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White House Deal with Japan Risks Military Capability in Asia

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On February 8, the United States and Japan jointly announced changes to the existing bilateral accord for realigning U.S. Marines on Okinawa. While both sides affirmed commitment to relocating a Marine air unit on the island, more significantly, the Obama Administration abandoned longstanding U.S. insistence that Japan fulfill pre-conditional commitments prior to Washington removing 8,000 Marines from Okinawa and returning U.S. bases to local control.

As a result, the U.S. has needlessly compromised military capabilities and significant negotiating leverage in favor of budgetary and political considerations. By de-linking the interconnected clauses of the accord, Japan achieved benefits earlier and without fulfilling the preconditions required by the original agreement. In return, the U.S. received nothing more tangible than yet another vague Japanese affirmation of its promise to make progress toward eventually fulfilling its commitments.

Few Details in Announced Revision. Contrary to media reports, the U.S. and Japan did not announce that 4,700 of the originally planned 8,000 Marines would go to Guam with the remainder heading further eastward. No details were provided on the size, composition, or destination of Marine redeployments from Okinawa.

The U.S. is reportedly considering altering Guam Agreement deployment plans—which would have moved Marine command elements to Guam and

retained warfighters on Okinawa—and relying on rotational rather than permanent deployments. Washington was reportedly considering having more infantry, pilots, and logistics personnel amongst the Marines redeploying to Guam.¹ In addition, a U.S. official commented last year that the Defense Department was considering “rotating Marine units deployed to Guam every several months rather than stationing them in Guam permanently.”²

Washington and Tokyo did declare that they remain committed to the construction of the Futenma Replacement Facility (FRF) at Camp Schwab and adjacent waters in Henoko, Okinawa, for a U.S. Marine Corps helicopter unit as the only viable way forward. Both sides also affirmed the importance of Guam as a strategic hub to include Marines relocated from Okinawa.

Under the terms of the 2006 bilateral Guam Agreement—which updated and affirmed commitments made in 1996—the United States would not redeploy 8,000 Marines nor return military facilities south of the Kadena Air Base to Okinawan control until there had been “tangible progress toward com-

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pletion of the Futenma Replacement Facility.” Successive U.S. Administrations had used this clause to press Tokyo and Okinawa for constructing the alternative Marine air base, which faces local opposition.

What Is Driving the Deal? U.S. acquiescence to altering the Guam Agreement is driven by two predominant factors. The first is responding to U.S. congressional concerns over rising military construction costs related to the Guam Agreement amid draconian defense budget cuts.

In the fiscal year (FY) 2012 defense budget, Congress slashed \$150 million allocated for construction to accommodate the planned relocation of Marines from Okinawa to Guam. Congressional sources commented that the funding cut was not meant to eliminate the Guam Agreement but, rather, to pressure the Obama Administration to provide alternative options to mitigate the increased cost estimates. It was suggested that sending some of the Marines to existing U.S. bases in Hawaii or the mainland could restore Guam construction funding in the FY 2013 defense budget.

However, the congressional action led Tokyo to respond by cutting its own funding for the Guam Agreement by 80 percent and eliminating any spending on the Futenma move, thus making implementing the accord more problematic.

The second catalyst is an attempt to improve the atmosphere with Okinawa in hopes that it will reduce local resistance to continued U.S. base presence. Since the original 1996 agreement, Japan and Okinawa have repeatedly asked the U.S. for greater “flexibility”—i.e., concessions—to enable construction of the FRF, which faces strong local opposition.

But the Guam Agreement already consists of a number of U.S. compromises unilaterally reducing alliance military capabilities. In short, there is no military or strategic benefit either from the Guam Agreement or in today’s revision: It is being con-

ducted solely to respond to Okinawan demands to reduce the U.S. military footprint on the island.

Self-Imposed Injuries. The U.S. has also made a number of additional concessions since the signing of the Guam Agreement. Washington agreed to transfer at least five aircraft training exercises during the past six months from Okinawa to Guam. The Marine Corps has also self-imposed restrictions on its training activities on Okinawa.

Washington also agreed to change the Status of Forces Agreement to respond to Okinawan concerns. Under the revised plan, Japanese authorities will have jurisdiction over serious crimes committed by U.S. civilian base staff if U.S. authorities decide not to prosecute.

Tokyo has also sought to buy Okinawa’s affections. The Noda administration rejected entreaties to use the renewal of Japan’s 10-year economic aid package to Okinawa as leverage for achieving progress on the FRF. Instead, Noda decided to increase support to Okinawa by 27 percent in FY 2012. The funding would be provided in lump-sum subsidiary with no strings attached in hopes of sweetening the dialogue with Okinawa to induce the latter to accept the FRF plan.³

In response to these and other concessions, Okinawa Governor Hirokazu Nakaima has simply pocketed the benefits and stated that they have no impact on the need to move the Marine Corps air station off Okinawa.

What Do Okinawa Critics Want? Okinawans opposed to the Guam Agreement range in their stated objectives from claiming to be against only constructing the alternative air station to those advocating removal of all U.S. military bases and personnel from Okinawa. Nago Mayor Susumu Inamine stated during a February 7 presentation in Washington that he advocated the removal of all U.S. Marine forces and bases from Okinawa, claim-

1. “New Plan Surfaces to Relocate US Marines to Guam,” *Mainichi Shimbun*, November 14, 2011.
2. “US DOD Official Confirms Possible Rotation of USMC Units Deployed to Guam,” *Okinawa Times*, September 18, 2011.
3. “Calm, Rational Deliberation Needed on Futenma Issue,” *Daily Yomiuri*, December 28, 2011, at <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/editorial/T111228003367.htm> (February 8, 2012).

ing that they account for 60 percent of the personnel and bases and “the majority of the crimes” on Okinawa.

A delegation of Japanese national legislators and non-government organizations visited Washington in January 2012 to demand the removal of all U.S. bases on Okinawa, including the U.S. Air Force Kadena Air Base.

What the U.S. Should Do

In looking forward, the U.S. should:

- Retain Marine Corps combat elements on Okinawa instead of dispersing them further from conflict zones. While imperfect, the Guam Agreement at least maintained integrated Marine Corps ground, air, and logistics components deployed on Okinawa. Moving them eastward, as is currently being considered, would degrade U.S. military response capabilities to Asian security and disaster contingencies.
- Continue to insist that the Marine Corps air unit will remain at Futenma until the FRF is completed. Washington should press Tokyo to move forward on all necessary steps to enable construction on the runways at Camp Schwab.
- Increase public diplomacy efforts to explain to Japanese and Okinawan legislators, media, and

the public that the U.S. military presence is critical to the security of Japan as well as regional stability. The Marine Corps presence on Okinawa is an irreplaceable component of any U.S. response to an Asian crisis.

- Reject advice by experts that Washington should abandon the FRF in attempts to “save Kadena.” Okinawan opponents have made clear that they have additional objectives beyond a solitary Marine air station.

Correcting a Mistake. De-linking the components of the Guam Agreement was a mistake, since it did not provide the U.S. any tangible benefits. Moreover, it signaled to Okinawan opponents of the accord that the U.S. is more willing to provide concessions as a result of massive cuts to the defense budget.

If the U.S. wants to maintain the level of readiness required to respond to a crisis in Asia, it should start correcting the mistake of offering concessions on Okinawa that have not been reciprocated.

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