

JAPAN CHAIR PLATFORM

June 21, 2011

Questioning the Senators' Proposal on U.S. Force Realignment in Japan

Jeffrey W. Hornung

Prime Minister Naoto Kan of Japan may have survived a recent no-confidence vote, but his long-term survival as premier remains tenuous. Focused on domestic politics and the country's reconstruction efforts, it is increasingly likely that Kan will not visit the United States for a summit meeting scheduled for September. This leaves the relocation of the troubled Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Okinawa unresolved precisely at a time when leadership is required. Worse, because of the interference by three U.S. senators, unnecessary confusion has been interjected into the Futenma debate. Their proposal lacks clarity on key points and confuses political expediency with necessity. The current realignment agreement, while not perfect, should be implemented. Yet, with waning political leadership in Tokyo, this will be difficult.

Brief History on Realignment

Futenma has long been a sore spot in U.S.-Japan relations, largely because it sits in densely populated Ginowan. In 1995, the U.S. presence on Okinawa became a focal point for debate after three servicemen raped a middle-school girl. The incident provided impetus to reduce America's presence, including the closure of Futenma and other bases. Regarding a Futenma Replacement Facility (FRF), various possibilities were examined and rejected, including the integration of Futenma air functions at Kadena Air Force Base (AFB). In December 1996, Washington and Tokyo agreed to close Futenma and transfer its air operations to an FRF in the waters off the east coast of Okinawa. After a decade of stalemate on the details, a 2004 Futenma-based helicopter crash into Okinawa International University provided new impetus. In May 2006, a U.S.-Japan Roadmap for Realignment Implementation (hereafter "Roadmap") was reached, but not before the feasibility of integrating Futenma's air functions at Kadena was once again studied and rejected. The FRF would be built at Camp Schwab and two runways on reclaimed land in Oura Bay (both near Nago in northern Okinawa) by 2014. Only *after* the FRF's completion would Futenma's air units relocate to Camp Schwab, about 8,000 Marines move to Guam (and 9,000 dependents), a host of U.S. facilities south of Kadena—including Futenma—close, and 2,600 acres of land be returned. Cost was calculated at \$10.27 billion, of which Japan would pay \$6.09 billion.

In February 2009, the United States and Japan signed the Guam Agreement, formalizing the link between the FRF and Guam realignment. When Japan's parliament approved it in May, it became a bilateral commitment. Three months later, however, Yukio Hatoyama of the incoming Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) administration promised to reexamine the 2006 Roadmap. His promise was supported by the Okinawan people and emboldened Okinawa governor Hirokazu Nakaima to oppose the relocation. Hatoyama's proposals were reminiscent of prior debates, including integrating Futenma with Kadena. The DPJ government offered numerous alternatives, which did not consider the cohesive functioning of U.S. land, sea, and air units. Angered by Hatoyama's actions, the Barack Obama administration pressed Tokyo to fulfill its Roadmap commitment, reminding the DPJ that the relocation process was a complex plan that required an FRF. Whether it was Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in Tokyo or Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Hawaii, Washington pressured Tokyo to fulfill its commitment. Bowing to various sources of pressure, Hatoyama renewed Tokyo's backing of the Roadmap on May 28, 2010. A few days afterward, he resigned due to reneging on his promise. His successor, Naoto Kan, embraced the Roadmap, committing his government to implementing it. Yet ongoing opposition from Nakaima (whose signature is required for land reclamation) and local groups has stalled implementation.

The Senators' Proposal and Its Shortfalls

Enter Senators John McCain, Carl Levin, and Jim Webb. On May 12, 2011, the senators issued a joint statement calling on the United States to reexamine its plans to restructure U.S. forces in East Asia (Japan and South Korea). Deeming the Roadmap as "unrealistic, unworkable and unaffordable," they proposed an alternate realignment plan. This included abandoning the FRF at Camp Schwab and instead integrating Futenma's air operations at Kadena. In turn, an unspecified number of Kadena airmen and assets would move to Guam's Anderson AFB and/or other locations in Japan. At Guam, instead of relocating 8,000 Marines and 9,000 dependents, they proposed hosting one permanent headquarters element

bolstered by deployed, rotating combat units home based elsewhere, such as Hawaii or California. Their dependents would remain at these home bases.

Unrealistic

The senators indicated that political realities on Guam and Okinawa make it difficult to implement the current agreement. Yet it is unclear how their alternative is more realistic.

The senators expressed dissatisfaction with the FRF at Camp Schwab taking as long as 10 years and remaining “rife with difficulties.” If 10 years is considered too long, they poorly underestimate the time frame for reopening negotiations on the contentious agreement, and then implementing that new agreement. After all, simply concluding the current agreement took over 10 years. Given how long this took, it is highly unlikely that their new proposal would be able to be negotiated and implemented within 10 years. They are naïve to think otherwise.

