THE ISSUE OF THE MARINE CORPS AIR STATION FUTENMA’S RELOCATION DURING THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF JAPAN

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Introduction

In 2006 the United States (US) and Japan signed a Bilateral Accord on Aligning U.S. Forces in Japan. Among the key points of the agreement was the agreement by both parties to the relocation of the US marines’ air base (MCAS Futenma) in the heart of Ginowan to the less densely populated area of Henoko, in Nago City. The relocation of the military base into Okinawa was a prerequisite to the transfer of 8,000 out of 18,000 U.S. troops in Okinawa to Guam by 2014. It was also agreed that Tokyo will bear a total of USD 6.1 billion, out of a total cost of USD 10.2 billion for the transfer.

The agreement was a solution to the long and controversial U.S. military presence in Okinawa. Although the agreement was considered the best solution by the central government, dissatisfaction was still abound because majority of Okinawans wanted the MCAS Futenma to be relocated totally out of Okinawa or even Japan. This is proven in the Okinawa Times and Asahi Shimbun poll conducted in June 2009, which found that 68 per cent of residents was opposed to the MCAS Futenma relocation into Okinawa. The Ryukyu Shimpo/Mainichi Shimbun poll in 2009 also found 70 per cent of the Okinawans oppose the construction of U.S. military base in Okinawa to replace MCAS Futenma in Ginowan. This argument was further strengthened when Hirokazu Nakaima, with his stand against the relocation of MCAS Futenma into Okinawa, won the gubernatorial election. Furthermore, majority members of the Okinawa assembly as well as mayors in Okinawa demanded an immediate removal of MCAS Futenma from Okinawa.1

The Okinawans’ hope to relocate MCAS Futenma out of the prefecture was revived when the largest opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) promised in the lower house election campaign in August 2009 to move out the base at least from Okinawa or probably out of Japan should they be successful in their bid to form the government.2 Their promises were significant pulling factors in the DPJ acquiring a huge support which lead to their win in the election and success in forming the government for the first time since its inception in 1998. However, until 2012 when the

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DPJ administration ended, the controversial problem regarding the relocation of MCAS Futenma remained unresolved and proved to be persistent.³

This article looks at the DPJ administration policy on Okinawa, especially on the relocation of MCAS Futenma under three prime ministers, Yukio Hatoyama, Naoto Kan and Noda Yoshihiko. Researchers argue the significance of national security interests under Japan-U.S. security agreements in explaining why DPJ’s prime ministers were not ready to move MCAS Futenma out of Japan. Furthermore, Japan is bound by its constitution to curb the possession of military assets for the purpose of war. In the meantime Japan was facing a threat from neighbouring countries namely China and North Korea. For example, the threat from China as a result of the territorial dispute over Senkaku Islands and military modernization. At the same time, Japan was concerned about North Korea’s massive nuclear weapons development which may potentially bring instability to the region.

The Necessity of Relocating MCAS Futenma Out of Okinawa

Many factors motivated Okinawans to demand the removal of MCAS Futenma out of Okinawa. First was the safety of residents in the prefecture.⁴ A landmark tragedy which served as a reminder of the dangers of U.S. military presence in Okinawa occurred on August 13, 2004 when a helicopter belonging to the U.S. marines crashed in the Okinawa International University campus, located adjacent to MCAS Futenma in Ginowan.⁵ The crash destroyed the university’s administrative building and as a consequence and in order to prevent a recurrence of such a tragedy, residents demanded the closure of the marine air force base and consequently, for it to move out of Okinawa. Furthermore, MCAS Futenma has long been labelled as a disaster in waiting with regards to errant landing and/or take-offs, with 45 thousand aircraft take-offs and landings occurring each year in an area surrounded by houses and shops.⁶ Errors in military aircraft landings and departures would potentially have terrible consequences.

Rather than a sole occurrence, this was actually part of a string of tragedies involving U.S. forces in Okinawa, triggering outrage amongst the residents. The most horrendous tragedy happened on September 4, 1995 in which a 12-year-old girl was kidnapped and raped by three U.S. military officers.⁷ Although the U.S. military apologized for the incident, deep concerns persist.

Second, discontent among the residents was due to land acquisition for the construction of U.S. military bases. Fertile lands for agriculture have been destroyed to give way for the construction of U.S. military bases.⁸ In addition, the Chairman of Okinawa’s house of assembly, Zenashin Takamine stressed that Okinawans have to deal with the burden of stress and anxiety which exceeded levels considered tolerable. Okinawa nowadays hosts in excess of 75 per cent of the total land used by U.S. military bases and nearly half of the 50,000 troops in Japan. At the same time the Okinawa area

⁴ Interview with Okinawans on 16-20 December 2013 in Naha, Okinawa.
⁵ A part of the destroyed building was not cleaned but remain as a memorial for the Okinawans, authors’ research trip to the memorial on 18 December 2013.
⁸ Interview with Okinawans on 16-20 December 2013.
ensuring the dugong habitat in Henoko maintained, so that the next generation would be able to recognize them.\textsuperscript{13}

**The Administration of Yukio Hatoyama (September 16, 2009- Jun 2, 2010)**

During his visit to Okinawa in 2008 for the next lower house election campaign, Yukio Hatoyama promised to Okinawans that should the DPJ manage to form a government and he himself made prime minister, he would move MCAS Futenma at least out of the prefecture or out of Japan entirely.\textsuperscript{14} Hatoyama's statement was reiterated by DPJ’s senior leader, Seiji Maehara who claimed that U.S. presidential candidate, Barack Obama was willing to review the 2006 agreement if he became U.S. president.\textsuperscript{15} Hatoyama and Maehara’s promises were the hope for Okinawans who demanded the relocation of MCAS Futenma out of Okinawa.

In 2009 Hatoyama repeated his promise to relocate MCAS Futenma out of Okinawa when the lower house election campaign reaches its peak.\textsuperscript{16} In the manifesto, DPJ insisted to review the Japan-U.S. relations, particularly in term of relations between the two countries as equal partners based on the principle of mutual trust.\textsuperscript{17} To achieve the aim, DPJ insisted that the 50 years old Japan-U.S. Security Treaty must be re-evaluated, especially in terms of U.S. military presence in Japan.

Compared to the DPJ which asserted that the base should be moved out of Okinawa or entirely out of Japan, the stand of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in supporting the relocation of MCAS Futenma to other areas in Okinawa was assumed with the signing of an agreement in 2006. DPJ’s firm stand on the relocation problem became a significant factor which contributed to the DPJ’s great victory in the election with a total of 308 seats out of 480. However, upon his appointment as prime minister, Hatoyama realized the importance of the U.S. military presence in Japan as a strategic deterrence from potential threats in the region.

This can be proved in some of his speeches and statements about the presence of MCAS Futenma in Okinawa. For example, on October 7, 2009 he hinted the possibility of the central government to accept the 2006 agreement to relocate MCAS Futenma within Okinawa, not out of the prefecture as promised. He also pointed out that the promises made in the manifesto were mere promises which can potentially change over time.\textsuperscript{18}

Recognizing the importance of the U.S. military presence in Japan as part of a deterrence strategy, Hatoyama suggested several sites as an alternative to the Henoko. Among them were the construction of artificial islands near White Beach in the Uruma Katsuren Peninsula in East Okinawa and Tokunoshima in Kagoshima Prefecture.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{13} Interview with Okinawans on 16-20 December 2013 in Naha, Okinawa.


\textsuperscript{15} Seiji Maehara was later appointed as Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism as well as minister responsible to Okinawa and Northern region during Hatoyama’s administration.


\textsuperscript{17} Jinbo Ken, “Gaikou Anpo: Rinen tsuikyu kara genjitsu rousen he”, p 126.

\textsuperscript{18} “Shift on Futenma?”, \textit{The Japan Times}, 8 October 2009.

\textsuperscript{19} “Air Base Issue Frying Nerves”, \textit{The Nikkei Weekly}, 10 May 2010.
agreement in 2006. The U.S. maintained its stand that regardless of whoever is at the helm, the Japanese government must honour the agreement because it was made between governments, not politicians.\(^{39}\) This is crucial in order to maintain the mutual trust between two governments.\(^{40}\)

**The Administration of Naoto Kan (4 June 2010-26 August 2011)**

Hatoyama’s unfulfilled promise became a thorn in the flesh for his successor, Naoto Kan. Kan who was elected on June 4, 2010, needed to solve the problem of relocation of MCAS Futenma wisely in order to restore the DPJ’s credibility. However, Hatoyama’s unfulfilled promise left a detrimental impact on the DPJ.\(^{41}\) An example of this would be when the DPJ decided not to put up candidates in the upper house election in July 2010 in Okinawa due to the lack of support.\(^{42}\) In fact, the MCAS Futenma relocation problem had actually worsened under the Hatoyama administration, and continued in similar fashion under Kan’s administration.

