

Japan opens radar station 150km from Diaoyutai Islands

Written by Taiwan Tati Cultural & Educational Foundation
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Members of Japan Self-Defense Forces hold an opening ceremony for a new military base on the island of Yonaguni in Okinawa Prefecture, Japan.

Photo: Reuters / Kyodo / Files

Japan yesterday switched on a radar station in the East China Sea, giving it a permanent intelligence-gathering post close to Taiwan and a group of islands disputed by Japan and China, drawing an angry response from Beijing.

The new Japan Self-Defense Forces base on Yonaguni Island is at the western extreme of a string of Japanese islands in the East China Sea, 150km south of the Diaoyutai Islands (釣台) — known as the Senkakus in Japan. The Diaoyutais are claimed by Taiwan, China and Japan.

China has raised concerns with its neighbors and in the West with its assertive claim to most of the South China Sea where Taiwan, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei have overlapping claims. Japan has long been mired in a territorial dispute with China over the East China Sea islands.

“Until yesterday, there was no coastal observation unit west of the main Okinawa island. It was a vacuum we needed to fill,” said Daigo Shiomitsu, a Ground Self-Defense Forces lieutenant colonel who commands the new base on Yonaguni. “It means we can keep watch on territory surrounding Japan and respond to all situations.”

Shiomitsu yesterday attended a ceremony at the base with 160 military personnel and about 50 dignitaries. Construction of some buildings, which feature white walls and traditional Okinawan red-tiled roofs, is still unfinished.

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The 30km² island is home to about 1,500 people, who mostly raise cattle and grow sugar cane. The Self-Defense Forces contingent and family members are to increase the population by 20 percent.

“This radar station is going to irritate China,” Nihon University professor and retired major general Nozomu Yoshitomi said.

In addition to being a listening post, the facility could be used as a base for military operations in the region, he added.

In a statement, the Chinese Ministry of National Defense said the international community needed to be on high alert to Japan’s military expansion.

“The Diaoyu Islands are China’s inherent territory. We are resolutely opposed to any provocative behavior by Japan aimed at Chinese territory,” it said. “The activities of Chinese ships and aircraft in the relevant waters and airspace are completely appropriate and legal.”

The listening post fits into a wider military buildup along the island chain, which stretches 1,400km from the Japanese home islands.

Policymakers last year told reporters it was part of a strategy to keep China at bay in the Western Pacific as Beijing gains control of the South China Sea.

Yonaguni is only about 100km east of Taiwan, near the edge of a controversial air defense identification zone established by China in 2013.

Over the next five years, Japan is to increase its Self-Defense Forces in the East China Sea by about 20 percent to almost 10,000 personnel, including missile batteries that would help Japan draw a defensive curtain along the island chain.

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Chinese ships sailing from their eastern seaboard must pass through this barrier to reach the Western Pacific, access to which Beijing needs both as a supply line to the rest of the world's oceans and for naval power projection.

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