The reelection of Governor Hirokazu Nakaima in the Okinawa gubernatorial election has intensified the myopic focus on the relocation of the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma as the measure by which to gauge the health of U.S.-Japan relations. Governor Nakaima, once a supporter of relocation within Okinawa, promised during the election to seek Futenma’s relocation to somewhere out of the prefecture. This contradicts Prime Minister Naoto Kan’s commitment to implementing a May agreement with the United States to relocate Futenma’s operations to Cape Henoko in Nago in northern Okinawa. Because the United States has no intention to modify its Okinawa base consolidation plans, which hinge on Futenma’s relocation, Kan faces the challenge of having to broker an agreement that will satisfy both Naha and Washington. This requires adept political leadership that can make difficult choices. While Kan’s plummeting support limits his ability to exercise such leadership, there is an opportunity for success.

The Way Forward

Since Naoto Kan became premier in June, he has repeatedly emphasized his commitment to implement the Futenma relocation agreement first brokered in 2006 and reconfirmed this past May. This means he is convinced of the deterrent capability of the U.S. Marines in Okinawa and will not seek alternative proposals that aim to build the Futenma replacement facility elsewhere. Having chosen to push forward with the existing agreement, Prime Minister Kan’s challenge is showing political acumen to get Governor Nakaima to accept it. Below is one possible suggested set of priorities for the prime minister to pursue.

1. Begin immediate dialogue with Okinawans, but be prepared to move ahead without them.

Prime Minister Kan promised that he would listen to the concerns of the local communities affected by Futenma’s relocation. His problem is that some of these communities do not share his enthusiasm for implementing the existing agreement. Not only does Mayor Susumu Inamine of Nago staunchly oppose relocation, but like-minded candidates won a majority of seats in September’s city assembly election. Additionally, following the gubernatorial election, a Kyodo News exit poll found that 68.9 percent of Okinawa voters opposed Futenma relocation to Cape Henoko. Understanding that he may be resisted, Kan nevertheless needs to visit Okinawa as often as possible to engage in a concerted dialogue with the people. Accepting that he may not greatly change their minds, he must explain why he believes relocating the Marines out of Okinawa is impossible in light of deterrence and regional stability.

Surprisingly, Prime Minister Kan may find resonance to his message given indications that there is some retraction in anti-base sentiment. Not only are there reports of significant numbers of people who support the relocation for economic purposes, the fact is that in the election Governor Nakaima beat a vocal opponent of relocation. In Nago, which one year ago elected a critic of relocation and recently a majority of candidates to the municipal assembly, Nakaima won by 2,173 votes. This is larger than the 1,588-vote margin of Mayor Inamine over former mayor Yoshikazu Shimabukuro. Although this retraction appears related to Inamine’s refusal to accept U.S. military realignment-related subsidies, which affect the financial management of municipal government, it indicates a potential opportunity for Kan to communicate his message.

Prime Minister Kan should not view a few visits as being sufficient. He and Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara recently met with Governor Nakaima, which is a good start. But the prime minister needs to meet with local citizens and must clearly explain why he accepts the existing agreement, as well as his long-term vision on how to reduce Okinawa’s burden. He must avoid simply repeating the benefits of moving Futenma out of Ginowan, as this logic is already understood and will fail to convince anyone of why the Cape Henoko plan is best. Kan should also set a low bar by which to gauge success at obtaining local consent. This can be as simple as a bump in polls or the acquiescence of a certain portion of the local community, such as business. Regardless of the measurement, Kan should pursue implementation even if he fails to convince the majority of the local communities. Okinawa public support is highly desirable, but it is not indispensible or legally required. Given his...
Importantly, alliance managers must resist the temptation to tie Futenma’s resolution to the joint declaration on deepening the alliance scheduled for spring when the prime minister visits the United States. Futenma is one aspect of the alliance, and well into next year.

