



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

Fall of Hatoyama: What Went Wrong?

Joshy M. Paul

15 June 2010

The main reason for the resignation of Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama was his inept handling of an important component of the Japan-US security pact, a US air station in Okinawa. He should have focused on domestic issues first and aimed to win the Upper House election in July to implement his vision.

After barely nine months at the helm, Yukio Hatoyama has resigned as Prime Minister of Japan on June 1. Ichiro Ozawa who was the general secretary of the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) also relinquished his position. There were two main reasons for his resignation: his failure to keep his promise to relocate the US Marine Corps Air Station from Futenma, Okinawa, and a political funds scandal that included his mother's provision of some ¥1.26 billion to him over the years. The immediate reason, however, was his botched handling of the Futenma airbase issue. During the election last August, Hatoyama had pledged to shift the airbase out of Okinawa prefecture -- and if possible out of Japan --by May this year.

The 2006 Agreement

The United States and the previous Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government signed an agreement in 2006 after 13 years of negotiation that stipulated shifting the Futenma Air Station from the current location to the less populated Henoko at Nago city in Northern Okinawa. Further both countries had agreed to relocate 8000 Marines and their dependants to Guam by 2014. The Japanese government would pay US\$6.09 billion towards the Guam transfer cost. This would eventually reduce the Marines in Okinawa by nearly a half. Currently more than half of the total of 47,000 American troops based in Japan are located in Okinawa.

The 2006 plan was endorsed on May 28 in a joint statement signed by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defence Secretary Robert Gates and their Japanese counterparts, Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada and Defence Minister Toshimi Kitazawa. According to the statement, some of the

training facilities were to be relocated to Tokunoshima, a small island some 200 kilometres northeast of Okinawa, which was originally proposed by Hatoyama as a new location for the Futenma airbase.

In fact, Hatoyama had failed to check the voices opposed to the US military presence in Okinawa. He was planning to split the Futenma functions by keeping a helicopter pad in the new site of Henko while constructing a larger airfield at Tokunoshima. Foreign Minister Okada, however, argued for a merger of the Futenma facilities with those at the US Air Force base at Kadena on a 15-year lease-. On the other hand, Defence Minister Kitazawa was for the implementation of the 2006 plan in spirit, while Okinawa governor Hirokasu kept a low profile when the base issue flared up.

However, right from the beginning the US administration stood firmly by the 2006 agreement and strongly opposed splitting the Futenma airbase. According to the US any distance beyond 200 kilometres from the land station to the airfield would cause operational difficulty; it insisted that the two stations be close enough to enable them to react swiftly in contingency operations. The helicopter unit at Futenma is used to transport marines stationed at Okinawa Camp Hansen and Camp Schwab. During his visit to Washington to attend the recent nuclear summit, Hatoyama failed to secure a one-on-one meeting with President Barack Obama; he got just about 10 minutes during dinner along with other dignitaries, though he sat next to Obama.

The bungled handling of the issue saw Hatoyama's popularity rating plummet from roughly 70 percent to less than 20 percent, possibly triggering the decision to resign. Hatoyama's backtracking from his campaign pledge also created cracks in the coalition government. The leader of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and Consumer Affairs Minister Mizuho Fukushima was relieved of her post because she refused to abide by the cabinet decision accepting the 2006 plan. SDP had been more vocal against the US military presence in Japan.

Factors behind Acceptance of 2006 Plan

There were four major reasons why Hatoyama was forced to continue with the 2006 plan. Firstly, keeping the US-Japan security alliance was of prime importance for any government in Japan. Okinawa is the focal point of the security pact between the US and Japan which has guaranteed the security of Northeast Asia since World War II. At the same time it stands at an important location close to the flashpoints of North Korea and Taiwan.

Secondly, the *Cheonan* incident compelled Japan to comply with the demands of the US. The South Korean naval ship *Cheonan* was sunk purportedly by a North Korean torpedo on March 26. The issue became more complicated when China was reluctant to accept the findings of the investigation conducted by a multinational Joint Civilian Military Investigation group. The *Cheonan* incident has since created confusion and anxiety in the region. In a way, Japan's option was limited as it had to fall back on the Japan-US security system.

Thirdly, the current economic condition of Japan did not allow it to substitute the US security umbrella system with indigenous capabilities should the security pact be broken. It is reported that Japan's actual economic growth for the next five years may barely exceed 1.0 per cent per annum which leaves little margin for Tokyo to build a defence infrastructure through tax revenues. A political magazine *Se'taku* warned in February that if the alliance with the US collapsed, then Japan "would have to increase its 5 trillion yen defence budget to 10 per cent annually for the next 10 years."

Fourthly, Japan will have a series of elections in the second half of 2010 -- an Upper House election in July; the Nago municipal city election in September and the Okinawa Governor's election in November. The Upper House election is an important one as DPJ has to prove that the result of the 2009 was not an aberration while it needs to secure a comfortable majority in both houses of parliament. A prolonged dithering and uncertainty over Futenma would derail DPJ's chance for

victory in the July Upper House elections.

Ever since his election as prime minister over eight months ago, Hatoyama had focused on a difficult, albeit achievable foreign policy issue of Futenma. Instead, he should have concentrated on domestic issues like the economy and environment and winning the Upper house elections. Had he pushed the airbase issue more gradually, he could have saved his premiership.

Joshy M. Paul is MacArthur Visiting Associate Fellow at the Multilateralism and Regionalism programme of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. He is also Associate Fellow at the National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi.