

Okinawan Election With US Base Plan in the Balance

Eric Johnston

Okinawan Election With US Base Plan in the Balance

By Eric Johnston

Eric Johnston's two-part article examines the issues in Okinawa's gubernatorial election and the implications for the continuing US-Okinawa conflict over the transfer of the Futenma Air Base to Henoko in northern Okinawa where a strong anti-base movement has long thwarted base relocation efforts by the US and Japan.

I Okinawa's Gubernatorial Election and the US Base Relocation



The two main contenders in the Nov. 19 Okinawa gubernatorial election -- Nakaima Hirokazu (above) and Itokazu Keiko -- speak to supporters as the campaign kicked off on Nov. 2.



OSAKA -- Last November, during a visit to Kyoto for talks with then Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, U.S. President George W. Bush was asked by reporters about the agreement the two countries had just signed to realign the U.S. bases in Japan.

Bush responded by looking directly at Koizumi and saying that Japan had promised to carry out the realignment, and that the United States expected Japan to keep its promise.

However, it is not Koizumi but his successor, Abe Shinzo, who faces the unenviable task of actually carrying out the agreement. And the deal's immediate fate rests on the outcome of the Nov. 19 Okinawa gubernatorial election.

The centerpiece of the realignment plan, and the most contentious issue in the election, is the relocation of the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Ginowan in central Okinawa Island to a new airstrip to be built in Camp Schwab in the Henoko district of Nago in the north by 2014.

In exchange for construction of new runways by extending Camp Schwab into the nearby sea, the U.S. has agreed to pare down the marine presence in Okinawa by 7,000 to 8,000 plus dependents. This deployment, also expected by 2014, will be to Guam.

The Futenma relocation plan, first drawn up in 1996, has stalled due to intense local opposition, and not only from the antibase movement.



The U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in central Okinawa surrounded by densely populated Ginowan.

Okinawa's leaders, including departing Gov. Inamine Keiichi, who initially indicated they might be flexible on accepting a new airfield to replace Futenma, have become angry by what they say is Tokyo's arrogant and dismissive attitude toward their conditions for hosting the

new facility.

The upshot is that none of the three candidates running for the November election to succeed Inamine supports the central government's relocation plan.

Former Okinawa Electric Power Co. Chairman Nakaima Hirokazu, who is backed by the ruling coalition of the Liberal Democratic Party and New Komeito and many of the larger Okinawan businesses, has indicated he would accept a new U.S. military facility inside the prefecture if certain changes to the current plan are made. However, he has so far refused to offer details on the kind of changes he wants.

In fact, Nakaima has spent his campaign playing down Futenma and playing up economic development for Okinawa, where the unemployment rate is 7.6 percent -- the highest of all 47 prefectures. Nakaima is betting that a majority of Okinawa voters will put the economy before their opposition to the bases.

"The most important issue is how to assist Okinawan industry. My goal is to create a prefecture with no unemployment. The second most important (goal) is improving social welfare services, while the base issue is the third-most important," he said at a rally in Naha on Nov. 2.

Reviving the local economy will require massive financial assistance from the central government, and Nakaima has enlisted the support of many of his former colleagues at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry to show local voters that his connections there remain strong.

Last week, Nakaima told voters that the Henoko facility will be a giant public works project that will bring money and jobs to Okinawan businesses, especially those involved in construction.

There are an estimated 4,000 construction companies in Okinawa, including Kokuba-gumi, the largest and most politically connected, and with which both Nakaima and Inamine have close relations. Kokuba is expected to receive a large part of any contract to build the new runways at Camp Schwab.



Kokuba Construction

Antibase candidate Itokazu Keiko, a former member of the Upper House who enjoys opposition party support, says that if she is elected, she will demand the Henoko plan be scrapped and that the Futenma base be relocated outside Okinawa.

"This election is the perfect opportunity to tell both the governments of Japan and the United States that we don't need a new base. But what is most important is that we look to the future and ask ourselves how we can ensure a peaceful, base-free Okinawa 100 years from now," Itokazu told supporters in early November.

