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Discordant Visitors: Japanese and Okinawan Messages to the US

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Governments come and go in Japan, Noda Yoshihiko's the most recent, being the third since the general elections of 30 August 2009 brought the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) to power, following those of Hatoyama Yukio and Kan Naoto. In the weeks following his assumption of office, Noda has stated his core vision for the office on many occasions, including his inaugural Diet speech as Prime Minister on 13 September. He promises to confirm, deepen, and strengthen the alliance with the US, "the axis of Japan foreign policy and security." That means, above all else, he will construct the base for the Marine Corps in northern Okinawa designed to substitute for the Futenma base that squats dangerously in the middle of the township of Ginowan.

The fact is, however, that for the past 15 years a series of Prime Ministers – seven of the LDP and three of the DPJ¹ – have tried without success to accomplish this. Inter-governmental agreements on the "Futenma Replacement Facility" have been made, postponed, revised, and postponed again (1996, 2006, 2009, 2010, and 2011), mostly because of the constant opposition in Okinawa, and Noda is no more likely than his predecessors to resolve the issue. The Okinawan opposition has grown steadily more determined over those fifteen years, especially the last two, since the DPJ took power promising to transfer Futenma base outside of Okinawa and then renege on its promise. So Noda takes office pledging to do the impossible, and therefore is almost guaranteed to join the conga line of Prime Ministers jiggling offstage after the others in the near future.



Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko at the inaugural speech on September 13

On 21 September, meeting President Obama at the UN headquarters in New York for the first time, Noda assured the President that "We will strive to achieve cooperation in line with the agreement between Japan and the United States, and I will do my best to gain the understanding of the Okinawa people."²

First reports (from AP and Kyodo)³ of the meeting said it lasted 45 minutes, but that was soon revised downwards to "about 35 minutes" (which, allowing for interpreting, meant at most twenty minutes). There can scarcely have been time for detailed discussion of anything but the agenda ranged far and wide, from the two parties "hailing" their alliance, Noda declaring it "even more unwavering" than it had been and Obama promising that "much, if not most of the history of the 21st century will be written in Asia, and the United States wants to be a full part of that history going forward."⁴ They then moved briskly through the Japanese tsunami catastrophe of March, the ongoing nuclear crisis that it precipitated, Japan's gratitude for American aid, the global economy (which worried both), North Korea (with Japan, as always at high-level meetings, seeking American help in solving the problem of abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korea three or four decades ago), the free trade Trans Pacific Community project (Noda's government was thinking about it), restrictions on US beef imports (it was thinking about that too), to the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction (this seems to have consumed much of the attention of the meeting and on this too, Noda's government was thinking, although it was known to be unenthusiastic). Obama also thanked Noda for Japan's \$5 billion contribution towards Afghanistan reconstruction programs and Noda promised that he would achieve "stable government," which, given his extremely fragile position, seemed highly unlikely.

Though all these matters were on the agenda, Japanese reports concentrated almost exclusively on the single item of Futenma and the oft-repeated Japanese pledge for construction of a new base at Henoko to replace it. In the first account of the meeting by a participant, the Department of State's Kurt Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, said that

"Both sides understand that we are approaching a period where we need to see results, and that was made very clear by the President."⁵



Japan-US Bilateral Meeting (photo from the website of [the Ministry of Foreign Affairs](http://www.mofa.go.jp))

Campbell quoted no direct words from the president, and he is well known as a core member of the Washington "Japan handlers" who have long insisted on and demanded that Japan proceed with the base construction, so it was not surprising that he would choose to emphasize this point. In the first reports of the talks published in Japan (in *Yomiuri shimbun*), these words, which Campbell had given no indication were the President's, were placed within quote marks as the direct speech of the President.⁶ The Japanese media immediately highlighted the words "need to see results," making it sound as though Obama had issued something close to an ultimatum.

