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By Hisane MASAKI

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's ruling coalition has cleared one hurdle in its drive for realignment of US military forces in Japan, as a moderate candidate who is open to the idea won a mayoral vote in Nago city on the southern island-state of Okinawa.

Winner Yoshikazu Shimabukuro, 59, was backed by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and its junior coalition partner New Komeito, as well as retiring mayor Tateo Kishimoto. Munehiro Gakiya, 59, was supported by the biggest opposition - the Democratic Party of Japan, the Social Democratic Party and the Japanese Communist Party. Yoshitami Oshiro, 65, is affiliated with a citizens' movement that is against the relocation of a US air base.

There was more at stake in Sunday's closely watched election than just the future of the controversial project to build a new US air station in Nago, a city of some 58,000. The defeat of the coalition-backed candidate would have cast a pall on the overall realignment plan for US military forces in Japan. Also, it would have been a slap in the face for the staunchly pro-US prime minister and could have set back moves made in recent years by Tokyo and Washington toward forging a stronger and closer security alliance.

The Nago mayoral vote came nearly three months after Japan and the United States signed an interim pact on the realignment of US military forces in Japan. Tokyo and Washington plan to finalize the pact in March. In an interim pact, the two countries struck a deal on the focal point of realignment talks: the long-running dispute over the relocation of a key US air station to Okinawa. The Nago mayoral election marked the first time local residents had made their voices heard on the relocation plan for the US Marine Corps' Futenma air station. It was also seen as the first referendum held in a local community on the overall US military realignment plan.

The three candidates - all municipal assembly members who ran as independents - oppose the Futenma relocation plan, but their views differ in detail.

While opposing the new Futenma relocation plan in its current form, Shimabukuro has indicated he would enter negotiations on the relocation issue if the plan were revised to be more acceptable for residents, implying Nago might accept the plan under certain conditions. His supporters include members of the local business community, such as the construction industry, who expect that the relocation would bring more central-government-funded infrastructure development projects and jobs to the local community. After winning the vote, Shimabukuro said he wants to sit down at the negotiating table with the national government if he can get local citizens' consent.

Meanwhile, Gakiya and Oshiro are steadfast opponents of the relocation plan.

The national government had kept a close watch on the election because it is eager to win the local government's cooperation regarding the relocation and also because the outcome will likely influence Okinawa Governor Keiichi Inamine's attitude toward the plan. Inamine has authority to approve reclamation of publicly owned coastal waters, which is essential for the Futenma relocation. Therefore, his cooperation is vital if the government is to carry out the relocation plan within the current legal system's framework.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe said in a statement: "We take the [Nago] election results as a recognition of the US military realignment we have proceeded with. We will continue to proceed with the realignment plan."

Defense Agency director general Fukushiro Nukaga said in a separate statement: "We would like to explain [the Futenma relocation plan] in good faith and hold constructive talks [with the local government]. We will make our utmost efforts to realize the plan without further delay."

Will the air base take off?

To be sure, Shimabukuro's victory in the Nago poll was good news for Koizumi's ruling coalition. Particularly encouraging for the coalition is that Shimabukuro garnered more votes than the other two candidates together. But it is too early to conclude that the air-station project will go smoothly.

The two countries agreed in 1996 that the US would return the US Marine Corps' Futenma air-station land to Japan "within five to seven years" on condition that its heliport operations be relocated within Okinawa prefecture. The Japanese government decided at the end of 1999 to relocate the base to the waters off the Henoko district of Nago city. But this original relocation plan ran aground because of fierce opposition from local citizens.

A junior high school demonstrator

In the interim pact signed in October, the US accepted Japan's proposal for the relocation of the Futenma air station, now in a densely populated area of Ginowan city, southern Okinawa prefecture, to the coastal area of the marines' Camp Schwab in Nago, in the prefecture's north. Most local citizens are dead set against the new relocation plan as well. In mid-December, the Okinawa prefectural assembly adopted a statement opposing the plan, stepping up pressure on the Koizumi government. The Futenma relocation is scheduled to be completed by 2012.

No heliport

Meanwhile, the US administration is reviewing the role of its bases in Japan as part of its military's worldwide "transformation". The US expects Japan to play the role of strategic hub to ensure stability in an "arc of instability" stretching from Northeast Asia to the Middle East via Southeast and South Asia.

The realignment plan would include deployment of a US nuclear-powered aircraft carrier for the first time to be based in Japan, at Yokosuka Naval Base, headquarters of the US 7th Fleet and Koizumi's home town and constituency near Tokyo.

But the repositioning in Japan is also meant to ease tensions caused by the US military presence. The US bases 47,000 troops in Japan, and residents in Okinawa prefecture - where most of the troops and bases are concentrated - have long complained of crime, crowding and noise linked to the military. Okinawa is about 1,600 kilometers southwest of Tokyo. The realignment plan calls for transferring 7,000 marines from Okinawa, 6,000 of them to the US Pacific territory of Guam.

