

Breaking the Imposed Myth – the Permanence of U.S. Bases in Okinawa

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As the realignment of U.S. forces proceeds, pessimism spreads among many Okinawan people, who, feeling powerless, question if it is at all possible for Okinawa to get rid of U.S. military bases. The Tokyo government has just about succeeded in containing local residents' opposition to the bases, offering local communities around the bases development funds, which are subject to retraction if they refuse to accept bases. Local mayors and other administrative chiefs, sensing that resistance was no longer effective, have opted to trade for larger government grants. Official fund infusion has worked like a drug, letting the bases take root yet more deeply in Okinawan society. All of this has strengthened the myth that Okinawa can do nothing without depending on the bases, and this sense of dependence and resignation shared by local community leaders and residents close to them may allow Okinawa to slip into the status of colony. Signs of such a danger are in evidence.

On the other hand, however, more and more people in Okinawa have begun to see that the myth of the permanence of U.S. military presence is something that has been deliberately and craftily planted in the minds of the people by the Japanese and U.S. governments over a long period of time. As they learn about the origins, history, nature, and function of the U.S. bases, using now accessible mines of information, they have realized that the Okinawan people were simply mesmerized and conned by this myth. How can this myth be shattered? This is the question concerned people in Okinawa now seriously ask in order to open up Okinawa's own future.

It is recalled in this context that half a century ago Toma Jugo, a prominent lawyer who served as U.S.-appointed Chief Executive of the Ryukyu government, categorically denied the possibility of Okinawa being reverted to Japan in the future. Waiting for return to Japan was like waiting for the murky water of the Yellow River to get clear, he said, using a Chinese metaphor. It is striking that Toma said this in the midst of the all-Okinawa land struggle of 1956, the first mass resistance to the U.S. military rule against the requisitioning of land for bases. In predicting the future of Okinawa, Toma did not count on people's resistance as a meaningful factor.

At that time, everyone believed that the U.S. would never give up administrative control over Okinawa, a territory it had won at the cost of American blood and turned into its permanent base. Toma's forecast notwithstanding, Okinawa was reverted to Japan 16 years later. Before the reversion, Kushi Village (now Henoko), resigned to the notion that U.S. military rule would last forever, decided to surrender its land for use as a U.S. base, a decision whose bitter legacy is now tasted as the ongoing new Henoko U.S. marine base dispute.

No Confidence in the Nakaima Prefectural Administration

On June 9, 2008, Okinawa had the Prefectural Assembly elections, which are held every four years. Having been elected in November 2006, the June elections were the first opportunity for local voters to review what Governor Nakaima Hirokazu and his administration had done. Before the elections, Nakaima's ruling coalition controlled 27 of the 48 seats while the opposition had 20 seats. The ruling coalition comprised the Liberal Democrat Party, the New Komei Party, and non-affiliates, while the opposition consisted of the Social Democratic Party, the Communist Party, the Okinawa Social Mass Party, the Democratic Party, the Political Group of Okinawa Revolution, and independents. Before the election, Governor Nakaima, characterizing the coming elections as an interim assessment of his rule, declared he was "120 percent sure" that his coalition would win.

Instead, what happened was a shattering defeat of Nakaima and his followers. The opposition returned 26 members and the ruling coalition only 22 to the assembly. The LDP lost four seats from the pre-election 20. As many as six officially recognized LDP candidates lost. The pro-Nakaima coalition barely evaded being completely carved out by the Komei's success in seating all five of its own and affiliate candidates. For the first time in 16 years, the ruling coalition had become a minority in the Okinawa Prefectural Assembly.

Governor Nakaima is the successor to Inamine Keiichi, the first Okinawa top executive throughout Okinawa's postwar history to approve the establishment of a new U.S. base (albeit under the Tokyo government's pressure). In his election campaign, Nakaima pledged to reduce Okinawa's unemployment rate — the worst in Japan — at least to the national average, to use returned U.S. base sites effectively, and to promote industries with a focus on tourism. As regards the base issue, Nakaima, toeing his predecessor's line, promised to oppose the current version of the Henoko base project (the V-shaped runways) in support of the Nago city-proposed movement of the location of one of the runways in the direction of the sea. He also asked for the closure of the Futenma Air Base within three years.

