

A Story of Continuing Struggle and Sacrifice:
Explaining Okinawan Public Resistance to American Military Bases

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Abstract

Since their establishment, American military bases in the southern Japanese island of Okinawa have been considered by Japanese and American governments to be an indispensable cornerstone of security in the highly significant Indo-Pacific region. However, the Okinawan peoples' relationship to the bases has always been fraught, and in recent years opposition to the bases has become much more entrenched due to a combination of social, political and economic factors changing Okinawan perception of military bases. These factors explain why even the most probable compromise to reconfigure military assets on Okinawa will not be the end of anti-base public sentiment in Okinawa.

Author Biography

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Introduction

After the bloody conclusion of World War II, American military bases in foreign countries became an indispensable instrument of United States foreign policy. Only the U.S. military maintains the military and financial capital to run its constellation of bases in far-flung locations around the world. The total number of overseas military bases administered by the United States military is estimated to total around 750. 120 are located in Japan, with a forward-deployed troop presence of approximately 53,713. Japan hosts not only the largest number of military bases, but also the greatest number of deployed troops (Hussein 2021). Of these bases, 70% are hosted in the southern island of Okinawa, which as a result has developed a particularly unique relationship with both the United States military and the Japanese government.

Throughout and after the American occupation, the Okinawan response to military presence has varied from destructive protest to tentative support. Soon after the pivotal Battle of Okinawa, Okinawans tended to support the American military due to the many atrocities that they endured under the Imperial Japanese Army (Altenerg 2019). In recent times, however, a legacy of incidents has led Okinawan opposition to basing becoming more entrenched. A 2016 poll found that 43% of Okinawans supported the complete withdrawal of American military forces from the island, the highest number since Okinawa returned to Japanese control (Robson 2016). A 2019 referendum called by Okinawa's governor Dennis Tamaki showed that 72% of the electorate opposed the construction of a new base at the northern Henoko site to replace the Marine Core Air Station Futenma, often referred to as the "most dangerous military base on Earth" (BBC 2019). Although there seems to be universal consensus that the removal of the Futenma Air Base is necessary, it is clear that Okinawan voters would rather the military bases be completely relocated off the island. This anti-base sentiment appears to be getting stronger.

Today, amongst Okinawans, the percentage of people who have positive views towards American military bases is about 44%, compared to 48% with a negative view. Among the general public, only 20% have a negative view of American bases, as compared to 71% positive. The percentage of Okinawans who feel that mainland Japanese do not understand them has always been high, but it has risen about ten points to 71% from the period between 1973 to 2012¹. So what factors have caused Okinawan voters to become so resistant to the American military presence on their island, a sentiment in tension with the policies of the central Japanese government?

In this essay, I will argue that Okinawan resistance to basing has become harder to overcome for pro-base actors because of five non-exclusive factors: (1) declining economic dependence on the bases, (2) basing as an issue of heightened national political significance, (3) the emergence of a unique brand of Okinawan identity politics, (4) grassroots mobilization leading to a greater sensitivity towards recurring incidents caused by U.S. Marines, and (5) a lengthy and frustrating base relocation process. These factors have all contributed towards building a much more sustained and deep-rooted opposition towards the bases. I will start with a discussion of the strategic value of the Okinawan bases, followed by addressing each of the five planks that have resulted in Okinawans' decreased tolerance towards the interruption of military bases in their daily lives. Subsequently, I will examine other possible explanations for Okinawan reactions towards the bases and assert why these explanations are insufficient. Finally, I will conclude by addressing future solutions as this contentious issue plays out.

¹ Charts 1 & 20 from [2017 NHK Survey](#).

Background: Why are the bases there?

