

US-Japan Alliance: The Future of 'the Most Dangerous Base in the World'

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Thank you to Dr. Harris Dousemetzis for supervising my research

INTRODUCTION

Japan currently hosts the largest number of American military personnel abroad. However, 70% of these military facilities are concentrated in Okinawa, a small prefecture south of Japan's mainland island, despite it constituting only 0.6% of the country's total land mass (Hikotani et al, 2022, p. 337) In particular, the Futenma Marine Corps Air Base, centrally located in Ginowan City, has garnered much opposition (Okinawa Prefectural Government, 2026, p. 5). Whilst the US-Japan alliance remains crucial in the Asia-Pacific region, this research consolidates the advantages and disadvantages of the US military presence in Japan.

METHODOLOGY

1. Quantitative analysis of public opinion

- Longitudinal public surveys from 1982-2022
- Government surveys from 1997-2006
- Official Okinawa prefectural referendums recording public opinion of Futenma base

2. Counterfactual analysis

- Examine the claim that closure of the Futenma base would significantly weaken US extended deterrence against China
- Rational Deterrence Theory and Tetlock and Belkin's six counterfactual criteria is used to assess deterrence
- The Philippines is used as a comparative case study



(Wikimedia.org, 2025)

FUTENMA AIR BASE

OKINAWA ISLAND

JAPAN

RESEARCH QUESTION:
Should Futenma Marine Corps Air Station be closed?

KEY FINDINGS

- 79-81% of Okinawans opposed Futenma over the last three decades
- 56%-66% of mainland citizens additionally opposed Futenma
- 58% of Okinawans and 81% of mainland respondents believing the US-Japan Security Treaty to be important
- Futenma's Marine Corps capabilities are marginal compared to national US military presence (O'Shea, 2024)
- Removal of US bases from the Philippines did not terminate their alliance (Austin, 2003)

CONCLUSION

Overall, the continued operation of Futenma Air Station is difficult to justify, considering local costs and its limited contribution to US extended deterrence. The resistance is due to the negative externalities locals face with relocation within the prefecture to be inadequate to address these concerns. The counterfactual analysis additionally suggests that Futenma's closure is not likely to produce a significant decline in Japan's security. Therefore, closure of the facility is a viable means of reconciling Japan's security interests with the voices of its local population.

