



## **Risky Business: U.S. Pressure Over Okinawa Base Could Poison the Alliance** by Ayako Doi

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When the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), led by Hatoyama Yukio, scored a landslide victory over the long-ruling Liberal Democrat Party (LDP), many U.S. observers saw potential for a very productive synergy with the Obama administration. The two governments, both ushered into power on the strength of agendas for change, aspire to many of the same goals on urgent global issues – drastic reduction of CO2 emissions, nuclear nonproliferation, the eventual abolition of nuclear weapons, and stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan, to name a few. The prospect of Japanese and U.S. leaders working creatively together to solve some of the most intractable global problems was exciting.

But suddenly the honeymoon is over. The tension over the security alliance created by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' two-day stop in Tokyo late last month has cast a cloud over the prospects for cooperation on the broad range of other issues. While Prime Minister Hatoyama hoped to discuss with Gates what Japan might do to help in Afghanistan – building infrastructure, promoting public health and education, and providing vocational training to former Taliban combatants, for example – Gates arrived in Tokyo with a single-minded determination to pressure the DPJ government into fulfilling a 2006 agreement to build a new airfield in Okinawa for the U.S. Marines.

The idea of building an 1,800-meter air strip along the coral shoreline at Camp Schwab, near the northern Okinawa town of Nago, has been around since 1996 when the U.S. agreed to shut down the existing Futenma Marine Air Station in the middle of densely populated Ginowan city. Gates' frustration is understandable, given that successive Japanese governments under LDP leaders, who proclaimed themselves faithful allies of Washington, had dragged their feet on the issue for 13 years. Gates told Japan's new defense and foreign ministers that any major change in the Nago plan could unravel the broader base restructuring project, designed to reduce the U.S. military footprint on an island that hosts 75 percent of U.S. forces in Japan. The centerpiece of that project is a plan to move 8,000 marines from Okinawa to Guam.

According to Japanese reports, Gates adamantly demanded that Tokyo commit to execution of the Nago plan before President Obama visits on Nov. 12. His body language was equally curt: he declined a dinner invitation from senior defense officials – and even a ceremonial salute from Japanese

honor guards. All that stunned the Japanese, and blew away any warm and fuzzy feelings they had about the Obama administration. Commentators were dismayed to find an Obama Cabinet member – and Republican holdover – so dismissive of the domestic political pressures on Hatoyama. His party ran on a platform that included a thorough review of the Nago plan – and though it holds 311 of the 480 seats in the Lower House of the Diet, it needs the cooperation of the anti-bases Social Democratic Party to control the Upper House.

Some experts assert that the U.S. refuses to consider a cheaper and less disruptive solution for Futenma – to expand the U.S. Air Force base at nearby Kadena so it can house the Marines as well – because it doesn't want to deal with inter-service rivalry. In response to U.S. officials who suggested that the new government should not renege on an agreement made by its predecessor, an *Okinawa Times* editorial pointed out that Obama just last month reversed Bush administration pacts to deploy missile defense systems in Poland and Czech Republic. If the Democrats in the U.S. find it daunting to reverse eight years of Bush administration policy, it is even more difficult for Hatoyama and his party, governing for the first time, not only to review inherited policies, but at the same time to gain control of, and overhaul, a policymaking structure cemented in place by five decades of LDP rule.

As Japanese editorial writers struggled to digest implications of Gates' stern message, Hatoyama and his ministers seemed to be backing off. By the time Gates returned to Washington, they said they understand that a DPJ suggestion to move the Marine air base out of Okinawa would not be a realistic option, and indicated that they may even okay the current construction plan before long. But even if they do, there is no guarantee that the air strip will be built in Nago. The city will elect a new mayor in January, and the race pits the pro-base incumbent against an opponent of the plan. If the challenger wins, it could leave the plan mired in the same haggle between national and local governments that has stalled it for the last 13 years.

Beyond that, a high-handed approach like that chosen by Gates could poison the chemistry between two governments whose cooperation is essential to solving a range of global issues that are far more important than giving the Marines a new airstrip in Okinawa. When he visits Japan next week, President Obama will have a chance to clear the cloud of vexation, and to encourage Hatoyama in his pursuit to be his useful ally on many of the most urgent problems facing the world. That would also ensure that Tokyo's new leaders would not drift away from the U.S. and start charting their own international agenda.