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U.S., Japan Postpone Plan to Shut Marine Base

By NATHAN HODGE

WASHINGTON—The U.S. and Japan agreed on Tuesday to postpone plans to close a U.S. Marine Corps base on the Japanese island of Okinawa, as budget concerns in the U.S. and Tokyo's inability to find a new location amid local opposition delayed a key element of a broader plan to reorganize U.S. troops in East Asia.

The two governments said they still intend to shut down Marine Corps Air Station Futenma and move the troops and aircraft to sites on Guam and elsewhere on Okinawa, but would miss the 2014 deadline.

"We shall strive for the earliest possible relocation," Japanese Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa said after meeting with his U.S. counterpart, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, as well as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Japanese Foreign Minister Takeaki Matsumoto.

The Futenma base, located in a densely populated part of southern Okinawa, has for years been a sore point between Tokyo and Washington. Okinawans complain that the Marine base is noisy and the troops rowdy—even, at times, to the point of criminality.

The Democratic Party of Japan pledged to relocate the base outside of Okinawa before sweeping to power in 2009 but it was unable to find a new location acceptable to both the U.S. and local residents in other parts of Japan.

Former prime minister Yukio Hatoyama resigned over his flip flop on the issue last June, and his successor, Naoto Kan, has made little progress since due to stubborn local opposition to an existing plan to build a new facility in another part of Okinawa.

Meanwhile, negotiations aimed at finding a solution have lost momentum somewhat as Tokyo focused its energy on dealing with nuclear emergencies and reconstruction after an earthquake and tsunami on March 11. Keeping troops at the Futenma base has been considered the worst option for the local residents, and for the officials of the two governments.

In 2006, the U.S. and Japan had agreed to relocate 8,000 Okinawa-based Marines to the U.S. territory of Guam and to close Futenma. The closure, however, hinges on building a new facility in northern Okinawa, a base with V-shaped runways that would be built on landfill and house some of the 10,300 Marines that would remain based on the island.

Construction hasn't started on the new site. It isn't clear when it will be completed.

The Okinawa moves would be part of a larger cost-cutting realignment of U.S. forces in the Pacific, including a consolidation of bases in South Korea and elsewhere in Japan. At the same time, both U.S. and Japanese officials see continued military ties as essential in the face of provocations by nuclear-armed North Korea and concerns about China's rising military power.

"Uncertainties in the regional security environment have been increasing," Mr. Matsumoto said.

Budget difficulties are compounding the already large logistical and political issues delaying the base realignment on Okinawa. Japan, still reeling from the aftereffects of its March 11 earthquake and tsunami, faces an enormous reconstruction bill. And U.S. lawmakers have raised questions about the cost and the feasibility of relocating the Marines.

Last month, Democratic Sens. Carl Levin of Michigan and Jim Webb of Virginia and Republican John McCain of Arizona called for a rethink of the current plans, saying they were "unrealistic, unworkable, and unaffordable."

The lawmakers forwarded an alternative: Shifting Marines aircraft from Futenma to Kadena Air Force Base, another U.S. installation on Okinawa, and moving some Air Force assets from Kadena to other locations in the Pacific. The senators argued their approach would be more cost-effective, while reducing the overall U.S. footprint on Okinawa.

The Senate Armed Services Committee recently endorsed their plan. After Tuesday's meetings, Sen. Webb called the results "predictable." He added: "The reality of extensive delay in completing the Futenma Replacement Facility as it is now proposed underscores the importance of resolving U.S. basing realignments in a more realistic manner for the good of our alliance and for our strategic posture in East Asia."

On Tuesday, Mr. Gates acknowledged lawmakers' concerns. "Secretary Clinton and I both informed our colleagues this morning that the letter from Sens. Webb and Levin about the realignment is really a manifestation of growing congressional impatience with the lack of progress," he said. "We both reaffirmed the U.S. government's commitment to the 2006 realignment plan, but at the same time, emphasized the importance of concrete progress over the course of the next year."

In addition to discussion of basing issues, the two countries touched on other security issues. Mr. Kitazawa said the two sides had discussed creation of a "logistics hub" for humanitarian aid and disaster relief, as well as collaboration on robotic systems and unmanned aircraft.

Drones and robots were an important component of the response to the earthquake and tsunami and the subsequent nuclear disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, with the U.S. military deploying pilotless aircraft to perform disaster assessment.

—Yuka Hayashi contributed to this article.

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