After the United States victory in the combat-intense Battle of Okinawa, an invasion staged as part of a greater plan to invade the Japanese home islands, Okinawa was placed under American military occupation from 1945 to 1972 under an administration that was separate from Japanese home control until repatriation. The 1951 San Francisco U.S.- Japan Security Treaty allowed the United States to maintain military bases with few restrictions on Japanese soil in exchange for a security commitment (Schoppa 2020). A 1960 revision came that increased Japanese parity in the alliance and solidified U.S. commitment to the defense of Japan. As a result, the United States-Japan alliance is vital to the security of Japan and for U.S. interests in the Far East, with Okinawans bearing the greatest burden of this commitment in what many Okinawans consider an externalization of risk by the central Japanese government. At the same time, the U.S.–Japan Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) makes clear the legal status of American service members in Japan, as well as attempts to clear up the more general logistics of how the military can operate in Japan (The Mainichi 2020).

In terms of rationale for the American military presence, policymakers in Washington and Tokyo maintain that the bases have a deterrence value, shore up the U.S-Japan alliance, and enhance rapid response time to security and other humanitarian threats. During the Cold War, the bases with their strategic position served as a bulwark against communist spread supported by the Soviet Union. Geostrategically, Okinawa has an optimal position due to its close proximity to China, Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula and mainland Japan, meaning that in the hypothetical situation of an attack on American allies, the U.S. could respond with timely military action by deploying either the Marines from Futenma or air force personnel from Kadena Air Base (Reisener 2018).

The presence of the Marines in Okinawa means that the ability of North Korea to logistically sustain a prolonged ground offensive against South Korea is severely limited. Combined with the U.S. presence in South Korea, the Okinawan bases enhance the regional security situation, as F-22s from Kadena Air Base have been deployed in order to respond to North Korean missiles and nuclear tests (Heginbotham 2008). Okinawa's proximity to the heavily disputed Senkaku Islands allows the United States to project power into the East China Sea and limit Chinese provocation in terms of claiming physical ownership of the islands (Reisner 2018). If the Senkaku Islands were to be claimed by China, Okinawa would serve as the major hub for logistical and air support operations, and the U.S. Marine Corps would be heavily involved in directing the Japan Self-Defense Force's Western Infantry Regiment, Japan's amphibious assault force.

Other major China-related contingency includes military movement in the Taiwan Strait. Should China threaten Taiwan militarily, Okinawa is much closer to Taiwan than any of the mainland Japanese bases, Guam, or Hawaii. Okinawa would also serve as a major logistics hub in this contingency, with tankers from Okinawa able to refuel planes flying towards Taiwan. P-3 aircraft from Okinawa could provide anti-submarine and surveillance support, while fighters based in Okinawa could react effectively to tactical situations and recover speedily. The Okinawan bases are and will remain strategically significant in terms of providing air and naval power projection to South Korea and Taiwan (Heginbotham 2018). Therefore, proposals to move all of the marines off of Okinawa are not likely to be considered seriously by Washington or Tokyo, but both governments are cognizant of the long-standing need to reevaluate the current configuration of military assets, particularly marine ones, maintained on Okinawa.

Peace with (non)prosperity: Bases as economic barriers

After World War II, Okinawa relied on U.S. bases for more than 50% of its total economic output. By the time of reversion to Japanese control, this dependence has decreased to 15%, falling further to 5% today. After reversion, Okinawa lacked foundational industries and was heavily dependent on the service industry, a problem which persists today. In 1972, the gross prefectural product of Okinawa was 0.445 trillion yen, consisting of about .0445% of total Japanese GDP. By 2006, the gross prefectural product had risen to 3.7 trillion yen, consisting of .74% of total Japanese GDP (Shimabukuro 2019). Okinawa today has the highest child poverty percentage rates of Japanese prefectures, estimated to stand at 29.9%, while the national child poverty rate is 16.4% (The Mainichi 2017). Additionally, Okinawa records higher rates of single-mother households and percentages of people with non-regular employment compared to mainland Japan, in addition to lower wages (Shimabukuro 2019).

Okinawa has struggled to shake off the perception of being an impoverished rural backwater of Japan. While Okinawans may have seen their living standards rise over the decades, compared to the mainland Okinawa is much lacking in terms of a vibrant and prosperous economy. Accusations of Okinawa's economy being dependent on the military bases do not ring true in the 21st century, however, as in 2008 sightseeing revenue was \$4.1 billion compared to \$3.3 billion for base-related revenue (Yoshikawa 2012). As the Okinawan Prefectural Government writes², "The U.S. military bases are the greatest impediment to Okinawa's economic development".