In later reports, the *Yomiuri* attributed its source for the "Obama" remark to unnamed Japanese government sources.⁷ The Japanese media soon built a picture of the meeting replete with insights into its mood and the President's mind. There was (according to the *Asahi*, quoting "a Japanese government official") an "unexpectedly tense atmosphere," in which Obama "pressed for action,"⁸ and according to the *Japan Times* (quoting "sources") Obama was "impatient and irritated" and Noda was under pressure.⁹ Jiji News Agency offered the most dramatic account:

"The President cut into the discussion as if not to waste a second, saying, 'The time to produce results is approaching.' According to sources accompanying the Prime Minister, without even waiting for the other participants including Secretary of State Clinton to introduce themselves, the President turned upon the

Prime Minister to demand of him in firm tones progress on the Futenma problem."¹⁰

Oddly, however, the Japanese Government's report on the meeting gave neither direct nor indirect reference to any view the President might have expressed on this matter,¹¹ and when Noda himself was questioned about it at a press conference in New York, he shook his head at the suggestion that Obama had pressed him for action on the Futenma replacement or said "the time has come for action." As Noda put it, he himself had explained that "determined to reduce the base burden on Okinawa, he would sincerely explain the situation and seek Okinawa's cooperation," to which Obama responded that he would "look forward to developments."¹² He could hardly have said anything else. Noda, in other words, simply assured the President, as he had assured the Diet and the people of Japan, that he intended to push ahead with the base construction. If the President had really made a statement about "approaching a period where we need to see results," it would be remarkable for the Foreign Ministry's report to include no mention of it. Asked by an opposition member at the Lower House budget committee meeting on 26 September about Obama's reported use of the words "need to see results," Noda replied, "I take this to be the private view of the individual who conducted the briefing [i.e., Campbell], not to be coming from the President."¹³

It is also clear that Japan's national bureaucracy and mainstream national media support the position to move ahead with the base construction plan in Okinawa. They have long done so. On the eve of the New York meeting, the Asahi declared that Noda needed to "start by trying to win the trust of people in Okinawa."¹⁴ The Yomiuri summed up after the talks, saying, "the government must accelerate its negotiations with the Okinawa prefectural government to advance the relocation plan."¹⁵ As both papers well knew, however, the people of Okinawa have insisted in every democratic forum possible that they would not accept any new base. The only way to "win the trust" of Okinawans, therefore, would be to tell them that it was revoking all agreements on new base construction and that it was asking Washington to quickly and unconditionally close and remove its Futenma base. But such a view was scarcely to be heard in Tokyo or Washington.



MCAS Futenma (photo from [the Mainichi Daily News](#))

continuing that Futenma was "not an acceptable option" and that if the national government was to choose to proceed "against the will of the local citizens," it might lead to "an irreparable rift ... between the people of Okinawa and the US forces in the prefecture." In other words, as this conservative Okinawa top official sees it, the national government's specific agenda for "deepening" the alliance (that Noda would express to the President two days later) threatens to plunge it into crisis.



Okinawa Governor Nakaima Hirokazu, giving a speech at George Washington University

The unidentified "sources" that insisted Obama had been irritated and had demanded early steps to resolve the stalemate must be presumed to be the very same Japanese officials who during the time of Prime Minister Hatoyama (2009-2010) did all they could to sabotage their Prime Minister and promote the Henoko project, while urging Washington not to show any weakness in negotiating with him.¹⁶ For them to have isolated the sentence from the Obama-Noda meeting in which Obama said whatever he said in response to Noda's pledge - ignoring other matters that seem to have drawn greater attention such as the Hague Convention - and to thus turn the meeting into one for the delivery of an Obama ultimatum to Noda was therefore hardly surprising.

The Noda-Obama meeting was all the more bizarre for following by two days a lecture given at George Washington University in Washington D.C., by Okinawan Governor Nakaima Hirokazu that flatly contradicted the Prime Minister.¹⁷ Nakaima declared that opposition in Okinawa to the Okinawan base project was almost total. He spoke of the unanimous declaration within the prefectural parliament (the Prefectural Assembly), and the explicit opposition of all 41 local government mayors and heads, including the mayor of the city of Nago, the designated site for the new base. Nakaima told his Washington audience that the relocation plan "must be revised,"

These two meetings - Nakaima in Washington on 19th and Noda in New York on 21st September - delivered to the US totally different and contradictory messages. Both saw in utterly different light the projected construction of a base for the Marine Corps in Nago. Nakaima's speech exposed the emptiness of the Noda-Obama meeting and the absurdity of the continued statements by liberal and conservative mainland opinion leaders and media alike that more effort and more sincerity could somehow solve the problem. The belief that the near universal Okinawan hostility could be reversed by more "sincerity" on Noda's part was an insult to Okinawans.

