

America's Unsinkable Fleet

Why the U.S. military is pouring forces into a remote West Pacific island.

By Christian Caryl

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Feb. 26, 2007 issue - For an out-of-the-way spit of land in the West Pacific, Guam has been getting a lot of interesting visitors recently. First came a steady stream of Pentagon bureaucrats and senior U.S. military officers. Then, a few weeks ago, a high-ranking delegation of Japanese officials arrived. And this week the island is set to greet its most illustrious guest yet: U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney.

So why all the fuss over a tropical island just 30 miles long, known mainly for its white-sand beaches and glorious sunsets? The answer: the Pentagon has begun a major redeployment of U.S. forces in the region, pulling troops and equipment out of sometimes unreliable allies and beefing up its presence in more-congenial locales. First on its list is Guam, a U.S. territory since 1898 that is fast becoming the linchpin of Washington's new Asia strategy. Current U.S. forces on the island number just a few thousand but within a decade will total well over 20,000—about the same size as the Bush administration's planned surge in Iraq. By comparison, there are some 29,000 U.S. troops left in South Korea, yet despite the dangers of a nuclear-armed North, that number is expected to drop significantly.

At a time when most of the world's attention is focused on the United States' misadventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, Pentagon planners are quietly working on ways to fortify the U.S. presence in East Asia. And they're looking to do so in ways that will give them a free hand in a wide range of contingencies—including fighting regional terrorists and a possible showdown with China. Guam offers the U.S. military both proximity to potential hot spots and the advantages of operating off U.S. soil. The

transfer of forces to the island also reflects the Pentagon's determination to give regional allies such as South Korea and Japan more responsibility for their own security.

Guam, a sleepy but diverse place that looks like a cross between Micronesia and Middle America, has long served as a U.S. air base and way station for troops traveling through the Pacific. At the end of the cold war, the Pentagon began shutting down some facilities on the island. But then came September 11, and a dramatic reassessment of America's global forces. Former secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld began to advocate the lily-pad strategy: rather than relying on large, static bases in Germany and South Korea, the Pentagon should create a global network of jumping-off points for quick responses to unpredictable attacks. Guam is an ideal lily pad, since the United States can act there without seeking permission from allies, says Honolulu-based defense analyst Richard Halloran. Declares Carl Peterson of the Guam Chamber of Commerce: "This is the U.S. in Asia. This is the tip of the spear."

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It's also well positioned for possible trouble to come. As Rear Adm. Charles Leidig, U.S. Navy commander on Guam, points out, if you take a map and draw a circle with Guam at the center and a radius of 1,500 nautical miles—equivalent to three hours' flying time or two to three days by ship—you come close to the main islands of Japan, Okinawa, Indonesia and the Philippines. China and the Korean Peninsula are only a bit farther off. So are several of the world's most important sea lanes, such as the Strait of Malacca, through which some 50 percent of the world's oil passes each year.

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The nature of the U.S. reorganization reinforces this point. Washington and Tokyo have agreed to move 8,000 Marines to Guam from Okinawa by 2014, at a cost of \$10 billion (60 percent of which will be paid for by the Japanese government). But this is only the most public part of a broader buildup that has largely escaped notice. If all the pieces come together, it could mean billions more in Defense Department funds and a total increase in Guam's population (which is currently just 170,000) of 35,000.

Guam is already home to a major U.S. Navy port and one of the biggest bases in the U.S. Air Force, featuring twin two-mile-long runways. Not long after September 11, flights of massive B-52 bombers began returning to Andersen to carry out regular training missions. Now the Air Force has begun to prepare for the deployment of tanker aircraft and up to 48 fighter planes, including the state-of-the-art F-22 Raptor. Andersen has also already started construction of a \$52.8 million project that will house up to 10 Global Hawks—large unmanned spy planes that, according to Pacific Command Air Force Gen. Paul Hester, could end up replacing aging U-2 spy planes now based in South Korea.

Meanwhile, the Navy has turned its port at Guam's Apra Harbor into a home for two Los Angeles-class nuclear-powered attack submarines, with a third to come later this year. It also plans to refurbish wharves to accommodate aircraft carriers and to transform Guam into a base for its new Littoral Combat Ship (a shallow-draft stealth ship designed to operate close to shore) and Trident submarines. The Tridents, immense cold-war-era craft converted to fire Tomahawk cruise missiles, can also be used by Navy Special Operations Forces, who can set off on missions in mini-submarines launched through the Tridents' missile ports. Guam is already home to an undisclosed number of Navy SEALs, many of whom have seen duty in the war on terror, and their number will likely grow.

