



US EXPANDS ITS INFLUENCE IN THE WESTERN PACIFIC: CHINA REACTS

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Saipan, a small island located in the Western Pacific, will now form a crucial part of the US Rebalancing Strategy toward Asia Pacific. The island located about 200km north of Guam, already finds its place in history as a battlefield between the Japanese and the Americans during World War II. The US Air Force now plans to lease 33 acres of land within the island for a period of 50 years, to construct a 'divert airfield', which will serve as a back up to the Joint Region Marianas in Guam. The construction will be an expansion to the already existing international airport at Saipan.ⁱ This strategic move by the US not only falls under the purview of their Pivot Policy but also finds a place in their 'Air Sea Battle' strategy which is yet to take concrete shape.

As per the US Department of State Foreign Affairs, the Saipan Island, known to be a part of the Northern Mariana Islands was granted to the US as a UN Trust Territory in 1947. Over the years, after having entered into a political union with the United States, the people of the Northern Mariana Islands began a system of self governance.ⁱⁱ The US thus has claims over the island otherwise. John Reed, a US military analyst says that the strategic location of the island will enable the US to defend itself and its allies from any potential attack over the Second Island Chain which extends from northern Japan to the Bonin and Mariana Islands. The new base is claimed to allow the US to hold fighters, tankers, fuel storage facilities, aircrafts, cargo as well as a personnel staff of over 700 people to conduct military operations, humanitarian assistance or disaster relief in times of need. Meanwhile, Eloy S. Inos, governor of Saipan wrote to the US Air Force asking them to rethink the decision as the local people were not in favour of the idea. The

governor also requested the US to consider Tinian instead, keeping in mind that two thirds of Tinian had already been leased to the US Department of Defence.ⁱⁱⁱ Official documents are yet to be released by the US to get a clearer picture of their actual goals and plans in Saipan.

There have also been proposals for the regular deployment of aircrafts in partner or allied regions such as Indonesia, Philippines and Malaysia.^{iv} It is clear that the US is certainly looking towards increasing its influence in the Asia Pacific region either by the expansion or renovation of already existing military bases or by the strategy of offshore balancing where it militarily and economically supports its allies and partners in the region to balance the power equation.

It is also interesting to note that while reports of the setup of this military base were out, Chinese Defence Minister Chang Wanquan was on a four day visit to the United States where he met with the former US Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice and his own counterpart Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel. This was Chang's first visit after having assumed his post as the Defence Minister. US for the first time invited China to participate in the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC), the biggest naval exercise led by the US in the Pacific. The two officials discussed a number of relevant issues varying from enhancement of military relations to China's territorial disputes. With regard to the latter, Chang reiterated that China would always ensure to safeguard its core interests which included defending its own territory. Chang also made sure to stress on the fact that US involvement in Asia Pacific should in no way "target a specific country in the region" and that the two nations should "refrain from gaining one's own interest at the expense of the interest of the other".^v These strong statements made by the Chinese minister clearly highlighted the Chinese sentiments with regard to the US Pivot Policy.

US engagement in the region has and will always be looked at with suspicion by China. The US high level visits along with activities in the Asia Pacific region clearly reinforce their focus and strategy towards the Asia Pacific. Admiral Robert Willard, the Commander of the US Pacific Command, back in March 2010 during a US Congressional Committee claimed that the increasing Chinese military buildup in the Asia Pacific was a matter of great concern for the US as well as its allies in the region which include South Korea and Japan as well as those in South East Asia and Oceania^{vi}. US hence will continue to closely engage with countries in the

region in order to counter balance China's growing military capabilities and at the same time protect its allies and partners in the region.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)

End notes

ⁱ "US to build base on Saipan to counter PLA missiles: analyst", *Want China Times*, 30 September 2013, see <http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclasscnt.aspx?id=20130930000100&cid=1101&MainCatID=11>

ⁱⁱ "U.S. Department of State Foreign Affairs Manual Volume 7 Consular Affairs", see <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/86756.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Haidee V. Eugenio, "US Air Force Urged anew to put Divert Airfield on Tinian", *Saipan Tribune*, 12 August 2013, see <http://www.saipantribune.com/newsstory.aspx?newsID=139419&cat=1>

^{iv} Michael Evans, "US bolsters island bases as insurance on China", *The Australian*, 27 August 2013, see <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/us-bolsters-island-bases-as-insurance-on-china/story-fnb64oi6-1226704524741#>

^v "What signals does the Defence Minister's visit to the US send out?", *People's Daily Online*, 21 August 2013, see <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90883/8373228.html>

^{vi} Amitav Acharya, "The United States in Asia Pacific: The Changing Balance of Power", *Op-Eds*, Canada Asia View Points, 29 April 2010, see <http://www.asiapacific.ca/editorials/canada-asia-viewpoints/editorials/united-states-asia-pacific-changing-balance-power>