By his repeated insistence that the project would go ahead, Noda implied that if persuasion (which meant bribery) did not work, then force would have to be invoked. Obviously contemplating this prospect, Governor Nakaima told a Washington press conference that the only way that base construction could go ahead would be by recourse to "bayonets and bulldozers," i.e. in the way that the bases were first built under US military government in the 1950s.¹⁸ Instead, he insisted, "The two governments should stop doing deals and return the bases promptly."¹⁹

In other words, Okinawa's most senior official believed that base construction would call for rolling the tanks through Nago. The "alliance" supposedly in the name of democracy, would be called upon to justify its crushing. Nakaima's address exposed to the Washington audience the depth of the confrontation between the nation state and the prefecture of Okinawa. For that, there is no precedent in Japan's modern history, and it deepens year by year.

What is clear from the exchanges surrounding the Noda visit is that Japan's top bureaucrats and Washington's "Japan handlers" are determined to press ahead with the Henoko base construction. They will brook no dissent, whether by a Japanese Prime Minister (such as Hatoyama, 2009-2010) or by Okinawa people and institutions. Fifteen years ago, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro decided that the project could not be carried forward by force. No government since then has dared to suggest otherwise, with the result that government after government has sought to soften Okinawan resistance by combining carrots and sticks, but utterly failed to change it. Instead, the opposition has become more determined and more united.

Obama must feel some Okinawa-related irritation over the fact that Congress in June delivered him its own ultimatum, slashing \$150 million off the Pentagon's estimates and saying it would not authorize further payments for the Guam base transfer (designed to accommodate some of the relocated Marines from Okinawa) unless the Pentagon could provide a thorough justification. Senior figures of both major parties in the Congress are increasingly dubious about the long frozen relocation plans, most famously declaring them "unrealistic, unworkable, and unaffordable."²⁰



The all-party, all-Okinawa rally against the plan to build a “Futenma Relocation Facility” in Henoko, on April 25, 2010

The US-Japan “alliance,” forever being “deepened,” thus actually grows shallower and emptier. Rarely has there been a leaders’ meeting more devoid of substance than this one between Noda and Obama, with its pious and flatterulent phrases about the United States being part of the history being written in Asia, “going forward.” Tellingly, the one positive Japanese act that Obama referred to was one nearly two years old – the contribution announced in November 2009 of \$5 billion over five years to Afghan reconstruction. Of course Japan pays much greater sums than that to support the Pentagon, the dollar and US policy generally, including more than double that in direct subsidy towards expenses of the US military bases in Japan (the so-called “sympathy payments”) on a per-year basis,²¹ but Obama’s advisers must have decided that it might be too embarrassing to offer public thanks for that.

The two Okinawan papers presented a view of these events so different from that of the national media as to suggest they were from a completely different world. The *Okinawa Times* spoke of Noda delivering Obama a “bad check,” since he had no concrete policy and no prospect of resolving the problem.²² As *Ryukyu shimpo* put it, “the Henoko transfer plan not only completely fails to gain the support of the Okinawan people, but it has lost the support of Congress too. Do not those politicians and bureaucrats who make up the Ampo [Security Treaty] mafia, and who see themselves as realists, realize that they have become ‘unrealists?’”²³

Although Noda as DPJ Prime Minister from September 2011 expresses a resolve to break the stalemate, he cannot believe that there is any room left for “persuasion.” He can, and almost certainly will, try to put together an attractive financial package to try to find an appropriate price at which Okinawa will be ready to sell its soul – but ultimately he and his advisors can only be assumed to be contemplating the use of force. Tellingly, his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Genba Koichiro, declared that in order to honour the agreement with the US on base relocation and “reduce the burden on the Okinawan people,” he would “continue to engage with the people of Okinawa in all sincerity, even if stomped upon and kicked.” Genba in other words portrays himself and his government as victims of Okinawan “stomping and kicking,” a bizarre reversal of roles in the relationship that hinted at the same readiness to resort to force because it could be seen as *retaliatory*. His comment passed with little note in mainland Japan but outraged Okinawans.²⁴

The Noda government in its early weeks repeatedly declared that it would deliver on the many promises former governments had made to Washington about Okinawa. Both Noda and Genba, repeating the mantra about lessening the base burden, insisted on increasing it, requiring Okinawa to continue bearing its hugely disproportionate base burden for the sake of the alliance in the form of the construction of a new base at Henoko. Tokyo will prevail, they keep repeating, but the citizens of Okinawa have for fifteen years of mass, non-violent resistance defied all the Tokyo promises, threats and bribes designed to crush or neutralize them. No amount of “sincerity” on the part of Noda and his Ministers seemed likely to overcome that determination, and violence would threaten the very fabric of Japan’s security in whose name it would be taken.

