The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Birds & Bombs: US Live-Fire Air Force/Navy Training in the Pacific Centers on No'os Island in the Northern Marianas
Feb. 25, 2011

By the Guahan Coalition for Peace and Justice -- On February 25 the U.S. Air Force, U.S. Navy and units from the Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) were scheduled to wrap up Cope North, an annual military exercise run in Guam that is designed to improve US-Japan joint air operations in the Pacific.

According to a US military news release, the 2011 Cope North, which began February 13, was the largest "ever executed by Pacific Air Forces, with nearly 50 percent more sorties than last year's exercise."

The U.S. has around 600 participants and the JASDF 300 participants involved in the exercise (700 personnel from both countries participated in the 2010 exercise).

A key element of the exercise is five days of live-fire bombing of the island of No'os from morning to night. This live-fire training comes on the heels of 3-4 days of US Air Force bombing of the island at the end of January. When trainings are scheduled, authorities issue strong warnings in advance to fishermen, commercial pilots, marine tour operators and anyone else to steer well clear of the uninhabited island.

Cope North is a bilateral exercise conducted annually since 1978 between the JASDF and the US military under the auspices of the US-Japan Mutual Defense Treaty. It is one of the longest-running bilateral engagements and has involved personnel from the Japanese military bases of Kadena, Komatsu, Misawa, Hamamatsu, Tsuiki, Atsugi, Yokota, and Chitose.

The July 2005 Cope North joint exercise between JASDF and the US Air Force marked the first time that the JASDF dropped live ordinance on ground targets outside Japan since WWII. The JASDF has since been using live ordinance on No'os for its Cope North exercises. The 2011 Cope North exercise is the twelfth time it has been organized in the Mariana Islands, the first of which began in 1999.

In February 2010 Colonel Larry Bowers, U.S. exercise director for 2010 Cope North, told the *Marianas Variety* that the goal of Cope North exercises is to enable US and Japan military forces to familiarize themselves with the Pacific environment to enable smoother joint military operations in the region.

"We need to learn to fly together," said Bowers, while also noting the increasing strategic importance of both Guam and Japan to U.S. military operations. "We need to make sure we have access to Asia in the event of a contingency."

The *Marianas Variety* also reported that Bowers explained, without quoting him, that "Guam's location makes it ideal for training exercises like Cope North" and that "in Japan, military forces are not able to fly as freely over the heavily congested Japanese airspace or train over the open ocean."

No'os (the colonial name of the island as commonly referred to in maps and documents is Farallon de Medinilla) is an island that is part of the Marianas Archipelago. Located about 270 kilometers north of Guahan (Guam) or 63 kilometers north of Sa'ipan (Saipan), the island is 5.4 kilometers long and nearly one kilometer wide, stands 75 meters above sea level, and is politically zoned as part of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), a self-governing commonwealth in union with the United States. The CNMI, comprised of 17 major islands, was part of the now extinct Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, which once included the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands and Palau. The people of the Northern Marianas are US citizens but are only unofficially represented in Washington.

The United States military has used No'os as a bombing range since the end of World War II. In 1976, around the time that the newly-formed CNMI began formalizing its political status as a separate US Trust Territory-thereby removing it from the United Nations Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands-the US military secured a 100-year lease agreement with the CNMI for the island of No'os.

No'os is the unfortunate site of other military exercises, such as Valiant Shield and Koa Lightning.

As the Pacific Fleet's only US-controlled range, No'os is continually strafed by bombers, fighter jets and naval ships: the island has endured degradation from repeated attacks by 500, 750, and 2,000-pound bombs, air-to-surface missiles, precision-guided munitions, mines, deck mounted guns, grenades, and shoulder-fired missiles.

GlobalSecurity.org describes the importance of No'os to US training and military operations in the Pacific:

The Farallon de Medinilla Target Range is the Pacific Fleet's only U.S.-controlled range available for live-fire training for forward deployed naval forces. Farallon de Medinilla plays a special and unique role in national defense. Its location provides access frequency that supports established training requirements. In addition, the air and sea space in the Farallon provides sufficient room for the many different attack profiles necessary to replicate training opportunities in the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands [CNMI]. American fighter pilots must maintain capability and proficiency in precision-guided arms and specific target engagement. These are perishable skills that require frequent access to high fidelity, scenario-based targets. Accessibility to the Farallon de Medinilla supports these requirements.

GlobalSecurity.org also states that during the peak of the Vietnam War "ordnance delivered on the island was estimated at 22 tons per month," consisting mainly of "air-dropped, 500 and 750-pound bombs," and also included "approximately 60 rounds of three-inch ammunition from ship guns."

No'os enables forward-deployed airwing and surface units in Japan to conduct two and three-unit level training operations and one large-scale exercise per year. Without this range, live-fire training would be contingent upon access to non U.S.-controlled ranges and airwing and surface unit readiness would decline to "not ready" status within six months. The range is used about five days each month by the Navy, Marines and Air Force, and provides training opportunities unmatched in the entire Pacific region.

Amidst the destruction of its natural environment No'os is the largest of only two breeding colonies for the Great Frigatebird of the Mariana Islands, is the largest known nesting place in the Mariana and Caroline islands for the Masked Booby, and is home to another rare bird, the endangered Micronesian Megapode (see map of No'os showing bird locations on the island).

The Brown Booby, Red-footed Booby, Sooty Tern, Brown Noddy, Black Noddy, Fairy Tern and Red-tailed Tropicbird are also known to nest on the island.

Based on international conventions between the US, Canada, Mexico, Japan, and Russia, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) of 1918 is one of the oldest US conservation laws. It prohibits harm to migratory species by means of hunting, pursuing, wounding, killing, possessing or transporting any migratory bird, nest, egg, or part, with the exception of cases governed by permits issued in accordance with rules and regulations. Under the Act, a migratory bird is defined as "any species or family of birds that live, reproduce or migrate within or across international borders at some point during their annual life cycle."

Admitting that protected birds are in fact killed during training exercises, the US Navy in 1996 applied for a permit from the US Fish and Wildlife Service and was denied. Despite this, the Department of Defense continued training exercises on the island, claiming that the Act (MBTA) did not apply to federal agencies.

In December of 2000 the Center For Biological Diversity, represented by Earthjustice (formerly the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund), filed a lawsuit against the US Navy, citing violations of the 1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act. In March 2002 the US District for the District of Columbia ruled in favor of Earthjustice and issued an injunction against any military activities that would harm or kill the birds of No'os.

The US Navy, however, pursued other avenues for exemption and was granted one by the US Congress through the 2003 Defense Authorization Act.

As military activities on and around No'os continue with impunity, the people of the Marianas are left with many questions that beg answers, yet one thing remains certain: the presidential proclamation to create the Marianas Trench Marine National Monument issued in 2009 under the Bush administration, while ensuring that military war games go unhindered, has cordoned off a part of the ancient archipelago of the Marianas from those who call these islands home.

Asia-Pacific Journal articles of related interest:

- LisaLinda S. Natividad and Victoria-Lola Leon Guerrero, The Explosive Growth of U.S Military Power on Guam Confronts People Power: Experience of an island people under Spanish, Japanese, and American colonial rule
- LisaLinda Natividad and Gwyn Kirk, Fortress Guam: Resistance to US Military Mega-Buildup
- Catherine Lutz, US Bases and Empire: Global Perspectives on the Asia Pacific
- Kensei Yoshida, Okinawa and Guam: In the Shadow of U.S. and Japanese "Global Defense Posture"