

U.S. Military Base in Japan: Source of Friction and Mistrust?

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[Tokyo](#) – Japan and the U.S are dead-locked over the future of a key American military base. The issue has huge domestic and foreign policy implications for one of Washington’s closest allies.

There’s something distinctly troubling about the U.S- Japan relationship these days. In any case the bi-lateral arrangement is in deep flux. Japan’s Prime Minister Yukio Hatayama may not be very popular in Washington. It appears he’s just not their man. Hatayama promised during his election campaign to “re-locate” one of the largest Pacific U.S marine-air bases , which is currently located on the island of Okinawa to an alternative site, preferably as far as Hatayama’s supporters are concerned out of Japan. If he is successful this would reconfigure America’s naval strength and air power in a not insignificant way. With the military rise of China and its own naval fleet challenging U.S dominance in the Strait of Taiwan and the “Yellow Sea” and elsewhere in the far-east, Washington is not keen on leaving the Nippon Islands soon. One of the proposed sites for the re-location is the U.S island of Guam.

Should they stay or should they go? The Japanese want to know

Japan is currently re-valuating its military ties to the U.S. As part of the process, the presence of the base has been a constant source of friction between Tokyo and its closest military ally. Crime and lawlessness have only fueled more local resentment towards the American military and naval presence. \

The issue has this month come to head and created a domestic political crisis for the governing Social Democratic party. As a symbolic historical backdrop to this dispute, the 50 year old Japanese-American military-nuclear and strategic partnership hangs in the balance. Without a doubt Beijing is watching very closely how this diplomatic imbroglio pans out. On the domestic Japanese front, members of the coalition government have threatened to withdraw their support and potentially bring down the government if a resolution to the issue is not found. An end of May deadline hovers over the consultations between Japan and the U.S over the issue.

Is the U.S pressuring Tokyo to remain a supine and faithful ally?

The U.S. said it conducting apparently “closed doors” meetings with their Japanese counterparts in efforts to resolve the very thorny matter before the end of this month. There have been, so far, working-level discussions yesterday at Japan’s Defense Ministry and supports a “politically sustainable” solution to the dispute.

“As always we value our alliance with Japan. We understand that this alliance provides both benefit to the American people and to the Japanese people,” U.S. State Department spokesman Philip Crowley told reporters in Washington yesterday.

“It also levies a burden on the American people and the Japanese people, so we do recognize this; it’s one of the reasons why we’ve been involved in an intensive and lengthy process to evaluate the best way to maintain operations that are important and viable.”

Perhaps part of the talks is the other prickly point: Who will pay for this massive move elsewhere of the U.S base? It seems Washington expects its ally to maintain its troop on Japanese soil or as Axel Berkovsky wrote earlier this year in the Asian Times (“Okinawa call to shape new U.S.-Japan era, Asia Times Online, 02/06, 10):

“The longer he waits to make the “right” call — which, as far as Washington is concerned, would be to stick to the existing agreement.”

It remains unclear if Tokyo will remain welcoming to the American base for much longer, due to domestic considerations. Nevertheless, Japan is feeling the heat to stay the course and maintain the Okinawa base as where and as it is.

Hitting Japan where it hurts: Its car export to the U.S.

Enter the possible backlash in America recently, against Japan’s largest car-maker Toyota. The U.S Congress has lambasted this “crown jewel” of Nippon industry (and humiliated its CEO during harsh hearings), by castigating the auto-maker for being nearly criminally negligent. And for delays, in reporting faulty parts which caused accidents in the U.S.

Massive recalls of some of the manufacturer’s flag-ship models and million dollar fines against the company were enacted. There is some speculation, (perhaps undue) that the on-going tiff over the base be linked to the “Japan bashing” campaign on Capital Hill. The UFPPC’s Joe Thompson said he “can’t help seeing a link between Toyota’s worsening recall problem and the defiant Japanese stance in Okinawa.” (Could Japan’s balking at Okinawa agreement be related to the Toyota recall? www.ufppc.org) If this is the case, then the bi-lateral ties between the two strategic partners may sour even more in the days and weeks to come.

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