

Now is the Time to Move from Okinawa to Hokkaido

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Now is the Time to Move from Okinawa to Hokkaido  
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In November 2004, Japan's Ministry of Finance proposed a massive restructuring of the Japan Self Defense Force (JSDF) permanently based in Hokkaido. This proposal, if enacted, presents a unique opportunity to correct artillery and other ground combat arms training deficiencies that affect US forces on Okinawa. The USMC should pursue stationing combat units on soon-to-be vacated JSDF bases in Hokkaido to correct current Okinawa-based units' training deficiencies and to strengthen US military, Government of Japan (GOJ), and Okinawa relations.

#### Background

The composition of JSDF forces in Japan's northernmost island was designed to deter Soviet aggression from the North. A GOJ official<sup>1</sup> (who requested anonymity from me) proposed that force restructuring would allow Japan to reposition forces to the south to respond readily to current regional issues such as an emerging China, possible contingencies in Korea or Taiwan, terrorist infiltration into Southeast Asia, or natural disasters.<sup>2</sup> The Ministry of Finance did not address forces reassignment, but did

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<sup>1</sup> A senior Ministry of Foreign Affairs official who has negotiated Japan-US Military policy issues in Tokyo and Washington, D.C.

<sup>2</sup> GOJ Official, phone conversation (28 December 2004)

propose closing up to thirty bases and reducing troop strength in the region by up to eighty percent.

#### Okinawa training encroachment

In 2002, the Government Accounting Office reported that "very few of the USMC combined arms and supporting arms training needs could be met on Okinawa."<sup>3</sup> This situation still exists today. Training has deteriorated on Okinawa due to concessions made by the US military. The concessions were a result of urbanization, the memory of the Okinawan people, and the peculiar nature of Okinawan politics.

Like military bases in America, many bases on Okinawa that were once in rural areas have become surrounded by urban development – a process called urbanization. While the most controversial urbanization issue concerns Marine Corps Air Station Futenma<sup>4</sup>, urbanization also hinders ground training. For example, due to noise pollution, live-fire training is canceled on days when local schools conduct high school or college entrance examinations. Also,

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<sup>3</sup> Government Accounting Office, *Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Readiness and Management Support, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, MILITARY TRAINING Limitations Exist Overseas but Are Not Reflected in Readiness Reporting* (GAO April 2002), 26

<sup>4</sup> MCAS Futenma is to be relocated to a replacement facility in northern Okinawa

accidental range fires threaten local communities near training area boundaries. Range restrictions due to urbanization restrict parachute training, certain small arms, and machine gun training.<sup>5</sup> Live-fire artillery training is prohibited on the island. In 1996, initiatives from the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) curtailed all live-fire artillery training on Okinawa. Since then, Okinawa based artillery units have had to travel to various bases throughout Japan to conduct live-fire training. This training comes at a high cost. The GOJ pays the transportation costs for artillery units to conduct 35 training days each year at designated locations<sup>6</sup> throughout Japan.<sup>7</sup> The relocation plan also calls for 12<sup>th</sup> Marines to be able to conduct regimental live-fire training at the relocation sites. This has not happened. Regimental sized artillery live-fire training has not occurred since relocation training was implemented<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> GAO, April 2002, 16-17

<sup>6</sup> Kita-Fuji, Higashi-Fuji, Ojojihara, Yausubetsu, and Hijudai training ranges

<sup>7</sup> Government Accounting Office, Report to the Honorable Duncan Hunter, House of Representatives OVERSEAS PRESENCE Issues Involved in Reducing the Impact of the U.S. Military Presence on Okinawa (GAO, March 1998), 42-43

<sup>8</sup> 12<sup>th</sup> Marines has conducted regimental fire direction center training with multiple artillery batteries at Camp Fuji, but they have not conducted live-fire training with all three battalions

Okinawa's recent history makes negotiating with locals difficult—for both local US commanders and the GOJ. Besides the cities bombed by Allied air strikes, and the now uninhabited island of Iwo Jima, Okinawa was the only area of Japan that experienced ground combat operations. In addition, Okinawans felt they were abandoned by the GOJ during the period of US military occupation in 1953 until Okinawa reversion to GOJ control in 1972. Due to these remembered experiences, Okinawans are more pacifistic than mainlanders and less willing to cooperate with US and GOJ military planners<sup>9</sup>. This unwillingness hampers any Okinawa based solution to the training problem.

Another issue that affects training is the peculiar structure of Okinawa politics. Unlike mainland Japan, Okinawan towns are extremely small. As a result, planners must deal with a jigsaw puzzle of political entities when negotiating training issues.<sup>10</sup> Any of these political entities, in pursuit of their own special interests, can frustrate GOJ or US military plans. Following a "not in my backyard" agenda, local Okinawa officials have recently sought to obstruct the Futenma relocation project and the development of a shoot-house in the Central Training Area.

