

## Will regional tensions shift the deadlock on Okinawa's military bases?

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe may be close to achieving one long-pursued goal, the relocation of the controversial Futenma airbase in Okinawa. This has been a perpetual sore in the US-Japan alliance. But recent international trends may be reshaping Okinawa's base politics and pushing the two allies closer to carrying out the Futenma relocation.



The [Futenma controversy](#) <sup>[1]</sup> was triggered in 1995, after widespread protests erupted in Okinawa following the rape of a 12-year-old girl by US military personnel. The US and Japanese governments subsequently reached an agreement in 1996 to close Futenma following the construction of a replacement facility. Some Okinawans were willing to accept this relocation under certain conditions, but others viewed the arrangement as a perpetuation of America's excessive military presence in Okinawa.

The two national governments were content to live with the status quo, especially in the face of other more pressing issues, until change could be delivered on their terms. It was only in 2006 that they finally agreed on a clear plan for base realignment — including Futenma's relocation elsewhere in Okinawa (to Henoko) — as part of a broader restructuring of the alliance. But this plan was not well received by those Okinawans who remained committed to the relocation of Futenma outside the prefecture.

The resulting standoff was complicated further when the Democratic Party of Japan led by Yukio Hatoyama came to power in 2009–10. Hatoyama promised to review the 2006 agreement and have Futenma moved outside Okinawa (and perhaps even outside Japan). But the US

strongly opposed this and US pressure on Hatoyama forced him to renege on his promise before resigning.

When the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) returned to power in December 2012, the Japanese government moved to resolve the Futenma impasse. In December 2013, Abe obtained the approval of Okinawan Governor Hirokazu Nakaima to begin landfill work at Henoko. But in November 2014, Nakaima lost the Okinawan gubernatorial election to Takeshi Onaga, a former LDP member who opposes the Henoko relocation plan.

Since then, the prefectural and national governments have been at loggerheads. In March 2015, Onaga ordered that surveys on the new site be suspended on environmental grounds, only to be overruled by the national government. Then in July, the Okinawa Prefectural Assembly voted to restrict the transport of sand to Henoko in order to block the ongoing landfill work. In early August, Onaga announced that he would nullify Nakaima's land reclamation approval. In response, the Abe administration has suspended offshore preparatory work at Henoko until September to allow for further talks.

The Futenma dispute has now persisted for so long that the international environment has been dramatically transformed since the crisis of 1995. The rise of China has come to dominate debates about the region's future. In particular, China has begun to contest the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands more vigorously. This shift has strongly reaffirmed Okinawa's strategic importance.

Okinawa's significance lies in its geography. It is an obvious location for a rapid deployment of forces in response to clashes around the disputed islands. This is reflected in [recent changes in US](#) <sup>[2]</sup> and Japanese strategic thinking. Japanese strategic doctrine, for example, now highlights the need to be able to respond rapidly to 'grey zone', or low-level, disputes in the area.

Okinawa, then, is firmly in the minds of strategic thinkers. The deployment of the MV-22 Osprey vertical take-off and landing aircraft to Okinawa improves response capabilities. Recent reports also suggest that plans are well underway for further, more substantial deployments of Japanese forces to Okinawa. In the newly-released [Guidelines for US–Japan Defense Cooperation](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, the US and Japan 'reaffirmed' that the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands are 'within the scope' of the security treaty. At the same time, during Abe's US trip in late April the two governments confirmed their 'unwavering commitment' to the Henoko plan.

This indicates that although Onaga has warned that Futenma's relocation will be impossible without Okinawan consent, regional insecurity is actually making Japan and the US more willing to endure local protests: the political costs of creating further discontent in Okinawa are now outweighed by the consequences of failing to stand up to China.

Abe may now believe that, on the Futenma issue at least, he is close to success. That such an outcome will likely favour Abe's security agenda is in no small part thanks to increasing regional tensions and China's growing assertiveness.

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[1] Futenma controversy:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/04/30/why-us-military-bases-divide-okinawa-and-main-land-japan/>

[2] recent changes in US:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/05/02/abe-takes-a-step-towards-reconciliation-in-us-visit/>

[3] Guidelines for US–Japan Defense Cooperation:

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