

Changes in US

By Keizo Nabeshima

Reorganisation of US forces in Japan is a crucial issue affecting Tokyo's security. As an equal partner of the bilateral defence alliance, Japan should not blindly accept US policy decisions

THE transformation of US forces overseas, which is now under way, will have a profound effect on Japan's security policies. Through the reorganisation, the Bush administration plans to enhance the rapid-deployment capabilities of US forces to deal with terrorism and other threats. The realignment will also allow US forces to conduct military activities outside areas where they are stationed, and give America's allies expanded military roles.

The administration has changed the Clinton administration's policy of retaining 100,000 US troops in Asia. As for US military forces in Japan, it has proposed to reorganise the command system and remove or consolidate military installations. This represents a de facto reorganisation of the Japan-US security system.

In areas where US military installations and units will be relocated, strong opposition has arisen to the plans. Although the plans will have serious effects on the bilateral security system, the government has failed to explain them to the Diet and local autonomies involved. The government regards the Self-Defence Forces and the bilateral

security system as the key to the nation's security.

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi should recognise that giving blind support to US military reorganisation plans could undermine public support for the bilateral security system.

US President George W. Bush laid out his plans for reorganising US forces overseas last November. The plans were intended to strengthen US military capability to deal with new types of threats following the 9/11 attacks and to re-deploy troops in suitable locations. Forward-deployment troops would be repositioned on a global scale. Plans call for cutting the US military presence in Germany, which clashed with the United States over the Iraq war, and scale down the troop level in South Korea by one-third.

In Japan, the main points of the reported plans are as follows:

- Consolidating the 13th Air Force in Guam with the 5th Air Force Yokota Air Base outside Tokyo;
- Moving the headquarters of US Army I Corps in Washington state to Camp Zama, Kanagawa Prefecture;
- Assigning a second aircraft carrier to the 7th Fleet based at Yokosuka Naval Base, Kanagawa Prefecture;
- Moving part of the 3rd Marine Division to mainland Japan; and,

- Transferring night takeoff/landing practice operations of carrier-based aircraft from Atsugi Naval Air Station in Kanagawa Prefecture to Iwakuni Marine Corps Air Station in Yamaguchi Prefecture.

The existing national-defence programme outline unveiled in 1995 says the Japan-US security system, along with the SDF, is indispensable

Koizumi must recognise that giving irrational support to US military reorganisation plans may undermine public support for the bilateral security system. If US forces in Japan were to expand the scope of their current operations to the Indian Ocean and the Middle East from Asia and the Pacific, they will certainly exceed the purpose of their presence as defined in the Japan-US security treaty, thus creating problems for the Koizumi government

for the nation's security.

Koizumi and Bush reaffirmed in their joint statement issued in June 2001 that "forward US presence is critical to regional stability (in Asia and the Pacific)."

In 1996, Japan and the US agreed, in their joint declaration on security, that close defence

cooperation between the two countries is a prerequisite of the bilateral security alliance.

Before the 9/11 attacks, Japan and the US had established a system for strengthening cooperation to deal with the traditional threats of North Korea's nuclear-arms and missile development and China's defence build-up.

After the 9/11 attacks and the wars against

prets the scope of the Far East as "Japan and its surrounding areas north of the Philippines." The Japan-US joint declaration on security effectively revised the Japan-US security system, as it was intended to contribute to "peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region." It now applies to a wider area than before. Plans for reorganising US forces overseas, unveiled last November, reportedly were made on the assumption that they should be ready for deployment outside areas where they are stationed.

If US forces in Japan were to expand the scope of their current operations to the Indian Ocean and the Middle East from Asia and the Pacific, they would exceed the purpose of their presence as defined in the Japan-US security treaty. The question is: Will the government give convincing explanations to the public concerning the reorganisation of US forces in Japan?

As it gears up for reorganisation of US forces overseas, Washington reportedly is seeking expanded defence roles for its allies. The US is likely to seek stronger roles for its military installations as well as increased defence cooperation on missile defence and other issues.

The reorganisation of the US military presence overseas, intended to improve the operational efficiency, could increase the importance of US military installations in Japan.

Japan gives unparalleled host-nation support to US forces, appropriating 244.1 billion yen for the

force configuration challenge Japan

purpose under the fiscal 2004 budget. It is doubtful that the government will be able to convince the public, amid the fiscal crisis, of the need to increase an already massive amount of host-nation support to US forces in Japan as part of the reorganisation programme. The Japanese and US governments held talks in San Francisco last month on reorganising US forces in Japan. The governor and mayors of Kanagawa Prefecture, which hosts a number of US military installations, asked the government for information on the talks, but the government has failed to comply with the request. Reorganisation of US forces in Japan is a crucial issue affecting Japan's security. As an equal partner of the defence alliance, Japan should not blindly accept US policy decisions.

The government is conducting a drastic review of Japan's defence capability as part of efforts to compile the defence programme outline by December. The government faces an important challenge in overhauling the national defence programme in conjunction with the reorganisation of US forces and making judgement on the exercise of the right of collective self-defence and other constitutional issues. The task should start with studies on what role Japan should play as an important player in the international community. COURTESY JAPAN TIMES

The writer, former chief editorial writer for Kyodo News, writes on political and international affairs