None of this will happen quickly. Due to the bungling of the issue by Prime Minister Kan’s predecessor, there is a high level of distrust between the people of Okinawa and Governor Nakaima on one hand and the central government on the other. Chances for Success

Prime Minister Kan needs to convince the United States that reducing its presence as early as possible is in its best interest. The United States recognizes the risk posed by Futenma and wants to move forward on relocating its functions to a new facility. Tangible progress on a replacement facility will trigger the process of reducing the number of Marines on Okinawa. If Kan cannot persuade Nakaima, then Futenma cannot close as early as all would like, the Marines cannot begin their move to Guam, and Okinawa base consolidation cannot move forward. This is the worst scenario for Tokyo, Washington, and Naha. Given that it is in the U.S. interest to avoid this situation, it should not be terribly difficult for Kan to make Washington recognize that the political situation in Okinawa requires some compromise.

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The first is reducing Okinawa’s burden of U.S. forces. Governor Nakaima recognizes that the purpose of U.S. forces in Okinawa is for the security of Japan and the stability of the Asia-Pacific region. However, as evident in his campaign, he wants to reduce their presence. By working with the United States to help Nakaima deliver his campaign pledge, Kan will demonstrate his understanding of the problems identified by Nakaima and his commitment to addressing them. With a concrete proposal in hand, the prime minister will then be able to help the governor claim success in fulfilling this campaign promise.

As important as the Futenma relocation issue was in the election, Governor Nakaima’s primary goal has consistently been Okinawa’s economic development. Okinawa is a poor prefecture in need of investment. While he cannot bribe the governor to accept relocation in exchange for financial handouts, the prime minister needs to offer a significant economic development package to Naha. It would be advantageous for Kan to convene the government’s Okinawa Policy Council to discuss economic stimulus measures that provide tangible benefits for the people of Okinawa, not just construction companies. Kan has some leverage because the government’s current special measures law for Okinawa development will expire in March 2012. It is in Nakaima’s interest to work with Kan so as to ensure continuing subsidies, especially since a lump-sum grants system will be introduced in fiscal year 2011 that allows local governments to decide for themselves how to use government subsidies. If Kan can craft a sweet enough package that provides Nakaima with a mix of preferential tax treatment and much-needed resources, as well as a legal structure to promote the active use of the land vacated by U.S. forces, he would present a hanamichi (gift) by which Nakaima can grudgingly accept Futenma’s relocation.

Chances for Success

None of this will happen quickly. Due to the bungling of the issue by Prime Minister Kan’s predecessor, there is a high level of distrust between the people of Okinawa and Governor Nakaima on one hand and the central government on the other. Some semblance of trust needs to be regained before moving forward. This means the current impasse will likely continue well into next year.

Importantly, alliance managers must resist the temptation to tie Futenma’s resolution to the joint declaration on deepening the alliance scheduled for spring when the prime minister visits the United States. Futenma is one aspect of the alliance, and a minor one at that. Because both countries are cooperating in a wide variety of areas regionally and globally, the focus...
needs to be on how to package their cooperation under a new framework of shared strategic goals and areas of responsibilities. This is the key to deepening the alliance. While Futenma is an issue that requires attention, it is foolish to believe that failure to resolve it by spring will undermine the strength of the alliance.

Failure is not inevitable, but success will require Prime Minister Kan to spend political capital that he is losing. Due to his handling of the collision of a Chinese trawler with Japan Coast Guard vessels and a string of gaffes made by his cabinet members, which resulted in one resignation and a House of Councillors’ censure motion against two others, Kan’s approval has plummeted to just above 20 percent. Worse, out of political necessity, he has reached out to the Social Democratic Party (SDP) for Diet cooperation. Given the SDP’s staunch opposition to relocation, this partnership would limit Kan’s options and thus make progress impossible. If he truly hopes to implement the agreement, he needs to avoid the SDP.

The three steps outlined above require the exercise of strong political leadership to expand wins for Naha and Washington, while possibly moving forward without local community consent. Unfortunately, the political tides appear not to be in the prime minister’s favor. Prime Minister Kan’s weakened political standing and reliance on the SDP will make it difficult for him to cut deals with Governor Nakaima and negotiate with the United States, given that there is an increasing possibility he will not be the individual visiting the United States next spring as Japan’s premier. There is still a window of opportunity for Kan; whether he succeeds depends on his adeptness as a leader.

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