

Yonaguni plans raise questions of Taiwan

Written by I-chung Lai
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Recent news reports said the US and Japan are planning to station military on Yonaguni Island in response to demands from local residents following China's military expansion. A closer analysis, however, shows that it is more likely that such a military deployment would be the result of US and Japanese questions about the future strategic direction of Taiwan. In other words, the move is aimed at Taiwan rather than China.

Yonaguni lies almost on the same latitude as Hualien, and when the weather is good, it is possible to see Hualien from the island. Yonaguni residents often go to Hualien for shopping on weekends, and some Yonaguni children study in Hualien. It is the Japanese territory closest to Taiwan. Taiwan shields Yonaguni from China, and it lies quite a distance away from the Philippines, so there can only be two reasons for stationing troops there.

The first reason is that the US and Japan believe there is a very high risk of conflict in the Taiwan Strait, and that after an outbreak of war, it is very likely that Chinese military would enter and leave Taiwan on the east coast, which would be the reason for strengthening the military presence on Yonaguni.

This implies that the US and Japan do not buy into the claim by Taiwan's government that cross-strait tensions have fallen and that the situation has stabilized, and that they are stationing military east of Hualien to prepare for all eventualities.

The second possibility is that the US and Japan feel the accession of President Ma Ying-jeou's administration has brought about a fundamental change in the direction of Taiwanese strategy and the two countries are therefore preparing for the possibility that Taiwan would side with China in a hypothetical future conflict between the US and Japan on the one hand, and China on the other.

The fact is that after Ma hinted at the possibility of war with Japan over the Diaoyutai and that he would tolerate calls within the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) to side with China against Japan, after the National Security Council's advocacy that Taiwan abandon its passive sea and air defense, and after the recent refusal to meet with Japan's representative to Taiwan, Tokyo is questioning the government's strategy direction, while the US is beginning to worry over the possible Finlandization of Taiwan.

These concerns prohibit the US-Japanese alliance from treating Taiwan as an ally. If Taiwan were to cooperate with their opponent, Hualien would no longer function as a shield from China and Yonaguni would be on the front line of the conflict and it would also be used to monitor Taiwan's actions.

Regardless of whether the US and Japan station troops on Yonaguni because they are worried about Taiwan or because they want to monitor Taiwan, such action does not coincide with what the Ma administration has said.

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Late this year, Japan will announce its defense strategy outline, and next year is the 50th anniversary of the US-Japanese alliance. By that time, the plans of the two allies will become clearer.

However, the fact that the promise to let Taiwan assemble P3-C anti-submarine aircraft fell through tells us that Taipei has become a strategic uncertainty factor.

As a result of the government moving closer to China, distancing itself from the US and opposing Japan, Taiwan has gone from being a friend that cooperates with the US and Japan to a country that the two allies must defend themselves against. The stationing of troops on Yonaguni will be the first step in this change.

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TRANSLATED BY PERRY SVENSSON

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