said a war would turn existing oil wells "into a sea of fire" and "Western oil companies will flee the area."

The Chinese, claiming historical precedents dating back centuries, have declared the South China Sea largely their own. They claim an area stretching 1,000 miles from their southernmost borders as an "exclusive economic zone."

Under international law, nations are supposed to claim no more than 200 miles out as exclusive economic zone, meaning they have sole rights to resources within that domain.

China is also declaring its exclusive economic zone to be sovereign territory, meaning other nations would have to request permission to enter it.

The United States, led by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, has been adamant in saying it won't accept China's sovereignty claims. Sovereign waters under international law are limited to 12 miles.

"The Chinese are clearly feeling their oats. There is always the danger they become too pushy," said Ted Carpenter, defense expert at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. "Their territorial claims in the South China Sea are breathtakingly bold."

While China eyes the resources in the region, the South China Sea has been called the "world's highway" because of the amount of shipping from all nations that goes through it.

Pike calls the Chinese claims "insane." He said they are declaring they will operate under "a different set of rules" than the rest of the world." He said the United States, which regards freedom of navigation in international waters as sacrosanct, could only agree to such claims at its peril.

"If we do that, we might as well bottle up the U.S. Navy in the Gulf of Mexico," he said.

"I think it (the South China Sea) is our best chance to go toe to toe with the Red Chinese."

For the United States under such a scenario, Pike added: "Guam is a front-row seat. It is essential."

Similarly, Thomas Mahnken of the Naval War College said, “Guam is occupying an increasingly important role for the United States.”

And Carpenter called it “a major (U.S.) military citadel” in the Western Pacific.

While most of the recent focus on Guam has involved the transfer of at least 8,000 Marines from Okinawa by 2014, the island’s air base and naval facilities figure evermore prominently in Pentagon moves to counter China’s growing threat to U.S. military hegemony in the Western Pacific, various defense studies and publications say.

“Guam plays a critical role in the maintaining stability in the Asia-Pacific region. All the proposed realignments and investments in military infrastructure on Guam will help ensure that our Armed Forces are appropriately postured to respond to a variety of interests in our region,” Del. Madeleine Bordallo of Guam said in a statement.

The Government Accountability Office, a research arm of Congress, said in June the buildup of all facilities is projected to cost \$7.5 billion by 2016. As part of an agreement with Japan to move the Marines off Okinawa, the Japanese are providing another \$6 billion, plus \$3.2 billion in loans.

The GAO also said the Air Force would have additional construction costs — for a “Guam Strike Initiative” — that would extend beyond 2016 that are not included in the \$7.5 billion. The initiative involves developing a global hub for intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, strike, and aerial refueling at Andersen Air Force Base.

In addition to strengthening defenses at Andersen, the U.S. has been moving B-2 Stealth bombers and drones to the island and making it a home for nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers.

By the 2020s, the Defense Department hopes to have a new generation of stealth bombers to penetrate Chinese airspace. They would also be able to control drones.(AT)

Air Force Magazine earlier this year described the Guam buildup as part of the U.S. “positioning forces which could threaten China’s supply lines through the South China Sea. The oil and raw materials transported through those shipping lanes are crucial to a surging Chinese economy — an economy paying for Beijing’s swiftly expanding military power.”

The magazine added: “The pivot point of this emerging strategy is Guam, the U.S. territory in the central Pacific within striking distance of the South China Sea. The island is also 1,800 miles from the coast of China, and therefore, within range of Chinese missiles. Asked why the U.S. was expanding Andersen Air Force Base and other bases on Guam, sites that could be hit by intermediate-range ballistic missiles, a senior U.S. officer replied, ‘The message to China is that we are here and we mean to stay.’”

A Congressional Research Service report in September said the Chinese “civilian and military commentators commonly have suspected that the U.S. defense buildup on Guam partly has been aimed at China.”

In recent years, China has routinely dispatched submarines near Guam to show the U.S. Navy it cannot regard the island as a sanctuary, according to numerous accounts in the U.S. and foreign press, as well as defense journals.

In the event of a U.S.-China conflict, it would be essential for U.S. ships, including those possibly carrying Marines, to quickly depart the U.S. naval base at Apra Harbor, said a 2009 report from the Naval War College that discussed Guam’s vulnerabilities.

“Guam’s single harbor provides a hostile submarine force with a tradition of unconventional tactics an opportunity to transform Apra Harbor into a critical vulnerability that can be exploited to indirectly attack United States forces located there,” it said.

Military history shows how surprise attacks by submarines can bottle up forces in such a base, the paper added.

And Guam’s vulnerability to Chinese missiles was highlighted in an August Department of Defense report. On page 31 is a multicolored map that shows targets within reach of Chinese weapons. Guam is shown as within range of China’s CSS-2 ballistic missiles and B-6 bombers with land-attack cruise missiles.

The Department of Defense report also shows how China regards Guam as a part of the outmost of two island chains in the Western Pacific that it considers extensions of the Chinese landmass even though it is a U.S. territory. Other parts of the chain include the Northern Mariannas, Palau and Iwo Jima.

The ultimate aim of the Chinese is to project power past both island chains and have the capability to deny the United States access within them if need be, many defense and foreign policy journals report. The new Chinese J-20 stealth fighter, a prototype of which was unveiled this year, is seen as part of that strategy, although the Defense Department estimates the plane will not obtain “operational capability” until 2018.

But such timetables regarding the Chinese have often proven wrong in the past.

“The Chinese military has moved forward faster than we’ve expected,” Mahnken said.