

US Marines Futenma Replacement Facility in Okinawa Delayed - For How Long?

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Futenma Marine Corps Air Station in Futenma City

Abstract

New evidence from the Japanese government indicates that long-delayed plans to build a new Marine base at Okinawa's Henoko will be further delayed with best prospects for completion of the project now pushed back to approximately 2032, or fifteen years. The cause of the delay, which may in fact preclude completion of the costly project permanently, is the discovery of soil in the bay of the consistency of mayonnaise, requiring implanting of 77,000 sand pillars at great depth prior to land filling. Together with the robust anti-base movement, the prospects for completion of the Henoko base continue to fade.

On 23 December, 2019, the Okinawa press

reported that the Japanese Government had announced a new time schedule for the construction of the US Marine Corps superbase at Henoko, in the northern part of Okinawa Island. This base is supposed to be the new home for the 1st Marine Air Wing, now dangerously housed at Futenma Air Station smack in the middle of Ginowan City, farther to the south. The Okinawan people's overwhelming opposition to this project, and the refusal of both the US and Japanese governments to heed that opposition, has dominated Okinawan politics for the past 24 years. For the Japanese Government officials, who have been declaring year after year that nothing on earth could stand in the way of this juggernaut construction project, admitting that there would be yet another delay must have been mortifying.

The way the delay was reported in the newspaper I read, the Ryukyu Shimpo, reflected this discomfort. The article began by saying that the five years projected for landfill had been doubled to ten years. Then it went on to explain that the US and Japanese governments had agreed in 2013 that reclamation would take five years and building construction three more, so that the target date - the date the new facility would be handed over to the Marines - was estimated at 2022. That makes sense: $2013+5+3=2021$. It's likely that after the construction was completed, testing and formalities would take another year before the airstrip could be put to use. But now they are saying that because of the unanticipated discovery that part of the sea bottom beneath the reclamation site is the consistency of mayonnaise and that firming up

that foundation will require implanting 77,000 sand pillars before land filling in those areas can begin, the whole land filling operation can be expected to take ten years. As a result, the target date has been postponed, from 2022 to “sometime in the ‘30s.” But here the math doesn’t work. “Sometime in the ‘30s” presumably means around 2032. That is a ten-year postponement. It’s not the original five years becoming ten; it’s that five years plus ten. From the original starting line of 2013, this would become a twenty-year project. If completed at that time. It was left to the readers to make the simple calculations that would yield these embarrassing numbers.

The next day I took the charter bus from Naha to Henoko to join the sit-in that seeks to block the trucks hauling the dirt with which to reclaim part of the bay there.

Standing just up the hill from the sit-in there was (as usual) an observer with the words “Prime Minister’s Office” printed on the back of his jacket. I struck up a conversation with him. “I read that the projected construction time has been extended.” “Oh yes”, he said, “The 5 years is now 10 years.” “No, no, the target date has been moved back 10 years. Five years plus 10 years makes 15 years. After some confusion and fruitless fiddling with his smart phone, he acknowledged that I must be right.

Then I asked him if this new construction schedule was calculated taking the protest movement into account. It took him some time to understand the question, but when he did he said that the postponement was made necessary because it was discovered that the sea bottom beneath the site is the consistency of mayonnaise, and whether or not the protest continues it will take that much time to firm it up. I asked, “Don’t you think that whether the protest continues or not will make a difference in how much time it takes?” The answer he gave can be translated, “That’s true too.”

This person dispatched by the Prime Minister’s

Office to observe the protest movement in Okinawa, presumably one of their Okinawa Experts, apparently knew only what he read in the papers.

A couple of days later the Government’s story changed again. The newspaper headline stated that construction would take 12 years “from the date of the construction permit issued by the Prefectural Governor”. People who read just the headline will assume that it refers to the permit given by former Governor Nakaima in 2013, after almost four years posing as an opponent of the base. But you need to read the fine print. With the discovery of the unstable sea bottom, the construction project for which Nakaima gave his permit became impossible. The Defense Bureau needs to come up with a different plan, which will require a different permit. The present Governor, Tamaki Denny, was elected on an anti-base ticket and has sworn he will never grant this new permit. So it is entirely unclear when the Marines will get their superbase at Henoko – if in fact they ever do.

