

Washington may agree to tweak U.S.-Japan military alliance

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- During Obama's weekend trip to Japan, both sides agreed to a review of their military alliance.
- Japanese living near U.S. bases have complained that the facilities have brought noise, pollution.
- Washington is unlikely to undercut the DPJ's campaign pledge to conduct the review.

by Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, Nov. 17 (Xinhua) -- Despite recent tensions between the United States and Japan over the future of U.S. troops in Japan, Washington may be open to some degree of change in its military alliance with Tokyo, analysts said.

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But while the dynamics of the alliance may shift, it will remain intact, and U.S. troops are unlikely to pack up their bags and leave the island nation, analysts said.

During U.S. President Barack Obama's weekend trip to Japan, both sides agreed to a review of their military alliance, which could conclude before next November's Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation economic leaders meeting.

The agreement comes on the heels of a row between the two countries over the nature of the alliance, as Japan's newly elected Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama called for a "partnership of equals" in a relationship dominated by Washington since the end of World War II.

That assertiveness played out in a spat over the relocation of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, which the prime minister suggested could be moved off the island entirely, to the chagrin of U.S. officials.

Japanese living near U.S. bases have for years complained that the facilities have brought disturbing noise and pollution, as well as crime. Indeed, the infamous 1995 case in which three U.S. servicemen kidnapped and gang raped a 12-year-old Japanese girl is still fresh in the minds of locals.

But both sides dialed down their row several notches for the sake of the weekend's meeting and emphasized the importance of their relationship.

Matthew Gertken, an East Asia analyst at global intelligence company Stratfor, said part of Obama's trip was aimed at signaling to Tokyo that Washington is open to a review of the security alliance.

And despite recent disagreements, Washington is unlikely to undercut the Democratic Party of Japan's (DPJ) campaign pledge to conduct the review, he said.

The United States understands the need for the relationship to evolve and reflect existing geopolitical conditions, such as Japan's interest in playing a larger regional role, he said.

The DPJ signaled after Obama's visit that while a deadline for this reconsideration was not firm, the process would ideally be concluded by the end of the year.

"The Japanese feel the urgency, and want to meet their domestic commitments but not drive the wedge deeper with the Americans," Gertken said.

"Ultimately I think the two sides will arrive at a mutually acceptable agreement... but with some adjustments," he said.

Richard Bush, director of the center for Northeast Asia policy studies at the Washington, D.C.-based Brookings Institution, said: "U.S. officials understand the best approach is not to force the issue but to engage incrementally." The United States has a fair amount of experience

with new political parties coming to power in democratic systems, he added.

Washington, however, must not press Tokyo too hard, Bush said.

But that might be easier said than done, as U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates raised eyebrows during his last visit to Tokyo when he bluntly pressured Japan's new government to "move on" quickly with a prior agreement to build a new U.S. airbase in Okinawa.

Still, most of Japan's public views the presence of U.S. forces in their territory as necessary, unlike many in neighboring South Korea, for example.

"Generally public opinion in Japan is in favor of the alliance and there is an understanding of how the U.S. plays into geopolitical issues," he said.

Most protests against the presence of U.S. forces take place on the island of Okinawa, where most of the 47,000 U.S. troops in Japan are stationed. Residents of far-off cities such as Tokyo and Osaka tend not to pay as much attention to the matter.

Meanwhile, Gertken noted that while the weekend's meetings were positive, there will be some hurdles going forward.

"There are going to be some bumps as they fine tune the channels of communications," but the outcome will likely resemble what occurred several years back in South Korea, he said.

When former President Roh Moo-hyun took power in 2003, South Korea moved to assert itself militarily in the face of a widely unpopular U.S. troop presence.

While U.S. forces remain, Seoul has since shifted the direction of its military and kick started its emerging defense industry.

Japan may see similar changes, although Washington is unlikely to completely give up its bases in the land, Gertken said.

"Both parties are firmly committed to the U.S. umbrella," he said. "On the surface the U.S. can seem skeptical (of change) but in end it is willing to hear what its allies have to say," he said.

Some analysts, however, believe that more than a tweaking of the existing relationship is in order.

Doug Bandow, fellow at the Washington, D.C.-based CATO Institute, believes the U.S.-Japan defense alliance is no longer necessary, as the Cold War is over and Japan -- the world's No. 2 economy -- is capable of defending itself without the aid of U.S. forces.

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