In his speech as Prime Minister in the Japanese Diet, Kan stressed that the relocation of MCAS Futenma was a major challenge in his cabinet.\(^{43}\) Based on the speech, it can be concluded that Kan was determined to focus on solving the MCAS Futenma problem in his administration while restoring Okinawans’ trust for the DPJ.

On the other hand, the selection of Kan as Prime Minister was considered the best opportunity to start over relations between the central government and Okinawa, as well as Japan-U.S. relations. As described above, Japan-U.S. relations was at its worst during the Hatoyama administration owing in large part to his promise to relocate MCAS Futenma out of Okinawa. After taking over the administration, Kan’s policy tends to restore to the normal Japanese foreign policy, particularly to have good relations with the U.S.

Kan’s administration started off with his admission of the Japan-U.S. relationships being the main axis of Japan’s foreign policy while at the same time committing to ease the Okinawans’ burden in hosting the U.S. military bases.\(^{44}\) Kan’s strategy was to continue the relocation process of MCAS Futenma to Henoko as he mentioned to Nakaima on June 15, 2010 as well as to transfer 8000 U.S. troops from Okinawa to Guam. In fact, Kan adopted the 2006 agreement by Tokyo and Washington.\(^{45}\)

Kan’s decision disappointed the Okinawans. Nakaima stressed that the relocation of MCAS Futenma into Okinawa is still very difficult to implement due to the objections by Okinawans and himself.\(^{46}\) In the mean time a number of Okinawans who used to support the DPJ cannot decide which party to vote in the upper house election in July 2010 as disclosed by The Japan Times in an interview with female voters in the district

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\(^{39}\) "Futenma Deal 'will be Respected': Pentagon", *The Japan Times*, 3 June 2010.

\(^{40}\) "Delayed Futenma Decision Posing Multiple Crises", 14 December 2009.


\(^{42}\) "No Okinawa Candidate", *The Japan Times*, 16 June 2010; Mariko Yasumoto, "Hatoyama Legacy Bedevils DPJ in Okinawa", *The Japan Times*, 8 July 2010.


\(^{44}\) "Mr. Kan States his Approach", *The Japan Times*, 12 June 2010.

\(^{45}\) "Japan must be Firm with Russia, China", *The Nikkei Weekly*, 22 November 2010.

Nakaima visited Maehara and demanded for the removal of MCAS Futenma out of Okinawa since the central government did not have an acceptable proposal. However Maehara insisted that Okinawa continue to host U.S. military bases.\textsuperscript{54}

On January 21, 2011 the Chief Secretary of the Cabinet and minister in charge of Okinawa, Yukio Edano visited Okinawa. The visit was also an attempt to resolve the relocation issue as well as to persuade the Okinawans to accept the central government’s proposal, particularly with regards to the 2006 Japan-U.S. agreement.\textsuperscript{55} Edano persuaded Okinawans by suggesting economic growth assistance and a new special law related to the development of Okinawa. Edano also mentioned the significance of the U.S. military’s presence for the peace and security of Japan and the surrounding region.\textsuperscript{56}

In order for the construction of military bases to materialise, the Kan administration agreed to build two runways at the new relocation site in Henoko. In addition, both countries agreed to work together to design the runways and on other technical aspects.\textsuperscript{57} This was evident when in a press statement after a meeting in Washington on June 21, 2011, the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Defence Secretary, Robert Gates and their counterparts from Japan, Foreign Minister Takeaki Matsumoto and Defence Minister Toshimi Kitazawa insisted that the relocation of MCAS Futenma will be completed after 2014.\textsuperscript{58} An agreement was also reached in which two V-shaped track will be built in the coastal area of Okinawa and the initial agreement which stated 2014 as the final year of the transfer was cancelled, but rather the relocation is to be completed earliest possible after 2014.\textsuperscript{59}

On August 26, 2011 Kan resigned as Prime Minister and was replaced by Yoshihiko Noda. MCAS Futenma relocation problems persisted despite the change in the Prime Minister at the helm of the administration happening twice.