² [What Okinawa Want You to Understand about the U.S. Military Bases](#), Okinawa Prefectural Government.

Many Okinawans see increasing tourism, particularly from China, as one viable way to boost their economic output and diversify development. However, as fifteen percent of the island's land is occupied by the bases, base relocation - particularly that of centrally located Futenma - would assist in this goal. As long as there is a military presence on the island, there will be businesses and contractors that target the patronage of U.S. service personnel and military procurement. Today, with the bases contributing to an all-time low towards the economy and continuing to occupy patches of prime real estate that could be developed for other uses, the military bases are a prohibitive barrier to productive restructuring of the Okinawan economy, thus further driving Okinawans to oppose the bases.

Basing becomes a national campaign issue

In 2009, candidate Hatoyama Yukio of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) made a campaign pledge to move the Futenma Air Station out of Okinawa completely. When the DPJ achieved a landslide victory in the 2009 elections and Hatoyama took office in 2009, party officials attempted to find a location for the base relocation other than the previously agreed to bilateral agreement on relocating Futenma to the northern area of Henoko, a coastal region in the small town of Nago. However, Hatoyama was unable to persuade the Foreign Ministry and effectively negotiate with U.S. officials and President Barack Obama's administration. Ultimately, Hatoyama reneged on his promise and became the first DPJ minister to resign after only eight months in office (The Japan Times 2019).

Hatoyama explained to Okinawans at the time that: "In terms of the role of the Marine Corps in the totality of all US forces in Okinawa, the more I learned, the more I have come to realize their interoperability. I have come to believe that it was the [only] way to maintain deterrence". The belated realization of "deterrence" as rationale for the bases angered many

Okinawans, who felt that it was being used as an excuse after explicitly promising to move the Futenma base (Norimatsu 2011). After turning Futenma into an issue of national political significance and winning an election on the promise of bold change, this blatant betrayal by the Japanese government may have further outraged Okinawans and hardened already underlying anti-base sentiments. Additionally, the renegeing on a promise by the central government aggravated tensions between the already-strained Okinawa-Tokyo relationship, further adding to the multitude of grievances Okinawans have accumulated against the central government.

Frontierism: A new Okinawan identity politics

Hijino and Vogt (2019) argue that a new identity politics is developing in Okinawa, primarily born out of distrust for mainstream parties and the central government. Notable anti-base governor Onaga Takeshi's 2014 speech reflected this attempt to develop an Okinawan political identity:

Against attempts to place U.S. bases in the prefecture by the rest of Japan, it is necessary to correct the false impression that Okinawa is a base-dependent economy. I believe we must overcome [divisions of] ideology, unify the hearts of the prefectural citizens, and continue to demand a resolution of the base problem... We must band together not on ideology, but through our identity as prefectural citizens.³

Onaga's campaign catchphrase of "identity, not ideology" also showed an effort to build a populist, pan-ideological coalition that explicitly appealed to the electorate's sense of Okinawan identity and their collective grievances against the central government. Hijino and Vogt use candidate manifestos for gubernatorial elections post-reversion to quantitatively analyze how identify politics have changed over time. They find that the use of two phrases: *aidentiti*

³ Quote from Hijino and Vogt (2019), page 2.

(identity) and *kenmin no hokori* ('pride of Okinawans') spiked during Onaga's 2014-2018 term, and that governor's inaugural speeches have shown an increasing emphasis on matters of Okinawan culture and identity, culminating in 2014 with Onaga explicitly deploying identity politics in the form of Okinawan cultural and linguistic appeals as a way to mobilize voters and bridge the gap between pro- and anti-base voters.

