U.S. BASES IN OKINAWA:
WHAT MUST BE DONE, AND QUICKLY

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SASAKAWA USA
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SASAKAWA USA
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INTRODUCTION

By LtGen Wallace “Chip” Gregson, USMC (ret.)

Okinawa has achieved a remarkable status: much more discussed than understood. This paper by Admiral Dennis Blair and James Kendall helps clear away the fog.

The hundreds of islands that constitute the Japanese Prefecture of Okinawa form the eastern boundary of the East China Sea. In 1945, the main island was the scene of the greatest air-land-sea battle in history. Seven years after the battle, the rest of Japan returned to Japanese sovereignty. Okinawa remained under U.S. occupation until 1972, largely because of Cold War exigencies.

Now, we are in a new era, but strategic geography remains relevant. Japanese and U.S. defense capabilities along the island chain bounding the East China Sea are vitally important. But it is equally important that these islands be thriving, successful communities as well as convenient locations for security capabilities. Security along this critical part of the “first island chain” must be comprehensive, addressing development as well as defense. To do that, we need to link elite deliberations among security professionals and alliance managers in each nation with those of government and community stakeholders in the Prefecture.

Alliance endurance demands Okinawa’s transformation into a showplace of Japanese developmental power and the advantage of U.S. support. Okinawa’s population is growing, in contrast to declining numbers across Japan. It must become a power center of Japanese education, professional skill, and economic success. Japan’s establishment of the post-doctoral Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology research institute is part of the development foundation. Now, it must be exploited to serve the growing younger generations.

It is noteworthy that recent U.S.-Japan agreements discussed in this paper recognize past development and economic growth in Okinawa. Many bases in Okinawa took root around the capital, Naha—where we were when the fighting stopped. That area is now the very site of Okinawa’s greatest urbanization. In fact, urban expansion has overwhelmed many of our bases, constraining U.S. activities.

As a result, U.S. and Japanese plans call for relocating the capabilities of the Futenma Marine Corps Air Station to a facility at Camp Schwab in the northern part of the island, away from urban encroachment. The relocation of Futenma’s capabilities and the realignment of U.S. capabilities to Guam, Australia, and other locations will permit the closing of five bases south of Kadena Air Force Base and the return of 1,048 hectares (2,589 acres) of prime urban property—much of it fronting the ocean—to Okinawa and Japan for development. The bases
that will close are Camp Kinser, Camp Lester, Kuwae Fuel Farm, the lower third of Camp Foster, and of course Futenma.

Adm. Blair and James Kendall make a strong case for adjusting and accelerating the return of some of those bases. I endorse their recommendation for the concurrent, rather than consecutive construction of new facilities on Guam and Hawaii to take years off the timetable for relocating American forces from Okinawa. I agree strongly with their recommendation that the U.S. and Japanese governments create some “quick wins” for the Okinawan people by executing near-term land returns and co-locating American and Japanese units and staffs for better interoperability. It is also worth taking another look at the deployment of Marines to Australia from an operational point of view.

By presenting an unvarnished look at U.S. history on Okinawa, and prescribing practical, achievable steps forward, the paper serves a valuable purpose. It is most important that we exploit the realignment and return of valuable property in Okinawa to create the conditions for enhanced education, business, and quality of life. Then, together, Japan and Okinawa will have the opportunity—and the obligation—to use Okinawa’s geographic destiny to enhance the Prefecture, sharpen Japan’s competitive edge in 21st century technology, and further the comprehensive security that will make our alliance stronger and more enduring.
U.S. BASES IN OKINAWA

CHANGING STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT: JAPAN AND U.S. ADAPT

Over the past two decades, a strategic national security shift has occurred in Japan. During the Cold War era, Japan’s defense was oriented towards the Soviet threat north of Hokkaido. In the ensuing years, Japan redirected its focus as Russian forces in the Far East Military District deteriorated, threats of North Korean missiles and nuclear proliferation developed, violent extremist Muslim groups gained global reach, Tokyo participated more fully in international peace-keeping activities, and, most pressing, China grew more self-confident and assertive.

Beijing includes Japan as the northern part of the “first island chain,” which it considers a final, defensive line on its maritime border; it claims the Senkaku Islands and surrounding waters; and it has dramatically increased its maritime and air activities in the waters around Japan.¹

The East China Sea has been the scene of frequent, ongoing incidents and encounters between China’s navy and paramilitary maritime agencies on one side and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) and Coast Guard on the other. Exacerbating the tensions are China’s 2014 creation of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) overlapping the long-standing Japanese ADIZ over the East China Sea and Senkaku islands, and the frequent forays into Japanese-controlled airspace by China’s air force.