\textbf{The Administration of Yoshihiko Noda (September 2, 2011- December 2012)}

As Prime Minister, Yoshihiko Noda adopted policies which inclined towards the continuation of his predecessor’s which aims to restore the close diplomatic relations with the U.S.\textsuperscript{60} In the meantime Noda continued to reduce tensions with Okinawans due to the unresolved issue of the MCAS Futenma relocation. His stand is made clear by his statements in relation to the MCAS Futenma relocation problems in Okinawa.

On the diplomatic front, Noda maintains that strengthening relations with the U.S. was significant in his administration, following Japan’s increasingly strained relations with neighbouring countries such as China and North Korea. As described earlier, there was tension in Tokyo-Beijing relations over territorial dispute regarding the islands of Senkaku. For example in 2010, Japanese authorities arrested Chinese fishermen who allegedly intruded into the Senkaku Islands area. China responded by suspending ministerial-level meetings as well as cultural relations between the

\textsuperscript{54} “In a Nutshell, it’s Okinawa’s Wish vs. National Interest”, \textit{The Nikkei Weekly}, 8 November 2010.

\textsuperscript{55} “Edano on Same Kan Futenma Page”, \textit{The Japan Times}, 22 January 2011.

\textsuperscript{56} “Hatoyama had no Futenma Relocation Plan”, \textit{The Japan Times}, 14 February 2011.

\textsuperscript{57} “Futenma Replacement Runway Relocation Plan OK’d, \textit{The Japan Times}, 30 April 2011.

\textsuperscript{58} Japan, U.S. Can’t Manage to Shake Futenma Headache”, \textit{The Japan Times}, 23 June 2011.

\textsuperscript{59} “Gist of Bilateral Security Statement”, \textit{The Japan Times}, 23 June 2011.

\textsuperscript{60} Shuhei Kuromi and Takashi Imai, “Many Hurdles in Rebuilding Alliance”, \textit{The Daily Yomiuri}, 7 February 2012.
further to persuade Nakaima by saying that the central government will help Okinawa by holding a special law which will help especially in stimulating economic growth in the prefecture. After the meeting, Nakaima insisted to remain with his stand to move the military bases entirely out of Okinawa as it was the goal of Okinawans.\textsuperscript{72}

Analysis

The issue surrounding the MCAS Futenma relocation; whether it would be in or out of Okinawa actually stemmed from Hatoyama’s promise to move it out of the prefecture. After gaining power in the lower house elections in 2009, Hatoyama failed to deliver on his promise and instead stressed for the MCAS Futenma to remain in Okinawa. Although the DPJ manifesto does not specify the relocation, only to “review the alignment of the bases and the way they should be”, but for the Okinawans, they kept waiting for Hatoyama to deliver on his promise.

Hatoyama’s promise resulted in the strained relations between the central government and Okinawans as well as Japan-U.S. relations. Therefore, Hatoyama had to face two different parties that oppose each other. First, the Okinawans who demanded the relocation of MCAS Futenma out of Okinawa or from Japan and second, the U.S. who wishes to stick with the 2006 agreement. For the U.S., abiding with the 2006 agreement served as the best solution to the problem.

Finally Hatoyama adopted the view that the 2006 agreement is to be honoured. The position was taken having considered the Japanese deterrence strategies to balance China’s military modernization as well as North Korea’s nuclear threat. Additionally, it was agreed that the maintenance of military bases in Japan was a prerequisite to the Japan-U.S. security agreement.\textsuperscript{73} Should the agreement not be adhered to, it would result in the U.S. not having to commit to protecting Japan in the event of an attack.\textsuperscript{74} Furthermore, the failure to resolve the MCAS Futenma problem will potentially worsen the situation into the country’s internal and international problems.