Another prominent anti-base governor, Masahide Ota, differentiated the Okinawan experience during World War II from the Japanese mindset in a 1999 speech:

Okinawa, formerly a peaceful nation-state (*heiwa kokka*), had no choice but to go along with a military state (*gunkoku*), Japan. This, one may say, was the beginning of Okinawa's fortification (*Okinawa no kichika*).⁴

While Ota was not as prone to using the Ryukyuan identity as Onaga, he, too, sought to appeal to a distinct Okinawan identity that honored the Okinawan sacrifices during and after the war and build a more dignified and secure future for the island (Hijino and Vogt 2019). However, one reason that Okinawan opposition to the bases has hardened could be that identity-based mobilization has increased during Onaga's term, blurring the policy differences between the traditionally pro- and anti-base elements in the Okinawa electorate by causing them identify with the frontier cause. Of course, Onaga's populist framing of the "bad" Japanese government against the innocent, victimized Okinawans may have also been successful at changing the policy views of the Okinawan electorate.

Grassroots mobilization increases awareness of Marine incidents

Anti-base Okinawans have seen remarkable success at organizing at the grassroots level movements, often sparked as a result of incidents committed by marines. A major example of

⁴ Quote from Hijino and Vogt (2019), page 14.

such a mobilizing incident is the 1995 rape of a twelve-year old girl by three GIs, which triggered protests of over 85,000 people and led Governor Ota to refuse to sign the five-year lease that authorizes American use of the land for the bases. Ota took his argument to the Supreme Court, where he argued that the bases violated the fundamental rights of Okinawans to live in peace and security; however, the Supreme Court rejected this argument. Unfortunately for Ota, a referendum that he himself called came in a few days later, showing 89% support for reducing American military presence (Mikanagi 2004). However, Ota had no choice but to reverse course and sign the lease agreement, frustrating the anti-base groups that had supported him until now. Ota went on to lose his reelection bid to a much more pro-basing governor. Concurrently, both the United States and Japan agreed to a revision of SOFA, and both countries agreed to form a Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO). The Committee proposed relocating Futenma to a sea-based facility and “heliport” in Henoko, Nago. Although this solution addressed the concerns many had with the location of Futenma being an air base in the middle of a densely populated city, Nago has a considerable amount of biodiversity that would be affected by the construction of a coastal air base. Additionally, 82% of Nago residents were opposed to the Henoko base (Mikanagi 2004).

A key factor in such hardened opposition to the bases is undoubtedly a result of relentless work by groups such as Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence, a women’s group who organized the various groups protesting the 1995 rape to culminate in the 85,000-person strong protest. Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence has been successful at organizing on two different tiers - on the international scale, they have organized different groups focused on military violence, while also having success organizing different anti-base groups within Okinawa (Mikanagi 2004). Women in particular tend to be on the front lines of the anti-base

movement because they feel that they are fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers by protecting their children from the environmental, noise and safety concerns of the base. Other protest groups include environmental, anti-militarism and elderly-oriented groups. The groups keep a list of atrocities and injustices resulting from the American bases and regularly remind the public through the media and other venues (Vine 2019).

Social movements such as the anti-base movement benefit from having a clear framing and a dedicated involvement from ordinary people who are rallying against a cause that permeates into their day-to-day lives (Ketelaars 2016). The anti-base movement has all of these characteristics, translating into a clear and effective message that will resonate easily with Okinawans. Through protest, rally and organization, citizen groups have achieved remarkable success raising general awareness amongst Okinawans, Japanese, and the international community at large about their objections to the bases.

The lengthy and frustrating base relocation process

Multiple botched attempts to execute a relocation of Futenma has been a particular incident around which anti-base sentiment has crystallized. The SACO first proposed relocation to Henoko, while a 2006 agreement formally recognized this solution. Even though PM Hatoyama had promised relocation of Futenma would not occur within Okinawa, he ultimately endorsed the Henoko plan, which many Okinawans had come to oppose. In 2006 and later 2012, agreements were made to move Marines out of Okinawa into Guam. The current agreement is that around 9,000 Marines will be moved into deployments in Guam, Australia, and Hawaii. This realignment is still currently underway. Members of the American Congress also periodically raise concerns about the costs incurred relocation, which further jeopardizes confidence in the process (Chanlett-Avery & Rinehart 2014).