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<sup>9</sup> GOJ Official

<sup>10</sup> GOJ Official

## A Move to Hokkaido

A move to Hokkaido would provide units places to train without the issues faced by units on Okinawa. Hokkaido, with a quarter of Japan's landmass but only 5% of the population,<sup>11</sup> does not have the urbanization problems experienced by bases on Okinawa or even on the Kanto Plain.<sup>1213</sup> Hokkaido residents do not have memories of the US invasion. Nor were they occupied by the US military following the Treaty of San Francisco. As a result the people of Hokkaido do not have a feeling of abandonment and resentment towards the GOJ like Okinawans do. Hokkaido residents are not as pacifistic as Okinawa residents either. Hokkaido towns are also larger than those in Okinawa so GOJ officials and base commanders would not have a large number of local officials with whom to negotiate training issues.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Japan's Coddled Frontier," *The Economist*, 11 December 2004, 39

<sup>12</sup> A region east of Mt Fuji (landmass approx. 32,000 sq km; population approx. 40 million.) This area contains five major military bases besides Camp Fuji and their attendant satellite facilities. It is the largest concentration of US military bases in Japan outside of Okinawa that is nestled in the most densely populated part of Japan.

<sup>13</sup> GAO, April 2002, 15

<sup>14</sup> GOJ Official

A move to Hokkaido would monetarily benefit both local Hokkaido towns and the GOJ. Hokkaido communities surrounding the JSDF bases that are shut down will lose many of the benefits that those bases provided, including jobs for local citizens, and payments for JSDF's land usage. If US units occupied those closed bases in Hokkaido, the benefits would return. Locals would get jobs on US bases and would receive payments from the GOJ as Okinawans did. The GOJ could also benefit from the move to Hokkaido. Since US artillery units would be able to conduct training on Hokkaido, the GOJ would no longer have to pay for relocation training.

#### Regional stability and stronger US-Japan relations

Any move of US forces off Okinawa must account for GOJ's concerns regarding regional stability and US Government (USG) concerns with overseas force disposition. The GOJ understands the importance of US presence on Okinawa, "and will not commit to minimizing the burden on the island, unless two guarantees can be met: short term regional stability, and the continuation of a healthy long term US-Japan alliance."<sup>15</sup> Planners in the Pentagon also

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<sup>15</sup> GOJ Official



believe moving units to Hokkaido will reduce US response time to regional contingencies.<sup>16</sup>

Relocating any combat arms unit, Marine Corps or Army, to Hokkaido would not affect US forces readiness in the region. During regional contingencies, the majority of US bases and units on Japan serve to support the flow of materiel and forces into theatre and then on to the area of operation.<sup>17</sup> A slower response time is not an insurmountable factor either since Japan-based US combat units are not the primary fighting force for any regional contingency.<sup>18</sup> Given the time negotiations in Japan take, US planners should be able to adjust regional operational plans' time phase force flow data<sup>19</sup> before units leave Okinawa.

A reduction in troop strength on Okinawa would contribute to the stability of US forces by placating their most outspoken critics: the Okinawa people. Okinawans feel that they shoulder a disproportionate share of the US forces stationed in Japan. With 75% of all US facilities

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<sup>16</sup> GOJ Official

<sup>17</sup> *Due to the supporting role US installations in Japan provide to regional contingencies they are often referred to as "gas station Japan"*

<sup>18</sup> COL David D. Knack, former US Forces, Japan, Director of Plans and Policy, email correspondence (20 December 2004)

<sup>19</sup> Air and sea ports of entry/departure exist at Otaru, Chitose, and Sapporo

in Japan concentrated on Okinawa, which only comprises 0.6% of the total land area of Japan, this feeling is understandable. A relocation of forces to Hokkaido would increase the burden shared by other prefectures and reduce the US footprint in Okinawa. The willingness of the Okinawans to accept the presence of remaining US units would increase when they see that the USG and GOJ are addressing their concerns regarding these two issues. The long-term effects of this willingness would be a more stable situation for remaining the US forces on Okinawa, therefore strengthening the US-Japan Security Alliance.

