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We Need Both Hatoyama's Decision and Obama's Patience

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Alliance managers in both Japan and the United States are worried about "alliance drift" again. There are two causes for concern: the impasse over the relocation of the US' Futenma Air Station in Okinawa and US doubt about the liberal Hatoyama administration's commitment to the bilateral military alliance.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

Firstly, how are the two countries to reach agreement on a relocation plan for Futenma Air Station, which is surrounded by a densely populated residential area in Ginowan City in Okinawa? Initially the Japanese and US governments agreed to move the air station offshore to Camp Schwab in Nago City in 1996. After the original plan fell through due to opposition from the local governments in Okinawa, both the US and Japan agreed to implement the plan again as a part of the transformation of US forces in Japan in 2005. This plan was again held up when the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) beat the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which had ruled Japan for more than a half-century, in the summer 2009 general elections. During the campaign, the DPJ proposed revising the existing US-Japan agreement to move Futenma Air Station not to Camp Schwab but somewhere outside of Okinawa. Currently, Prime Minister Hatoyama has vowed to conclude a final agreement between the two governments on the Futenma relocation plan this coming May.

On January 24, the electorate in Nago City opted by a small margin – 1588 votes – for a new mayor who vows to refuse to host a new air station rather than the incumbent who was willing to accept the new air station. This is regarded as a boost for an alternative for a current agreed plan for relocation. However, Hatoyama's Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirano commented on the day after the election that no allowances would have to be made for the Nago election results. At present, nobody can confidently predict the Hatoyama administration's course of action in May.

Secondly, alliance managers suspect the DPJ leaders' commitment to the Japan-US alliance. Up to now, the inexperienced DPJ leaders in the administration have made a series of confusing and contradictory statements on the Okinawa base issue. As a result, many alliance managers in both countries have come to question the DPJ government's basic understanding of and support for the alliance. The current status of US-Japan relations had evoked in a considerable number of observers a sense of *déjà vu* that recalls a similar situation with the South Korean government under the left-leaning Roh Moo-hyun when anti-American sentiment was sparked by a fatal traffic accident in which a US military vehicle killed two school girls.

Since 1951, the Japan-US alliance has endured occasional turbulence such as the anti-US-Japan security treaty movement in the '50s and early '60s and Japan-US trade friction in the '80s and early '90s. In the past, however, LDP political leaders continued to show strong support and commitment to the bilateral alliance, while the current DPJ leaders' commitment to the alliance has not yet been tested. As a matter of fact, the LDP was established by merging two conservative parties in order to maintain Japan's participation in the Western liberal camp and the alliance with the US in opposition to the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) and the Japan Communist Party (JCP), which were sympathetic to the Communist camp. The current DPJ government is in coalition with the Social Democratic Party of Japan (formerly the JSP), and the DPJ includes many left-leaning members who used to belong to the JSP. In addition, the DPJ has vowed not to rely on government bureaucrats who have managed day-to-day alliance issues with their US counterparts.

Thus, it is no wonder that alliance managers on both sides worry about the current DPJ leadership regarding the alliance. Meanwhile, there are a few positive aspects to the DPJ's constituency for the bilateral alliance.


First of all, there is no strong or deep-rooted anti-Americanism in Japan. This is a major difference from the Roh Moo-hyun government in South Korea or the anti-Japan-US alliance movement in the '50s and '60s in Japan. In addition, Japanese voters are realistic enough to understand the necessity of alliance with the United States in view of the volatile international situation surrounding Japan, with an aggressive North Korea and the uncertain path of a rising China.

According to a joint Yomiuri-Gallup poll conducted in November 2009, 75% of Japanese respondents think the Japan-US alliance contributes to stability in the Asia-Pacific region while 70% of Americans think the same. In this regard, there is little perception gap between Japanese and Americans. The small margin of victory in the Nago City mayoral election showed that half of the voters would accept an air station. This suggests relatively less anti-American sentiment than in the rest of Okinawa.

In fact, support for the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which does not favor the Japan-US alliance, has been dramatically shrinking. In the last general

election in 2009, the SDP won only 7 seats out of a total of 480 seats in the Lower House of the Diet. A number of Japanese who voted for the DPJ rather than the SDP are frustrated with this instance of “the tail wagging the dog”.

In light of such facts, it would be wise for the Obama administration to step back from complicated base issues by showing “strategic patience”. However, Prime Minister Hatoyama must not avoid making a decision on the base issue in May because his prime task is restoring mutual trust at both the government level and the summit level. In order to maintain mutual trust between Japan and the US, PM Hatoyama should approve the existing relocation plan unless a mutual agreeable alternative is presented in May.

Even if PM Hatoyama approves the existing Futenma relocation plan, there would be more obstacles ahead for actual implementation of the plan. The Okinawa governor has a veto over the construction of any sea-based runways. As Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirano hinted in his controversial comment, the Hatoyama government eventually may have to resort to legal measures that would enable coercive execution overriding a local veto. This is a far more risky decision since it could stimulate anti-base sentiment not only in Okinawa but across Japan as well. This is the open secret explaining why the efforts of even pro-alliance LDP governments floundered over the past 13 years. However, if mutual trust were created between the leaders of both sides, it would not be impossible to find solutions to overcome future troubles as well as the current impasse without damaging the alliance itself. On the contrary, if PM Hatoyama disappoints President Obama, the US side could become unwilling to tackle those complicated and time-consuming tasks. The complex and difficult management of bases in Okinawa should not be a litmus test for support of the general Japan-US alliance. At the same time, PM Hatoyama is responsible for maintaining trust between Japan and the US by giving a clear answer to his counterpart. 

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