Okinawa, Japan’s southernmost prefecture, is the part of Japan most exposed to this disputed region of the East China Sea. Japan has, in part, reoriented its defense posture to face south, towards the East China Sea, to be better positioned to protect its territorial integrity, shape Chinese behavior, and hedge against future Chinese expansionism. This reorientation has brought Japanese fighter aircraft to the Naha airbase in Okinawa, and a new, more capable Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF) unit to the island. The 15th Brigade, headquartered in Naha near Camp Kinser, has grown to include chemical units, air/missile defense units, and a robust aviation capability. This aviation element is based at the crowded Naha airport, and includes CH-47 Chinook heavy lift and UH-60 Blackhawk utility helicopters.

¹There are two major points of friction regarding conflicting maritime territorial claims between China and Japan. The first is a disagreement over where China’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the East China Sea ends and Japan’s begins, and the second is the dispute over sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands. Both issues are potential causes of conflict. The motivation behind the diplomatic and military wrangling is possession of estimated undersea oil deposits on the order of 100 billion barrels, as well as large amounts of gas.
Meanwhile, the United States has also been adapting its force structure to this new strategic environment in East Asia. To deal with the North Korean nuclear threat, the United States substantially increased its technical and policy coordination with Japan and South Korea, building a missile defense architecture that includes both maritime and ground-based components. Reversing a 1990s decision to close many facilities in Guam, the U.S. Department of Defense improved its logistic infrastructure on the island, added additional forces and attack submarines, and made more frequent rotations of long-range bombers. During the Cold War, the American air and naval forces in Japan had been among the least capable in the U.S. inventory, but during the 1990s and early 2000s, the Navy and Air Force began to deploy their newest systems to the region.

In 2006, the Bush administration instituted a policy, called the Defense Policy Review Initiative (DPRI), a subset of the global posture review process, to review and rationalize America's global military presence. The DPRI's objectives were to realign the regional force structure for better training and quicker deployment, and to relieve some of the tensions with local communities in Japan where U.S. forces are based. In South Korea, changing posture generally means reducing the number of U.S. Army forces, while moving those that are left southward, away from the demilitarized zone. In Japan, Marine Corps units in the populated southern half of the island of Okinawa are to be cut by roughly half, and the remaining half will be moved further north to less populated areas. Besides relieving local tensions, new facilities in Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands will provide greatly improved training opportunities over the constricted ranges in Okinawa.

Another important feature of the various realignment plans and agreements are provisions for “joint, shared use” of Marine Corps facilities at Camp Hansen and Camp Schwab with the JGSDF. Under the Okinawa Consolidation Plan, the JGSDF will station an infantry regiment (a battalion, in U.S. terms) at Camp Hansen and a company of AAV-7 Amphibious Assault Vehicles at Camp Schwab, where the Marines have their own AAV Company. On the plans for the reconfiguration of Camps Hansen and Schwab, areas have already been marked off and set aside for JGSDF units.²

U.S. BASES IN JAPAN: FRAUGHT BUT NECESSARY PRESENCE

Since the end of the Pacific War, the United States has maintained an extensive base structure in Japan. Since 1979, Japan has contributed to the support costs for these bases, currently paying about $2 billion annually.

² The Japanese hope this initiative will produce two beneficial results: partnering with the Marines will allow the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force to gain valuable lessons from the combat-experienced Marine Corps, and the presence of the Japanese troops will improve ties with the surrounding communities. While the Japan Maritime and Air Self-Defense Forces have enjoyed such a partnership with the U.S. 7th Fleet and 5th Air Force for years in places like Yokosuka, Sasebo, Yokota, and Misawa, the Ground Self-Defense Force has not.
On the mainland Japanese islands of Kyushu and Honshu, U.S. forces are generally stationed on former Imperial Japanese Army or Navy bases. American units are also collocated with Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF). As a result, local resentments are more manageable.  

The climate is more strained on Okinawa, where U.S. bases were mostly created in the latter days of World War II by forcible land clearances and seizures in preparation for the planned U.S. invasion of Japan’s main islands. Today, U.S. forces dominate the military presence in Okinawa, and there is very little joint basing with the JSDF. Due to the unintended consequences of past U.S. and Japanese government policies, as well as Japanese domestic politics, Okinawa hosts a highly disproportionate percentage of U.S. forces in Japan for its size. To be sure, since it reverted to Japanese control in 1972, the prefecture of Okinawa has been richly subsidized by Tokyo for its “burden,” but this glaring disparity rankles Okinawans.

