The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Okinawa's Futenma base: a sticking point in U.S.-Japan Relations

Yoshio Okubo

Okinawa's Futenma base: a sticking point in U.S.-Japan Relations

Okubo Yoshio

Tensions between Japan and the United States are rising over U.S. bases on Okinawa, notably with respect to plans approved by the two powers in 1999 to move the Futenma air station from densely populated Ginowan to the pristine Henoko Bay, home of the threatened dugong, a large sea mammal. The following Yomiuri shimbun opinion piece examines the continued discussions at the highest levels of the military of the two countries. Here we note that the conflict is simultaneously being played out on the ground in Okinawa. Okinawan opposition to American bases crescendoed in August 2004 when a US helicopter based at Futenma crashed in Ginowan at the university. This accelerated pressure for the base transfer, but in Henoko, local resistance, now in its eight year, is manifest in a sit-in that has passed its 300th day at the port where activists in sea kayaks and fishing trawlers have prevented Defense Agency and other vessels from beginning to drill. Other calls throughout the prefecture demand that the nearly 7,000 Marines presently stationed in Iraq not be returned to Okinawa where women's groups in particular fear violent crimes by returning soldiers. Meanwhile, a Stars & Stripes article of February 24, 2004 makes clear that the Marines, who have made Okinawa their most important Pacific base for sixty years, are settling in for the long haul. For example, at Camp Foster, two nine-story apartment towers with 136 three and four bedroom units are nearing completion, following the recent completion of 194 townhouse units. Camps Hansen and Schwab are building new mini-malls and food courts. For its part, the US has expressed willingness to consider other sites for the Futenama base than Henoko, but insists that the base must be located in Okinawa. Japan Focus editors.

Okubo Yoshio

One of my friends who has contacts in the U.S. Defense Department called me a week ago and told me he would like to talk to an influential media outlet in Japan.

He wanted to talk to someone about discussions he had had with his friends--senior Defense Department officials--while on a business trip to the United States.

The officials said Japan considers U.S. bases in the country a source of trouble and that U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld basically saw the United States as not having to keep its troops where they are not welcome.

My acquaintance quoted them as saying that the number of U.S. government officials calling for the withdrawal of U.S. forces in Japan likely would increase rapidly if the current situation continues.

He said his friends told him the defense secretary had not forgotten the reception he received in Okinawa Prefecture.
Rumsfeld, who has retained his post in the second term of U.S. President George W. Bush, visited the prefecture for the first time in November 2003 and spoke with Okinawa Gov. Inamine Keiichi.

A smiling Rumsfeld told Inamine he had heard from U.S. troops that their presence was welcomed by Okinawans.

The governor, however, obstinately described a situation in which the U.S. bases had created difficulties for the community, such as noise pollution from U.S. military planes and crimes committed by U.S. troops. The governor said, "The U.S. military has reached its limit. The feelings of Okinawans are like magma--once there is a hole, it will erupt."

Aerial view of Futenma Base in Ginowan City, Okinawa

The meeting took a turn for the worse as Rumsfeld raised his voice and said the United States was working toward correcting the situation.

About 16 months have passed since the two held the meeting. However, the situation involving U.S. military bases in Okinawa fundamentally has remained the same, particularly with respect to a plan to relocate the U.S. Marine Corps Futenma Air Station.

The Special Action Committee on Facilities and Areas in Okinawa (SACO), comprising senior officials of the Foreign Ministry and the Defense Agency and their U.S. counterparts, said in its final report in 1996 that the base would be returned to Japan within five to seven years after an alternative base had been built and was operational. A decision was made in 1999 to transfer the base offshore near the Henoko area in Nago, Okinawa Prefecture.

Henoko Harbor, projected site of the new facility

Work on the construction of the new facility, however, has dragged on with no prospect of completion in sight. A major stumbling block is the 15-year time limit on the use of the base set at the demand of the Okinawa prefectural government. The Cabinet decided it would discuss the limit with the U.S. government.

An accident in which a U.S. military helicopter crashed in a site adjacent to Futenma Air Station in August then exacerbated sour relations between the Okinawa prefectural government and the U.S. military stationed in the prefecture.

The U.S. government grew more concerned about the rising anti-U.S. sentiment in the area. In a two-plus-two meeting of Japan-U.S. foreign and defense ministers in mid-February in Washington, the two governments confirmed the current importance of the final report.
However, U.S. Assistant Defense Secretary Richard Lawless told Nukaga Fukushiro, a former director general of the Defense Agency who visited the United States immediately after the meeting, that it was important for Japan to secure an appropriate alternative site for the Futenma base and asked the central government to study areas outside Henoko as well.

Foreign Minister Machimura Nobutaka said the government would not "exclude the possibility of securing a site other than Henoko."
In that case, the government would be best served by taking the plan to build a facility offshore in the Henoko area back to the drawing board as it effectively has been rejected and start discussing an alternative as soon as possible.

Futenma Air Station has three functions--a heliport for the transportation of U.S. marines, a refueling station and a base from which personnel and goods can be transported during an emergency. The government should study an alternative plan that can be realized earlier and that stipulates the reallocation of these functions.

Japan and the United States will enter formal discussions on the U.S. military realignment. Possible plans of the two countries include the relocation of a new U.S. army headquarters to Camp Zama in Kanagawa Prefecture.

Along with the "maintenance of deterrence," the main prerequisite for bilateral talks is a "reduction of the burden" on local governments in areas hosting U.S. military bases. About 75 percent of U.S. military bases in Japan, however, are located in Okinawa Prefecture. If a decision on the resettlement of the Futenma base is deferred, Okinawa's burden will not be reduced.

Futenma Air Station is located in a crowded residential area, leaving the margin for error very small as a single mistake could lead to a major accident. Such an accident could fuel Okinawans' antibase sentiment and create a serious situation in which the U.S. would curtail its military forces in Japan or withdraw from the country--as I mentioned earlier.

In Japan, some oppose the U.S. presence and would like U.S. troops to withdraw in full. But the principle of maintaining military deterrence is indispensable as Japan continues to face imminent threats, such as from North Korea's weapons programs and Chinese military buildup. Communications between Japan and the United States on the military realignment is a great opportunity to stop focusing on the past and break the stalemate over the Futenma issue.

This article appeared in The Yomiuri Shimbun on March 10, 2005. Okubo Yoshio is political news editor of The Yomiuri Shimbun.

Created by Datamomentum