

Future of the US Marines in Okinawa — long-term risks for short-term gain?

by Yuki Tatsumi

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On Feb. 8, the US and Japanese governments announced they would “adjust” plans for the relocation of US Marines in Okinawa as set forth in the 2006 Roadmap for Realignment. Washington and Tokyo also pledged to discuss “a number of issues associated with these adjustments” in the days ahead. While this adjustment may relieve pressure on the two governments in the short-term, it leaves unresolved issues critical to the sustainable presence of US forces in Japan, exposing the US-Japan alliance to a long-term risk.

Under the 2006 Roadmap for Realignment, (1) the relocation of MCAS Futenma to the Futenma Relocation Facility (FRF) that was to be built in the Henoko area near Camp Schwab, (2) the transfer of approximately 17,000 Marines and their dependents to Guam and (3) the return of land south of Kadena US Air Force Base (AFB) were framed as a single package. In other words, neither the reduction of the Marine presence in Okinawa nor the land return would occur unless the FRF was built.

Last week’s agreement separates these three elements. Now, the US government will seek the move of some US Marines in Okinawa to Guam regardless of progress (or lack thereof) in FRF construction. Meanwhile, the Japanese government will continue to push the original FRF reconstruction plan. The two governments will negotiate on how to handle the land return that was supposed to happen as a result of these relocations, in addition to other issues that may arise in sorting out the adjustment.

The two governments reached this conclusion out of necessity. In Tokyo, the political environment surrounding the relocation of MCAS Futenma has progressively gotten worse since the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) took power in September 2009. The recent revelation of misconduct by two consecutive director-generals of the Defense Facilities Administration Bureau (DFAB) in Okinawa aggravated the situation, further hardening the attitude of prefectural and local governments in Okinawa. The implementation of FRF construction is effectively deadlocked, with no real prospect of a meaningful breakthrough. In Washington, Congress has been increasingly skeptical about the feasibility of the Marines relocation to Guam. The FY2012 Defense Authorization Act suspends the release of funds that the Department of Defense requested for Guam relocation due to these concerns, in part due to a lack of progress in FRF construction. If DOD wants to salvage the Guam relocation and protect the resources needed for it, it had to come up with a scheme under which it

can claim progress in Guam reconstruction without having to rely on progress on FRF reconstruction.

In the short term, last week’s agreement seems to relieve the pressure on Washington and Tokyo. The DOD can now argue to Congress that it can proceed with the relocation of Marines to Guam. Tokyo supposedly is now able to concentrate its energy on working with the prefectural and local governments in Okinawa that are opposed to the Henoko plan without worrying about constant pressure from the US.

The adjustment leaves many important issues unresolved, however. First, last week’s announcement re-energized those in Okinawa who want to continue to push for complete Marine relocation out of Okinawa. Inamine Susumu, mayor of Nago City where the FRF will be built, a strong opponent of the plan, and who was in Washington when the two governments announced the adjustment last week, said that the announcement essentially nullified the rationale for the current FRF plan.

Second, the prospect of the relocation of Marines to Guam going ahead without real signs of progress in FRF construction is low. In the FY2013 budget request released Feb. 13, DOD requested a level of funding to “maintain force structure in the Pacific.” In reality, however, the US forward presence in the Asia-Pacific region is evolving as DOD seeks to redistribute that presence in the region. In particular, the Marine presence in the region, as demonstrated by the December 2011 joint announcement by President Obama and Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, is likely to shift from a presence rooted in permanent bases in Japan to one that is driven by rotation and more active security cooperation with a wider number of US allies and partners. Despite the insistence of both the US and Japanese governments, the Marine transfer to Guam without the FRF could signal a lowered number of US forward deployed forces, with a consequent negative impact on deterrence in Northeast Asia.

Finally, the Feb. 8 announcement fails to address the very issue that the past two rounds of bilateral negotiations attempted to tackle — coming up with an alternative that can lead to the closure of MCAS Futenma to ensure a sustainable US military presence in Okinawa. Now that the linkage between construction of the FRF and the Marines relocation to Guam has been severed, it is highly likely that MCAS Futenma will continue operations for the foreseeable future given the political deadlock between Tokyo and Naha. This means the US-Japan alliance is “one accident away” from irreparable damage.

The Feb. 8 adjustment meets the short-term goals of all interested parties. If utilized appropriately, it can provide the opportunity for both allies to think through ways their two militaries can deepen cooperation that allows the US to have a more distributed forward presence in the Asia-Pacific region

while enabling Japan to play a larger role in its own defense and contingencies in Far East. If not managed properly, however, it could harm the long-term credibility and strength of the US-Japan alliance. Defense establishments in Washington and Tokyo must work to ensure that the decision to adjust the Marine relocation plan will benefit the US-Japan alliance in the long run.

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