Candidate Yara Chosuke, who heads the Ryukyu Independence Party, is also running on an antibase platform. But his calls for Okinawa to secede from Japan has made him a considerable long shot.

Nakaima's campaign, from the beginning, has had the unified support of the ruling coalition of the Liberal Democratic Party and New Komeito, and Okinawa's business and political leaders. In contrast, Itokazu's selection came only after intense divisions within the antibase movement were resolved and wrangling between opposition parties, both in Okinawa and in Tokyo, over her support was settled.

The sharpest differences were between hardcore antibase activists who do not care if a governor provokes anger in Tokyo, and those who oppose the bases but want a governor who can deal with Tokyo diplomatically.

Antibase activists feared a repeat of the mayoral election in Nago in January, in which the antibase votes were split between two candidates, and conservative candidate Shimabukuro Yoshikazu won. During his campaign, Shimabukuro barely mentioned Henoko and then promptly indicated he would support the central government plans after he was elected.

This time, the antibase activists and the opposition parties have been able to settle on one candidate. Itokazu is someone with charisma and political savvy to whom experts give high marks.

"Itokazu has shown a great ability to communicate with voters. The fact that she's a woman and has her own Tokyo connections is a plus. And her questions about whether voters believe all of Okinawa, as opposed to a few Okinawan businesses, will benefit from a Nakaima governorship have struck a chord," said Robert Eldridge, an associate professor at the Osaka School of International Public Policy and a leading U.S. expert on Okinawan politics.

Growing numbers of small businesses feel only a few big firms like Kokuba, or Nakaima's old company, Okinawa Electric Power Co., stand to benefit with him as governor."

With election day nearing, concern is growing in Tokyo that Itokazu may win and Abe's government is doing what it can to bolster Nakaima's chances.

In early November, Abe instructed the Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries Ministry to work toward increasing the annual domestic production of bioethanol to 6 million kiloliters,

or 10 percent of Japan's annual gasoline consumption. Okinawa is Japan's center for bioethanol production from sugar cane. Nakaima has repeatedly promised economic benefits to Okinawa through large-scale bioethanol production.

Tokyo has also made it clear that future economic assistance depends on a governor who agrees to the Futenma relocation.

"I hope that, rather than have a situation where the economic revitalization of Okinawa is stalled, it can progress realistically. I hope to be able to speak frankly with whoever is elected," Takaichi Sanae, minister in charge of Okinawa, told reporters in Tokyo last week, indicating she might be willing to discuss changes to the Henoko plan.

But Defense Agency chief Kyuma Fumio, whose agency drew up the plan, said on Nov. 2 that no matter who wins the election, the Henoko plan will be difficult to accomplish.

Okinawa media and antibase activists have said that if Itokazu wins, the Defense Agency may push for a legal measure to appropriate the land for the new airstrip without first getting the Okinawa governor's approval.

"The Abe administration is now finding out that central government leaders can make all of the promises to the U.S. about Okinawa they want, but that actually carrying them out is another story," Eldridge noted.

II Okinawa Base Deal in Limbo: Washington calls Futenma move a done deal but officials aren't so confident

In early 2005, senior U.S. officials had become fed up with Okinawa.



A protester on May 22 points to the spot on an aerial photo of Henoko, northern Okinawa, where two runways will be built for the relocation of the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma.

Then U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was furious at Okinawa and central government officials for not making progress in relocating the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station at Futenma to northern Okinawa Island, for which a plan had been first formulated in 1996.

Rumsfeld's anger surfaced in a November 2003 meeting with Okinawa Gov. Inamine Keiichi. After listening to the governor talk about the problems caused by having U.S. forces in Okinawa, Rumsfeld said they won't be stationed where they're not wanted.

In January 2005, with Japanese media reporting the Futenma relocation plan was all but dead due to local opposition, Rumsfeld reportedly made the comment again during a Pentagon meeting on plans to realign U.S. forces worldwide.

But by last November, the stalemate had been broken, and President Bush and then Prime Minister Koizumi met to sign a broad realignment plan for U.S. forces in Japan. The plan included the relocation of Futenma to a base with two runways to be built in a V-shaped

pattern straddling, and extending into the water beyond, the Henoko peninsula at Camp Schwab, farther north on the island, by 2014.

