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STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR JAPAN OF THE RELOCATION OF US MARINES FROM OKINAWA TO GUAM

Matake Kamiya

On February 17, 2009, Japan's Foreign Minister Hirofumi Nakasone and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton signed an accord on the planned relocation of US Marines from Okinawa to Guam. Currently, there are approximately eighteen thousand Marines (most of whom belong to the III Marine Expeditionary Force [MEF]) stationed in Okinawa. On May 1, 2006, in the *United States-Japan Roadmap for Realignment Implementation (Roadmap)*, Tokyo and Washington agreed to transfer approximately eight thousand of

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these Marines to the US bases in Guam by 2014. The two countries also agreed that Japan would assume about 59% of the financial cost of the relocation. The new accord reconfirmed the willingness of the two countries to actually implement the relocation as stipulated in the *Roadmap*. On May 13, the Japanese Diet officially endorsed the accord.

Since the announcement of the *Roadmap*, Tokyo and Washington have consistently emphasized that the planned relocation will reduce the burden on the local Okinawans while maintaining a sufficient level of deterrence for the security of Japan and the region. The latter part of their assertion is, however, not a matter of course. The Marines in Okinawa represent approximately one-third to one-quarter (depending on the statistical data used for calculation) of the US Forces Japan (USFJ) in terms of personnel. At first glance, it seems probable that the transfer of nearly half of them to Guam, located more than two thousand kilometers south of the main island of Okinawa, could lessen deterrence and adversely affect the security of Japan and East Asia.

How should we assess the impact of the relocation on Japan's security? The planned relocation is part of both the ongoing buildup of US bases in Guam and the realignment of US forces in Japan. Japan's financial support for the relocation (about \$6 billion) will cover almost 40% of the entire estimated cost of the planned buildup of the US' Guam bases (about \$15 billion). It is not appropriate to assess the impact on Japan's security of the relocation alone. It is necessary to evaluate the strategic implications for Japan of the entire scheme of the buildup, the realignment, and the relocation.

To make a long story short, this entire scheme could do more than maintain the level of deterrence. It represents a singular opportunity for Japan to enhance its security. While the strengthened Guam bases and the relocated Marines there will enhance the capability of the US military to intervene in the vast area from the West Pacific to the Middle East and the east coast of Africa, they could serve as a particularly useful tool to support stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Guam is located close enough to the "hot spots" in Asia, including the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait, to be vital to any conceivable conflicts, but far enough from mainland Asia to preclude attacks


from other countries in the region (except for attacks by ballistic missiles). The bases there could also be useful to the United States and its allies in preparing for China's buildup of its navy's blue-water capability. As for the US capability to provide defense support for Japan, too, the overall impact of the ongoing scheme on it could be positive. According to the USFJ realignment plan, the command functions as well as the military capabilities of the USFJ (such as missile defense) will be strengthened. In Okinawa, the Marine units on high combat readiness will remain after the relocation. The USFJ will maintain its capability to support Japan in the event of a military clash between Japan and China over the Senkaku Islands or in the East China Sea. At the same time, the USFJ realignment plan includes various ways to alleviate base-related issues in local communities in Japan, including but not limited to the relocation of the Marines in Okinawa to Guam. Such measures will enhance the Japanese people's support of the alliance with the United States.

So far, so good. One crucial fact, however, must be kept in mind by the Japanese public: the translation of such an opportunity into reality will be conditional. It will be a matter of political willingness. How the strengthening of the Guam bases, the relocation of the III MEF, and the realignment of the USFJ will actually work in a way that reflects Japan's security interests will depend on whether the Japanese government is willing to take two significant military measures, which will represent innovative steps for Japan's security policy.

First, access routes from the bases in Guam to Japan, Taiwan, the Korean peninsula, and the like will have to be secured. In addition to developing and maintaining the necessary means of transport, the Japanese government will have to enable the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to work together with the US military to defend the open sea bounded by Guam, Tokyo, and Taiwan.

Second, the Japanese government should allow the SDF to utilize the strengthened Guam bases to enhance Japan's security. Guam could serve both as a training site for the Air SDF and other branches of the Japanese SDF and as an operational base from which the SDF could defend the sea-lanes and conduct overseas missions. Tokyo should ensure that the US buildup of the Guam bases includes the construction of facilities for use by the SDF.

Security is still a very sensitive issue in Japanese society. Nevertheless, Japanese policymakers need to be courageous enough to discuss the necessity of these measures before the Japanese people to obtain their consent.

Finally, but not least importantly, Japanese policymakers must make non-partisan efforts to realize the construction of the Futenma Replacement Facility as soon as possible. Any further delay in its construction will also delay the relocation of the US Marines, make impossible the return to Japan of the Futenma Air Station, and postpone Japan's possible use of Guam for its security. Indeed, such a delay is likely as well to damage the United States' trust in Japan and even undermine the Japanese people's support for the alliance with the United States. 

Matake Kamiya is Professor of International Relations at the National Defense Academy of Japan. He was a main author of the report titled "Strategic Implications of an Ongoing Buildup of the US Bases in Guam for Japan," which the Research Institute for Peace and Security published in 2007.