



New Thinking on Futenma Replacement

by Kiyoshi Sugawa

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Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma is surrounded by densely populated residential areas in the midst of Okinawa Island. In December 1996, the governments of Japan and the United States agreed, as a part of the realignment of US bases in Okinawa, to return it “within the next five to seven years, after adequate replacement facilities are completed and operational.” Although Tokyo and Washington later decided to build the Futenma Replacement Facility (FRF) at the Camp Schwab Henoko-saki area and adjacent waters, the construction has long stagnated because successive Japanese administrations have failed to persuade Okinawa Prefecture to approve the landfill. Hopes of the two governments now hinge on the approval in the next few months of the landfill plan by the Okinawa government.

Regardless of the decision by the Okinawa governor, however, the fundamental question will remain. Why should we consume money and energy for unpopular, expensive, and ineffective base-moving when the security environment and fiscal condition is so severe?

Drawbacks of the Current Plan

The current FRF plan has serious flaws. The most obvious problem is political feasibility. Okinawans’ opposition to a new base is stronger than ever. Even if Prime Minister Abe Shinzo succeeds in gaining approval for a landfill permit from the Okinawa governor, the FRF will still not win the support of the majority of Okinawans. Lack of support from the local community would eventually weaken the basis of the alliance.

The financial costs of the realignment plan for the US bases in Japan also weigh heavily on Japan and the United States. The General Accounting Office reported that the costs for military construction in Guam will be more than \$23.9 billion. The estimated price for the landfill and construction of the FRF is almost \$4 billion, although the real figure would be easily doubled as is often the case for this kind of public works project. In addition to the FRF, the Japanese government will have to pay another \$20 billion or so in total.

From a strategic point of view, the present US base realignment initiative fails to meet today’s most important security challenge in East Asia – the rise of China. The shift of Marines from Okinawa would presumably weaken the deterrent capability of the alliance. Under current plans, approximately 9,000 III Marine Expeditionary Forces (MEF) personnel are to deploy to Guam and other places. The new airfield at Henoko, which is to be shortened from the current

2,740 meters at MCAS Futenma to 1,800 meters, will not be able to accommodate the same range of aircraft. Ironically, the costs of the FRF and other replacement facilities are likely to undermine the ability of the Japanese government to fund much more vital defense spending, including new forces to deal with China’s maritime buildup in the region.

Basic Principles of a New Initiative

To overcome these drawbacks, Japan and the United States need to reset the current plan and work on a new initiative that is acceptable, affordable, and strategically effective. Four basic principles should be kept in mind.

First and foremost, Japan and the United States must fulfill their promise to return MCAS Futenma to the Okinawan people. Withdrawing the promise or postponing the return indefinitely will make them feel betrayed and their confidence in the alliance will be lost. Furthermore, the present situation where the MCAS Futenma has potentially endangered the lives of Okinawans can never be justified.

Second, the present realignment plan for US bases in Okinawa other than MCAS Futenma should be downsized. Although the FRF has attracted a great deal of attention, even bigger projects such as the relocation of Naha military port remain to be carried out under the current agreement. Unlike Futenma, however, these bases do not pose immediate danger to the residents of Okinawa. The less ambitious plan will enable the Japanese government to use the saved money for the modernization of SDF weaponry. Additional funds could also be allocated to share the costs of rotational training by the US Marine Corps on Okinawa.

Third, most of the Marines need to be relocated outside Japan, not just Okinawa. The viability of the large-scale Marine infantry deployment depends on access to air fields, along with vast training space, to accommodate the helicopters and transport aircraft they need to fulfill their missions. Without a replacement for Futenma, large numbers of Marines cannot remain on Okinawa. And the reality is no other area of mainland Japan is prepared to house such a presence and the Okinawa public refuses to accept any other site for the FRF in the prefecture. While smaller crisis response elements of the III MEF can remain on the island, the entire division needs to relocate. Due to financial difficulties, the US government may want to bring them back to Hawaii and California rather than relying so much on Guam.

Fourth, it is important that the departure of the majority of Marines based on Okinawa not be read as a retreat or a sign of decline of the alliance. Japan and the United States can create a framework to substantially compensate for the losses of deterrent capability. As a part of such efforts, US scholars Mike Mochizuki and Michael O’Hanlon have suggested a new strategy to assure the swift and robust projection of the Marine

Corps across the Pacific at a significantly lower cost.

We should also discuss steps to augment alliance capacity in other areas, particularly the US air and naval presence based in other parts of Japan. The existing US base at Misawa in northern Honshu, home to an F-16-equipped fighter wing, could host more advanced F-22 aircraft, for example.

Expanded Military Role of Japan

Equally important, the role and capability of Japan's own defense forces should be expanded. Under the present US base realignment initiative, the government of Japan is expected to pay for relocation facilities, but not to play a larger military role. This scheme contrasts with the realignment of US Forces Korea where the Republic of Korea agreed to bear more military burden. If Japan really demands a smaller presence of US forces in the current security environment, it needs to step into the gap.

Japan needs to invest more resources steadily in the defense of southwest of Japan. It does not necessarily mean, however, that the SDF should establish its own naval infantry unit. Improvement in maritime and air power as well as space and cyberspace security is more urgently required.

More effective coordination between the SDF and the US troops would significantly improve the capability of the alliance. One of the most serious weaknesses in the current operation of the Japan-US alliance is the ambiguity and complexity about what the SDF can do in contingencies when "Japan is not under attack, but some kind of emergency takes place around Japan." The SDF will provide logistical support to US troops in such events, but the domain of the SDF activity must be limited to the "non-combatant area" as Article 9 of Japan's Constitution prohibits the use of force unless Japan is attacked.

Although talk of amending the Constitution was not realistic for a long time, the situation seems to have changed. The Abe administration is trying to change the interpretation of Article 9 to admit the exercise of the right to collective self-defense, while others believe that such a substantial change should be made through a deliberative process of formal amendment. In either case, recognition of the exercise of the right to collective self-defense, as well as relaxation of constitutional restraints on collective security, will clear the way for allied forces to coordinate more closely, based on military rationales.

The SDF will also be able to increase Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance activities to share various levels of intelligence with the US military. It is therefore conceivable, for instance, that the Maritime SDF will assume a larger responsibility in the East China Sea and reduce the burden for the US Navy.

Expansion of Japan's military role, however, must be very carefully designed. Neighboring countries in East Asia will certainly take it as a sign of Japan's resurgence as a military power. If they respond militarily, the region will face a new arms race and we will be less secure. To avoid such a clumsy outcome, prudence is required for both Japan and the United States. For example, the larger roles and missions for the SDF may be emphasized in the realm of logistical support to the

US military and multilateral missions such as peacekeeping.

At the same time, Japan needs to build confidence with its neighbors to reassure them that Tokyo is not embarking on a dangerous course. The Japanese government should express more candid reflection on its responsibility for the war in the Pacific, while China and South Korea could reciprocate with acceptance of genuine Japanese gestures of contrition. Japan should also construct a comprehensive China strategy that emphasizes not only deterrence but also proactive engagement. Military to military cooperation between the SDF and People's Liberation Army, including joint training or even coordinated activities in UN-sanctioned peacekeeping operations, should be pursued as well.

Faced with new realities, Japan and the US can no longer settle for a policy that merely clings to the existing plan. The leaders of the two countries should take this opportunity to demonstrate the viability and resilience of our precious alliance, yet again.

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