A touchstone event was the 1995 abduction and rape of a young Okinawan girl by three U.S. service members. Okinawan resentment against the overbearing American presence turned to outrage. In reaction, the U.S. and Japan set up the Special Action Committee on Okinawa in 1996 to deal with Okinawan grievances. Many concessions were made to appease local citizens, including a ban on a great deal of live-fire training and relocating, at Tokyo’s expense, much of the Marines’ unit training to mainland Japan and Guam.

However, chief among the Okinawans’ demands was the closure of Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma, near Ginowan. Futenma is the base for the Marine Corps helicopters stationed on Okinawa, and over time has become completely surrounded by residential neighborhoods.

In 1996, the U.S. and Japanese governments agreed to relocate the functions of the controversial MCAS Futenma to an artificial island to be constructed off Camp Schwab, which is in northeastern Okinawa near the city of Nago. However, the political difficulty of relocating this air base to a place that would satisfy both U.S. operational requirements and local political constraints stymied progress.

In 2005, under the DPRI, the runway was to be moved to Camp Schwab, and two additional runways were to be built on an artificial peninsula that would extend into the

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3 Unlike their American counterparts, who vote in elections by absentee ballot in their respective home states, Japanese soldiers and their spouses vote where they are stationed. This creates a small but significant bloc of pro-defense voters in these small, Okinawan constituencies. Joint, shared use at Camps Hansen and Schwab would allow the JGSDF to establish new Japanese cantonments on Okinawa outside of their overcrowded base in Naha—something that would be very difficult to do, otherwise.

4 The focus of protestors’ ire, MCAS Futenma has long been suffering the effects of urban encroachment, producing complaints from locals about safety, noise, and crime. Camp Schwab is in a less congested part of Okinawa to the northeast of Futenma. Since 1959, Schwab has primarily been a base for Marine infantry and reconnaissance units. As such, it currently has no runways or aviation facilities, beyond a helipad.
bay.\textsuperscript{5} This plan for the Futenma Replacement Facility, as the new installation on Camp Schwab is known, has been exhaustively reviewed.\textsuperscript{6} On the Japanese side, it withstood a challenge by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government, which came to power under Prime Minister Hatoyama in 2009 pledging to move MCAS Futenma outside of Okinawa Prefecture, although the DPJ actions invigorated and emboldened anti-base activists.\textsuperscript{7}

By proposing to relocate the rotary-wing aircraft away from Futenma to Camp Schwab, moving roughly half the Marines out of Okinawa, and returning 68 percent of land occupied by U.S. forces to the Okinawa Prefectural Government, Tokyo and Washington believed they had gone a long way towards satisfying local Okinawan concerns. Japan had agreed to pay all of the relocation costs in Okinawa and roughly 40 percent of the costs of the new facilities in Guam. To the consternation of both governments, opposition has continued, both from an increasing proportion of Okinawans and from outside opponents, as well.

**RECENT EVENTS: DIFFICULT BUT STEADY PROGRESS**

Since the election of a conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in late 2012, the Government of Japan has steadfastly pursued its side of the bargain. In December 2013, Okinawa's then-Governor Hirokazu Nakaima, after exhaustive negotiations with Tokyo and the extraction of many, large concessions, issued a permit to carry out the landfill for the air facility at Camp Schwab. According to Marine Corps Headquarters, the Japanese Ministry of Defense has, at the time of this writing, awarded eight contracts, worth $14.4 million, to execute the survey and design of the Futenma Replacement Facility landfill.

Additionally, since the decision to move the air base to Camp Schwab in 2006, the Japan Ministry of Defense has spent $344 million on 22 projects to reconfigure Camp Schwab. Construction continued despite protests and legal wrangling (much work is needed to internally relocate the ground combat units currently based within Camp Schwab in order to make room for aviation facilities). Finally, some land returns have already been

\textsuperscript{5} Under the Futenma Replacement Facility plan, land will be reclaimed by landfill in Oura Bay adjacent to Camp Schwab, and a new air station will be constructed on the newly-expanded base (land is at a premium in Japan, and the terrain to the west of the Camp is hilly and unsuitable for an airfield). When the new airfield is ready, the helicopters and tilt-rotor MV-22 Ospreys would be relocated to Camp Schwab from MCAS Futenma, and Futenma would be closed. The new facility, to be named Marine Corps Air Facility Camp Schwab, will be on the coast rather than a plateau like MCAS Futenma. This avoids the problem of encroachment, because using “V-shaped” runways and approaches over water addresses over-flight of populated areas.

