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U.S. Military Presence on Okinawa and Realignment to Guam

Introduction

In recent years, the U.S. and Japanese governments have steadily strengthened key elements of the U.S.-Japan alliance, but have continued to struggle with how to manage the large-scale presence of U.S. troops in the southernmost Japanese prefecture of Okinawa. These challenges affect broader U.S. efforts to realign its military forces in the region, particularly the plans to transfer some marines to Guam, which faces its own difficulties. Okinawa occupies a key strategic location: the bases provide a crucial component of the U.S. military's forward operating presence in the Indo-Pacific and are seen by many as a bulwark against China's expanding presence in the region.

Okinawa's Grievances

Despite comprising less than 1% of Japan's total land area, Okinawa hosts over half of the more than 50,000 U.S. military personnel stationed in Japan and about 70% of all facilities and areas used exclusively by U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ). Okinawa also bears the painful legacy of the Battle of Okinawa in 1945, when 100,000 Japanese soldiers and 40,000-100,000 civilians perished. The United States administered Okinawa from 1945 until 1972, two decades longer than it occupied Japan following World War II.

Many native Okinawans chafe at the large U.S. military presence, reflecting in part the tumultuous history and complex relationships with "mainland" Japan and with the United States. Although the views of Okinawans are far from monolithic, many Okinawans—including those who largely support the U.S.-Japan alliance—have concerns about the burden of hosting foreign troops, particularly about issues like crime, safety, environmental degradation, and noise. Long-held grievances erupted in 1995 when three U.S. servicemembers were convicted in a Japanese court of raping a 12-year-old Okinawan girl, prompting the allies to try to alleviate the burden on hosting communities.

Futenma Base Relocation

In 1996, the bilateral Security Consultative Committee (composed of the U.S. Secretaries of State and Defense and their Japanese counterparts, also known as the "2+2") established the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) to address the concern that the basing situation may not be politically sustainable. The 1996 SACO Final Report mandated the return to Okinawa of thousands of acres of land used by the U.S. military since World War II, including by moving Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma from crowded Ginowan City to Camp Schwab in Nago City's less congested Henoko area. Decades of residential development around the Futenma base has made the noise of the facility an irritant to the local community and elevated the risk of an aircraft accident in a heavily populated area. Efforts to implement the Okinawa agreement, however, quickly stalled due to local opposition,

as protests against the planned Futenma Replacement Facility (FRF) and Okinawan leaders presented steep challenges to implementing the 1996 plan.



Source: Map created by CRS using data from the U.S. State Department, 2009; and ESRI Data 10, 2009.

Subsequent bilateral negotiations aimed at addressing local resistance culminated in the 2006 U.S.-Japan Roadmap for Realignment. The United States agreed to remove roughly 8,000 marines from Okinawa to Guam by 2014. Congressional concerns over the scope and cost of the Guam realignment, as well as concerns about Guam's preparedness, led to later revisions that adjusted the number of personnel and dependents to be relocated.

Marine Corps Realignment to Guam

Guam is a 210-square-mile tropical island, roughly 12 miles at its widest point, lying 1,230 nautical miles southeast of Okinawa; it has long hosted a significant American military presence. Once claimed as a U.S. territorial possession, Guam is currently classified as an "unincorporated territory" whose people maintain U.S. citizenship status and limited rights to self-government. The Department of Defense (DOD) controls 30% of all acreage on the island, and approximately 11,000 DOD military and civilians currently reside there. Situated between Hawaii and the Philippines, the island represents an important strategic hub for U.S. air and maritime assets in the Western Pacific.

The current strategy for moving military personnel to Guam from Okinawa is based on a 2012 revision to the 2006 U.S.-

Japan Roadmap for Realignment, and would relocate 5,000 marines and 1,300 dependents to Guam; 2,700 marines and 2,000 dependents to Hawaii; 1,300 marines to Australia (on a rotational basis); and 800 marines to locations in the continental United States. Originally, the relocation of troops was to be contingent on completion of the FRF. In February 2012, the United States and Japan announced they were removing this linkage, in order to sidestep delays in Futenma's relocation. The U.S. Marine Corps has committed to commencing the flow of forces roughly by FY2025, with the date of completion still to be determined. The Department of Defense has assessed the total cost of the Guam relocation at \$8.7 billion, with \$3.1 provided in contributions by Japan (in FY2012 dollars).