Hatoyama used the word “deterrence” to explain the importance of hosting MCAS Futenma and hence the reason behind him being unable to fulfil his promise. The word and similar sentiment was also used to clarify the decision to relocate the base from Ginowan to Henoko. His indecision on the issue and his subsequent unfulfilled promises was not only frustrating to the majority of Okinawans, but also destroyed their trust in the politics of the country. Okinawans felt isolated and discriminated against by the central government. In fact Hatoyama had no concrete plans on the issue of relocation of MCAS Futenma prior to the promises he made in the election. This was proven in an interview with the Japan Times, in which he claimed he did not think the issue was going to be serious enough to cause him to resign.\textsuperscript{75}

Kan’s administration on the other hand did not take up interest in the relocation of MCAS Futenma out of Okinawa or Japan, but rather decided to adhere to the 2006 agreement. Kan merely intended to move MCAS Futenma to a less densely-populated area while easing the burden on the Okinawans. Kan however, faces a tough challenge

\textsuperscript{72} "Nakaima Tells Noda to Give Up Nago Plan", The Japan Times, 28 February 2012.

\textsuperscript{73} "PM must Speak Clearly about Role of U.S. Forces", The Nikkei Weekly, 10 May 2010.

\textsuperscript{74} Interview with Assoc. Prof Dr. Md Nasrudin Md Akhir in Asia-Europe Institute on 13 November 2013.

\textsuperscript{75} "Hatoyama had no Futenma Relocation Plan", The Japan Times, 14 February 2011.
It is hence apparent the significance of Japan-U.S. relations in the uncertain political environment in East Asia. Former Japanese Ambassador to Thailand, Hisahiko Okazaki opined that the presence of U.S. military bases in Okinawa is an asset to Japan and severing ties would be detrimental. For example, an unstable security situation in Southeast Asia ensued post the Philippine Senate’s decision to close down U.S. military bases; Camp Clark and Subic Bay in the Philippines. Therefore the MCAS Futenma relocation problem was not only of concern to Japan and the U.S., but also neighbouring countries such as South Korea and the Philippines. For example, Ambassador and former Foreign Minister of the Philippines Domingo Siaison warned that the relocation of U.S. troops out of Japan will affect the stability of Asia. He concluded that the presence of the U.S. military was not only for the benefit of Japan but also neighbouring countries. Many Southeast Asian countries were involved in territorial disputes with China in the Spratly Islands and the U.S. military presence in Okinawa served as a stabilizer in Southeast Asia. The DPJ administration which recognizes the significance of U.S. military presence should thus maintain the troops in Okinawa.

Realistically, Okinawa was of strategic value for the central government in protecting national security. The central government should persuade the Okinawans to understand the significance of U.S. military presence in the prefecture, including the relocation of MCAS Futenma to Henoko. However the reluctance of the central government to move MCAS Futenma out of Okinawa was exactly because Japan needs U.S. troops in the country.

In the lower house election in 2012, the DPJ lost 75 per cent of its seats after its landslide victory in 2009. The main reason for the fall was the DPJ’s failure to fulfil its manifesto, especially on the issue of Okinawa. In fact the DPJ’s ability to resolve the MCAS Futenma issue became more questionable with waning support from the people.

Conclusion

During the DPJ administration, the government focused on national security issues in order to relocate MCAS Futenma to Henoko. The strategic location of Okinawa was appropriate for the deterrence strategy adopted by Japan in East Asia. Okinawans on the other hand took into account the tremendous burden they had endured thus far in their argument to oppose the relocation of MCAS Futenma inside Okinawa. Because of the difference in view, the MCAS Futenma relocation problem remained unresolved until the end of DPJ administration.

In May 2013 after it badly lost in the 2012 lower house election, DPJ invited 500 people younger than 30 years old to a convention for the purpose of criticizing the party’s three years of national administration. It was an initiative by young leaders within the party with the aim of finding out the reason why they were rejected in the last election. The convention was attended by top party leaders such as former Prime Minister Naoto Kan, Former Chief Secretary of the Cabinet Yukio Edano and former Minister of Health, Labour, and Welfare, Akira Nagatsuma. To a question regarding the DPJ administration, the attendees were in agreement in their answer that the party

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made outrageous promises which were difficult to fulfil. Their credibility suffered the most when Hatoyama failed to relocate MCAS Futenma out of Okinawa.82

After his retirement, Hatoyama sought to find other possible locations as a replacement for Henoko, a goal he considered would be his ultimate achievement. He established the East Asia Peace Centre, a research institute in Tokyo which aim to promote peace and stability in the region. Although Hatoyama was often criticised over his unfulfilled promise, as Prime Minister he was responsible in raising the issue of MCAS Futenma in the mainstream debate.

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82 Ayako Mie, "To Woo Young Voters, DPJ Tries Self -Reflection", The Japan Times, 12 May 2013.