

Japan to withdraw ships from Afghanistan support role

By [Richard Lloyd Parry](#)

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Japan will withdraw its naval ships from their support role in the war in Afghanistan, in the first concrete sign of the new government's willingness to say no to the United States.

The country's defence ministry confirmed this morning what had been expected since the election victory of the prime minister, Yukio Hatoyama - that Japan will withdraw its naval forces from the Indian Ocean in January after eight-years in support of anti-terrorism operations.

The announcement comes six days before the visit to Japan of the US defence secretary, Robert Gates, and a month before that of President Barack Obama, and underlines the new tone adopted by Mr Hatoyama's centre-left government in its dealings with the US.

Japan's Maritime Defence Forces deploy a supply ship and a destroyer to provide fuel and water to US and British naval vessels in the Indian Ocean. Compared to other international contributions, the "floating petrol station", as it was cynically called, is small. But for Japan, which has taken part in only a handful of overseas military operations since the Second World War, it is an important and controversial commitment.

Throughout his campaign for August's election, which was won overwhelmingly by his Democratic Part of Japan (DPJ), Mr Hatoyama repeated his wish for a "more equal" relationship with the US. In essays and speeches, he acknowledged the importance of the Japan-US alliance, but insisted that East Asia "must be recognised as Japan's basic sphere of being" and that Japan and its smaller Asian neighbours must "restrain US political and economic excesses".

He appointed as defence minister Toshimi Kitazawa, an opponent of the country's military support for the US. The question is now what Japan will offer its ally in place of ships and troops, and how Mr Hatoyama will reconcile his new approach to the US with his stated wish for a close and friendly relationship with Mr Obama.

The answer is likely to be a combination of grass roots aid projects and the dispatch of civilian personnel such as aid officials and trainers. "Sending troops is not necessarily the only way to provide support," Japan's foreign minister, Katsuya Okada, said this month. "There are many people that are joining the Taliban because they have no other ways to support their livelihoods. To allow them leave the Taliban, I think it is effective to guarantee their livelihoods."

According to Akihisa Nagashima, a junior defence minister who officially informed his

American counterparts, the US department of defence accepted the decision. Much trickier will be another item in Mr Hatayama's manifesto - the question of where to relocate Futenma airbase on the island of Okinawa.

The current site is close to densely populated civilian areas. Previous Japanese and US governments negotiated and finalised a plan to relocate it to another part of Okinawa. But Mr Hatoyama has indicated that he wants to review the scheme, and to consider moving out of Okinawa and onto the Japanese mainland, an idea which is causing quiet consternation among US defence officials.

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