

U.S. military presence to remain thorn in relations with Japan: experts

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Xinhua) -- The U.S. military presence in Japan will remain a long term source of consternation between the two allies, in spite of a recent easing of tensions, some experts said.

"All you need is another rape case and it comes up as a high profile issue," said Rodger Baker, director of East Asia analysis at global intelligence company Stratfor.

Residents of Okinawa, a Japanese island that hosts about two-thirds of Japan's 40,000 U.S. troops, still recall the 1995 case in which three U.S. servicemen kidnapped and raped a 12-year-old Japanese girl. They continue to complain about noise from overhead U.S. aircraft and the island has seen mass demonstrations calling for U.S. forces to leave.

Last year, then Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama sparked a row when he called for a "partnership of equals" in a relationship dominated by Washington since the end of World War II.

When the dust cleared, Hatoyama resigned because of a broken campaign promise to shutter Futenma, a U.S. air base located in Okinawa.

The relationship underwent a public reset at the recent G20 summit in Toronto. Japan's new Prime Minister Naoto Kan pledged he will stick to a previous agreement with Washington to move Futenma to the north of the island, even though Okinawans want the base gone altogether.

U.S. President Barack Obama responded that he understands the delicacy of the matter and that he would strive to make the U.S. military presence more palatable to Tokyo.

Still, analysts said the problem is not going away.

"The issue is not dead," Baker said, adding that tensions are high with locals wherever U.S. troops are deployed overseas. In South Korea, for example, dissatisfaction with the U.S. military presence has led to a number of mass demonstrations over the years.

Doug Bandow, senior fellow at the Cato Institute, said the issue could become messy for Japan's ruling party, as Okinawans are unlikely to compromise over the issue.

The Kan administration may, however, take a cue from the former ruling Liberal Democratic Party, which in 2006 agreed to move Futenma but dithered on the relocation so as not to arouse anger in Okinawa, Bandow said.

"Kan's best hope is to kick the can down the road," he said.

Ichiro Fujisaki, Japanese Ambassador to the United States, said in a speech from Washington on Thursday that "we have to lessen the burden" on the people of Okinawa, but that the U.S.-Japan alliance "will be honored."

Richard Bush, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said Japan's leadership deemed the former prime minister's approach a political loser.

"They needed to cut their losses, they did so and that brought about an immediate improvement in U.S.-Japan relations," he said.

While the party will continue to deal with expectations raised by former Prime Minister Hatoyama, Kan is deflating those expectations, he said.

While Kan will feel Washington's pull on one side and Okinawa's tug on the other, he will respond more to the former, Bush said.

For now, both Washington and Tokyo are downplaying the military issue and Japan's leadership is focusing on the economy in the face of an ongoing global recession.

Baker said Japan understands its inability to provide fully for its defense, and a number of what Washington perceives as regional security concerns will cause the United States to keep a sharp eye on the region, he said.

The occasional need for humanitarian intervention and the threat of piracy are also reasons the United States wants to maintain a presence in Japan, he said.