Political Resistance to Base Relocation in Okinawa

Contemporary politics surrounding basing issues in Japan are complex and involve politicians from local village wards up to the Prime Minister's office. In general, the debate over basing issues has been driven by Okinawan politicians demanding that the FRF be moved outside of the Okinawan prefecture and trying to block work on the FRF.

In 2009 and 2010, then-Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama's campaign pledge to move the new facility out of the prefecture elevated the issue to a major U.S.-Japan point of contention and, some assert, may have irrevocably shifted the political landscape in Okinawa by raising and then dashing the hopes of the anti-base movement. In late 2013, the Abe government appeared to break this stalemate by wielding unprecedented pressure and inducements to win over key Okinawan politicians. However, Okinawan citizens in late 2014 and 2018 voted in two consecutive governors who ran on platforms opposed to the relocation plan. The current governor Denny Tamaki and his predecessor Takeshi Onaga (who died in 2018) both employed a variety of political and legal strategies to prevent or delay construction of the FRF at the Henoko site. Both governors traveled to the United States to raise awareness of their grievances, including meeting with some Members of Congress to express their opposition.

In February 2019, Okinawa held a non-binding referendum on the relocation of the U.S. base. About 72% of those who voted opposed the construction of the new base. With a 52% turnout rate, the opposition votes exceeded 25% of eligible voters. A local ordinance requires the governor the governor to "respect" results meeting that threshold, and send notifications to both Tokyo and Washington. Despite the clear signal from Okinawans, the Abe administration indicated it would proceed with construction as planned.

Outlook for FRF Relocation and Construction

An additional challenge adding to delays in the Futenma relocation is the physical difficulty of constructing offshore runways for the base. According to a 2010 bilateral experts study group, the offshore runways will require 21 million cubic meters of soil to create 395 acres of reclaimed land, most of which will be imported from other areas of Japan. It was subsequently discovered that underwater soil in the area is less stable than originally thought, leading to more complex building requirements. A slightly larger offshore runway at a U.S. base at Iwakuni took 13 years to complete.

After years of delays and legal disputes between Tokyo and Okinawa, culminating in a Japanese Supreme Court decision that the Okinawan governor could not revoke the landfill permit, land reclamation activities for the runway began in mid-December 2018. Uncertainty remains about the cost and timeframe of the project. Japan's Ministry of Defense originally estimated in 2013 the project would take about 5 years and cost 231 billion yen (about \$2.1 billion at current exchange rates); in late 2018 the Okinawan government asserted that it was likely to take 13 years and cost around 2.5 trillion yen (about \$22.7 billion).

Other uncertainties could affect construction. For example, the ability and will of the Okinawan Prefectural Police to thwart determined anti-base protesters and enable smooth construction could be tested. Some anti-base groups in Okinawa have pledged to take extreme measures to prevent construction. Progressive political groups in mainland Japan have also held rallies to demonstrate opposition to the FRF and put pressure on the central government. Similarly, the willingness, or lack thereof, of local municipalities to cooperate with construction of the FRF could bring additional inconveniences and logistical delays.

Both Japanese and U.S. officials have repeatedly declared the intent to return the land of MCAS Futenma to local control as soon as possible. U.S. military officials, including the Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command in congressional testimony, stated that operations would not cease at Futenma until a replacement facility on Okinawa is completed. Japanese officials are hopeful that land returns from vacated U.S. bases will spur economic development on Okinawa and ease opposition to the U.S. base plans. In December 2016, the United States returned nearly 10,000 acres of land to Japan, the largest transfer of land since the reversion of Okinawa to Japan in 1972.

Congress's Role

In its oversight responsibilities for U.S. foreign policy, Congress may be concerned about the sustainability of major U.S. bases in Okinawa. Ongoing delays to U.S. base restructuring on Okinawa could force a broader conversation about the utility of marines in Okinawa, or about whether the strategic environment demands a different arrangement. In addition, with contentious cost-sharing negotiations on the horizon, Tokyo may argue that its ongoing subsidies to Okinawan communities hosting U.S. bases, as well as increasing cost of constructing the necessary runways, should be part of the burden-sharing formula. Congress may also be concerned about the ballooning cost of construction on Guam.

For more background, see CRS Report R42645, *The U.S. Military Presence in Okinawa and the Futenma Base Controversy*.

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