

SIGUR CENTER ASIA REPORT

The Okinawa Question and the US-Japan Alliance: Factoring in Japanese Domestic Politics and Debates

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This Asia Report is based on "The Okinawa Question: Regional Security, the US-Japan Alliance, and Futenma," a conference held on September 19, 2011 at the Elliott School of International Affairs and co-sponsored by the Sigur Center for Asian Studies and The Nansai Shoto Industrial Advancement.

The event hosted a luncheon speech by Governor Hirokazu Nakaima of Okinawa Prefecture (click here for [text](#) and [video](#)) and featured the following experts:

- Akikazu Hashimoto
- Llewelyn Hughes
- Mike Mochizuki
- Kazuhisa Ogawa
- Michael O'Hanlon
- Michael Swaine
- Robert Sutter
- Akio Takahara
- Kurayoshi Takara



Governor Hirokazu Nakaima of Okinawa Prefecture delivering the keynote speech at a September 2011 conference at The George Washington University

Introduction

Since Yoshihiko Noda took office as Prime Minister of Japan two months ago, there appears to be some possibility that the United States and Japan will be able to make progress on the stalled issue of relocating the U.S. Marine Corps Futenma Air Station in Okinawa prefecture. However, even cautious optimism should be tempered by the reality of domestic politics in Japan and a thorough consideration of Japan's overall strategic thinking.

Noda has made specific gestures expressing an intent to honor the U.S.-Japan agreement to relocate the Futenma base from densely populated Ginowan to the Henoko district of Nago City in northeastern Okinawa, where a new on-shore facility would be built. To win political support from Okinawans, he announced in late September that his government would remove the conditions currently attached to development subsidies to the prefecture. In October, he told visiting U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta that the government would submit an environmental impact assessment report to Okinawa prefecture by the end of this year, which would formally start a legal process whereby the Okinawa government is required to respond within 90 days. From Washington's perspective, these moves may indicate some long-awaited momentum on the Futenma issue.

Opposition and skepticism in Japanese domestic politics

However, the official message coming from Tokyo stands in stark contrast to the local opposition in Okinawa, which has grown stronger and more vocal over the years. Just days after Panetta's visit, Okinawa Governor Hirokazu Nakaima told Noda that the Futenma relocation within the prefecture was "virtually impossible."^[1] In a recent speech delivered at The George Washington University, Nakaima stressed the intolerable impact of Futenma on

the daily lives of Okinawans, and compared it to a military base in the middle of New York City on 36th Street. Added to this is the sense of unfairness of having to bear the lion's share of U.S. military presence in Japan: Okinawa comprises only 0.6% of Japan's national land mass, but hosts 74% of American facilities in Japan.

While there is nothing new about local opposition to U.S. military basing in Okinawa, observers note that it has dramatically strengthened in the past few years that the Democratic Party of Japan has been in government. This is largely attributed to a sense of being slighted by former prime minister Yukio Hatoyama's flip-flopping on the Futenma issue. Some Japan experts, such as Akikazu Hashimoto (J.F. Oberlin University in Tokyo) and Kurayoshi Takara (University of the Ryukyus) think that public opinion in Okinawa is "not reversible" by this point, and that local resistance makes the relocation to Henoko impossible. Mike Mochizuki (George Washington University) and Michael O'Hanlon (Brookings Institution) note, "Not only did voters in Nago City elect in January 2010 a mayor who is adamantly against this new airfield, but also every head of Okinawa's cities, towns and villages are also opposed." [2] Pushing through the Futenma relocation to Henoko in the face of this opposition could undermine Okinawan willingness to host other U.S. military bases on this island prefecture. More broadly, this is what Sheila Smith has argued is the increasingly integral role of citizen voices in the politics of national security. [3]

In this sense, the Futenma impasse appears to be an issue of domestic politics that pits the views of the central government against local opposition. However, resistance to, or at least skepticism of the Futenma relocation plan, is not confined to local Okinawan politics. The mainstream Japanese press has also expressed reservations about the plan's feasibility and have called for alternatives. An editorial of the *Asahi Shimbun* calls for "a fresh start" and says Tokyo and Washington should be "doing everything to seek 'a third way' that does not include relocation to Henoko." [4] The *Mainichi Daily News* likewise says "the governments of Japan and the U.S. should face up to the political situation in Okinawa, and seriously consider the issue including a review of the bilateral agreement." [5]

Directions in Japanese strategic thinking

But what might such a "fresh start" or "review" lead to? Any reconsideration of the Okinawa basing issue would draw out questions about Japan's national security strategy and the overall state of the U.S.-Japan alliance. Yet on these larger questions, despite the recurring rhetoric from both Tokyo and Washington on the importance of deepening the alliance, there is actually a great deal of uncertainty.

As Michael Swaine (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) points out, in recent years Japanese strategic thinking has been "very much in flux." While remaining committed to its alliance with the U.S., Japan is also assessing its security posture in an environment marked by a rising China and a relatively weaker U.S. In a similar vein, scholars Richard J. Samuels and Narushige Michishita also argue that there exist various tendencies in Japanese strategic thinking. They identify main schools of thought in Japanese foreign and security policy discourse along a spectrum from isolation to integration in military and economic affairs, considered in the context of closer or more distant relations with China and the United States. [6]

Moving forward amid uncertainty and fiscal constraints

The jury is still out on the direction and course of Japan's strategic thinking and posturing. Military analyst Kazuhisa Ogawa argues that the stalemate over the Futenma base relocation can be attributed to the lack of a national security council in the Japanese government, and hence the lack of a clear political source of strategic goals, command and implementation. While this may not be addressed any time soon, the Futenma issue has become more complicated in face of serious fiscal constraints in both Japan and the U.S. The planned shift of about 8,000 Marines from Okinawa to Guam, which would significantly reduce the burden on Okinawa of hosting U.S. troops, is still tied to the Japanese implementation of the Henoko plan. But the shift to Guam as well as the construction of a new Marines airfield in Henoko will be costly and could become harder to justify in this era of fiscal austerity in both countries. Although the official rhetoric for now in Tokyo and Washington is to move forward with relocating the Futenma base to Henoko, the reality of

domestic politics and the uncertainty in domestic thinking in Japan will pose serious challenges to the plan's implementation. As Mochizuki and O'Hanlon argue, it might be necessary to re-think the 2006 base realignment plan without sacrificing common U.S. and Japanese strategic interests.[7]

By Amy Hsieh, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Political Science, George Washington University, and Research Assistant, Rising Powers Initiative

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- [1] "Noda urged to relocate key U.S. base outside Okinawa," *Mainichi Japan*, October 27, 2011.
[2] Mike Mochizuki and Michael O'Hanlon, "Rethink US military base plans for Japan," *CNN Global Public Square*, Nov. 4, 2011.
[3] Sheila Smith, "Citizen Interests and the U.S. Military Presence in Asia," in Hashimoto et al., *The Okinawa Question and the U.S.-Japan Alliance* (Washington, D.C.: Sigur Center for Asian Studies, 2005).
[4] "Japan, U.S. should make fresh start on Futenma issue," *The Asahi Shimbun*, October 19, 2011.
[5] "Japan-U.S. talks make little progress on relocation of Futenma base in Okinawa," *The Mainichi Daily News*, October 26, 2011.
[6] Presentation by Richard J. Samuels and Narushige Michishita at "Worldviews of Rising Powers: Domestic Foreign Policy Debates" Conference, April 25, 2011, The George Washington University.
[7] Mochizuki and O'Hanlon, "Rethink."



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