

# **A Lost Chance?: The Question of the US Air Bases in Okinawa and an East Asian Community**

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## **1. The Futenma Question and East Asian Community**

To keep a stable alliance relationship with the United States and to maintain and increase good relations with the other Asian countries: these two tasks are no doubt the main stones of the foundation of Japan's international relations and foreign policies. When he became the Prime Minister of Japan, as head of the first Minshuto or Democratic Party cabinet, in September 2009, Mr. Hatoyama Yukio declared that his cabinet would make it its diplomatic goal to construct the Japan-U.S. relationship on the principle of equal partnership, and to do its best to build an East Asian community with the other Asian countries. He gave us high hopes with these promises, but betrayed us with miserable failures. I would like to explain, in my own way, why Mr. Hatoyama failed.

As the first step of his endeavor to construct Japan-U.S. relations as an equal partnership, Mr. Hatoyama proposed to relocate Futenma Air Base out of Okinawa to another prefecture, or outside Japan. Futenma Base is in the middle of a residential area in the center of Okinawa Island; it had to be removed. Allegedly, an agreement had been reached between the governments of Japan and the United States to move the base to the Henoko area, off-shore next to another U.S. base, in Nago city.

Why did the new Prime Minister of Japan make his proposal, breaking the agreement with the U.S. government? The following are some of the reasons news analysts and commentators have guessed at:

- 1) Mr. Hatoyama was hopeful that U.S. President Obama's pledging for "a world without nuclear weapons" would create a situation favorable for Japan to negotiate the move of U.S. bases out of Okinawa.
- 2) The United States was already set to move some of its Marine forces from Okinawa to Guam. Mr. Hatoyama might have thought, then, why not relocate some of the air bases in Okinawa to Guam, too.
- 3) Mr. Hatoyama did not share the view that the U.S. Marines were a deterrent force vital to the international security arena of Asia-Pacific. Later, in the last days of his incumbency, he admitted that he had finally arrived at that understanding.
- 4) Mr. Hatoyama was an optimist who believed that he could build with President Obama a good personal relationship. He was reported to have said to President Obama in their first official meeting, "Trust me."
- 5) Mr. Hatoyama was conscientious in thinking that mainland Japan must bear a greater burden of the Japan-U.S. security alliance, with diminished burden for Okinawa. And
- 6) simply, Mr. Hatoyama is an idealist.

The Hatoyama cabinet could not obtain from any prefecture of Japan or from the U. S. government cooperation for the plan to transfer Futenma Air Base. Despite all the wrangling, the issue is still pending, with Futenma Base still where it was, and many people are forced to think that Futenma Base, if moved, would be relocated to Henoko. The people of Okinawa are deeply disappointed and hurt, having first warmed to Mr. Hatoyama and his euphoria, only to be betrayed by the return to square one. In the meantime, Nago city elected a mayor who was resolutely opposed to the Marine base coming to Henoko. So now, it is far more difficult than ever to find a solution to the problem.

Mr. Hatoyama and his cabinet do not seem to have had a well-prepared plan for negotiation with the U. S. government, nor do they seem to have engaged in purposeful negotiations. At the same time, Mr. Hatoyama declared that his administration would do its best to promote the formation of an East Asian community. But again, he did very little toward that goal either.

To go back to the start of his short-lived cabinet, Mr. Hatoyama listed, first, a solution to the question of Futenma Air Base and, second, the promotion of East Asian community building as the two main foreign policy goals of his cabinet. It was, and it is, my view that the key issue here is how the Japanese government correlates these two goals, and how Japanese diplomacy takes measures necessary to realize them by correlating them step by step. They are so closely related with each other that neither goal can be reached in isolation from the other. In order to correlate these two goals, we need to set a series of simultaneous equations and to solve them one by one. Since Mr. Hatoyama is a doctor of engineering science, I expected him to do that job skillfully, but he failed to do so.

## **2. U.S. Air Bases in Okinawa**

It has been pointed out that the Japan-U.S. security treaty has been a common good for the Asia-Pacific region as a whole since the early 1970s when mainland China normalized diplomatic relations with the United States and Japan, and when Okinawa was reverted to Japan. It so happened that during the period of the Hatoyama cabinet, the question of “*mitsuyaku*,” secret agreements between Washington and Tokyo concerning the reversion of Okinawa to Japan, was debated and some of the “*mitsuyaku*” were disclosed. Those tortuous negotiations were designed to get Okinawa reverted to a nuclear free status. We can believe that Okinawa has indeed been nuclear free, if not since the beginning, at least for some time now.

No one can deny that Japanese security has been guaranteed by the nuclear umbrella of the United States. No one can deny either that the security of the whole Western Pacific region is balanced by the U.S. forces in Okinawa. Okinawa is really situated in the strategic center of the whole region, covering the Japanese archipelago, the Korean peninsula, the Russian Far East, Mongolia, mainland China, Taiwan and the Taiwan straits, the whole of Southeast Asia, and Australia. From a geopolitical point of view, it must be admitted that the U.S. Marine forces in Okinawa are a deterrence indispensable and irreplaceable for regional security.