Guam's new capabilities, however, are designed for more than just low-intensity conflicts. The attack submarines that will soon be based there, for example, probably wouldn't be much use in a conflict with North Korea or Qaeda-allied terrorists in the Philippines; the presence of the subs, experts say, is clearly aimed at the possibility of a naval confrontation with China over the Taiwan Strait. Similarly, analysts argue, the stationing of F-22s and tanker planes on Guam points to the Pentagon's desire to ensure dominance in the air should it have to fight the Chinese. China's media often worry about just this scenario, but not everyone agrees that China is the main target of the Guam buildup. Evan Medeiros of the RAND Corporation says "the initial impetus and primary driver" were to restructure the U.S. military for the wide range of operations it now faces, from fighting the war on terror to chasing pirates and conducting humanitarian missions.

In the complicated post-9/11 world, the United States believes it must be able to respond to various threats as flexibly as possible. This means keeping its forces close to the action. In the past that's required basing them in other countries' territories. But Guam offers an almost unique combination of a good location, excellent facilities (including a topnotch harbor, vast warehouses and massive airfields) and a lack of political restraints. As Kurt Campbell, a former White House staffer and Defense Department official now at the Center for a New American Security, says, "[Guam is] a point from which you can do a variety of things. And it's a place to remind people that you're still focused on the region."

Campbell points out that these secondary missions, such as protecting sea lanes, countering weapons proliferation and conducting relief missions, remain important; the U.S. military's humanitarian efforts after the tsunami of December 2005 gave a huge boost to the country's reputation in Asia. Brad Glosserman, executive director of Pacific Forum CSIS, a Hawaii-based think tank, agrees. The Asia-Pacific region, he says, "is a

jigsaw puzzle where all the pieces are changing shape and size all the time. China's the big story—but there are also changes going in on Japan, India, South Korea, Taiwan."

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One such development driving the move to Guam has been the steady withdrawal of the United States from South Korea in recent years (more than 9,000 troops have left in the last three years)—a result, in part, of rising anti-Americanism there and Rumsfeld's reluctance to keep troops in politically sensitive places. Some Air Force units that have pulled out of South Korea have already arrived on Guam; others may be yet to come. That, along with the planned removal of the Marines from Okinawa, has led some commentators to characterize the Guam expansion as evidence of a virtual U.S. retreat from East Asia. But Campbell and others disagree: "I would see this not as a retrenchment but as a diversification." Indeed, after years of maintaining an even balance between its Atlantic and Pacific fleets, the U.S. Navy is now clearly emphasizing its force in Asia.

Whatever the rationale, the changes represent good news for Guam's population. The locals were hit hard in the early 1990s when the U.S. military's post-cold-war drawdown, combined with the Asian financial crises and the resulting plunge in tourism, caused the loss of thousands of skilled and unskilled jobs on the island. Guamanians are hoping that the Pentagon's new plan can bring billions in investment into the territory as well as new support for its sagging infrastructure. Contractors are already maneuvering for deals to build housing and other structures. Real-estate prices shot up 50 percent between 2005

and 2006 and there were more property sales in the fourth quarter of last year than in all of 2003.

To be sure, hurdles remain, such as ensuring that the Marines from Okinawa actually make the move. The deal, which requires Japanese cooperation, has already run into political problems there. Then there's the possibility that local activists in Guam will throw a wrench into the works. Some of Guam's indigenous Chamorro people, who wield great influence on the island, have opposed the changes, warning that the military could overrun the island. The Pentagon, which already controls one third of the territory, has promised not to expand this share, but that pledge could prove hard to keep. Still, most Guamanians support the buildup, given their traditional patriotism—traumatic memories linger of Japan's occupation during World War II—and the potential economic benefits the rebasing will bring.

Guam's significance as a regional base and steppingstone for U.S. military power therefore seems set to grow exponentially. Notes Gov. Felix Camacho: "We can no longer be ignored as some distant American territory." He seems right about that. If, as many in the region predict, the 21st century ends up belonging to the nations of the Pacific—and conflict in the region rises—Guam will have to get used to being in the headlines.