

Japanese Government Keeps Plugging Away at Henoko Base Construction Despite Clear Structural Obstacles

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Abstract: Twenty-three years after the announcement of the U.S.-Japan plan for a new U.S. Marine Corps air base at Henoko, the project’s completion date continues to fade into the distance as technical challenges mount. For its part, the Japanese government continues to insist that it will be completed in the face of powerful Okinawan opposition and soaring costs.



Henoko base construction

Like many construction projects supported by the public sector, the new U.S. Marine Corps air base being built in the Henoko district of Nago, Okinawa Prefecture, has seen its budget skyrocket since it was first proposed and its completion date postponed. When the project was first announced jointly by the U.S. military and Japan in 1996, the construction period was going to be five years for landfill work and three years for building the airfield. Henoko is meant to replace the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, which is considered a danger to residents of Ginowan City, and according to a previous plan, Futenma would be "returned" to Okinawa by 2022 at the earliest. On Dec. 25, the Defense Ministry announced that the land would not be returned until the mid- to late 2030s.

The reason for the latest delay is that the seabed of Oura Bay, where the Henoko construction is underway, is too soft to support an air field, and therefore will require more reinforcement than originally planned. The design for the work has been altered, which means a new construction plan has to be approved by a local government that is against the project in the first place. This opposition, demonstrated by a majority of residents voting to reject the project last year, has not swayed the central government from proceeding under the usual strategy, which is that once a public works project has begun it is impossible to stop, regardless of the size and extent of any popular or legal resistance. When he was in Okinawa on Dec. 22 to inspect Shuri Castle, a world heritage site that was destroyed in a fire last year, Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide told the press that he would not comment on the reapplication because it was still being studied. Though Suga expressed sympathy about Shuri Castle he pointedly

avoided talking about Henoko and even Futenma. In June, Okinawa will hold an election for prefectural assembly, and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) wants to attain as many seats as possible, so between now and then the government will try to avoid the base topic. Okinawa relies heavily on aid from the central government, though according to some media the amount of money that Okinawans can spend at their own discretion has been reduced, while funds that go directly to local governments that already have majority LDP assemblies has increased. In that regard, it should be noted that Okinawa Gov. Denny Tamaki has indicated he will reject the new construction plan, but nobody sincerely believes the project will be canceled.

Consequently, the media focus has been on the conflict between the LDP and the Okinawan prefectural government. Less attention is paid to the impracticality of the new base. According to a Dec. 14 article in the Okinawa Times, landfill work began on Dec. 3, 2018, and in the subsequent year only 1.1 percent of the soil needed for the landfill had been transferred, so unless work is accelerated appreciably, that means landfill work alone could take almost 100 years. This supposition was mentioned during a discussion of Henoko on the web news program Democracy Times, whose participants, all journalists, also pointed out that after the Okinawan government rejects the new plan there could be more lawsuits, thus adding another layer of delay to the project. Realistically speaking, Henoko may never be completed, and yet the central government shows no signs it will even consider changing its mind.

On Jan. 3, when the Japanese media was still full of stories about former Nissan CEO Carlos Ghosn's escape from Japan, Tokyo Shimbun published an exclusive about the panel of scholars who had been recruited to study the new construction plan. Made up of eight university-employed experts, including retired

bureaucrats from the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, the panel concluded that the plan was sound and recommended it be submitted for approval, despite the fact that, as practically every media outlet has pointed out, the new construction entails sinking 77,000 piles 70 meters into the seabed, something that has never been attempted in Japan before.

Suspecting that the panel, whose members were selected by the Defense Ministry, was rubber-stamping the plan, Tokyo Shimbun looked deeper and found that three members worked at universities that had received donations for specific research from private companies with direct monetary interest in the project. Such donations are very rare in the U.S. and Europe, but fairly common in Japan, especially now with government subsidies for higher education on the decline. Two of the donating companies, in fact, have already taken orders for the project. Toyo Kensetsu received ¥16.5 billion for 4 landfill orders, and Fudo Tetra received ¥4 billion for seawall construction.

The Defense Ministry told Tokyo Shimbun that there was no relationship between these companies' donations and the panel's findings, and, in any case, it wasn't the ministry's job to monitor private contributions to universities. The newspaper pointed out that this isn't the first time a panel involved in Henoko was suspected of being tainted. Five years ago, when a group of academics approved an environmental impact assessment, four members were criticized for taking research funds from interested companies. Four days later, Tokyo Shimbun ran another article claiming that two of the panelists were once paid consultants to another company that had been hired by the defense ministry to help draft the new Henoko construction plan.

The ministry already knew about the instability of the seabed and kept it hidden when it

started construction against the wishes of local residents, so in effect the project is running on its own momentum based on the justification, as voiced by the Defense Ministry on Dec. 25, that "Henoko is the only way," meaning the only solution to the Futenma problem. Of course, the Futenma base is still in use and will likely remain that way until Henoko is completed, unless the U.S. decides it doesn't need it any more. There is a plan to transfer marines to Guam at some point, to a new base now being built with Japanese money. This plan has also been significantly delayed. According to the central government, construction of Henoko will now cost ¥930 billion, or three times the original estimate, though Okinawa prefecture thinks it will be more like ¥2.3 trillion.

The runaround became even more obvious in mid-February, when various media reported that the seabed was even softer than previously thought. A Feb. 12 Asahi Shimbun article cited a study carried out by Nippon University using available data that indicated piles would need to be sunk even deeper than 70 meters. Apparently, the Defense Ministry had this data but did not submit it to the study group that was approving the new construction plan. In response, the ministry admitted that the boring methods that produced the data were "simple" and perhaps not the most "thorough," but stressed that the soil more than 70 meters below the surface of the water was adequately firm.

On Feb. 16, Tokyo Shimbun ran a more detailed story that, in the end, implied it would actually be impossible to build an airfield on landfill at Henoko. A team headed by a marine geologist from Niigata University said it would be a significant problem if the seabed below 70 meters was too soft, since there are no construction ships in Japan that can handle sinking piles any deeper. The team studied a report that the Defense Ministry submitted to the Diet in March 2019, and concluded that

"improving the seabed" only up to 70 meters, which the report recommends, would not meet the demands of the government's own design for the airfield. And if those demands can't be met then construction should not proceed. When confronted by Tokyo Shimbun with this information, the Defense Ministry said it could not respond to "hypotheses," and it had no plan to carry out any more surveys. In a kind of ironic twist to the story, Tokyo Shimbun says that the data that indicated the seabed was too soft came at the end of the report that the ministry submitted to the Diet but was in English, so if the ministry says they don't have sufficient information about the strength of the seabed it means they are either lying or they don't read English.

The mainstream press has been handling the controversy gingerly, but that wasn't the mood on the New Year's web broadcast of the East Asia Community Institute run by former prime minister Hatoyama Yukio. He and journalist Takano Hajime joked about how quickly the academic panel approved the new construction plan and, referring to the Jan. 3 Tokyo Shimbun scoop, openly surmised that corruption was involved. The government had decided to go ahead with construction and just needed some kind of cosmetic justification, so they put together this panel. Hatoyama, it should be noted, has skin in this game, since he was forced to resign the premiership after the bureaucracy prevented him from keeping his campaign promise to move the Futenma air station out of Okinawa. Long retired from politics, he can now afford to laugh.

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