



The US and Japan Make a Good Step Forward, for Now

by Yuki Tatsumi

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Just before Japanese Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko's visit to Washington this week, the US and Japanese governments released their Security Consultative Committee (SCC, or "2 + 2") Joint Statement. This document sets the alliance on the right path, allowing alliance managers in Tokyo and Washington to focus on a wider set of strategic issues. While this is a positive development, both governments need to be realistic about future challenges.

Since the mid-1990s, Tokyo and Washington have struggled to find a mutually satisfactory solution to the relocation of Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma. Under a 2006 agreement, three key elements toward that end – relocation of parts of III Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF) to a new facility in Guam, the relocation of Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma, and the land return – were presented as a single package. There would be "neither relocation of III MEF nor land returns without the construction of the Futenma Replacement Facility (FRF)." The logic of this deal was that by packaging everything together, there would be greater incentives for Futenma relocation. Ironically, events of the last several years – particularly since 2009 when then Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio openly questioned the validity of the Futenma relocation plan – showed that the logic was faulty. "Packaging" the three elements created a deadlock. The new agreement delinks them.

There are obvious positives in the new agreement. From the US perspective, first and foremost, adjusting the Marines' force presence in the Asia-Pacific region from one that has been concentrated on Okinawa to one that is more widely distributed among Okinawa, Hawaii, Guam (and Australia) is aligned with the Department of Defense's "rebalancing" strategy. Delinking also allows the Pentagon to move forward with the relocation of the Marines to Guam without waiting for progress on FRF, which helps it get money from Congress to fund the Guam relocation. Furthermore, having the Japanese government financially committed not only to the Guam relocation but also to the joint training facility – locations in the Northern Mariana Islands are being examined by both governments – as well as repairs for MCAS Futenma helps DOD make its case for funding for these new programs with Congress.

From a Japanese perspective, the new agreement buys the government in Tokyo time to yet again try to convince Okinawa to accept the two governments' conclusion that the relocation to Henoko is the only feasible option. The new agreement allows some of the land currently occupied by the

US military to be returned to local landowners prior to the construction of FRF, showing Okinawa residents tangible benefits from the agreement. This will hopefully foster an atmosphere that is more conducive to eventual MCAS Futenma relocation to the Henoko area.

Most importantly, the agreement allows Tokyo and Washington to break the impasse over the Futenma relocation that sucked the oxygen out of alliance discussions. For the first time in six years, alliance managers can engage in deeper discussion of issues such as how the two militaries will work together in various missions (including humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR), intelligence/surveillance/reconnaissance (ISR) and anti-submarine warfare (ASW), how the two governments will address security challenges in cyber and space, and how they should align priorities given a host of regional security concerns. In the face of uncertainty in North Korea China's increasing assertiveness, the two militaries have a lot to talk about. Some discussions have been taking place at the military level in staff talks and seminars hosted by the US military and Japan's Self-Defense Forces. Complementary discussions at the policy level are overdue.

Serious challenges remain. In the United States, the biggest concern is how anticipated defense spending cuts will impact the resources available for the Asia-Pacific region. Even if the worst-case scenario of sequestration – an additional \$500 billion in spending cuts across-the-board starting in January 2013 – is avoided, a defense budget cut that is larger than currently projected (\$350 billion for the next 10 years) is still possible. It isn't clear how the Pentagon will respond and the subsequent impact on US military capability.

The government in Tokyo should recognize that they are now solely responsible for executing the Futenma relocation. This agreement may have bought time and political space to negotiate with Okinawa, but Tokyo will have only itself to blame if there is no progress. Failure would mean that MCAS Futenma will remain in place for the foreseeable future – an end state that everyone wants to avoid. Ironically, then, the new agreement raises the stakes for Tokyo to succeed in Futenma relocation.

The new "2+2" statement is a step forward. It isn't perfect, but it is the best agreement the two sides can reach now. As Tokyo works to get the Futenma move worked out, alliance managers in both countries should start the real work of "deepening" the alliance.

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