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by Simon Tisdall

Escalating tension with China, violently illustrated by renewed anti-Japanese protests in Shanghai and other big cities at the weekend, is increasing pressure on Tokyo to expand its military capabilities and back a deepening strategic alliance with the US reaching from East Asia to the Gulf.

Japan's pacifist postwar constitution restricts its armed forces to self-defence. About 50,000 US troops in Okinawa and other bases guarantee the country's security in return for a \$5bn (£2.6bn) Japanese cash contribution.

But defence analysts say the perceived Chinese threat, a more assertive, nationalistic Japanese mindset, and Washington's wish to use Japan as a command post for operations extending to the

Middle East are transforming Japan's formerly semi-detached defence posture.

In other words, after 60 years largely spent keeping its head down, Japan appears destined to supplant Australia as Washington's "deputy sheriff" in the Asia-Pacific region and become a pillar of America's 21st-century security architecture.

According to Kazuya Sakamoto of Osaka University, Japan and Britain are central to a far-reaching, post-9/11 US review of its overseas force deployments.

"The basic idea is that the US will gradually withdraw from the Eurasian landmass while assigning the two island nations at the east and west of Eurasia, Japan and Britain, even greater importance as strategic bases to ensure stability in Europe and Asia," Professor Sakamoto writes in the current issue of Japan Echo magazine.

An important element in this transformation fell into place last week when Japan agreed in

principle to allow the command headquarters of the US Army's I Corps to transfer from Washington state, on the US Pacific coast, to Camp Zama, near Yokohama, south of Tokyo.

The I Corps has responsibility for operations in the Pacific and Indian oceans, extending to the conflict zones and oilfields of the Gulf. The primary focus of its forward deployment is likely to be the defence of Taiwan, regional challenges posed by China's military expansion, and the nuclear standoff with North Korea.

But the US has also reportedly proposed that command operations of the 13th Airforce, now on Guam in the Pacific -- a base for long-range bombers and tanker aircraft frequently deployed in the Middle East -- be moved to Yokota airbase in Tokyo.

"The ramifications of this would be that Japan would essentially serve as a frontline US command post for the Asia-Pacific and beyond," said Christopher Hughes of Warwick University in a paper published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

The American forward deployments are certain to be viewed with suspicion in China and farther afield -- and face political opposition in

Japan. The US-Japan security treaty states that US bases may only be used "for the purpose of contributing to the security of Japan and the maintenance of international peace and security in the far east". It says nothing, for example, about Iran.

But Dr Hughes said that since Japan had given the US a free hand to use its bases for previous Middle East operations, Tokyo "might have to accept its enhanced role as a fulcrum for US military commands".

Japan's worries about China are the main reason for acquiescing in US plans that effectively shatter any remaining pacifist illusions. But Tokyo is in any case growing more militarily assertive under its prime minister, Koizumi Junichiro.

Japan sent non-combat troops to Iraq while its navy has joined the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative. Military cooperation with Australia, South Korea and Southeast Asian states is developing.

It is acquiring a ballistic missile defence system and new satellite intelligence capabilities. It has pledged to help keep the peace in Taiwan. And there has even been talk of pre-emptive strikes against North Korea and a Japanese nuclear

deterrent.

In short, Japan, emerging from the shadow of its past, is again becoming a military power with a global role and hopes of a permanent UN Security Council seat.

China's actions may thereby be more easily

explained. But further demonstrations of hostility will only exacerbate the slide towards an Asian cold war.

Simon Tisdall is a London-based columnist. This article appeared in The Guardian, April 19, 2005.

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