Why have Washington and Tokyo ratcheted up the issue of relocating the Futenma Marine Corps Air Station on Okinawa into a high-stakes face-off that could corrode and even irreparably damage the US-Japan alliance? From the US perspective, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama is walking away from a painstakingly negotiated deal formally approved by the Diet in May 2009 when the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was still in power. That agreement would restructure US military bases in Japan, relocate the marine base at Futenma on Okinawa to Henoko on Okinawa, and shift a large portion of the US Marine presence from Okinawa to Guam, thereby reducing the burden on Okinawans. The US is exasperated by Hatoyama’s weak leadership and by the contradictory messages coming from his cabinet.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates during his October 2009 visit to Tokyo veered from customary diplomatic niceties by publicly lecturing Tokyo that there was no alternative to the 2006 realignment plan and that “it is time to move on.” Gates snubbed his hosts by declining a dinner invitation from Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa, saying he had to prepare for a trip to meet with NATO. The message: Gates had more important tasks than massaging the feelings of Japan’s new government.

The Pentagon may have also wanted to mobilize Japanese domestic pressure on Hatoyama. The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) did not win the August 2009 election due to its stance on Okinawa bases. Signs that the party was mishandling relations with the US could alarm the media and public enough to compel acceptance of the existing plan. The same calculation probably motivated Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to summon Japanese Ambassador Ichiro Fujisaki to her office on a day when a snowstorm closed the rest of Washington. Clinton demonstrated the absence of daylight between State and Defense.

Compounding the problem are US suspicions about the DPJ’s general foreign policy orientation. Despite his repeated statements that the alliance with the US will remain the cornerstone of Japan’s foreign policy, Hatoyama has provoked consternation in Washington by criticizing “U.S.-led [economic] globalization” in a pre-election magazine essay, by terminating Japan’s naval refueling mission in the Indian Ocean in support of the military campaign in Afghanistan, and, in his summit meeting with Chinese president Hu Jintao, proposing a half-baked concept of an East Asian community without including the US. Washington worries that the DPJ may be reorienting Japan toward East Asia at the expense of the US. DPJ Secretary-General Ichiro Ozawa’s high-profile visit to China in December accompanied by a massive delegation including 143 DPJ Diet members only reinforced US concerns. In sharp contrast to his pro-active China diplomacy, Ozawa appears reluctant to engage US officials (partly because he is riled that they ignored him during his years in the opposition.)

What’s the motivation? What is so urgent about getting a quick “yes” on the relocation plan that the Obama Administration is testing the alliance’s resilience by not accepting the DPJ’s request to wait for a decision until after the crucial July Upper House elections?

If the marine air base is being moved from one part of Okinawa (Futenma) to another (Cape Henoko in Camp Schwab) mainly to close a noisy and dangerous facility located in a population center, why not just wait for Tokyo to decide and shift the blame for inaction onto the DPJ? That’s what happened to the 1996 SACO (Special Action Committee on Okinawa) plan to develop and construct an off-shore sea-based facility (SBF) near Henoko. Technical and political obstacles stalled the SBF concept beyond the original 2003 target, and Futenma continued to operate.

This time around, however, the status quo is unattractive to US defense planners. Unlike the 1996 plan, which was primarily about reducing the burden on Okinawa, the 2006 plan is linked to an ambitious and complex transformation of U.S. global defense posture to address more effectively new challenges—especially in a post-9/11 world. Guam is a key component. Through an increase of 14,560 active duty military personnel involving all services, the forces on Guam will grow by more than 225%. Because Guam is US territory, transforming it into a military hub would enhance strategic flexibility, freedom of action, and military readiness to deal with a variety of contingencies. The Marine Corps contingent will go from a baseline of three active duty personnel to about 9,700, including ground combat, air combat, and logistic support elements. Facilities at Guam’s Andersen Air Force Base will be expanded to accommodate the Marine air combat element.

The price tag is a hefty $10.3 billion, but Japan would contribute about $6 billion. This cost to Japanese taxpayers is justified in the 2006 agreement by “the strong desire of Okinawa residents that such force relocation be realized rapidly.” By linking the military buildup of Guam to the reduction of the Marine presence in Okinawa, Washington is able to get Tokyo to pay a large portion of the cost for a restructuring that Washington wants for its own reasons. If the 2006 agreement is not implemented, the US would have to cover most of the cost or the buildup on Guam will not happen.

Tokyo’s perspective The foreign relations section of the DPJ campaign manifesto on building “a close and equal Japan-U.S. relationship,” vaguely called for “moving in the direction of re-examining the realignment of U.S. military forces in Japan and the role of US military bases in Japan.” Even the three-party coal-
tion government policy agreement between the DPJ, the Social Democratic Party (SDPJ) and the People’s New Party repeats the same ambiguous wording. Nowhere in either document is there explicit mention of moving the Futenma replacement facility outside of Japan or even outside of Okinawa. The DPJ could just shift the location of the V-shaped air base to be built in Camp Schwab a bit further out to sea as Okinawa Governor Hirokazu Nakaima has suggested and still claim it has abided by its manifesto.