The US-Japan “Alliance” runs aground on the reef of Okinawan resistance. By making the promises he has made, supposedly in order to “deepen” the “alliance,” Noda heads towards exposing it to its greatest crisis.

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Notes

- ¹ Takeshita, Obuchi, Mori, Koizumi, Abe, Fukuda, and Aso of the LDP, and Hatoyama and Kan of the DPJ.
- ² “Obama hosts Noda, ‘advises action on base,’” *Japan Times*, 23 September 2011.
- ³ AP, Kyodo, Futenma broached at first summit, Obama hosts Noda, advises action on base,” *Japan Times*, 23 September 2011.
- ⁴ US Department of State, “US Foreign Policy in the Asia-Pacific Region,” 21 September 2011, [link](#).
- ⁵ US Department of State, “US Foreign Policy in the Asia-Pacific Region,” 21 September 2011, [link](#).
- ⁶ [“Shusho ‘Futenma isetsu ni zenryoku,’ Bei daitoryo ‘shinten kitai.’”](#) *Yomiuri shimbun*, 22 September 2011.
- ⁷ [Takeshi Endo](#), “Noda-Obama hold 1st talks,” 23 September 2011.
- ⁸ “Rough start: Obama pressed Noda at first meeting,” *Asahi shimbun*, 23 September 2011.
- ⁹ “Unrealistic promise on Futenma,” *Japan Times*, 24 September 2011.
- ¹⁰ [“Noda shusho Futenma shinten e kadai seou.”](#) Jiji News Agency, 22 September 2011. For a detailed survey of Japanese media coverage, see Satoko Norimatsu, [“Noda Obama kaidan hodo wa okashii.”](#) Peace Philosophy Centre 23 September 2011, [“Nichibei kaidan, Obama hatsugen to saretu mono o Noda ga hitei.”](#) Peace Philosophy, 24 September 2011, and [“Noda Obama kaidan hodo wa okashii sonogo.”](#) 27 September 2011.
- ¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Nichibei shuno kaidan (gaiyo),” 22 September 2011, [link](#).
- ¹² “Futenma isetsu gigi ga fujo, kubi o kashifgeru shusho,” *Ryukyu shimpo*, 24 September 2011.
- ¹³ [“Shuin yosan i de noda shsho bei daitoryo no kekka motomeru hatsugen hitei.”](#) *Ryukyu shimpo*, 26 September 2011.

¹⁴ "Editorial: Noda should win Okinawa's trust to solve Futenma," *Asahi shimbun*, 19 September 2011.

¹⁵ "To strengthen US alliance, Noda must produce results," *Yomiuri shimbun*, 24 September 2011.

¹⁶ See Gavan McCormack, "Deception and Diplomacy: The US, Japan, and Okinawa," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 23 May 2011.

¹⁷ The Nakaima speech seems to have been printed in full only in the Okinawan media, and covered only briefly elsewhere. See full text in English in [Satoko Norimatsu](#), "Okinawa Governor Nakaima: An Irreparable Rift in Okinawa/Japan/US Relations would result from forceful construction of Henoko base." Peace Philosophy Centre, 22 September 2011.

¹⁸ "Unrealistic promise on Futenma," *Japan Times*, 24 September 2011.

¹⁹ "Okinawa Governor denies a Japan-U.S. deal on US military realignment package," *Ryukyu shimpo*, 26 September 2011 (in English).

²⁰ On the statement by Senators Levin, McCain and Webb, see Gavan McCormack, "Deception and Diplomacy," op.cit.

²¹ The Government of Japan agreed early in 2010 to continue these payments at the 2009 rate of Y188 billion per year for five years. At today's exchange that means approximately \$2.4 billion per year, \$12 billion over the five years.

²² "[Bei kokubo kengen hoan' Futenma minaoshi no michi hirake.](#)"

²³ "Nichibei shuno kaidan, min-i hitei shite minshushugi ka," editorial, *Ryukyu shimpo*, 23 September 2011.

²⁴ See, for example, "Genba gaisho hatsugen, fumitsukete iru no wa dare ka," *Ryukyu shimpo*, 7 September 2011.