

China targeting Shimoji Airport in Miyakojima, Okinawa

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By Ryunosuke Megumi, leader of "Okinawa Senkaku Territorial Integrity Association"

On Aug. 24, six Chinese air force H-1 bombers flew in formation over the Miyako Strait

between the main island of Okinawa and Miyakojima then turned northeast toward the Kii Peninsula

for the first time. They then made a U-turn and returned home flying over the Miyako Strait again.

While the Japanese people's attention was focused on the Korean Peninsula, actually, moves by the

Chinese armed forces also had to be watched. At that time, tension was rising on the Korean Peninsula

while joint U.S.-ROK military exercises were taking place. Since the nationalization of the Senkaku

Islands in Ishigaki City five years ago, China has not only been sending a growing number of government

ships to Japanese territorial waters near the Senkakus; it has also been sending larger and more heavily

armed vessels to overwhelm the Japan Coast Guard (JCG). At first, three ships were sent three times a

month to linger near the Senkakus for two hours. Recently, they have been coming in groups of four.

The U.S. perceives this situation as "the Senkakus being surrounded by Chinese government ships.

" The JCG is still able to safeguard Japan's territorial sea only because Japan has an advantage in

air power. In the event of an air battle, pilot skill, the aircraft's capability, and the location and

number of air bases will be crucial. Yet, with regard to the two last factors, Japan is beginning to

lose its air power advantage. The Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) scrambled fighters 1,168 times in FY16, 851 times in response to Chinese military aircraft. Of the 851 aircraft, 830 flew from the Naha base.

This number is increasing further in the current fiscal year. ASDF aircraft at the Naha base scramble

3-4 times a day, and sometimes up to 8 times daily. To deal with this increase, the ASDF upgraded its

83rd Air Squadron to the 6th Air Wing [sic; should be 9th Air Wing] on Jan. 31, 2016, increasing its

fleet of 20 F-15 fighters to 40. Meanwhile, Naha Airport (with a 3,000-meter runway), jointly used by

the SDF and commercial airplanes, has been exceeding its capacity since April 2016 and yet ASDF fighters,

Maritime SDF reconnaissance planes, and Ground SDF helicopters continue to use the airport. Since the

civilian air controllers of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, and not the

ASDF's air controllers, are responsible for air traffic control at the airport for civilian and military

aircraft with completely different capabilities and operations, there have been multiple accidents and

incidents. There is also concern about labor union members among the air controllers. Chinese nationals

believed to be spies are already conducting activities from high-rise apartments near the ASDF Naha base.

Although a second runway is currently being built in waters off the airport, aircraft moving from the

terminal to the second runway would still have to cross the first runway, disrupting its use, thus

undermining operational flexibility. At present, ASDF aircraft only scramble during daytime,

focusing on the airspace over the Senkakus and the East China Sea. However,

with the improved skills of the Chinese air force and its increasing number of aircraft, nighttime approaches to Japan's airspace are becoming a possibility. In addition to its aircraft carrier Liaoning, the Chinese navy is also building new aircraft carriers. Its second carrier will, of course, be deployed to the Pacific Ocean near Okinawa. This means that the Naha base will soon need to scramble aircraft day and night and its area of responsibility will expand to the East China Sea and the Pacific. It will then have to address the issue of noise pollution at night at nearby communities. The anti-base movement could exploit this issue. On the other hand, the Shimoji Airport in Miyakojima City some 290 kilometers southwest of the main island of Okinawa is not being used. It has a 3,000-meter long runway and is one of the few airports in Japan with instrument landing systems (ILS) at both ends. However, the airport is currently administered by the Okinawa Prefectural Government (OPG) as a third class airport. The OPG owns the 300-hectares site on which the airport is located and the surrounding area. It began operations in July 1979 as a training site for commercial airplanes but has since fallen into disuse. It is located 190 kilometers from the Senkakus, or half the distance, 415 kilometers, between Naha and the Senkakus. An aircraft scrambled from the Naha base will take 28 minutes to reach the skies near the Senkakus. The figure for Shimoji is only 13 minutes. Fishermen in the remote islands of Okinawa, including Miyakojima, are frustrated with the government because they are unable to fish in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) north of the Senkakus, a fishery rich in tuna,

due to intimidation by Chinese government ships and the government's request for them to exercise "restraint."

On the other hand, Chinese naval vessels are passing through the Miyako Strait, which is international waters northeast of Miyakojima, as if they own the place. Therefore, a Miyakojima City citizens' group has started a

campaign to invite an ASDF detachment to Shimoji Airport. Not only is the runway at the airport usable anytime,

but the dormitories and facilities used for training civilian pilots are still standing. Therefore, the cost of

stationing a detachment (of around 8-12 aircraft) from the Naha base would be minimal. If this plan is realized,

half of the detachment's fighters could be used for scrambles and the other half for training alternately.

However, when the Miyakojima citizens visited the Okinawa Defense Bureau to inquire about the possibility of the

deployment in August, this was rejected by a senior (civilian) official who said: "This would be impossible under

the Onaga administration." Meanwhile, China has been taking steady steps to gain control of Shimoji Airport.

Officials of the China Association for International Friendly Contact, known to be an intelligence agency working

for the People's Liberation Army, have been making frequent visits to Shimoji Island since 2007, asking to lease

the entire island as a resort for rich Chinese and to use the airport for their private planes. Probably as part

of this project, the Chinese have been buying up property around the island.

The OPG signed a basic agreement on

March 8, 2017, with FSO Co., Ltd. and Mitsubishi Estate on the use of the Shimoji Airport. FSO is a private pilot

training school based in the central part of the main island of Okinawa, which has announced that it will open

its facilities at the Shimoji Airport from FY18. It also announced that it

will “accept trainees from major Chinese aviation schools” and that it had “signed a cooperation agreement with China’s Hainan Aviation School” and would “accept a total of 70 trainees from the Hainan school in a year, including 35 (in the first semester) from February 2018.” (from the FPO website, Dec. 20, 2016) Governor Takeshi Onaga made a request to Regional Revitalization Minister Kozo Yamamoto when the minister visited the OPG office on July 23 concerning “a plan for a National Strategic Special Zone (NSSZ) on Okinawa’s remote islands to allow foreigners to work in the agricultural sector.” This was evidence of China’s usual “salami strategy” of gradually chalking up faits accomplis.

Unlike on the main island of Okinawa where there is a noisy left-wing movement, the islanders of Miyako and Ishigaki are truly anxious about the imminent threat.

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