What has put Tokyo in an awkward position is campaign rhetoric. When the DPJ voted in the Diet against ratifying the US-Japan accord on relocation, it insisted that Futenma air station be moved out of Okinawa. In July 2009 during a campaign speech in Okinawa, Hatoyama stated, “If you feel the same way, [the DPJ will move] toward [relocating Futenma] outside the prefecture.” And he continued to talk about this option after becoming prime minister. This track record gave the SDPJ an opening to threaten to leave the coalition if the DPJ waffled and allowed the new air base to be built at Henoko. Although a tiny party, the SDPJ’s defection before the DPJ can secure a majority in the Upper House in this July’s elections could make the legislative process unmanageable.

In hindsight, all of this might have been avoided if Hatoyama had exerted stronger leadership, insisted on implementing the 2006 agreement with a few minor changes, and stressed the importance of closing down Futenma quickly. His vacillation has encouraged Okinawan opposition to Futenma’s relocation to Henoko. The Nago City (the municipality near Camp Schwab) mayoral election on January 24 could end in the defeat of the incumbent Yoshikazu Shimabukuro, who had supported accepting the new air base. The election of challenger Susumu Inamine, who adamantly opposes the new base, would make it much more difficult for the DPJ government to implement the realignment agreement.

Tokyo’s motivation
Hatoyama’s behavior cannot be attributed simply to political ineptitude. Whereas the LDP leaders usually deferred to the US on security matters, the DPJ is more likely to question American stances even while acknowledging the importance of the alliance. During the mid-1990s, Hatoyama proposed the notion of a US-Japan alliance without permanent US bases in Japan—a view he no longer holds. More recently Ozawa suggested that the presence of the US 7th (naval) Fleet might be sufficient for Japan’s security, along with Kadena air base for regional defense, if Japan assumed greater responsibility for its own defense, (see Ozawa interview in June TOE). In an October 2009 Kyodo News survey, 61% of the DPJ members of the Lower House supported ending Japan’s reliance on the US nuclear arsenal either in the future or immediately. Only 28% favored remaining under the US nuclear umbrella. While such ideas may be crude, they do indicate a strong willingness to challenge long-held assumptions.

A tenable compromise
What then should be done to prevent an alliance crisis? US officials might hope that Washington’s toughness will eventually create such domestic difficulties in Japan as to force Hatoyama to either embrace the original base realignment plan or resign. But if current political trends in Okinawa continue, Hatoyama will find it increasingly difficult to accept the 2006 plan without major modifications. Even if Hatoyama were to resign, the DPJ would still be in power and the new prime minister is likely to probe Washington for changes. This would hold true even if the DPJ wins a single-party majority in the Upper House election and can dispense with its unruly coalition partners.

DPJers are now brainstorming about alternatives to the existing plan. Ozawa has floated Shimojijima and Iejima (both small islands in Okinawa with airfields) as possible candidates. A private advisory group to Hatoyama has proposed moving these functions to Japanese Self-Defense Force bases in Nagasaki Prefecture. Whether any of these ideas turn into an official proposal remains to be seen.

An honest evaluation of these alternatives demands examining the necessity of the Marines slated to remain on Okinawa in order to provide “rapid crisis response capabilities.” Marines in Okinawa would have a geographic advantage over their counterparts in Guam by being closer to potential flash points like the Korean peninsula and the Taiwan straits. If these different elements of the Marines are to be maintained in Okinawa, then it would be desirable to have a dedicated air station on the main Okinawan island to facilitate the interaction among these units through regular training, exercises, and operations.

But the desirability of such an air station needs to be weighed against the political risks to the alliance. We two authors have long argued that the Kadena Air Force Base on Okinawa is militarily more significant than Futenma Marine base, given Kadena’s likely role in possible conflicts in Korea, the Taiwan Strait or elsewhere, as well as its role as a hub in the American global network. Preserving local political support for Kadena is, therefore, much more important than holding onto Futenma or building a successor. So, if further accommodating Okinawan interests on the Futenma issue is necessary, it is a modest price to pay for shoring up the broader political health of the U.S. military presence on Okinawa in general and at Kadena in particular.

Just as the US makes pragmatic decisions in other parts of the world about force relocation for the greater good of an alliance, it can factor local sensitivities into this issue. Provided the US could improve its contingency access to other airfields on Okinawa and elsewhere in Japan for use in a possible crisis or war, our view is that the US could make do without Futenma or a substitute. Losing the airfield altogether (with modest numbers of flights for the residual Marine presence occurring from alternative facilities in Okinawa and other prefectures, perhaps) is not a preferred option but a tolerable one—especially with the Marines in Guam.

Using commercial or Japanese military airfields in a crisis or war is allowed under the 1996 and 1997 agreements between Tokyo and Washington; prestationing of some supplies and engineering equipment on these other airfields, while also purchasing extra Marine Corps ground combat equipment and placing it aboard maritime prepositioning ships based in one of Japan’s harbors, could go a long way toward mitigating the downside of any loss of a permanent air station and even loss of the Marine Corps presence altogether.

Japan is overdue for a more far-reaching debate on its overall role in international security. Hatoyama and Ozawa have sometimes hinted at a greater willingness to consider an expanded global role for the Self-Defense Forces, and that is just part of the equation. It would be a shame for either capital to let the dispute over Futenma derail a broader positive US-Japan dialogue, particularly on the 50th anniversary of the US-Japan Security Treaty.