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

Introduction

As the U.S. and Japanese governments in recent years have steadily strengthened key elements of the U.S.-Japan alliance, they continue to struggle with how to manage the large-scale presence of U.S. troops in the southernmost Japanese prefecture of Okinawa. With the legacy of the U.S. occupation of Japan following World War II and Okinawa’s key strategic location, Okinawa hosts a large share of the more than 50,000 U.S. military personnel stationed in Japan. About 25% of all facilities used by U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ) and over half of USFJ military personnel are located in the prefecture, which comprises less than 1% of Japan’s total land area. At the same time, the bases provide a crucial component of the U.S. military’s forward operating presence in the Asia-Pacific and are seen by many as a bulwark against China’s expanding presence in the region. The attitudes of many native Okinawans toward U.S. military bases are largely negative, reflecting in part a tumultuous history and complex relationships with “mainland” Japan and with the United States. The United States administered Okinawa from 1945 until 1972.

turn affects broader U.S. efforts to realign its military forces in the region, particularly the plans to transfer some Marines to Guam. The Guam project faces its own difficulty in readying the necessary facilities to host new U.S. troops.

Futenma Base Relocation Agreement

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 alleviate the burdens of the base-hosting communities. The agreement mandated the release to Okinawa of thousands of acres of land that had been used by the U.S. military since World War II, including MCAS Futenma, which was to be relocated to the existing Camp Schwab in the sparsely populated Henoko area of Nago City. The encroachment of residential areas around the Futenma base over decades made the noise of the facility an irritant to the local community and elevated the risk of a fatal aircraft accident. In crafting the deal, alliance officials intended to make the U.S. military presence on Okinawa more politically sustainable.

Efforts to implement the Okinawa agreement quickly stalled due to local opposition to the 1996 plan. In a series of bilateral negotiations that culminated in 2006, the U.S. agreed to remove roughly 9,000 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 in the plan.

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 controls 30% of all acreage on the island. Roughly 10,000 military personnel reside on Guam, primarily stationed at Anderson Air Force Base at the northern end, and Naval Station Guam on the western coast. Situated between Hawaii and the Philippines, Guam represents an important strategic hub for U.S. air and maritime assets in the Western Pacific.

The current “distributed laydown” strategy would relocate 4,100 Marines from Okinawa to Guam; 2,500 to Australia on a rotational basis; 2,700 to Hawaii; and 800 to the continental United States. In a move intended to overcome delays, the United States and Japan announced in February 2012 that the relocation would no longer be contingent on the completion of the FRF. Consequently, the realignment



At the heart of the issue is a prominent controversy over the relocation of the Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) in Futenma, known as the Futenma Replacement Facility (or FRF). Despite over two decades of both bilateral and domestic Japanese efforts, transferring the airbase to a less congested area of Okinawa remains a divisive issue between the central government in Tokyo and Okinawan leaders. Ongoing protests against the relocated base and the opposition of the current Okinawan governor present steep challenges to implementing the planned relocation. This in

of Marines from Okinawa to Guam and elsewhere is proceeding on its own timeline, separate from the issue of the FRF. 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.

Political and Legal Resistance to Base Relocation

Elected in 2014 on an anti-base platform, Okinawa Governor Takeshi Onaga has used a variety of tactics to prevent or delay the construction of the FRF at the Henoko site. After Onaga's initial attempt to negotiate a new base relocation plan with the central government met firm resistance in Tokyo, in March 2015 he demanded that the Ministry of Defense stop work on the offshore landfill needed to build the runways at Camp Schwab. Onaga then appointed an expert commission that determined that the prior governor's approval of the landfill had been illegal, and Onaga used the commission's findings as the basis to revoke the permit in October 2015.

After a cabinet minister rejected Onaga's maneuver, the governor applied for screening by a third-party council that manages disputes between the central governments and local governments. Tokyo and Naha (the capital city of Okinawa Prefecture) agreed in March 2016 to a court-recommended mediation process, suspending construction of the FRF while the two sides resumed ultimately fruitless negotiations. A December 2016 Japanese Supreme Court decision ruled that Governor Onaga could not revoke the landfill permit. Governor Onaga has vowed to take further steps to prevent the construction.

On the political front, Onaga has sought to bring wider attention—from mainland Japan and around the world—to the issue of the U.S. military presence on Okinawa and to garner support for his positions. Onaga traveled to the United States in 2015 and again in 2017 to meet with U.S. officials and Members of Congress in an attempt to convince U.S. leaders that the current Futenma relocation plan is unwise. In August 2015, more than 100 Japan scholars and peace activists signed a petition urging Onaga to revoke the landfill permit for the FRF. 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.

Outlook for Construction of Offshore Runways at the Henoko Site

Construction of the new facility will involve challenges for both law enforcement officials and engineers working on the project. According to a bilateral experts study group report in 2010, the offshore runways will require 21 million cubic meters of soil to create 395 acres of reclaimed land. The bulk of this soil will be delivered by ship from other areas of Japan. (The Okinawa prefectural legislature passed an ordinance that requires imported soil to undergo special screening and allows the governor to cancel the import of soil.) A slightly larger offshore runway project at the Iwakuni base in Japan took 13 years to complete.

Abe Administration officials have repeatedly declared their intent to return the land of MCAS Futenma to local control

as soon as possible, and the most plausible means of achieving that goal under the existing agreement would be to accelerate construction of the FRF. In 2014, the commander of Marine Forces Japan reiterated the U.S. position that the Marine Corps would not cease operations at Futenma until a replacement facility on Okinawa is completed. A U.S. military official testified to Congress in 2016 that the expected completion of the new air station had been delayed from 2022 to 2025.

Construction of the new base could also be a law enforcement challenge for Japan. The ability and will of the Okinawan Prefectural Police to thwart determined anti-base protesters and enable smooth construction could be tested. The Japanese Coast Guard has been called into service to prevent sea-going protestors in kayaks from interfering with the land reclamation operation. The mayor of the local municipality has declared that he will not cooperate whatsoever in construction of the FRF, which could bring additional inconveniences and logistical delays.

2017 Developments

In 2017, a variety of statements demonstrated both continuity and potential changes to the existing plan. In February, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Prime Minister Abe reaffirmed their commitment to building the FRF. However, U.S. Marine Corps Commandant General Robert Neller testified to Congress in May that the realignment plan could be reviewed due to the changing security situation. In April, Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command Admiral Harry Harris testified to Congress that the United States planned to transfer 4,000 of the 19,000 Marines stationed on Okinawa to Guam between 2024 and 2028, and that the U.S. military ultimately hoped to reduce the number of Marines on Okinawa to about 10,000. In April, Guam's Governor Eddie Calvo announced that, due to prolonged shortfalls in the construction workforce caused by H-2B visa restrictions, he would no longer support the realignment of U.S. forces.

On Okinawa, the Japanese government has begun construction work at Camp Schwab in Henoko. Major landfill work is reportedly expected to start in 2018, barring further delays. 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 in the northern part of the island to Japan, the largest transfer of land since the reversion of Okinawa to Japan in 1972. For more information and analysis, see CRS Report R42645, *The U.S. Military Presence in Okinawa and the Futenma Base Controversy*.

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