

U.S. Presses Japan on Military Centers

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The plan goes beyond the scope of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty.

Washington is putting pressure on Japan to host command bases for all four branches of the U.S. military to swiftly deal with new threats of terrorism and regional conflicts, Japanese government officials said.

The problem is that playing host to such command centers would go beyond the scope of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, which states that U.S. troops are stationed here to maintain peace and security in Japan and the Far East. The U.S. military can use Japanese facilities and land only for those purposes, according to the treaty.

The U.S. plan is to set up command centers in Japan for the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps.

That would require the relocation of the U.S. Army's I Corps headquarters in Washington state to Camp Zama in Kanagawa Prefecture.

If that occurs, the U.S. military could flexibly deploy small troop units to areas in "the arc of instability," which stretches from Africa and the Balkan Peninsula through the Middle East to Southeast Asia.

But the Japanese government would find it difficult to convince the population that a regional conflict in Africa, for example, threatens security in Japan and the Far East.

"In order to make the U.S. plan happen, we must revise the bilateral security treaty or

change our interpretation of it. But we can't do that," a senior government official said.

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in his scheduled meeting Tuesday with President George W. Bush in New York was expected to discuss U.S. plans for military realignment, but he was not likely to go into details nor discuss moves to get Japan to play host to the command centers.

U.S. officials already are unhappy with what they view as stalling tactics by Japan on making a decision.

Working-level talks on the issue started in November after Washington's global military realignment plan was announced.

But Tokyo has not given a definite answer about hosting the command centers.

In the summer, local governments already hosting U.S. military bases opposed any realignment plan that would increase their burden. Japanese government officials did not pursue the issue at that time for fear of a public backlash before the July Upper House election.

Since the election, the U.S. side has pushed the plan in talks among officials of the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Defense Department, the Japanese Foreign Ministry and the Defense Agency. Additional talks have been carried out between officers of the U.S. military and the Self-Defense Forces.

Frustrated by a lack of response from Japan, U.S. defense officials visited Japan earlier this month to press for an answer by ruling Liberal Democratic Party officials. The U.S. officials also complained that the Foreign Ministry was reluctant to make a decision.

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