The people of Okinawa know this fact better than anyone else. Yet, deeply disappointed and hurt by the failure of the DPJ administration, they are more resolutely than ever opposed to the U.S. bases remaining in Okinawa. The Okinawa economy and the Okinawan people's livelihood have been deeply dependent on the military bases. But rapidly increasing portions of the population are now opposed to

the bases remaining in Okinawa. It is for sure that the current Kan cabinet finds itself in a long stalemate on the issue of Futenma. It is more difficult than ever to find a solution to the problem. But somehow or other a solution must be found.

### 3. An East Asian Community

In November 2005, in Kuala Lumpur, the first summit meeting of the East Asian Community was held, with the governments of ten ASEAN countries and three Northeast Asian countries attending. Recently, however, politicians express no enthusiasm for East Asian community building. Mr. Hatoyama, despite his announcement at the outset of his administration, did little for community building.

In my opinion, it is only the *politicians'* call for regionalism that is at a low ebb in East Asia now; regionalization by the people is proceeding steadfastly. Here, we must distinguish regionalization from regionalism. Regionalism is not the same as regionalization. While regionalism is an expressive political act by governments, or government officials and political leaders, regionalization is an actual process that proceeds with the movements of people, goods and information within a region. I would like to point out that regionalization has been going on in East Asia since the beginning of the 1970s, well before Prime Minister Mahatir bin Mohamad of Malaysia proposed the EAEC (East Asian Economic Caucus) in 1990–91.

What happened, then, back in the beginning of the 1970s? Jumbo jets started flying civil air routes in 1970. This facilitated the people of East Asia, as of other regions, to move around the region. Today, people take mid-range flights between any airports in the region for business, for overseas study, family reunions, tourism, shopping, cultural exchange, NGO activity and so on. The intra-regional airline network has developed into an ideal pattern, connecting any two airports in the region almost directly. In short, it can be said that regionalization has been a fact of East Asian life for some time, and it is a consequence of people's intra-regional transnational movements. Crossing national borders and moving around in the region, increasing numbers of visiting people make contact and interact with their hosts. It is the most significant fact today that ordinary people move around in East Asia and exchange with each other, however shallow those exchanges might be.

What is more, East Asian people nowadays tend to find similar cultural elements anywhere they visit in the region. Pop music is heard everywhere; manga and anime, which originated in Japan, are now enjoyed, and even produced, in many places; and movies and TV dramas produced with Korean taste are appreciated by many people across East Asia. We can say that these cultural exchanges are little by little creating conditions for East Asian people to share a common culture.

To repeat, as more and more people move across national borders in the region, regionalization proceeds in East Asia. Ordinary people move around and contact each other and so bring about the possibility of their sharing an East Asian common culture, although still to a limited degree. This ongoing process is brought about by popularization and equalization, which are characteristic of today's mass transportation. In other words, today's mass transportation, represented by jumbo jets, has expanded the range of ordinary people's movement throughout the East Asian region, pushing regionalization ahead and bringing forward the possibility of a shared common culture for the region. An East Asian community is no longer an impossibility and, as an extension of the current phenomenon, we can hope

to see a regional community by the people, for the people and of the people, which is incidentally the exact opposite of the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere.

Mr. Hatoyama could have taken advantage of the trend of regionalization in East Asia to advance his concept of an East Asian community.

#### **4. Constructive Thinking to Find a Solution**

Mr. Hatoyama listed two goals for Japan's foreign relations, but did not correlate them at all. They must be correlated, because only then, can solutions be found for each of them.

How do we correlate them? I think I have suggested the basic thinking by which to set a series of necessary equations. The first method is to correlate them in terms of space. East Asia is the whole space; Okinawa is a part of it. When East Asia becomes a more peaceful region, comprising a more friendly community, the Okinawa problem becomes easier to solve; similarly, when Okinawa reduces its military bases, East Asia will become more secure.

The second method is to correlate the two goals in temporal sequence. We place one of them in a shorter-range perspective, and the other in a longer-range perspective. It may be normal to see the Okinawa question on a shorter-range time scale, and the task of East Asian community building on a longer-range one. I would rather suggest that we place the task of East Asian community building on a shorter-range time scale, and the question of the Okinawa bases on a longer-range time scale. Try to construct East Asia as a community, that is, as a region without war, and we will have an Okinawa without military bases. Of course, the real world, and its security questions in particular, are not as simple as that. I wished in vain that Mr. Hatoyama would set up an intricate series of essential equations in such a constructive manner, and would negotiate persistently with the United States government and the governments of Asia, especially of the ASEAN countries. If it is difficult for governments themselves to engage in building a regional community on the state-to-state level, we ordinary people of Asia will continue to engage in constructing a community by social communication and cultural exchange in a people-to-people dimension.

What we need is a fresh grand design, that is to be created by constructive thinking.