A survey conducted by a local mainland newspaper last year showed that 80% of people polled do not approve of the Koizumi government's Okinawa base plans, while only 14% said they do. Asked the best way to resolve the Futenma relocation issue, 72% answered that the air base should be moved to Hawaii, Guam or somewhere else in the United States.

According to a news report, Nago's city government will propose a revised plan to the government in an attempt to break the deadlock. Under the proposal, the military facility would be constructed 800 meters south of where the current plan puts it. The revision is aimed at reducing a risk of helicopter crashes in residential areas. Shimabukuro reportedly appears likely to support the revised plan. Nature conservationists, however, don't support the revised plan because it entails a larger scale of offshore construction.

Meanwhile, Takeshi Onaga, mayor of Naha, the Okinawa prefectural capital, said recently the city will seek an alliance with other municipalities to gain support for his proposal to have the Futenma air station relocated to barren Iwojima Island about 1,200km south of Tokyo. Onaga met with Inamine to explain his proposal. He also indicated he would try to win support for the proposal from Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara because Iwojima belongs administratively to the island-village of Ogasawara, which is part of Tokyo.
It is still unclear how much change to the Futenma relocation plan would be enough to make the new Nago mayor bend. Koizumi's ruling coalition is reluctant about making any major modifications to the plan, a process that would require another round of hectic negotiations with the US. Also, Washington apparently believes it is the Japanese government's obligation to carry out the new relocation plan.

Inamine, a conservative, won the last gubernatorial election by pledging to promote dialogue with the national government and take a realistic approach to the US military presence. He accepted the original Futenma relocation plan on condition that it accommodate joint military-civilian use and that military use end after 15 years. But he has rejected the new plan. The Nago vote was regarded by the central government as a trial run or even a decisive showdown ahead of the next Okinawa gubernatorial election in November. Inamine has not yet made clear whether he will run for another term, though speculation is growing that he will not.

For the Futenma relocation to be completed by 2012, as envisaged under the current plan, the national government cannot afford to wait until after the Okinawa gubernatorial election before launching an environmental assessment. While some pundits optimistically predict that Inamine will have to accept any deal that might be struck between Nago and the national government on the Futenma issue, others caution that he might stick to his demands, including one for joint military-civilian use of the new facility.

Meanwhile, the Koizumi government is poised to adopt a carrot-and-stick approach to Okinawa. In a bid to win local support for the Futenma relocation plan, Koizumi's ruling coalition plans to draw up a development plan for northern Okinawa, including a railway system between Naha and Nago, and expansion of Naha airport. At the same time the Koizumi government is considering special legislation to transfer power for using public waters from the prefectural governor to the national government to ensure the smooth implementation of the Japan-US pact. Current law stipulates that any organization seeking to fill in public waters at sea or in rivers and lakes must receive permission from the

prefectural governor.

The Koizumi government is also planning in the current session of the diet to introduce a set of bills as early as April aimed at promoting the realignment. The new laws will allow Tokyo to help defray the estimated cost of several billion dollars to move Marine Corps personnel to Guam. Tokyo's financial support for construction of US military facilities abroad, such as command centers, barracks, housing for service members and their families and welfare facilities is not enshrined in the current Status of Forces Agreement. The set of bills would also enable the provision of huge subsidies to local communities affected by the realignment. The special legislation to strip the Okinawa governor of the power to authorize the use of public waters may be included in the package.

A host of remaining hurdles

In a meeting in Washington with Nukaga last Tuesday, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld emphasized that his country wanted to stick with the current Futenma relocation plan, regardless of the outcome of Sunday's Nago mayoral vote. The US has made progress on the Futenma relocation a condition for the realignment of other facilities and personnel in Okinawa prefecture, including the planned transfer of 7,000 Marine Corps personnel from there.

To be sure, the Futenma relocation is the focal point of the US military realignment. But there are many other local communities outside Okinawa prefecture affected by the realignment. Those local communities remain strongly opposed to the realignment plan and have vowed to fight it. The Koizumi government faces the daunting task of pulling out all stops to sell the realignment plan to them as well as Okinawa.

The Koizumi government has already begun informally to dangle huge subsidies in front of local communities hosting US military bases, including those on Okinawa; it is estimated the subsidies are worth more than 1 trillion yen (US$8.7 billion) over the next six years. But many residents of municipalities being asked to host more US military facilities oppose the realignment plan.

In his meeting with Rumsfeld, Nukaga asked that Washington provide specific measures to alleviate the burden of Japanese residents in areas hosting US military bases. "Because it takes time to persuade local communities [to accept the bases], Japan and the US need to promptly map out specific measures," Nukaga told Rumsfeld. Nukaga didn't elaborate on what specific measures he seeks from the United States.

Despite their efforts, there is growing speculation the two countries may not be able to sign the final pact by the end of March as planned, because of slow progress in putting the finishing touches on the agreement. Regardless of what the October realignment pact is officially called, there is a basic difference of perception over the nature of the document. Tokyo regards it as an interim deal while Washington sees it as final.

To be sure, Tokyo and Washington are moving in the same direction toward a stronger and closer security alliance, yet it remains unclear how this realignment plan will work out.

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