

# EAST ASIA INSIGHTS

## TOWARD COMMUNITY BUILDING

JCIE Japan Center for International Exchange

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## Futenma: Diplomatic Mess or Strategic Opportunity?

HITOSHI TANAKA, *Senior Fellow, JCIE*

Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama's self-imposed deadline of the end of May to resolve the dispute over the relocation of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma is now at hand. Thus far, consultations between the Japanese government and local authorities have yielded little progress. The Japanese government may soon settle on a proposal that can serve as a useful basis for consultations with the United States, but it appears unlikely that a resolution that could also garner the acquiescence of affected local communities will be reached by the end of the month.

Failure to resolve the Futenma dispute will undoubtedly continue to damage confidence in the Hatoyama government. Futenma has been seen as something of a test case of his administration's governing abilities, and public opinion polls have shown a rapid decline in the cabinet's support rate. Hastily labeling the Hatoyama government as incapable is overly harsh; however, it may be fair to say that given the complexities of the issue, publicly setting a deadline was unwise and the lion's share of

the blame regarding this diplomatic kerfuffle rests with his government.

Nevertheless, the United States also cannot escape the consequences, and it must recognize the reality that there have been dramatic changes in Japan's domestic political situation. The rise of China and the other changes taking place in the security environment in East Asia necessitate intensive consultations in the framework of a solid alliance, but some experts fear that the US-Japan alliance will be seriously undermined if the two governments cannot get their act together on Futenma. The United States, therefore, must work more closely with Japan to reach a sustainable resolution that meets the needs of both nations. In the absence of any easy solutions, it is imperative that we take a thoughtful and farsighted approach to the issue. For this, we must start by reaffirming the basic principles with which the relocation issue is to be handled so that this diplomatic mess can be transformed into an opportunity to consolidate and strengthen the alliance.

## **Basic Principles for Resolving the Futenma Dispute**

The United States and Japan should abide by four basic principles for their approach to the Futenma issue. First, there needs to be a firm determination from both ends that the Futenma dispute should not undermine the alliance. Rather than hastily rushing to an unsatisfactory resolution, what is important at this juncture is that both parties focus on the establishment of a process that will contribute to recovering confidence in the alliance.

Second, it is important to recognize that, ultimately, the Japanese central government is responsible for fixing the final relocation site. There is no legal procedure for obtaining agreement from any given local community. Therefore, while due consideration must be given to gaining broad understanding from the local community surrounding the relocation site, the central government must ultimately make the final decision.

Third, since reducing the burden on the local community serves the common objective of sustainable alliance relations, the process of managing the relocation must be considered joint work, rather than a confrontational negotiation between the two governments.

Fourth, the relocation plan for Futenma must recognize the long-term perspective of the alliance. As the United States considered the relocation of the base in the context of the transformation of US forward deployment, Japan must contemplate the issue in the context of the changing security environment in East Asia and under the new foreign policy orientation of the Democratic Party of Japan government.

I personally recall the time when I was in charge of US-Japan security affairs in 1996 when consultations on the Futenma relocation first began. Against the background of huge anti-base outcry in Okinawa, triggered by a rape committed by US Marines, we established for ourselves a strategic objective of reaffirming the alliance. This objective was achieved through Prime Minister Hashimoto and President Clinton's US-Japan Joint Declaration on Security, which laid out a broad vision for the post-Cold War alliance, encompassing an agreement on the reversion

of the Futenma airfield and other friction-reducing measures, and through the defense cooperation guidelines, which clarified Japan's role in the event of regional contingencies. Throughout the process, we had one key phrase in common: "This is joint work."

## **Managing the May Deadline**

In order to allow time for consultations to reach a sustainable long-term resolution, Hatoyama's self-imposed deadline is bound to be extended beyond May. Here, it is crucially important to quell fears that the alliance is in trouble. The alliance is bigger than any single base, and it is critical that neither side forget how strong the ties are that bind Japan and the United States in a wide range of areas.

Therefore, it is good news that the governments of the United States and Japan are reportedly preparing to issue a joint statement by the end of May. This should be a clear statement that demonstrates the commitment of the two governments to work together productively to resolve the issue in an expeditious way after May.

The Futenma relocation issue should be resolved keeping in mind the broader picture of East Asia as a region in transition. To facilitate thinking from this broad perspective, a joint commission on the future of the US-Japan alliance should be established and announced as a part of the joint statement. The timing for such an announcement is opportune given that this year marks the 50th anniversary of the US-Japan Security Treaty. The commission does not need to be explicitly linked to the Futenma relocation issue, but it may be helpful in facilitating a forward-thinking mentality on the matter. It needs to be composed of not just government officials but also politicians, public intellectuals, and business leaders to bring greater transparency and public participation into the making of alliance policy. The commission should chart a way forward for the US-Japan alliance, considering matters such as the changing security environment in East Asia, and in particular the rise of China and India; the future security architecture of East Asia; and ways for Japan to have a greater role in ensuring its own security and in contributing to international security.

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In a sense, the Futenma issue offers adept leaders on both sides a rare opening to strengthen the US-Japan alliance. If the US and Japanese governments can use the Futenma issue to encourage a constructive joint exploration of how their alliance can be strengthened and made more sustainable in light of the changing

realities in Asia, and if it can be used to promote deeper public discussion of how Japan might make greater contributions to international security, then there is hope that this diplomatic mess can be turned into an important strategic opportunity.

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*Hitoshi Tanaka is a senior fellow at JCIE. He previously served as Japan's deputy minister for foreign affairs.*

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## *East Asia Insights*

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Please direct any comments or questions to [eainsights@jcie.or.jp](mailto:eainsights@jcie.or.jp).

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