When anti-base Governor Onaga took office in 2014, he declared his intent to do everything in his resources to block construction at Henoko. His prefectural government repeatedly sued the central government as well as created administrative hurdles to construction, effectively delaying construction by several years while the legal processes played out. A drawn-out, politically fraught contestation is the last reason why public opinion in Okinawa is so anti-base. Okinawans have become exasperated at the gridlock of the relocation process, and the lack of speedy action undoubtedly leads many to question three different sets of authorities' commitments towards addressing their concerns, further solidifying anti-base sentiment.

Other Explanations: An independent, anti-imperial Okinawa?

Considering the Ryukyu Kingdom's sovereign status until its 1879 accession to Japan, as well as its distinct cultural identity, some may question whether or not a desire for Okinawan independence could be a driving factor in resistance to current basing solutions. Serious advocates like Jon Mitchell have raised the possibility that an independent Okinawa could manage their affairs better than the United States or Japan. However, Okinawa today is an unremovable part of Japan. A Ryukyu independence movement has failed to attract any significant attention. Self-determination of Okinawa, with its struggling economy and small population, is not a serious consideration.

Framing the anti-base movement as an anti-imperialist one also falls flat on its face. The United States jointly negotiates the finances and logistics of bases with the host country, who enters into a voluntary agreement with the U.S. in exchange for defense. Rather than being an imperial or occupying force, military basing is a mutually beneficial agreement for both the host nation and the hegemon. Therefore, these two reasons are not adequate framings for understanding the strength of anti-base sentiments in public opinion.

Concluding Remarks: Evaluations and future recommendations

The Okinawan experience of the U.S. military presence has been fraught since its inception. In a country as advanced and safe as Japan, the threat Okinawans feel as a result of hosting the bases is unacceptable. Not lost on many Okinawans is the fact that they are bearing these externalized costs of mainland Japan's defense after being treated as second-class citizens during their accession to the Japanese state and enduring horrific atrocities on behalf of the Japanese during the Battle of Okinawa. Adding to the injustice, Okinawa continues to remain the poorest prefecture, with lower education rates, higher poverty rates, and a struggling economy.

Arguably complicating the equation to alleviate some of the basing pressures is that Okinawans have become even more resistant to any kind of U.S. presence. Certainly, primarily as a result of markedly increased Okinawan opposition, the location of Futenma has become untenable. As I hope to have shown, five interacting factors have contributed to cementing this opposition in public opinion: (1) declining economic dependence on the bases, (2) basing as a national political issue, (3) Okinawan identity politics, (4) grassroots mobilization, and (5) aggravation at the politics of the base relocation process. However, the most easily operationalized solution - relocation to Henoko - is now unlikely to pacify many Okinawans and the anti-base element.

Fundamentally, the Okinawa question is "Can grand, realist strategic ambitions be reconciled with the horrors of war-making in the 21st century?" From the United States perspective, it is less than ideal to have the entire Indo-Pacific Command be at risk of collapsing due to one rape incident. Despite near-daily accusations of the end of American hegemony, its military bases in Okinawa are indeed essential to deterring the North Korean nuclear threat and Chinese threat to Taiwan. If the U.S. military leaves Okinawa, China may take it as an indication

of America's declining commitment to Taiwan's freedom. Furthermore, the American presence serves as a good faith example of American commitment to Japanese defense, and an American police presence aligns with Japan's strategic goal of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" as it reckons with China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Even as their anti-base resolve hardens, the Okinawan people have been admirable in their nonviolent and tolerant opposition to the bases. In the future, the United States would be wise to grant more concessions such as successively more favorable SOFA agreements. Future iterations of current basing solutions and asset packages should strive to be more innovative and less invasive. Base relocation to mainland Japan should be a serious consideration as much as feasible. Additionally, base co-location with the Japan Self-Defense Forces may also serve to alleviate some of the anti-American sentiment in Okinawa, although this element is not as much anti-American as it is anti-base. Attempts have been made to prevent incidents involving Marines, which have a particularly checkered history in Okinawa, but more training and greater education of Marines regarding Okinawan history can always be another preventative measure. No matter how the Okinawa question is resolved, it is clear that the U.S.-Japan alliance truly is the cornerstone of free movement and democratic values in the East. Any resolution must address both the concerns of the Okinawan people as well as safeguard this critical alliance.

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