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Military Base Dispute Strains U.S.–Japan Alliance

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On January 19, U.S. and Japanese leaders issued laudatory remarks commemorating the 50th anniversary of the U.S.–Japan bilateral defense treaty. These remarks were made partly to deflect attention from an ongoing dispute that has caused tensions in the military partnership between the two nations. At the heart of the controversy is the newly elected Democratic Party of Japan's (DPJ) refusal to abide by a 2006 bilateral agreement for the realignment of U.S. military forces in Japan.

While some U.S. experts have minimized the important security concepts inherent to base relocation, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama underscored these concepts' significance by asserting that solving the Futenma issue¹ is a litmus test for developing the U.S.–Japan security arrangement.² U.S. officials see the dispute as the canary in the coal mine, i.e., the initial indicator of potentially worse difficulties to come in the alliance—an analysis that has triggered broader U.S. concerns over the DPJ's long-term security plans. As one U.S. official commented, the DPJ is raising issues that question virtually every aspect of the fundamentals of the alliance.

A Disastrous Misreading. The DPJ was swept into office in a landslide electoral victory in August 2009 amidst euphoric expectations that the party would dramatically change the manner in which Japan was governed. In foreign policy, the DPJ sought to display a new assertiveness in Japan's relations with Washington. But by choosing to dramatize the Futenma issue, Hatoyama disastrously misread the Obama Administration's commitment

to maintaining the security capabilities necessary to fulfill its bilateral defense treaty requirements.

Now, just five months later, Hatoyama is buffeted by plummeting public approval, growing criticism over his indecisiveness, and financial scandals involving himself and party chief Ichiro Ozawa. Japanese public opinion polls show the highest level of support for the U.S. alliance in 50 years and rising concern that Hatoyama has damaged the important relationship with Washington.

The DPJ is now desperately seeking to extricate itself from the Futenma corner into which Hatoyama has painted his administration. DPJ members and supporters have come to Washington explaining Hatoyama's political difficulties and pleading for the U.S. to move Marine Corps air units from Okinawa to Guam.

Instead, the Obama Administration must remain resolute on the need to implement the force realignment agreement, especially maintaining U.S. Marine Corps air units on Okinawa. Privately, Washington should continue to press Tokyo to quickly accept the Futenma replacement facility plan. Allowing the Futenma wound to continue to fester distracts both nations from more important issues and strains important bilateral military ties.

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Increase Public Diplomacy. To garner increased Japanese support for the realignment plan, Washington should boost public diplomacy efforts to better educate Japanese officials and the populace on the necessity of forward-based U.S. forces to not only defend Japan but to also maintain peace and stability in Asia. Washington should explain how U.S. military capabilities are dependent on coordinated, integrated strategies, including that of the Marine Air Ground Task Force. As such, the U.S. Marines on Okinawa are an indispensable and irreplaceable component of any U.S. response to an Asian crisis.

At the same time, the U.S. should prevent the force realignment dispute from undermining ongoing efforts to strengthen the alliance by having Japan assume a larger security role. On January 19, Prime Minister Hatoyama stated that he hoped to present by year's end the results of joint U.S.–Japanese efforts to adapt the alliance to the evolving Asian threat environment.

In light of growing Japanese public unease over Hatoyama's mishandling of security matters, Washington should quietly press Tokyo to move expeditiously on any security reviews. The Obama Administration should also counsel caution to Tokyo given the far-reaching security ramifications of any changes to the U.S.–Japan alliance.

More Coherent National Security Policy Needed. Washington should also call on the DPJ to define a coherent national security policy, including the specifics of the party's repeated demands for a more equal alliance. The Obama Administration

should point out that for Japan to be truly equal, Tokyo would have to assume greater responsibilities for its own defense as well as addressing global security challenges.

Taking on such new responsibilities would require a commensurate expansion of Japanese self-defense forces, a significant increase in defense spending, the deployment of additional forces overseas for peacekeeping missions, the adoption of less restrictive rules of engagement, and a reinterpretation of Japan's current ban on collective self-defense. Successive Japanese administrations have resisted U.S. entreaties to undertake any of these steps.

Serving the Interest of Both Nations. A year ago, the 50th anniversary of the U.S.–Japan defense treaty was seen as an opportunity for transforming the military alliance to a broader security relationship. Now, discussion is focused primarily on repairing the status quo or even saving the alliance. It is worrisome that U.S. officials are expressing growing frustration and mistrust of DPJ intentions, particularly when North Korean and Chinese security threats to Asia are expanding.

It is important that both countries understand that Japanese and U.S. national interests are best served by maintaining and strengthening the alliance. U.S. forward-deployed forces in Japan and South Korea provide a tangible sign of Washington's commitment to defending its allies as well as the values that these countries share.

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1. As part of the extensive 2006 bilateral agreement on U.S. force realignment in Japan, both countries agreed to move the Marine Corps air units from the existing Futenma Air Station to a replacement facility to be built near Camp Schwab in a less populated area of Okinawa.
2. Mainichi Shimbun, "Futenma Issue Is the Litmus Test for Japan-U.S. Alliance: Hatoyama," January 19, 2010, at <http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/news/20100119p2a00m0na015000c.html> (January 20, 2010).