

Re-thinking Futenma, Revitalizing the Alliance

by Kerry Gershaneck

Kerry Gershaneck (Gershaneck@pacforum.org) is a senior associate at the Pacific Forum CSIS, and teaches International Relations and Communication at Hawaii Pacific University.

Japan's new prime minister, Abe Shinzo, has wisely declared his intention to review Japan's defense policies to ensure they properly reflect the nation's security requirements. Abe knows he faces significantly greater security challenges in defense of Japan than he faced when he last served as prime minister in 2006. To meet these increased challenges, Abe must focus his defense review on revising the plan for replacing Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma. He has a golden opportunity to introduce a more strategically useful, politically viable, and environmentally friendly alternative.

In 2005, the two countries agreed to a rushed FRF plan that replaces Futenma with a "heliport" air strip on an existing US facility (Camp Schwab) in northern Okinawa's less-populated Henoko district. However, the current Futenma Replacement Facility (FRF) plan is fatally flawed.

Specifically, the FRF plan fails to provide US, Japanese, and UN forces with the strategic capabilities currently provided by MCAS Futenma. It lacks any utility in enhancing alliance interoperability, and thereby undermines the alliance. FRF/Henoko already faces population encroachment before it is built, and no Air Installation Compatible Use Zoning (AICUZ) mechanism has been established to reduce continued encroachment. Failure to employ AICUZ mechanisms, which would be mandatory in building a US-based airport, will ensure continued anti-FRF activism. The current FRF plan would also lead to unnecessary environmental degradation of one of the region's most pristine and beautiful areas.

In short, the FRF/Henoko plan provides few, if any, operational benefits, and it fails to provide the claimed political benefits. But there is a ready alternative solution.

Following the 2010 change in administrations, the Democratic Party of Japan introduced a limited version of what is called "The Katsuren proposal," which called for constructing the FRF off a significantly more suitable peninsula on southeastern Okinawa. However, that effort was misportrayed in the media and by bureaucrats of both countries. Accordingly, the Hatoyama administration was forced to stick with the current Henoko plan. This idea should be reconsidered.

A properly conceived FRF would have the following basic attributes, absent which no agreement should be accepted:

1. It must replicate the same capabilities as the current

Futenma Air Station, to include a runway long enough to handle the full range of military aircraft. MCAS Futenma has a strategically valuable 2,740 meter runway. FRF/Henoko has an operationally questionable 1,190 meter runway; it cannot handle fixed-wing jet fighters (other than VSTOL aircraft) or multi-engine transports. Indeed, FRF is basically a long "heliport" – which was, unwisely, the preferred term for US and Japanese diplomats who negotiated the agreement.

2. The FRF must be reasonably close to the ground forces it supports.

3. There must be room for contingency loading of the FRF. It is essential to have space for additional aircraft (possibly hundreds), support equipment, and personnel (possibly thousands) that need to be forward deployed to respond to foreseeable contingencies. FRF/Henoko fails to meet this requirement.

4. The FRF should minimize environmental harm and noise pollution, while providing maximum safety to civilian populations. FRF/Henoko fails on all three counts.

In addition to these essential attributes, the FRF should enhance bilateral interoperability that intelligently advances the alliance. To this end, it should be a "joint-base" like Iwakuni, Atsugi, or Misawa, where US and Japanese forces operate side-by-side. A joint FRF is important operationally and politically.

The most effective military forces are those that live, work, train, and operate together. A joint base would promote interoperability, which would directly benefit Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF). The FRF/Henoko plan provides no such benefit. Instead, it continues the longstanding, inefficient practice of a "parallel" – rather than an integrated – relationship between US and Japanese ground forces.

It is also worth noting that the funding for the FRF comes out of SDF funding. To an extent, SDF officers resent this waylaying of funds, but they will accept it more readily if there are operational benefits to the SDF that result from the FRF. Joint basing would also free up Naha International Airport for exclusive commercial use, a longtime desire of Okinawa Prefecture.

Politically, joint basing overcomes the residue of WWII and the persistent image of the US military as an occupying force. This, in turn, makes it easier for the government of Japan to develop public support for the FRF. For the average Japanese citizen, protesting against a US base is one thing. Protesting a Japanese-owned base is another. This is especially true in light of the recent shift of Japanese public opinion from its intense post-WWII pacifism to a more "normal" national security perspective in response to increasing threats by neighbors such as China and North Korea.

Could FRF/Henoko be modified into a joint base? This is technically possible, but it would require a herculean effort given space limitations and the too-short runway.

While national security must be the primary FRF consideration, the new FRF should minimize environmental harm. FRF/Henoko unnecessarily endangers one of the most beautiful areas on Okinawa for no strategic or political advantage. It makes no sense to fill in the waters off Henoko when a feasible alternative exists that will fulfill FRF operational and political objectives.

A joint air facility offshore of Okinawa's Katsuren peninsula has all the attributes Henoko does not, and construction of a suitably sized facility there is feasible. There is sufficient unused space on Katsuren to ensure joint-basing and enable bilateral training and operations. The reef and underwater area around Katsuren are dead, and the location of the planned facility provides near-perfect noise protection for communities on the peninsula. From a safety perspective, no aircraft must overfly inhabited areas on landing and takeoff.

As important, from the long-term perspective, this new, expansive aviation capability would provide the SDF and the Okinawans a strategic airfield that could be used for both security and commercial purposes long after US forces depart Japan.

Unfortunately, the Katsuren option was never properly examined when the FRF was being negotiated. Then, once an agreement was reached, bureaucratic inflexibility and timidity took hold. Some officials on both sides now argue that it's now too hard to change the agreement. This is not true.

The Katsuren plan was significantly developed by Okinawan engineers alongside military officials and academics. Senior officials in the SDF, the Ministry of Defense, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as political leaders of both major political parties, have embraced the proposal. Accordingly, a small working group of the right people on both sides could produce a workable concept in two weeks or less.

There is minor local opposition to the Katsuren alternative, but the government of Japan routinely overcomes much stronger opposition to public works projects that have no national security importance. Prime Minister Abe must stand up publicly for Japan's national interests and continue to ensure that Okinawa is handsomely rewarded for its contributions to national security. Perhaps more challenging for Abe is how to deal with the politicians, major construction companies, and other elements with vested financial interests in completing FRF/Henoko. The prime minister has sufficient power to deal with these groups.

Prime Minister Abe has expressed commitment to FRF/Henoko. But true leaders adapt when the conditions that premised their planning have fundamentally changed. When the FRF agreement was reached in 2005, few people foresaw the dangerous security situation in northeast Asia in 2013. Changed circumstances alone warrant reconsidering and revisiting the FRF plan.

Prime Minister Abe has the chance to adapt to new conditions and rethink the FRF. He can ensure the FRF is

strategically significant and politically viable, as well as a vehicle for dramatically enhancing interoperability between Japan's SDF and US forces. Further, by implementing those recommendations, he would better safeguard the Okinawan people and the environmental treasure off Henoko.

Prime Minister Abe should act quickly and forcefully to do so.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.

Support our James A. Kelly Korean Studies Fellowship by sponsoring a table or purchasing a ticket to our Board of Governors' Dinner on Jan. 15, 2013, featuring former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage. Donations of any amount are also welcome. Visit <http://csis.org/event/2013-pacific-forum-board-governors-dinner> or call +1 (808) 521-6745 for more information.