



Osprey Deployment a New Tinderbox on Okinawa

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On May 23, 1988, in Arlington, Texas, Bell Helicopter unveiled with much fanfare a new combo-aircraft; a fixed-wing plane that could climb and hover like a helicopter, but also rotate its giant propellers forward and fly like an airplane. On that day, Peter Van Sant, then correspondent for CBS Evening News with Dan Rather, called the plane a "revolutionary new aircraft" that was the latest "future shock". He expected it to carry commuters to Washington or Boston from Manhattan, as it could take off and land in downtown business districts, reducing travel times. It was called the V-22. "By the year 2000, there could be a market of five to eight million passengers annually," a company spokesperson at Bell Helicopter predicted at the ceremony. Twenty-four years later, the V-22 has yet to be used as a commuter aircraft between New York and Boston. Instead, across the Pacific, the Bell-Boeing MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft, having been deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan, is becoming the next tinderbox issue on Japan's southernmost subtropical island prefecture, Okinawa.



V-22 Osprey

helicopter crashed into a university building in the city, causing no serious damage or injuries but causing a major international incident. (Thanks to summer vacation, most students were off-campus.)



Futenma surrounded by Ginowan City

Ospreys over Futenma

Plans to deploy 12 Osprey aircraft to US Marine Corps (USMC) Air Station Futenma in Okinawa prefecture within this year have emerged as a fresh flashpoint between Okinawa residents and Tokyo and Washington. How the two national governments handle islanders' sensitivities over the Osprey could prove critical for the future of the Japan-US alliance. The dispute over the controversial MV-22 erupted on June 7 when the Okinawa chapter of the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) demanded that newly appointed Defense Minister Morimoto Satoshi resign over remarks related to the safety of the Osprey deployment. The Japanese Defense Ministry had asked the US government to conduct a thorough investigation prior to the aircraft's planned deployment to Futenma, following a MV-22 crash in April in Morocco which killed two marines. However, Morimoto, known for his pro-US stance, said at a press conference on June 5, "It would be ideal to receive all the results [from the US] on the investigations into the accident prior to the deployment, but there is a chance that might not happen." "Does the [Japanese] government view the Okinawans as Japanese!" Chobin Zukeran, a DPJ lawmaker representing Okinawa, shouted tearfully at a press conference in Naha City on Okinawa. "Don't think Okinawans are stupid!" said Zukeran, who appeared in his shirt sleeves to emphasize his anger at the new defense minister, who was appointed the previous day. Futenma air base is located in the heart of densely populated Ginowan City. In August 2004, a US Marines CH-53 military

jet also crashed into an elementary school in central Okinawa, leaving 17 people dead, including 11 children. Okinawans remember these accidents vividly.

"Defense Minister Morimoto's remarks show nothing but contempt for Okinawans," the chapter said in an emergency statement. "There is no more room to reach a compromise between Okinawa and the Japanese government. This should be taken as all-out confrontation.

"It is unacceptable to increase the burden borne by the people of Okinawa prefecture anymore. This can't help but spark the public opinion that Okinawa should become independent," the statement also said. In damage control mode, the Japanese Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on June 8 that a US investigation into the crash in Morocco had found no mechanical flaws in the MV-22. However, the ministry admitted that the investigation was ongoing and had yet to specify the crash's cause.

On June 13, the MoD also outlined its support for USMC plans to deploy Ospreys to Okinawa. In the face of local concerns about the risk of MV-22 crashes at Futenma, MoD officials insist that the Osprey has a safety record that more than matches other USMC aviation assets.

Yet another crash in Florida

The row over the aircraft didn't end there, however. To make matters worse, on the same day, an Air Force CV-22 Osprey crashed during a routine training mission in Florida, injuring five crewmembers. It was the second crash in three months for the aircraft.

Okinawans protested vehemently. "The accident reinforced the impression that Ospreys often crash," Okinawa Governor Nakaima Hirokazu said in a nationally broadcast interview on June 14. "Until this sort of accident stops occurring, the deployment is impossible."

In Tokyo, Chief Cabinet Secretary Fujimura Osamu announced that Japan would suspend any procedures for the planned deployment of the MV-22 to Futenma until the cause of the accident in Florida could be ascertained.

"The Japanese government won't take any new action until details of the accident become evident," Fujimura said at a regular press conference on June 14.

However, Fujimura toned down his rhetoric the following day, saying that the Japanese government would not request that the US suspend the deployment of Ospreys, although he still called on Washington to provide detailed information on the crash.

