

Old Wine in New Bottles

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When politicians are faced with difficult and unpopular decisions they sometimes choose to avoid taking a stand by purporting to stake out new positions which, in reality, are no change or even sometimes make a bad situation even worse. The recent so-called “pivot” in U.S. national security strategy to place importance on the Asian Pacific area is an example of labeling “maintenance of the status quo” as “a positive change”; and the decision of the U.S. and Japanese governments to “delink” the closure of Futenma Air Base from the closure of six other bases south of Kadena Air Base in Okinawa might be an example of “delaying a long overdue decision even longer.”

“Pivot” is an exaggeration

By their nature, air and naval forces are more capable of responding quickly to crises owing to their more mobile nature as compared to ground forces. The Obama Administration hopes to cut U.S. defense spending drastically, not only by ending American Army and Marine Corps involvement in Iraq [which has already been accomplished] and in Afghanistan [faster than is prudent] but also by cutting back the overall U.S. force structure including naval and air forces. Worried about criticism that it will be endangering American security, the administration is touting its “prioritization of the Asia Pacific area.”

Certainly the Asia Pacific is extraordinarily important and it would not be wasteful to increase American capability in that area in order to ensure the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and other vital American interests. What the “pivot” of U.S. national security more likely means, however is that U.S. forces in the Asia Pacific area, which are already stretched thinly, will be less likely to be reduced compared to U.S. forces positioned elsewhere in the U.S. and abroad. Prioritization of the Asia Pacific area is in America’s national interest, but implying that it is an increase in capability is likely to be an exaggeration. At best it is likely to be maintenance of the status quo.

“Delinking” of Futenma is a mistake

After jointly studying the realignment of U.S. forces in Okinawa for ten years and examining every potential option, agreement was reached in 2006 that seven U.S. bases would be closed and their land returned to Japan and the helicopters of Futenma Air base, a key combat element of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, would be relocated to Camp Schwab near Henoko Village in northern Okinawa. This agreement was accepted by virtually all major political and commercial elements in Okinawa except the landowners of Futenma and other bases who worried about losing their lucrative rents.

While campaigning in 2009 Mr. Hatoyama unrealistically promised to relocate Futenma's helicopters outside Okinawa, a promise he couldn't carry out as prime minister. I think it is a big mistake to now "delink" the Futenma relocation part of the agreement from the remainder. Most obviously the helicopters will remain in Futenma which will remain open ["FRF" – Futenma Replacement Facility -- will likely be replaced by "FIF" – Futenma is Forever] but it is also unlikely that all the other six bases can be quickly closed and returned to Japan since they will be needed to support operations at Futenma.

It is tempting to put old wine [large reductions of defense budgets and continued delays in implementing the Okinawa relocation package of 2006] in new bottles ["pivoting to the Asia Pacific" and "delinking" Futenma from the 2006 agreement], but if only the bottles are changed, the wine will still not become better tasting.

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