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THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION'S SECURITY STRATEGY AND THE JAPAN-US ALLIANCE

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Due to a recent shift in American policy toward China, Okinawa is becoming of increasing strategic importance to the United States. This was manifested in the power game between Japan, the US and China in the East China Sea triggered by the September collision between a Chinese trawler and Japanese Coast Guard vessels near the Senkaku Islands belonging to Ishigaki city, Okinawa Prefecture, Japan. The subsequent visits to Asia by US President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton are now considered part of the American strategic hedge against (or a containment strategy for) China. The change in American strategy can be traced in a series of strategic documents issued earlier this year.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

US President Obama issued in May his first National Security Strategy (NSS), a grand strategy based on which other US national defense reports, including the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) and the Ballistic Missile Defense Review (BMDR), are to be produced by the Department of Defense. In other words, the NSS serves as a general framework of American security documents.

The latest NSS sets out a comprehensive security policy based on “smart” power, distinguishing itself from the previous NSS relying largely on traditional security. It identifies four national interests that the US should pursue: security, prosperity, values and international order. While giving his first priority to the defense of US territory, Obama vows to pursue American prosperity by adhering to an international order based on universal values. China is perceived as a challenge to this US endeavor, with the document stating that American prosperity would be maintained by deterring the rise of China.


Washington has been hedging against China as a potential threat, identifying the country as part of “the arc of instability” (QDR 2001) and one of “the countries at strategic crossroads” (QDR 2006). The warning was toned down in the latest QDR released in February 2010, yet China continued to be identified as a potential threat, with concern expressed over the expansion of its military capabilities and the lack of transparency in its long-term intentions.

Furthermore, the Department of Defense’s annual report on China’s military power, released in August, raised an alarm that the People’s Liberation Army Navy was developing capabilities that could extend its operational reach beyond the “first island chain” of defense, which stretches from the East China Sea through Taiwan to the South China Sea, to reach the “second island chain”, which runs from the Izu Islands through Guam and Papua New Guinea. The QDR 2010 also pointed out China’s intention to win the battle over islands in order to secure marine resources by maintaining sea control capabilities in the adjacent sea that falls within the first island chain as well as sea denial capabilities in the areas between the first and second island chains to deny an enemy control of the area.

The QDR 2010 also raised concern over the improvement in China’s so-called anti-access and area denial (A2AD) capabilities intended to prevent US

naval vessels from accessing and entering certain areas in the Western Pacific in the events of Taiwan and Japan contingencies. To counter China's A2AD policy, the QDR stated that Washington would adopt an air-sea battle concept (ASBC). The concept calls for air and naval forces to integrate capabilities across all operational domains—air, sea, land, space, and cyberspace—based on an analysis of military unbalance in the Western Pacific. The AirSea Battle report issued by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA), which first proposed the concept, stated that China was aiming to establish a “keep-out” zone in the sea 1,500 km of the Chinese coast to deny US access. If China succeeds in this, US forward deployment bases at Andersen, Kadena, Iwakuni, Misawa, and Sasebo will become vulnerable to pre-emptive strikes by China. Washington may be required to relocate some of these forward deployment bases farther outward to reduce vulnerabilities.

Japan needs to continue hedging against China as long as Japan sits adjacent to China geographically and China remains a military threat to Japan. However, Japan alone cannot counter China's massive military power. It needs US assistance in maintaining deterrence capabilities against China within the framework of the Japan-US alliance. The Nuclear Posture Review released in April stated that the US will shift from nuclear weapons to non-nuclear capabilities in reassuring its allies extended deterrence. This will increase the importance of the role of US forces in Okinawa.

Given the stalled negotiations over the relocation of the Futenma Air Base in Okinawa, Washington may want to rethink the US military presence in Japan should the above-mentioned conditions materialize. How will Japan secure extended deterrence from the US in such an event? If there is going to be a change in US military posture in Okinawa, Japan will need to move the Self-Defense Forces southwestward to fill the power vacuum and integrate the SDF further with the US forces in Japan in nuclear deterrence. 

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