His retreat came after Colonel James Slife, commander of a special operations wing at an Air Force base in Florida, on June 14 said that no fundamental

design flaws were suspected in the CV-22 Osprey aircraft, and that their operation will not be suspended despite the accident.

On June 17, thousands of Okinawans gathered in Ginowan City to oppose the deployment of Ospreys at Futenma in a built-up area of the city.

"I urge an immediate halt to the plan to deploy the Osprey, whose safety is in question, at the Futenma Air Station which sits next to private homes," said Sakima Atsushi, the mayor of Ginowan, who stressed the fact that Futenma is often described as the most dangerous base in the world, and the tilt-rotor aircraft's safety is in doubt.

Miyabi Kyan, a 15-year-old female student at the nearby Ginowan High School, said, "I want just this one thing to be heard: Please don't bring the Osprey into the city of Ginowan," drawing a storm of applause at the rally held in a seaside park in the city.

"It would be too late to do anything after an accident occurs," Kyan said, urging the governments to reflect on the US helicopter crash at Okinawa International University eight years ago and a series of accidents with the Osprey.

Starting later this year, the US and Japanese governments are planning to deploy a total of 24 Ospreys to the controversial USMC air station at Futenma in Okinawa to replace ageing 24 CH-46 transport helicopters. However, this comes amidst a decade-long deadlock over plans to relocate Futenma air station to Henoko, Nago, in northern Okinawa by constructing a new sea-based replacement facility off Camp Schwab. Local governments, supported by the majority of Okinawans, have demanded the immediate closure and transfer of Futenma outside of the prefecture, but the US and Japanese governments continue to move forward with their plans in the face of Okinawan opposition. In April, the Japanese government agreed to pay the costs for refurbishing the Futenma base until the sea-based replacement facility is constructed on the north of the island. Okinawans are quick to point out that maintenance and repair work on Futenma means a US-Japan commitment to its continued use. Plans to deploy the Osprey at Futenma strengthen Okinawan fears that the air base will become a permanent fixture. In an apparent attempt to ease tensions, the US and Japanese governments reportedly considered temporarily stationing the Osprey at USMC Air Station Iwakuni in Yamaguchi prefecture in July, and demonstrating their safety by conducting test flights there. The MV-22 would then be deployed to Futenma by mid-August, the Asahi Shimbun reported on June 9. An alternative plan to transport the Ospreys in pieces by sea to the Naha Military Port on Okinawa as early as July, with the aircraft to be assembled there, was aborted as the Naha City Council unanimously opposed the plan and Naha Mayor Onaga Takeshi followed suit. "Any logic that does not understand the Okinawan mind and our history won't be accepted," Onaga told a press conference on June 6. "While we are requesting the easing of the burden, they are bringing excessive burdens on us further. There is no need to consider the deployment."

The planned deployment of the MV-22 to Iwakuni fell apart in the wake of the most recent accident in Florida. On June 14, Yamaguchi Governor Nii Sekinari met with Defense Minister Morimoto and asked that the proposal to have Iwakuni Air Base serve as a stopover site be put on hold, citing safety concerns. Iwakuni Mayor Fukuda Yoshihiko told reporters the same day, "My doubts and concerns about safety have increased. Under the current circumstances, we simply cannot give our approval."

Thus, the Japanese government, caught between a domestic rock and a diplomatic hard place, that is, between local governments and the US, has been unable to resolve the dispute over the deployment of the MV-22.

For its part, the Okinawa Defense Bureau hews to its "know nothing" stance about the deployment plan until June 2011, despite the fact that deployment of the Osprey to Futenma was announced in the US Navy's 1992 document "Master Plan for Marine Corps Air Station Futenma" and in the 1996 Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) draft.

According to a joint survey conducted by the Asahi Shimbun and the Okinawa Times in April, 50% of residents of Okinawa Prefecture pointed to "discrimination by the mainland" as the reason why the scale of US military bases in the prefecture remains unchanged forty years after Okinawa's reversion to Japanese sovereignty. "The opinion that mainland discrimination is behind the failure to reduce US military bases in Okinawa has spread since around 2010, when then Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama broke his promise to relocate the US Marine Corps Air Station Futenma outside the prefecture," the Asahi Shimbun concluded.

Hirohito and MacArthur

Today's Okinawa problems are deeply rooted in a deal reached during the US occupation following Japan's defeat in World War II, when Emperor Hirohito suggested to Gen. Douglas MacArthur, then the post-surrender potentate in Tokyo, that the US continue occupying Okinawa and other islands in the Ryukyu chain for 99 years in exchange for keeping the imperial system intact.

