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Prime Minister Noda and Fixing the Futenma Impasse

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JUST A FEW WEEKS after taking office in early September, Japan's new prime minister, Yoshihiko Noda, had his first meeting with US President Barack Obama in New York on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. It was widely reported that first and foremost on the agenda for this meeting was the relocation of the Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, with President Obama delivering a stern message that the time has come for results. Just how stern President Obama's message to Prime Minister Noda has been the subject of speculation, as his words were relayed to the media through aides and spokespersons. Nevertheless, an atmosphere of impatience seems to have built in the United States over the Futenma relocation. Indeed, as Japan's merry-go-round of prime ministers continues to spin (Noda is the fourth Japanese prime minister during Obama's presidency), little to no progress has been made on the issue. In Japan there is an expectation that the current agreement—confirmed between successive governments of the ruling Democratic Party of Japan and the Obama administration—should be honored, despite it essentially being a carbon copy of an

earlier agreement made in 2006 under Japan's Liberal Democratic Party. And with another sideline meeting between Prime Minister Noda and President Obama in the cards at the APEC leaders' summit next month in Honolulu, there is an expectation that some progress, even if only symbolic, should be made to demonstrate that things are moving forward.

Feasibility of the Current Plan

There is a serious danger right now that expectations will be raised and we will be disappointed once again, renewing strains in the US-Japan alliance. But forcing the implementation of the current plan—which would see Futenma relocated farther north on Okinawa's main island to Henoko Bay near the town of Nago—appears infeasible given the significant changes that have taken place in political conditions in both Japan and the United States.

In Okinawa, local opposition to the Henoko plan has greatly intensified. Since I was personally involved in the original relocation negotiations beginning in 1996, I have frequently travelled to Okinawa

and I have been able to witness first-hand the change in people's sentiment. The intensification of the local opposition was given renewed vigor due to former Prime Minister Hatoyama's mishandling of the issue. His flip-flopping on the idea of relocating Futenma outside of Okinawa Prefecture greatly raised local expectations that Okinawa's excessive basing burdens might be decreased.

The vigorous opposition movement has also skillfully mobilized protesters. They bring their protest to the relocation site in Henoko Bay itself and strategically place elderly protesters in the front lines. This makes it difficult for the police to disperse protesters, and efforts to do so forcefully would risk bloodshed and possibly jeopardize sustainable alliance relations.

Another complicating issue is the central government's need to obtain approval from the Okinawa governor's office in order to construct landfill runways across the waters of Henoko Bay. Current Governor Hirokazu Nakaima campaigned on a platform of consulting with local residents on the issue. In a speech at George Washington University just days before Prime Minister Noda met with President Obama, Governor Nakaima stated that if the US and Japanese governments choose to force the implementation of the current relocation plan it will cause an irreparable rift between the people of Okinawa and the US Forces in the prefecture and adversely affect the US-Japan alliance. Further, the current mayor of Nago City, Susume Inamine, was elected on a platform of opposing the relocation of Futenma to Henoko, meaning it looks highly unlikely that the central government will be able to acquire local agreement, which in turn means that Governor Nakaima's permission will likely not be forthcoming.

In the United States, too, there have been changes in conditions that call into question the feasibility of the current relocation plan. The global financial crisis, and more recently the kerfuffle over the deal to raise the debt ceiling, demonstrate that serious reductions are needed in the US budget. While some modest military budget cuts have already been announced, this may be only the tip of the iceberg, and the United States may have to review its global military posture if it is to bring its current military spending to sustainable

levels. It would be reckless of the United States to insist that Japan implement a Futenma replacement facility plan without ensuring that it also has the means within its own budget to follow through, and it would be tremendously damaging to the alliance, especially in light of how much tension Futenma has already caused. Amid the economic turmoil, tensions over the current military spending levels have already begun to emerge between Congress and the Obama administration. Senators Carl Levin, Jim Webb, and John McCain have recommended that the Department of Defense revisit the option of integrating Futenma's functions into the Kadena Air Base to keep costs down. However, the Department of Defense has historically opposed such integration of forces. The current standoff is becoming a game of chicken as the Obama administration has not shown signs of accepting Congress's proposals and instead looks more likely to try and shift the burden for resolving the problem onto the government of Japan.

Finding a New Way Forward

While neither the US nor the Japanese government cares to admit it, local opposition to the current Henoko plan effectively means the situation has reached an impasse. Imposing the current plan upon the people of Nago will have severely negative consequences for the US-Japan alliance. On the other hand, if the current relocation plan is not implemented and Futenma continues its status quo ante operations, there is a risk that one major accident at or around the base will cause tensions to spill over and fatally damage the alliance. In either scenario, Futenma will become more significant, making it a stumbling block for the whole alliance. This is a harmful way to frame alliance relations. Rather than building the Futenma relocation up again into a big unresolvable issue that will continue to burden the alliance, what is needed now is open-mindedness and a process that allows for a soft landing.

To ensure such a process, both governments need to sit down together, review the changes in conditions that have taken place, and formulate a plan that is acceptable to both governments and to the people of Okinawa. Until the time that Futenma can be returned to the people of Okinawa, it is clear that Futenma's functions need to be gradually reduced sooner

rather than later. Other sites (such as Kadena, areas of Japan outside Okinawa, and areas outside Japan such as Guam and Hawaii) need to gradually assume Futenma's functions. Futenma should be made into the least busy military airport in Japan, reducing the risk of an accident occurring in the heavily urbanized residential areas that immediately surround the base. But at the same time it needs to be kept open—on standby—for contingency planning purposes, and the base's landowners need to continue to be able to collect rent in exchange for the lease.

Moreover, rather than fixating on Futenma, US-Japan alliance relations should be re-framed to give greater importance to a broader range of topics. We need a future-oriented plan that maps the way forward for the alliance while taking into consideration the changing security dynamics in the region and China's growing military capabilities. To adapt to the rise of China, such a plan needs to include confidence-building measures vis-à-vis China, establish inclusive mechanisms that allow for greater US-Japan cooperation with China, and

create a legal framework for increasing the Japan Self Defense Force's military role. A wisemen's commission, including government officials, politicians, public intellectuals, and business leaders from both countries, should be established to allow for the deepest and best expert consideration of the issues at stake.



US-Japan relations can no longer be held hostage to the debate over the relocation of Futenma, and the issue needs to be resolved before it causes irreparable damage to alliance relations. But both the US and the Japanese governments need to be pragmatic in their search for a solution, one that takes into account the major shifts in the political and financial environment since the existing relocation plan was first agreed upon.

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