\textsuperscript{6} During the Obama administration, then-Secretary of Defense Gates ordered a thorough review of the plan. Over 20 alternative courses of action for a Futenma Replacement Facility were studied. All were rejected as operationally unsuitable or practically unworkable. Gates' successor, Leon Panetta, also scrutinized the project.

\textsuperscript{7} The DPJ proposed several alternatives to the Camp Schwab Futenma Replacement Facility plan, most of them fanciful, which were rejected by both Japanese constituencies and the U.S. Government. Eventually, the DPJ government conceded that there was no viable alternative location for the functions of MCAS Futenma, other than Camp Schwab.
made, the most significant of which is the West Futenma Housing Area.\(^8\)

Despite this progress, a new Governor of Okinawa, Takeshi Onaga, was elected in late 2014 on an anti-base platform. At the same time, four single-seat Diet constituencies in Okinawa were won by anti-base candidates—including one by the Japanese Communist Party that was the Party’s first directly elected, non-proportional Diet seat in 18 years. During his campaign, Onaga announced his intention, if elected, to rescind the landfill permit for the Futenma Replacement Facility at Camp Schwab. In March 2015, he followed through with a decree to that effect, but rescinding the permit will prove legally difficult in practice, and the central government has been strong-willed in its desire to stay the course on both the Futenma Replacement Facility and Okinawa Consolidation Plan. Nevertheless, the Government of Japan must submit two remaining modifications to the landfill permit for approval by the Okinawa Prefectural Government, giving Governor Onaga some remaining leverage. Denial of either or both modification measures would not halt progress of construction, but would likely slow it.\(^9\)

It is thought by informed Japanese sources that the issue of the landfill permit will end up in court after Governor Onaga’s reversal decree is overturned in a bureaucratic review process. According to these same sources, it seems likely that the Prefecture would lose in a court case, due to the wording of environmental statutes, the presence of planned environmental mitigation measures by the government, and the fact that large coastal land reclamation projects, such as the ongoing construction of a second runway for Naha airport, are commonplace on Okinawa. Such a court case should take from one to three months to run its course.

These legal and bureaucratic maneuvers are taking place against a backdrop of increasingly strident protests against U.S. bases on Okinawa, fueled in part by “professional” protestors from outside the prefecture as well as a tumultuous debate on collective self-defense in the Diet. In response, and in the face of falling poll numbers for the Abe Cabinet, Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga met with Governor Onaga to try to defuse the situation, and on August 4, 2015, Tokyo announced a one-month suspension of landfill-related work at Camp Schwab. This suspension expired, and work has since proceeded.

The Guam portion of this plan has suffered its own political setbacks and delays. In Guam’s case, the pressures have come from skeptics in the U.S. Congress. The Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC), reflecting the opinions and objections of its then-Chairman Carl Levin, Ranking Member John McCain, and Senator Jim Webb, placed many funding

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8 Unfortunately, local authorities in Okinawa have been unable to develop an alternative use for this extensive area. At the time of this writing, the houses sit derelict on an abandoned piece of land. Rather than providing a positive example of the benefit of the relocation plan, the West Futenma Housing Area is an eyesore.

9 The first modification will add a conveyor belt to move fill material for the land reclamation; the second reroutes a river around the construction.
restrictions on U.S. military construction on Guam.\textsuperscript{10} Most of the Senate restrictions centered on skepticism about the feasibility of the relocation plan and the seriousness of Japan’s commitment to it; they were lifted last year in the face of ample evidence that progress was being made on Okinawa.\textsuperscript{11} Marine units are scheduled to start leaving Okinawa for Guam in 2021, with the move completed by 2026. As they leave, the spaces they vacate on Okinawa will be repurposed for units moving from the southern part of the island.\textsuperscript{12}

Due to the Department of the Navy’s self-imposed cap on DPRI-related construction, relocation facilities in Hawaii will not be built until all facilities on Guam are complete. (This cap was not entirely arbitrary. It was based on Congress’s historical appropriations and guidance for military construction.) Therefore, under this plan, Marines from Okinawa will not relocate to Hawaii until after 2027, and moves to Hawaii will not be completed until 2031, at the earliest. Many of the Hawaii-bound units on Okinawa, some of them significant, such as Third Marine Division Headquarters, currently occupy key locations on land that cannot be either repurposed or returned until those units move.

Another major component of the current relocation plan involves the movement of about 2,500 Marines, known as Marine Rotational Force-Darwin, to the Northern Territory of Australia. This part of the plan was announced in 2011 during a U.S. presidential trip to Australia, as a component of the “pivot,” later “rebalance,” to Asia. In strategic terms, the relocation moves American combat power far from the flashpoints of East Asia, and off the primary American lines of communication across the Pacific.

