

## Analysis: Reversal on Futenma promise could have political cost for Hatoyama

By David Allen

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GINOWAN, Okinawa — Yukio Hatoyama's future as Japan's prime minister could be cut short after he admitted Tuesday that his campaign promise to move all U.S. Marine Corps air operations off Okinawa was ill conceived.

Political analysts say Hatoyama's inability to "relieve the burden of Okinawa," which hosts the bulk of the U.S. military in the country, makes him appear weak and could lead to his resignation.

He has yet to announce which of several alternatives he will recommend for shifting Marine air operations on Okinawa once Marine Corps Air Station Futenma is closed. But there have been calls for his resignation, some from his own party, if he fails to produce a favorable plan.

He could be deemed a hindrance by his party if his diminished political standing threatens the outcome of this summer's Upper House elections. The next election for the Lower House, which selects the prime minister, won't be held until 2013.

Hatoyama's approval rating has tanked from 70 percent in September to 20 percent today, and his ruling coalition is in danger of crumbling less than a year after it broke the almost uninterrupted 50-year rule of the Liberal Democratic Party.

"He's inexperienced and made blunders in handling the Futenma issue," said

John Feffer, a foreign policy expert with the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington. "He has lodged himself between the rock of Japanese opinion and the hard place of Pentagon pressure."

When Hatoyama met Tuesday with Okinawans, he echoed what U.S. military and diplomatic officials have been saying since he announced last fall that he would reexamine a 2006 pact on the realignment of U.S. forces in Japan: Keeping Marines on Okinawa is necessary to ensure the region's stability.

All agree that Futenma poses dangers to the urban area surrounding the base, and moving the Marine air units to a new facility on Camp Schwab was the keystone of the realignment plan. With the new base built on Okinawa's rural northeast coast, 8,000 Marines and their families would move to Guam, and most of the U.S. base property south of Kadena Air Base would be returned to Japan.

Hatoyama's attempt to stand up to the U.S. government was seen as part of his move for closer ties with other countries in Asia, especially China. But during the review, Hatoyama said he realized the military threat posed by China, which recently flexed its naval muscles with exercises in international waters near Okinawa's outer islands.

"When we considered the need for deterrent power under the current East Asia environment, we couldn't help but to once again recognize the importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance," Hatoyama said.

Chalmers Johnson, president and co-founder of the Japan Policy Research Institute at the University of San Francisco, maintains that Okinawans are more afraid of their own national government than of China.

"You must never forget how deeply hated the Japanese mainlanders are on Okinawa," he said.

Johnson said former Okinawa Gov. Masahide Ota once told him: "I dislike Americans, and I hate the Japanese."

Japan has also used checkbook diplomacy with Okinawa, the nation's poorest prefecture.

In 1999, Japan embarked on a plan to build a sea-based Marine air facility connected by a causeway to Camp Schwab. To sweeten the deal, Tokyo provided \$850 million to develop northern Okinawa and brought the 2000 Group of Eight Summit to Nago, where Camp Schwab is located.

The off-shore plan was later scrapped.

The 2006 realignment plan also came with incentives for Okinawa.

"The government did not mind pouring money over Okinawa," said Masaaki Gabe, professor of international relations at the University of the Ryukyus.

But he noted that the 2006 plan was made under a previous government at a time Japan's economy was growing.

Japan's economy has since soured, making it unlikely such payments will continue to flow as freely.

That could be a factor in why many businesses on Okinawa, unlike the general population, had opposed Hatoyama's pledge to move Marines off Okinawa.

U.S. bases are the second-largest employer on the island, generating \$3 billion a year, about one-fifth of the prefecture's economy.

The 2006 agreement calls for two runways to be built on Camp Schwab and extending onto reclaimed land in adjacent Oura Bay. Hatoyama has suggested easing environmental concerns by building the part of the runway over the water on pilings instead of damaging the bay's pristine waters with landfill.

But looming in the background are unresolved legal matters.

A coalition of Japanese and U.S. conservation groups contended in a pending lawsuit that a project on Oura Bay would damage the feeding grounds of the Okinawa dugong, a saltwater manatee.

In January 2008, a federal judge in San Francisco ruled the Department of Defense failed to conduct its own study of the environmental effects of reclaiming land in Oura Bay. The Department of Defense is appealing the ruling.

"The suit in itself could ultimately kill the relocation plan," Feffer said. "Even if the Pentagon were willing to appeal the case all the way to the Supreme Court, the issue could be wrapped up in so much bureaucratic red tape that the plan would effectively be killed."

In such an event, Futenma probably would remain open, he said.

"No one will say it publicly, but that might be the solution Tokyo would be perfectly happy with," Feffer said.

Feffer said that any suggestion Hatoyama makes is now going to be a hard sell. And should he resign, it is doubtful a successor will revisit the Futenma issue, some political experts say.

"Under the present political environment surrounding Japan, the only choice Japan has now is to strengthen ties and walk together with the United States," said Kazuya Sakamoto, professor of International politics at the University of Osaka. "Soured relations with the U.S. government is Hatoyama's problem. What is left for him now is how well he can draw the curtain on this and bring it back to the original plan."

*Stars and Stripes* reporters Chiyomi Sumida and Teri Weaver contributed to this story.