It is true that relocating Marines to Guam is less politically challenging given the warm welcome Governor Eddie Calvo has shown to the planned buildup and expected influx of money. Yet, the senators are naïve to believe that integrating Marine functions at Kadena will be politically easy. The senators acknowledge the “sensitive political issues surrounding Futenma” but ignore how integrating Futenma’s air operations at Kadena will simply transfer Futenma’s problems to Kadena. This includes increased noise, chance of accidents, and flight hours. This is why the mayors of towns close to Kadena, the people who live there, and Nakaima all oppose integration. It is also one of the reasons why the idea has been rejected numerous times, a fact reiterated in *Stars and Stripes* interviews by former Kadena 18th Wing commander, Brig. Gen. Kenneth Wilsbach (December 2009) and current Pacific Air Forces commander, Gen. Gary North (January 2010). Given its history of being dismissed, and the strong opposition by local actors, it is unrealistic to believe that the senators’ proposal is politically easier than the existing Roadmap.

Unworkable

While the senators lament that the Roadmap is unworkable, it is unclear how their proposal is workable from the standpoint of Guam’s infrastructure and U.S. operational capacity on Okinawa.

The senators are right to be concerned about the large influx of Marines and their dependents into Guam. An approximate 20,000-person increase on an island of 180,000 will place significant strain on Guam’s infrastructure, requiring considerable money for improvement projects. The senators’ proposal to exclude Marine dependents is a sound solution. Less people mean less strain. The proposal has the added benefit of requiring fewer housing facilities, schools, hospitals, and recreation facilities, which, in turn, saves money. Yet all this is negated by their proposal to transfer an unspecified number of Kadena personnel and assets to Anderson AFB. If saving money is the reason behind excluding Marine dependents, relocating an unspecified number of Air Force personnel and assets will necessitate infrastructure improvements and new facilities. Unless they intend fewer than the planned 9,000 Marine dependents, their proposal does not offset the reduction and, thus, is not workable in terms of saving money or reducing crowding on Guam.

Operationally, integrating Futenma with Kadena is unworkable. While Kadena is currently the largest airfield in East Asia, there are three problems with the idea. The most important of which is the reduction of the number of runways available to U.S. forces, thereby affecting U.S. contingency capacity. Currently, U.S. forces have three runways in Okinawa: two at Kadena and one at Futenma. Closing Futenma without the FRF at Camp Schwab means the United States loses an alternate runway at a separate location in case weather or emergency conditions prevent aircraft from landing at Kadena. In any situation where an additional runway becomes necessary, the only option is for the U.S. military to use the civilian airport at Naha.

Additionally, integrating Futenma’s helicopter operations at Kadena would not only increase the daily flight operations, it would complicate flight operations. Because integration means more air traffic of different types, it forces a division of air space for fixed-wing, fast-moving aircraft and the slower-moving Marine helicopters. This means the United States would have to develop a more complex system to avoid collisions, thereby magnifying the chance for an accident to occur.

Finally, as cited in a December 2009 Heritage Foundation report, there is insufficient capacity at Kadena to house Futenma’s redeployed Marine air unit. Kadena has three possible locations that could house the redeployed air unit. The storage capacity at both the north ramp and the south ramp are insufficient for Marine assets. The only option, the golf course, requires facilities to be built. However, this carries with it the flight operations problems noted above.

Because the senators fail to specify how many airmen and assets they would transfer to Guam, it is unclear how Guam would be affected and how much room would open up at Kadena. This lack of specificity is important because the senators propose to increase the number of air units at Kadena. It is expected that during a contingency there could be 6,000 takeoffs/landings per month (one every two to three minutes) at Kadena. If Kadena is already at capacity, it is not feasible to increase its operations without additional heavy ramp construction or an additional airfield. Integration would exceed

Kadena's capacity if this construction does not occur. Without the specifications, and proposed solutions to the aforementioned issues, it is unclear how workable their proposal is compared to the Roadmap.

Unaffordable

The senators are worried that the estimated cost associated with the realignment is unaffordable in today's constrained fiscal situation. Yet, it is unclear how their proposal is more affordable.

The current estimated cost for the Roadmap is \$10 billion. Japan is paying over \$6 billion of this. It is not up to the senators to decide what is affordable for Japan. It is brazen to think otherwise, especially when the United States borrows so heavily. Recovery from the March 11 disasters will be costly. Estimates reach as high as \$300 billion, but this "enormous burden" does not mean Tokyo cannot afford realignment. For a \$5 trillion economy, \$300 billion of reconstruction is only 6 percent. While 6 percent is twice as large as the recovery after the 1995 Kobe earthquake, it is not unaffordable. Japan spends around 6 percent of its budget on public works. Because reconstruction will involve significant public works projects, a considerable amount of this money can be allocated from existing funds. Budgets throughout Tokyo will be tightened, but countries can multi-spend, even in the face of overwhelming difficulties. Tokyo's continued support indicates it still believes the current agreement is affordable.

The senators believe they can save U.S. taxpayers billions of "unnecessary and unaffordable" costs. Not having to construct new facilities and a runway at Camp Schwab will save money. Yet, if the senators are really concerned with affordability they need to provide a bevy of specifics to demonstrate that their proposal is "substantially less expensive" than the current plan. The most important of these is how many Kadena airmen will be transferred to Guam. Unless it is far fewer than the proposed 9,000 Marine dependents, the United States will have to spend the same amount on housing and related facilities. In fact, it could result in greater spending if more than 9,000 airmen move or additional storage facilities are required for the influx of air force assets.