The AP version of this story, which was dated December 25 and appeared in the New York Times and other papers, seems to share the same reluctance to face the full boondoggle reality of this project. The headline announces that both the time and the cost of the relocation of Futenma Base have “doubled”. The cost was originally estimated at 350 billion yen (\$3.2 billion); now that figure is 930 billion yen (\$8.5 billion). The first line of the article says it’s going to take “more than twice” the time. Well, OK, “three times as much” is definitely “more than” twice as much, but that’s a strange way to put it. Then this is followed by the comment that the project “has already been delayed by more than 20 years because of local opposition and other reasons.”

That is accurate. But if so, where do these 5 year and 10 year figures come from? The Japanese Government keeps shortening the

project's alleged time span by moving the starting line. The plan to move the Marines' 1st Air Wing from Futenma Base to a new facility at Henoko was first announced in 1996. That was opposed by the overwhelming majority of the Okinawan people from the word go, and a campaign of non-violent civil disobedience was begun to prevent it from happening.



Part of the kayak flotilla challenging the base construction since 2016

This included lawsuits, sit-ins, vigils, the election of an anti-base Governor, demanding an accurate environmental assessment, and forming a flotilla of sea-kayaks directly to interfere with the Defense Agency's attempts to survey the sea bottom on the site to be reclaimed for the new airstrip, a flotilla that continues today. It took the Defense Agency until 2013 to come up with a construction plan. As I mentioned above, they announced then that they would have the facility ready by 2022. That already means 26 years after the plan was first proposed. Now they're talking 2032, which means 36 years from the original announcement. But that assumes that the Governor issues the new permit. If he doesn't - and he has repeatedly said he won't - that means more delays. And then there's Murphy's Law ("If there is something that can go wrong, it will."), which has been very much in evidence

at Henoko up to now, and will surely continue to operate. Concerning Murphy's Law, it's important to remember that the Okinawa Defense Bureau first learned about the unstable sea bottom in 2014 through their soil testing. Probably because they didn't know what to do about it, they just kept the information to themselves and continued work at the areas where the bottom is firm. It's difficult to confirm, but it seems they kept this information from the US military as well. It was only after an independent local engineer obtained copies of their soil testing reports through Japan's Freedom of Information Act that the information was made public and they began talking about possible remedies. It's unexpected things like this that builders call Murphy's Law, and there's every likelihood that the mayonnaise sea bottom will not be the last such obstacle to overcome on this job. So the estimate we hear from people who know the construction business, that this project is not likely to be completed before 2045 - just under half a century after it was announced - seems realistic.

(There's another way of calculating this, popular now in Okinawa. Actual dumping of dirt and rocks into the sea to build a foundation for the new airstrip began just a year ago. On every working day since then, convoys of hundreds of dump trucks have entered the construction site, delayed - and occasionally turned back - by the protesting sit-in demonstrators. At the same time several cargo ships have been bringing dirt from the other side of the island, where they are tearing down a mountain to turn part of the Henoko sea into land. They too have been delayed by the protesters. At the end of one year of this labor, made possible by hundreds of security officers and riot police, it was announced that the government had been able to dump into the sea off Henoko 1% (one per-cent) of the total volume of landfill required for the base. At that rate, landfill will be completed in 100 years, and that if a new landfill permit can be secured

and the mayonnaise problem solved. To make their deadline, they will need to up the pace.)

The Henoko project has been promoted by the Japanese Government as “the only solution”, that is, the only (or sometimes they say “the quickest”) way to rid Okinawa of the dangerous Futenma Airbase. It is neither. Japan’s absolute insistence that this base must be built in Ryukyuan Okinawa rather than Yamato Japan is what the Okinawans call structural discrimination. Without including that factor, the Government’s pushing on with this boondoggle year after year against Okinawa’s adamant opposition simply cannot be explained. From a business point of view, the thing makes no sense. How is it possible, one may ask, to say that from the US side, when Japan is paying for it? To answer that, it’s useful to remember the wise Japanese saying, “Nothing is more expensive than something

offered you for free.” Aside from ethical considerations, any cost-benefit analysis would lead to the obvious conclusion that whatever it is that this base is alleged to be useful for could be achieved far sooner, at far less cost, and at the price of far less political turmoil, by selecting a site inside mainland Japan. Yes, to make this choice would be embarrassing for the Japanese Government, which remains committed to preventing the construction of any new base in the main islands. The question for the US Department of Defense is, to what length is it willing to go in supporting this boondoggle in order to protect the Japanese Government from an embarrassment of their own making?

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