In training terms, Australian ranges are large and suited for combined arms training, but are very expensive to use because of their remote location, and because of the environmental inspections required on all equipment brought in from outside Australia. The solution of pre-positioning major items of equipment, such as vehicles and artillery pieces, in order to mitigate the expense of environmental inspections, imposes its own set of costs and adds an enduring requirement to maintain the pre-positioned gear in Australia. Also, without organic amphibious lift, Marine Rotational Force-Darwin is effectively marooned in the Northern Territory, placing a further burden on Pacific Command planners, who must consider this added requirement alongside that of the Marines on Guam.

\textsuperscript{10} Senators Levin and Webb have since retired; Senator McCain is SASC’s current Chairman.

\textsuperscript{11} According to U.S. Marine Corps figures, between Japanese fiscal years 2009 and 2014, the Japanese government deposited $957.9 million in the U.S. Treasury for Japan’s part of construction on Guam. Due to SASC restrictions on spending, only $125.2 million has been obligated, to date. This leaves up to $832 million available in the U.S. Treasury for support of future, relocation-related projects on Guam.

\textsuperscript{12} The relocation of Marine Corps units within Okinawa has its own complicated plan. As units move off Okinawa to Guam and then Hawaii, the southern-based units will move northward to take their places. Marine Corps units will move from camps in southern Okinawa, such as Kinser and Lester, to the northern bases of Camp Schwab and Camp Hansen. There will also be a consolidation and partial handover of Camp Foster and other properties.
ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The political situation on Okinawa is deteriorating and is caustic to the U.S.-Japan Alliance. The tandem solutions offered by the Futenma Replacement Facility and Okinawa Consolidation Plan are well thought-out and offer the only realistic solutions to the challenges of alleviating an overbearing U.S. presence on Okinawa and providing security for U.S. and allied interests in the Asia-Pacific. In addition, with the exception of the Australia moves, the relocation of Marine forces from Okinawa will improve readiness by providing better training opportunities, with little penalty paid in terms of reaction time to potential crisis locations in East Asia.

However, implementation is glacially slow, which only feeds the resentment felt by Okinawans. The planned turnover dates for parcels of land on Okinawa are generally highly optimistic, “best-case” estimates. Delay in one element, whether on Okinawa, Guam, or Hawaii, will cause significant delays elsewhere. The political opposition to a continued major U.S. presence on Okinawa is gaining strength, and dramatic action is needed to turn the situation around.

Four things must be done, and quickly:

• First, the U.S. must “double-down” on its construction of relocation facilities. Construction on Hawaii must be conducted concurrently with that on Guam. A goal must be set, and achieved, to move all units scheduled for relocation from Okinawa no later than 2025, rather than the current date of 2031, and additional Department of Defense military construction funds must be allocated to these projects in the near term. The completion date for the relocation must be in the near enough future to encourage those Okinawans who favor the American presence. If the permanent facilities are not completed on this schedule, then the Department of Defense must find temporary facilities for those units in the interim. Unilateral decisions by the U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Navy must be avoided; instead, important matters must be taken to the Secretary of Defense-level to ensure that decisions take into account larger American interests.

• Second, the governments of Japan and Okinawa must develop some “quick wins” in land returns for the many Okinawans who favor a continued American presence on the island. This means finding a use for the West Futenma Housing Area that will make it an attractive example of the benefits of land returns. It also means, on the American side, accelerating some of the land returns from Camp Kinser in the vicinity of the Naha port, which is the centerpiece of plans for Okinawan economic rejuvenation.

• Third, joint, shared use of facilities on Okinawa must be deepened. JGSDF rotary wing aviation should be moved from Naha to the Futenma Replacement Facility at Camp Schwab to collocate with Marine aviation units. JGSDF units should be relocated to
Camp Hansen and Camp Schwab, where they can plan and exercise with U.S. Marine Corps staff and units. Japanese Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) F-15 aircraft currently deployed to Naha should be moved to the American base at Kadena, relieving pressure on the joint civil-military Naha base and increasing cooperation between the U.S. and JASDF in the key southern air space off Okinawa. At least three major military bases on Okinawa need to collocate Americans and Japanese. Not only will this collocation improve the ability of Japanese and American forces to be more effective for contingencies like the Senkakus, peacekeeping, and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief, but it will also potentially improve civil-military relations on the island.

Fourth, the U.S. Department of Defense, working with the Government of Australia, must examine the relocation of Marine Corps forces to Australia. As an alternative, the Department of Defense should consider a leaner training detachment and exercise options that are closer to potential crisis points in East Asia.