Assuming the senators' plan will result in fewer new facilities/infrastructure projects, they need to reconsider how much Japan and the United States will fund. Yet, if the senators are concerned about Japan's ability to afford the relocation, are they prepared to significantly reduce Japan's contribution? What if it means an increase in the United States' portion? These are key questions that the senators left unanswered.

To borrow the wording of the May 25, 2011, U.S. Government Accountability Office report on bases in East Asia, the senators' proposal lacks critical cost information that is essential to assess its affordability. This omission makes it difficult to compare their proposal with the Roadmap. As such, they cannot definitively claim that their proposal will save "billions in costs" and is more affordable than the Roadmap.

Unnecessary Confusion

When the senators released their proposal, I was in Japan (for unrelated research) meeting with mid- to high-level government officials in the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). Futenma dominated many of my meetings, with Japanese officials worried that the United States would not remain committed to the Roadmap. One official from the PMO frankly stated that he was tired of academics and politicians becoming interested in Futenma and swooping in to offer alternatives, failing to realize their "alternatives" have already been examined, reexamined, and discarded. As it stands, the senators' proposal appears to be the product of such thinking.

What is worrisome to Japanese officials is the fact that the senators hold powerful positions. Levin and McCain are the highest-ranking members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and Webb is chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee for East Asia and the Pacific. Officials understand that implementation is stalled because Tokyo still has to convince Nakaima to sign off on the land reclamation. Yet, they are worried that the senators could use their positions to effectively hold funding for the plan hostage in Congress. Unfortunately, this is a fear that appears to have been realized. Last week, the Armed Services Committee agreed to freeze spending directly connected to the realignment plans contained in the FY 2012 National Defense Authorization Act. Although it still requires full Senate approval, and reconciliation with a House of Representatives bill, the senators have effectively blocked the relocation effort. At a time when officials and politicians in Tokyo are once again in agreement on the need to implement a plan that took so long to conclude, it is a colossal mistake that three senators have single-handedly made Japanese officials worry about the United States fulfilling its commitment, thereby giving them reduced incentive to spend the necessary political capital to push through any deal with Nakaima.

Conclusion

Given that it was just two years ago that the United States was pressuring Japan to fulfill its commitment, it is indeed strange to think that some in Japan are now fearful of the United States renegeing. Luckily, administration officials in both Tokyo and Washington have come out in strong support of the existing agreement. Yet, with Roadmap supporters about to retire

(Gates) or lose their job (Kan), the uncertainty of incoming Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta's position, and because of the unpredictability of circumstances, there is still a possibility that the senators' proposal could gain traction in Washington. This would be a mistake.

The Roadmap is not a perfect option, but it is the best option to meet the operational needs of the Marines and reduce the U.S. footprint on Okinawa. Without an FRF, U.S. troops do not leave Okinawa, Futenma and other facilities south of Kadena do not close, and land does not get returned to Okinawa. To pick apart portions of the Roadmap will cause it to unravel. It took over a decade to finalize. Revising proposals that have been examined numerous times—and discarded—is a waste of time. If history is any guide, we could expect new negotiations to last over a decade.

No one wants to keep Futenma open. Obviously, despite an agreement, Washington and Tokyo are still hamstrung on its implementation, largely because of domestic opposition on Okinawa. As such, relocating Futenma to Nago will remain a politically taxing effort. This is where political leadership is required. Leadership in Tokyo needs to convince local groups of the reasons why Marines need to stay in Okinawa. Also, Tokyo needs to convince Nakaima to return to his previous stance of supporting the agreement and that local concerns, while important, should not obstruct Japan's national security. This puts an enormous amount of pressure on Kan at a time when he is sliding toward irrelevancy. Yet, this is all the more reason for Washington to show solidarity with Tokyo. Officials at all levels in Tokyo and Washington were prudent to publically state continued support of the Roadmap and unofficially decide to delay the 2014 deadline, acknowledged to be technically impossible.

The senators' proposal sends the wrong message to Tokyo at the wrong time. Two years ago, it was the United States pressuring Japan to maintain the agreement; now Japan is worried that the United States might renege. Given the persistent difficulties involving implementation, the senators' proposal does little more than create additional lost time of examining false alternatives. Their authority in Congress has given critics of the U.S. presence another reason to oppose the current agreement. Yet, empowering the opposition increases the chances for Futenma to stay open. Had the senators thought their proposal through, they would have seen that *theirs* is an alternative that is unrealistic, unworkable, and unaffordable.

Jeffrey W. Hornung is associate professor at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Honolulu. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, the U.S. Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

The Japan Chair invites other essays for the Platform. Please contact Eri Hirano at (202) 775-3144 or by e-mail at ehirano@csis.org.

Japan Chair Platform is published by the Office of the Japan Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2011 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.