

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 4109 | DECEMBER 17, 2013

Time for Japan to Fulfill Commitment on U.S. Marine Base on Okinawa

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Long-overdue progress on relocating a U.S. Marine Corps air station within Okinawa hinges on a forthcoming decision by the island's governor. Okinawa Governor Hirokazu Nakaima is poised to decide whether to issue a land reclamation permit to enable construction on the Futenma Replacement Facility (FRF). Local opposition has long stymied efforts to implement the now nearly two-decade-old bilateral U.S.–Japan security agreement.

Washington should make clear to Tokyo that the time for endless delay is past. The Obama Administration should call upon Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to go beyond mere words of support and instead begin to fulfill Tokyo's commitments. Although the U.S. has repeatedly compromised alliance military capabilities to overcome Okinawan protests, Tokyo has dragged its feet on taking steps to allow the base's construction. For the Marines to be an effective deterrent and defense force, they must retain combined arms capabilities on Okinawa, including air units at the FRF.

The Chinese Threat. China's increasingly aggressive foreign policy underscores both the importance of the U.S.–Japanese alliance and the

necessity of strengthening the defense of Japan's southwest islands. Beijing's recent unilateral declaration of an air defense identification zone encompassing Japan's Senkaku Islands follows previous provocative Chinese maritime incursions.

The 2013 Japanese Ministry of Defense white paper warns of escalating Chinese maritime and aviation incursions near the Senkaku Islands and the need to enhance Japanese territorial defense. Tokyo will augment its air and naval forces and redeploy some ground forces to the southwest islands. Japan will convert an army infantry regiment into an amphibious force modeled after the U.S. Marine Corps.

U.S. Marines Still Necessary. Despite these efforts, Japan will remain highly dependent on the U.S. Marine Corps, particularly those units already deployed on Okinawa. Japanese ground forces remain less capable than their U.S. counterparts, with poor combined arms and amphibious operations capabilities.

The Third Marine Expeditionary Force on Okinawa is a flexible, scalable, tailored, self-contained, rapidly deployable, powerful military force that can fulfill any contingency that might arise throughout the Pacific region. The Marine Air Ground Task Force combined arms force requires collocation of its integrated ground, air, and logistics components.

Governor Nakaima instead advocates moving the Marine air unit completely off the island, thus undermining allied military capabilities for a broad spectrum of security and humanitarian contingencies. The U.S. Marines on Okinawa are an indispensable and irreplaceable component of any U.S. response to an Asian crisis.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4109>

Produced by the Asian Studies Center

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Japanese Opposition. Both Japan and the United States have made countless concessions to gain Okinawan support, but to no avail. Tokyo has provided billions of dollars in inducements while Washington has repeatedly sacrificed allied security capabilities purely to address local concerns. The Marine Corps has been forced to accept less capable bases; divide units; redeploy further from potential conflict zones; and reduce, relocate, and eliminate necessary training. Washington also capitulated by agreeing to return some bases prior to the required “tangible progress toward completion of the replacement facility.”

However, the potential for progress on the Futenma issue has improved during the past few months. In October, the U.S.–Japan Security Consultative Committee formalized Tokyo’s \$3.1 billion contribution for the relocation of U.S. Marines from Okinawa to Guam, sending a strong signal of Japanese commitment.

In November, the local chapter of Abe’s Liberal Democratic Party, including five members of the national legislature, reversed its opposition to the FRF and now supports the plan. It is likely that they would only do so only if they believed that Nakaima would approve the FRF construction.

U.S. Concerns Are Easing. During a recent trip to Japan, Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) member John McCain (R–AZ), who had previously opposed the FRF, adopted a more positive view. Following discussions with Abe and Japanese security officials, McCain no longer advocated an alternative proposal to integrate the Marine air unit into the U.S. Air Force base at Kadena. McCain commented, “I’m guardedly optimistic that if the governor of Okinawa makes the decision that allows us to move forward, that we have a great plan that we can implement.”

The SASC has opposed the Marine Corps realignment plan in the Pacific, citing costs of facilities in Okinawa and Guam as well as the lack of a strategic plan by the Obama Administration. The Marine deployment plan has been revised, enabling a smaller and less expensive Marine footprint on Guam.

In December, the SASC fell off some of its earlier objections. While retaining preconditions to unlock all of the funding, the committee greatly enhanced exceptions, allowing funding of some realignment projects.

Cutting the Gordian Knot. To stimulate positive action by year’s end:

- Tokyo should privately emphasize to Governor Nakaima that the additional inducements contained in the 2014 Japanese budget—to be released within two weeks—are contingent on his signing the land reclamation permit. A failure by Nakaima to do so should trigger a retraction of the subsidies, which would have severe economic consequences for Okinawa.
- Similarly, Washington should privately make clear to Nakaima that progress on all components of the Marine Corps realignment rests on his decision. There is no Plan B. Refusal to allow construction of the FRF would result in the Marine air unit staying permanently at the existing Futenma facility. In addition, the scheduled return of other Marine bases to Okinawan control would be suspended, the departure of 9,000 Marines from Okinawa to Guam significantly delayed, and existing reductions and relocations of Marine training rescinded.
- The U.S. and Japan should enhance public diplomacy efforts to better explain that a U.S. forward-deployed military presence, including Marines on Okinawa, is critical to the security of Japan and regional stability. They should emphasize that the Guam Agreement addresses Okinawan concerns by moving the Marine air unit to a less populated area, reducing the U.S. military footprint on Okinawa and returning land to local authorities.
- The Obama Administration should provide the congressionally required master plan and implementation strategy for the Asia Pivot. It is startling that an initiative of such apparent importance to the President has not been articulated in detail. The stalemate over Guam construction is a microcosm of bigger problems, namely a lack of an overall plan and ability to provide details of it.
- The U.S. Congress should fully fund the Marine Corps realignment plan. While pending SASC relaxation of restrictions is a positive step, it does not go far enough to allow the multi-part redeployment to proceed.

Remove the Roadblock. Making tangible progress on the FRF would remove a long-standing irritant in the U.S.–Japan alliance. Security officials in both countries have long complained that the Futenma stalemate “sucked the air out of the room” and prevented discussion on more pressing strategic issues, such as responding to the growing Chinese and North Korean threats.

Initiation of FRF construction would likely be a catalyst for relaxation of congressional restrictions on funding for several military construction projects on Guam, which, in turn, enables implementation of broader realignment plans. Removing the Futenma logjam would trigger movement on initiatives throughout the Pacific.

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