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Nakaima Wins in Okinawa: Implications for the US-Japan Alliance

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On November 28, Hirokazu Nakaima, the incumbent governor of Okinawa, won re-election after a very tight competition with his opponent Shoichi Iha, former mayor of Ginowan City. His victory is a sliver of hope for the US and Japanese governments as they continue to try to implement a bilateral agreement relocating the US Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma to an alternate location within Okinawa. However, both governments are likely to continue to face challenges for the foreseeable future in achieving this goal. This, in turn, will present significant challenges for Tokyo and Washington to identify ways to deepen the US-Japan alliance.

Whenever the Futenma air station relocation issue has been discussed in recent months, criticism about the lack of progress is often targeted at the incumbent Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government. Such criticism is certainly justified. After all, it was the DPJ's first prime minister Yukio Hatoyama who, just after winning office in August 2009, started to derail the implementation of the Futenma relocation agreement that had been concluded between the US and Japanese governments in May 2006.

That said, what is often overlooked is that the relocation of MCAS Futenma has been a fifteen-year-old challenge. Ever since the first Futenma relocation plan was agreed upon between Tokyo and Washington in 1996, in the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) Final Report, consecutive Japanese administrations led by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) failed to implement the relocation. Furthermore, the May 2006 agreement was negotiated precisely because the first relocation agreement in the SACO Final Report showed little sign of progress.

Under the May 2006 plan, MCAS Futenma would be moved to a relocation facility in Hennoko off Camp Schwab, located in a less populated area in the northern part of Okinawa Prefecture. MCAS Futenma would be shut down upon the completion of the relocation and the land returned to Okinawa Prefecture. Furthermore, with the construction of the Futenma relocation facility, the III Marine Expeditionary Force will be partially redeployed to the new Hennoko facility and partially to Guam. This relocation to Guam would result in the departure of approximately 17,000 Marines and their families out of Okinawa—a significant reduction in the US military presence within that prefecture. By pledging that the DPJ government under him would relocate Futenma “at least out of Okinawa” on the campaign trail in the summer of 2009, Hatoyama almost single-handedly threw out the fruits of a difficult four-year-long negotiation between Tokyo and Washington.

Yuki Tatsumi, Senior Associate of the East Asia Program at the Stimson Center, explains that the re-election of Okinawa's Governor Hirokazu Nakaima does not automatically bode well for the transfer of the US Marine Corps Air Station Futenma to a new location on the island, and that “... in turn, will present significant challenges for Tokyo and Washington to identify ways to deepen the US-Japan alliance.”



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Yukio Hatoyama not only nullified the four-year bilateral negotiation. More importantly, he undercut local Okinawan leaders who had made the difficult political decision to accept the May 2006 relocation plan. Since Okinawa still hosts approximately 75 per cent of all US forces in Japan, the relocation of Futenma outside Okinawa has always been Okinawan voters' preferred solution. Those who had decided to accept the option of an “intra-Okinawa” Futenma relocation (including Nakaima and the former Nago mayor Yoshikazu Shimabukuro) did so *not* because they actively supported the plan. They did so because they feared the most likely alternative—that is, they were concerned that in the absence of a viable relocation option, MCAS Futenma would remain open in the center of the densely populated city of Ginowan. Hatoyama's campaign rhetoric increased expectations among Okinawan voters that the DPJ would renegotiate the Futenma relocation plan with the United States, thus undermining the position of these local leaders. By the time the Hatoyama government eventually accepted the proposition that the May 2006 agreement was the only viable solution to the Futenma relocation issue—Hatoyama's government eventually reached an agreement with the US government in May 2010 regarding the Futenma relocation that is not too different from the May 2006 agreement—Okinawan leaders were calling for the transfer of MCAS Futenma outside of Okinawa.

Governor Nakaima's shift in his position clearly demonstrates this point. Although he supported the May 2006 relocation agreement four years ago, Nakaima now calls for the transfer of Futenma out of Okinawa and refuses to discuss the implementation of the Futenma relocation plan within Okinawa with the central government in Tokyo. Thus, while many in Tokyo, and certainly in Washington, may be relieved by the news of Governor Nakaima's re-election, a breakthrough on this matter is very unlikely in the short-term.

As difficult as it may be, however, it is urgent that the United States and Japan make meaningful progress on the issue of Futenma's relocation. This will be no easy task. It is questionable whether Prime Minister Kan, who has not shown much interest in security issues so far, is either willing to spend the political capital necessary and demonstrate the required leadership to finally implement the May 2010 plan agreed to by his predecessor Hatoyama. This appears even less likely amidst rapidly plummeting public support for his government. It is equally questionable whether the US government will show any flexibility in their current position on this matter.

Still, without meaningful progress on Futenma's relocation—whether that means taking concrete steps toward implementing the May 2010 agreement or beginning serious exploration of relocating Futenma to a facility that is outside of Okinawa—it is essentially impossible for the United States and Japan to engage in the necessary dialogue for shaping a joint vision for a deepened US-Japan alliance which, at present, both sides plan to announce when Prime Minister Kan visits Washington, D.C. next spring. Without such a vision, the perception of a weakening US-Japan alliance that began to emerge during Hatoyama's nine months in office will continue to exist, increasing anxiety among other US allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific.

Recent developments in Northeast Asia suggest that a robust US-Japan alliance is needed now more than ever. In particular, the most recent exchange of artillery fire between North and South Korea, and the subsequent US-South Korea joint military exercises, speak to the critical importance of the US military presence in Japan and South Korea as both a deterrent and stabilizer throughout the Asia-Pacific. Implementing MCAS Futenma's relocation at the earliest possible moment will go some way towards erasing the perception that the US-Japan alliance is weakening. It will also contribute a great deal to solidifying the strength of the US alliance-based deterrence in East Asia and beyond.