MacArthur saw limited Japanese opposition to US retention of Okinawa because "the Okinawans are not Japanese." Hirohito's suggestion, and the US military's desire to retain its most important base in the Western Pacific, underscored the reality that the islands were being sacrificed for joint US-Japan interests.

This thinking on Okinawa has remained deeply embedded in the minds of mainstream political elites, bureaucrats, politicians and the mass media in Tokyo, including in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is often criticized as being subservient to U.S. diplomacy. When Democratic Party of Japan Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio sought to question this logic, conservative forces joined to topple him in June 2010, in part over his mishandling of the Futenma issue.

Political impasse over Okinawa base issues has continued for subsequent Japanese administrations.

The widow-maker The MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) transport aircraft was once called the "widow-maker" due to a series of accidents during its development. Development of the MV-22 got off to a rocky start with the deaths of 23 marines in two crashes during testing more than 12 years ago. A US Air Force version of the tilt-rotor aircraft, the special mission CV-22, crashed in Afghanistan in April 2010, killing three service members and one civilian contractor. According to the Project On Government Oversight, 36 people have died in V-22s since the plane began flying.

This safety record has led the Okinawa prefectural government and local residents to fiercely oppose the planned deployment. The Pentagon has dismissed such safety concerns. "The MV-22 is among the safest aircraft in the Marine Corps' inventory," Captain Richard K Ulsh, USMC public affairs officer stated in an email interview with the author on June 8. "Including the mishap on April 11, 2012 in Morocco, since the Marine Corps resumed flight operations in October 2003, the MV-22B has demonstrated a safety record that is consistently better than USMC averages while conducting military training, humanitarian assistance missions, and combat operations in very challenging environments." According to Ulsh, the class A mishap rate for each of the identified aircraft is as follows. These rates are determined by the number of mishaps over a period of 100,000 flight hours. The rate of MV-22 Class A mishaps is higher than that of ageing CH-46, but is the second lowest among the five aircraft and lower than the average.

MV-22: 1.93 CH-46: 1.11 CH-53E: 2.35 CH-53D: 4.51 AV-8B: 6.76 ALL USMC: 2.45 "The Marine Corps views the MV-22 as a highly capable, reliable and safe aircraft," Ulsh said.

But those data did not take into account the most recent crash in Florida. Critics also point out that all of the factors, such as the length of flying hours, the number of take offs and landings and the number of aircraft deployed and operational duties in combat zone, must be considered if one wants to measure its real safety. Otherwise, they say, the figures would be meaningless.

On June 15, Pentagon spokesman Navy Captain John Kirby confirmed plans to deploy the MV-22 to Futenma this year. He reiterated that there has been "no change" in the US government's existing planned deployment of Ospreys despite a recent crash in Florida.

On June 19, Okinawa Governor Nakaima and Ginowan Mayor Sakima met Defense Minister Morimoto Satoshi and Foreign Minister Gamba Koichiro in Tokyo and formally requested that the government cancel deployment of the Ospreys.

Once on Okinawa, the Ospreys would move around the mainland of Japan, according to "Final Environmental Review for Basing MV-22 at MCAS Futenma and Operating in Japan" published by the USMC in April 2012. Detachments of two to six Ospreys will make two- or three-day deployments to Iwakuni and the Combined Arms Training Facility at Camp Fuji. In addition, the US plans to conduct low-level flight training down to 500 feet, or 152 meters, above ground level in six courses including those above Tohoku, Hokuriku and Kyushu.

"Based on expected training activities, MV-22 aircrews would fly approximately 55 annual operations along each route for a total of 330," the review said.

Latent anti-US base sentiment is likely to rise in coming months as local elections approach. Naha's mayoral election is scheduled for November, and there is speculation that low approval ratings for Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko's administration, currently running at around 20%, could soon spur a general election. Major political parties and prefectural chapters in Okinawa are likely to use the election to campaign for relocation of the Futenma facility outside of the prefecture as well as to halt the V-22 deployment. "It was unavoidable that the deployment of the Osprey would become a source of friction and conflict," Japanese military analyst Shikata Toshiyuki, a special advisor to former Defense Minister Tanaka Naoki, said in an interview with the author. "Without the accident in Morocco, the situation would have been better. Okinawans vividly recall the 2004 crash of a marine helicopter into Okinawa International University. The US and Japanese governments will now be forced to delay the deployment later than originally scheduled. A cooling off period is needed."

This is a revised and expanded version of an article that appeared at Asia Times Online. A companion piece to this article by the author is [US Marines Eye Japan as a Training Yard](#).

See the author's article of July 10, 2011, "[Is the Osprey Safe?](#)"

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