

Futenma Base Issue

A Test to Deepen Japan-US Relations

By Satoshi MORIMOTO

To realize political ideals, it is essential to build political foundations that meet realistic requirements. Without such foundations, not only do political ideals not come true, but also distrust in politics emerges among voters.

Since the birth of the new government led by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) last September, the question of where to relocate the US Marine Corps air base at Futenma in Okinawa Prefecture strayed off course. In the end, the Futenma issue went full circle to get back on the track at the end of May – relocation to the place Japan and the United States had agreed to originally.

Taking responsibility for the eight months of meandering stemming from his election campaign promise to move the air station out of Okinawa, then Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama stepped down, paving the way for the inauguration in June of another DPJ administration, led by Naoto Kan, deputy prime minister under the Hatoyama

government. Kan has made it clear his new government will follow Hatoyama's policy course. But the new leader lacks experience in diplomatic, security and defense affairs. With his knowledge of these critical policy areas uncertain, solution to the Futenma issue that has just taken a fresh start depends much on his leadership.

History of Futenma Base Issue

The Japan-US alliance marks a milestone this year, the 50th anniversary of the revision to the bilateral security treaty. But the many months of soured relations between the two countries over the Futenma issue caused serious effects on the diplomatic, security and economic fields as a whole, with key policy talks suspended and information exchanges at a low ebb. For the present, it is a major challenge for the Kan government to restore confidence in the bilateral alliance damaged by the Hatoyama administration. Behind the twists and turns of the Futenma issue was Hatoyama's pursuit of his political dreams to an unrealistic extent.

Based on the Japan-US Security Treaty, 36,000 American troops are stationed at more than 130 bases across Japan. Those military facilities kept under the security treaty serve not only as strategic bases to allow the US troops to function as a deterrent in the Asia-Pacific region but as relay stations to allow them to deploy to the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and South Asia.

The problem is that roughly 74% of those bases are located in Okinawa, the southernmost prefecture. The island of Okinawa was the site of the bloodiest and sole ground combat in Japan in the Pacific theater of World War II. The island was occupied by US troops and was governed for many years by the United States as a United Nations trust territory. It was returned to Japan in 1974. Before then, the US forces had used their facilities in Okinawa as forward bases in waging the Korean and Vietnam wars.

Okinawan people have been waging a campaign for the return of land used for the military bases, citing a spate of accidents, noise and other damage brought by their presence. The campaign gained momentum in 1995 when three American Marines raped an Okinawan girl. The Japanese and US governments agreed in 1996 on the return of the Futenma air station used by the Marines in a bid to ease the burden of the islanders. The return was on condition that the helicopter functions at the base be relocated.

The Futenma base issue, in reality, amounts to the question of where to build a facility to accommodate the Marines' helicopter unit. After some 10 years of hard negotiations, the two governments agreed in 2006 to relocate Futenma to an airfield to be constructed

Photo: Kyodo News



Participants in a rally in Naha against relocation of Futenma Air Station elsewhere in Okinawa hoist placards with a Chinese character meaning "anger."

on a landfill off the existing Marine infantry base at Camp Schwab in central Okinawa. Work was started to assess the impact the new facility might have on the natural environment.

Clamor Flares Up after DPJ Election Victory

In the meantime, the DPJ won an overwhelming victory in the general election in September 2009. Hatoyama went on record that his government would not accept the Japan-US accord on Futenma's relocation. His repeated remarks that a relocation site "must be overseas or at the worst outside Okinawa" have elucidated his intention that he would not allow a substitute base to be built in Okinawa. On the other hand, Washington has been pressing Tokyo to abide by the bilateral accord, which it said resulted from as long as 10 years of hard work.

The DPJ government began its own efforts to find a new relocation site. At first, it tried to find possible sites outside Japan. Learning that it was impossible, it turned its eyes to places outside Okinawa. It shortlisted a place outside the prefecture but immediately ran into vehement opposition by local residents. The US government has put forward its criteria that any new site must be compatible with both political sustainability (acceptance by the local community involved) and military sustainability (the ability to ensure the Marines' operations).

The Marine Corps stationed in Okinawa routinely conducts drills at training facilities on the island. Its helicopter unit assists the ground troops in the drills and helps them board landing ships. For this reason, the Marine Corps has its own standards that any new site for the helicopter unit must be located within 120 km of where the ground troops are stationed.

It will be far from easy to keep the US Marine Corps posted in Okinawa and find a site for its helicopter unit within the 120 km limit. No other communities in Japan outside Okinawa are prepared to offer a relocation site for the helicopter unit. However, the Marine Corps' relocation outside Japan could undermine US deterrence to the detriment of peace and stability in the region.

Futenma Case Tests Japan's Security Awareness

All told, the best solution to the issue was for the Japanese government to return to the present agreement as the US government had insisted. After wandering vaguely, Hatoyama finally decided he had no choice but to accept the agreement. On May 28, the two countries issued a joint statement confirming their agreement to locate a replacement facility for the Futenma air station in the Henoko



Ruling Democratic Party of Japan leader Naoto Kan makes his first public speech as prime minister in Tokyo as DPJ Secretary General Yukio Edano looks on.

area in Nago City. Although this laid the groundwork to get the battered Japan-US relations back on track, distrust in the government ensued at home and, in relations with the United States, Tokyo lost Washington's confidence in its foreign policy. Both represent serious aftereffects.

The Japan-US alliance is perhaps the most successful bilateral alliance through Cold War years. It was in no way advisable to see the alliance rupture simply by dint of wrangling over the relocation of a single military base. What really irritated the United States was the Hatoyama administration's security perception based on bleak awareness of potential threats and its disregard of the US forces' functions as a deterrent that underlie the mutual security treaty. The two governments had to seek a realistic settlement of the issue, paying due consideration to what costs they should pay and what risks they should bear to uphold their alliance for national and regional stability and peace.

But the renewed Japan-US agreement has left Okinawans furious as their initial hopes – raised by the previous DPJ government – of the Futenma base going out of Okinawa fizzled out. It is therefore no easy challenge to carry out the accord. US President Barack Obama is scheduled to visit Japan in November. The visit will be the target time for resolving the issue. To what extent the Kan administration is determined to grapple with it will greatly affect the future of the Japan-US alliance. **JS**

Satoshi Morimoto is director/professor, Institute of World Studies, Takushoku University.