However, U.S. State Department officials and military brass who have dealt with Okinawa said that while Rumsfeld and other Bush administration officials heralded the agreement, it will be the future leaders in Okinawa -- not the current lawmakers in Tokyo and Washington -- whose approval is needed for the Henoko plan to work.

Without Okinawan support, there is less likelihood that the new base will be built, and this could have a domino effect on the rest of the realignment plan for Japan.

Contingent upon the Futenma move to Schwab is the 2014 paring down of the U.S. Marine presence in Okinawa by 8,000 service members and their dependents, who numbered around 9,000 at the time the pact was reached. They will be relocated to Guam once the new base is operating. After the move, six other facilities will be returned to Okinawa.

And so U.S. officials are watching the Nov. 19 gubernatorial election closely. Officially, the Bush administration says the deal on relocating Futenma is done and it is now up to Japan to honor the particulars -- no matter who the governor of Okinawa is.

Unofficially there are two lines of thought among U.S. officials.

"One school of thought says an antibase governor will make life difficult for the U.S. military on Okinawa and cause an indefinite delay in relocating to Henoko, which will create further tensions with the local community," a U.S. State Department official who deals with Japan said on condition of anonymity.

Some officials fear that if Itokazu, the main antibase candidate, is elected, the Futenma

relocation plan will once again be put on hold and the entire base realignment plan will be in jeopardy.

"The other school of thought says it doesn't matter if Henoko is ever realized because the U.S. can continue to use Futenma," the State Department official said.

That indifference comes from a growing resignation in Washington that even if Okinawa were to elect a probase governor who endorses the Henoko plan as is -- and no candidate is 100 percent behind the plan -- it would still be at least eight years before U.S. aircraft would land at Henoko.

"In the meantime, there would surely be continued demonstrations against Henoko and renewed anger toward the U.S. military presence in general, which would place the security relationship between the U.S. and Japan in further trouble," said Robert Eldridge of Osaka University's School of International Public Policy. Eldridge, who has written extensively on the Okinawa base issue, opposes the Schwab plan, citing logistics and financial problems.

Eldridge thinks the Okinawa governor should be invited to the negotiating table on equal terms with central government and U.S. officials to work out a solution.

Brad Glosserman of Honolulu-based Pacific Forum, a think tank that gives policy advice on Asia to the U.S. government, said a three-way meeting is unlikely. Lower-level U.S. officials might be interested in talking to Okinawa, but people at the highest level do not want to get involved in local issues.

"America's leaders have decided Okinawan politics are for the Japanese to worry about, not America. After having been burned in their previous dealings with (former Okinawa Governor) Ota Masahide, who opposed the

bases, the U.S. is only going to talk to Tokyo," Glosserman said.

Sheila Smith, a fellow at Honolulu's East-West Center, said if there were talks, Tokyo would have to take the lead on any dialogue between Washington and Okinawa, but she added it is too late to scrap the Henoko plan.

"If the Japanese government asked the U.S. to join in a conversation with local officials in Okinawa, then the U.S. would probably do so," Smith said. "But the U.S. government has been negotiating the realignment plan for several years, and I doubt that it would be prepared to start over again at this point."

Security analysts on both sides of the Pacific are not just watching the Okinawa election. Most expect U.S. policy on Japan will change with the Democratic Party's victory in this week's U.S. midterm elections.

Their immediate reaction has been that the realignment of U.S. forces in Japan will likely become less of a priority.

"Given the full agenda waiting for the Democratic leadership in Washington, I'm not sure the Futenma base (and) realignment issue will be given much attention. It's more likely the new congressional leadership will focus on the Korean Peninsula and will attempt to influence the Bush administration's handling of North Korea," Smith said.

Eric Johnston is an Osaka-based staff writer for the Japan Times. He can be reached at japantimes-osa@sannet.ne.jp

This two part article on the Okinawan elections and the US bases appeared in The Japan Times on November 9 and 10, 2006. A slightly abbreviated version of the series was posted at Japan Focus on November 10, 2006.