

Japan asserting itself, but how far will it go?

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by Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, Oct. 28 (Xinhua) -- Japan's recently elected Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama on Monday called for a more equal relationship with chief ally the United States. But how far the new government will go in asserting itself remains to be seen, experts here say.

The call comes during a time of prickly relations between the two countries, as Japan's new government seeks to shift the dynamics of the long-standing alliance, and create a "relationship of equals."

Japan's newly found firmness has resulted in a row over the U.S. Marine Corps Futenma Air Base in Okinawa, which the prime minister suggested could be re-located outside the island, despite the Obama administration's blunt rejection of any such move.

The presence of U.S. forces, currently 47,000 strong, has drawn fire from locals for decades. Major complaints include pollution, noise from aircraft movements and the brutal rapes of a number of Japanese women and children by U.S. servicemen.

As a result, Hatoyama recently said he wanted to have "frank talks" with the United States over the presence of its troops on Japanese soil.

Rodger Baker, director of East Asian analysis at Stratfor, a global intelligence company, said a complete break from the United States, on which Japan has depended for security for more than 50 years, will not come for some time.

While Japan could fend off an invasion, its defense force lacks other capabilities, such as the ability to defend or evacuate Japanese citizens abroad. Tokyo also has no nuclear weapons, and building them could stir unwanted controversy in the region, he said.

Richard C. Bush, director of the Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies at the Washington, D.C.-based Brookings Institution, said Japan's long-term stance would be determined jointly by the country's new leaders and its career officials, those with a deep understanding of the complexities of the nation's policies.

"I have no doubt that Japan's new leaders are sincere in what they believe," Bush said. "But in any democratic system, new leaders must adjust their proposals to reality to some extent."

Doug Bandow, senior fellow at the Washington, D.C.-based CATO Institute, said it was still too early to tell how far the island nation would assert itself.

Japan had been tied to the United States for 50 years, he noted. "It's one thing to push for (more distance from the United States), but it's another thing to do it in practice."

Still, Tokyo has for years talked of re-balancing what it views as a lopsided partnership with the United States. Baker said Japan's military ties to the United States mean its defense forces must follow U.S. security interests. That worked well during the Cold War, when both nations aimed to keep the Soviet Union at bay but, since the early 1990s, their security goals had drifted apart.

The United States' main focus was now Afghanistan, a conflict in which Japan had no stake. Japan's interests lay in securing its supply lines in such pirate-infested waters as the Straights of Malacca, for which its armed forces were not properly structured, he said.

Despite its stiffening backbone, Tokyo's stance should not be misunderstood as anti-Americanism, Baker said.

Hatoyama's recent statements were also a bit of political posturing intended to differentiate the Democratic Party of Japan from its predecessor in the eyes of constituents, Baker explained.

"They are not challenging the United States, they are just trying to assert themselves a little more," he said.

Indeed, despite heightened tensions, Japan's prime minister upheld the importance of his country's alliance with the United States.

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"The close and equal alliance between Japan and the United States is the foundation" of efforts aimed at peace in Asia that would benefit Japan and the rest of the world, he told reporters.

More equality, he said Monday in his first foreign policy speech to the Diet, would mean Japan's defense force could better contribute to global security.

"Being equal means a relationship in which Japan can also actively propose roles and concrete actions that the Japan-U.S. alliance could perform for global peace and security," he said.

The current scenario has played out before in the region. The Republic of Korea, Baker noted, was in the same position five years ago as Japan now. 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.

For its part, Washington has its own reasons for wanting to remain in Japan. "Forward deployment has been the guarantee of U.S. national security," Richard C. Bush said.

Bandow said some U.S. officials still believed it was better for the United States to set the global agenda.

But he is skeptical of Washington's ability to maintain the status quo and said the United States must accept that it would not always play a dominant role in Asia, especially considering the many emerging nations with differing goals.

"So will the Obama administration be able to accommodate change or will it fight it? Will it be more accepting of other nations that want to take a larger role?" That would be an important test for the Obama administration, said Bandow.

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