#### Is Camp Fuji a Potential Option?

The idea to move 12<sup>th</sup> Marines to Camp Fuji has repeatedly circulated around Okinawa and PACOM as a way to solve the unit's training difficulties. This seems reasonable: move to an existing Marine base with adjacent training areas and use those training areas plus the existing infrastructure. Unfortunately, there are many reasons why Camp Fuji is not the answer for units on Okinawa. Camp Fuji also suffers from similar encroachment issues that Okinawa suffers from. Towns, resort communities, an animal park, and a ski slope all abut the training areas' boundaries. Live-fire restrictions due to

local school examinations also exist. Land usage agreements limit the number of training days during the summer and on weekends and give local civilians unrestricted access to all of the training area including impact areas. Kita-Fuji, and Higashi-Fuji, the Fuji Maneuver Area (FMA), are extremely busy training facilities. Currently US units deployed to Camp Fuji, JSDF units from five local garrisons, and countless JSDF units from around Japan compete for the areas limited ranges. These bases include Fuji Schools, and the Fuji Training Center (FTC). Like the School of Infantry or The Basic School, Fuji Schools and FTC monopolize ranges and training areas since have training priority over other units<sup>20</sup>. The training priority US artillery relocation units currently receive at the FMA would likely disappear if 12<sup>th</sup> Marines moved to Camp Fuji and the GOJ stopped shouldering their transportation costs. Such a move could result in 12<sup>th</sup> Marines having less training days than they currently have under the artillery relocation system.

Due to its remoteness and the possibility of a reduced JSDF presence, Hokkaido would not have the problems of urbanization or competition for range usage that Camp Fuji

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<sup>20</sup> *FTC conducts training exercises in Kita-Fuji that prohibit co-usage for weeks at a time.*

has. Twelfth Marines currently conducts relocation training at Hokkaido's Yausubetsu Maneuver Area and would enjoy reduced competition for range usage if moved there. Other combat arms units would experience similar benefits at other vacated JSDF installations.

#### Obstacles: Global Positioning, Infrastructure, and Politics

The Department of Defense (DoD) is currently conducting a global positioning study to reduce overseas presence while increasing deployability.<sup>21</sup> While a final decision on US disposition in Japan will have to wait for the study's completion, given Okinawa's strategic location in Southeast Asia, it is unlikely any changes will be made to III MEF. Therefore, it is not premature to address this issue.

The USG would only agree to station forces on Hokkaido if the GOJ funds the infrastructure required for US forces. Given the amount of money the GOJ spends in support of the US-Japan security alliance, the GOJ should be able to bear the cost of infrastructure development. The GOJ spends \$4

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<sup>21</sup> COL David D. Knack, former US Forces, Japan, Director of Plans and Policy

Billion annually to station US forces in Japan.<sup>22</sup> To appease Okinawan concerns, the GOJ agreed to build a replacement facility near Nago for MCAS Futenma. By reducing US footprint on Okinawa and increasing US burden sharing by other prefectures, the GOJ will decrease the Okinawan animosity to itself that will be more than worth the cost required to build the infrastructure required in Hokkaido.

For the move to be politically feasible, the GOJ would have to garner local political support in Hokkaido. While garnering this support would be less difficult than on Okinawa<sup>23</sup>, local officials would still make it difficult for the GOJ. While local officials might balk and hold out for more money or government projects, it is unlikely they will say no to the GOJ. Only the coastal areas in the south of Hokkaido have been able to capitalize on the recent upturn in the Japanese economy. The rest of the island is still weak economically and relies on government subsidies<sup>24</sup>. The economic impact to the region if JSDF bases close will be hard. The benefits US basing would bring to these hard hit

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<sup>22</sup> US Forces, Japan, Public Affairs Office, The Japan-US Security Relationship Speech to the Japan National Press Club, 26 August 2004

<<http://usfj.mil/newsreleases/transcripts/2004/>> (02 January 2005)

<sup>23</sup> GOJ Official

<sup>24</sup> The Economist, 11 December 2004, 39

areas such as GOJ subsidies, jobs, and base contracts should make the GOJ's job to garner support a lot easier.

### Conclusion

The recent proposal by the Ministry of Finance to reduce JSDF force structure in Hokkaido presents an excellent opportunity for the US and GOJ planners. US planners should start negotiations with the GOJ to base US troops in areas that will be vacated by the JSDF. A move to Hokkaido will allow US units to train without the training restrictions caused by urbanization and an unfriendly Okinawan population. For 12<sup>th</sup> Marines, a move would also end its reliance on the artillery relocation program.

Opposition and possible obstacles to the move are either poorly thought out or easily surmountable. A move by combat arms units to Hokkaido will not affect regional stability, but only serve to strengthen local Okinawan relations and the US-Japan Security Alliance. US concerns in regards to Hokkaido base infrastructure could easily be addressed by the GOJ. Finally, the GOJ should not have difficulties negotiating with Hokkaido politicians, given the economic benefits their communities will receive.

The recent announcement by the Ministry of Finance to reduce JSDF on Hokkaido is an opportunity that must be aggressively pursued by USG and GOJ planners to relocate US units to Hokkaido. The GOJ could finally solve Okinawa concerns on US footprint reduction and burden sharing, and the US units could gain a friendlier operating environment on Okinawa while increasing combat unit training readiness.

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