Nakaima served as governor for one year and a half, confident that he was supported by the people, but Okinawa voters articulately no-confidenced him.

Why has this happened? The explanations given by Nakaima himself and the LDP Okinawa Chapter as well as the ruling coalition headquarters in Tokyo are uniform. They both plead that Nakaima was defeated because of the Okinawan people's revulsion to the notorious late-stage elderly healthcare scheme and argued that the base issues had nothing to do with the polling results. Then Chief Cabinet Secretary Machimura Nobutaka said that the defeat only showed that "the political headwind blowing all over against us has reached Okinawa." "I have not heard that the Futenma substitute has ever become an election issue this time," he added. The defeat in the election being irrelevant, the new base project will go ahead, business as usual, as Machimura put it bluntly: "for the reclamation of publicly-owned water body (for the construction of the base in Henoko), we do require Governor's permission but we do not need the Prefectural Assembly's consent." (Evening edition, The Okinawa Times, June 9, 2008).

We remember the same explanation was given after the 2007 Upper House election in which LDP candidate Nishime Junshiro was beaten down by Itokazu Keiko of the Okinawa Social Mass Party by an unprecedented margin of 127,000 votes. Supported by a grand coalition of all opposition parties, Itokazu garnered a staggering 60 percent of the votes cast. Asked why this happened, the LDP ascribed it to the "headwind" — national furor over the government's mishandling and loss of national pension records.

The Nakaima administration sticks to Henoko as the only alternative location for a Futenma

replacement facility, though it requests the Tokyo government to fine-tune the original plan to meet local complaints. This policy, however, fails to enjoy support from Okinawa people. According to an opinion poll by phone conducted by The Ryukyu Shimpo newspaper on May 30 and 31, 2008, shortly before the prefectural assembly election, 59.3 percent of the respondents answered that the alternative base for Futenma should be located out of Okinawa or out of Japan, and 8.7 percent accepted the government's plan (V-shaped runways in Henoko), while only 13.7 percent supported Nakaima's proposal for seaward movement of one of the base's runways.

People's Mixed Fury against the National and Local Governments

Crimes committed by U.S. military personnel and accidents caused by them are still occurring frequently, but the Nakaima administration's reaction to them is perfunctory. The Okinawa prefectural government has been officially pressing for a drastic revision of the Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement for more than 10 years to enable it to properly handle criminal cases involving U.S. personnel. When this request was rejected by the Tokyo government, Governor Nakaima made only a toothless protest, without pressing the goal further.

In January, another crime committed by a U.S. soldier aroused Okinawa-wide indignation and protest. It was the rape of a junior high school student by a 38-year old U.S. Marine in base-dominated Chatan Town in the middle of the Main Island of Okinawa. However, the victim was driven to withdraw her lawsuit against the assailant as a result of a smear attack by some unscrupulous people. As under the Japanese criminal code, rape is an offense subject to prosecution only upon complaint, so the assailant was released by the Okinawa Prefectural Police and was subjected to a court martial in the U.S. military camp.

In the meantime, Okinawa-wide mobilization was being prepared jointly by a broad range of organizations to protest against this crime and to reiterate demand for the revision of the status of force agreement. The action was to culminate in a big rally on March 23. The prefectural assembly unanimously adopted a resolution protesting against this rape case. Governor Nakaima and the LDP Okinawa chapter, however, refused to participate in this rally on grounds that the victim had retracted her lawsuit.

This development stands in sharp contrast with the development over the Japanese school textbook issue in 2007. At that time, all parties and groups of different political and ideological persuasions and social statuses became readily united, and they enthusiastically participated in the huge September 29 rally to protest against the Tokyo government's textbook screening, which obfuscated the responsibility of the Japanese Army for the "collective suicides" of Okinawa citizens during the Battle of Okinawa. It should be noted that when it came to the matter of U.S. presence, there was no such enthusiasm and sense of unity on the part of the Okinawan establishment as had been shown in the textbook campaign.

The victory of the opposition parties in the prefectural assembly election, therefore, represented the explosion of accumulated mixed anger of the people against both the central and local governments on national and local issues. The faulty healthcare scheme mattered, of course, but it is basically the acute Okinawan issues and the ways the central and local governments handled them — ranging from the Henoko base and Takae helipads, to the textbook issue and U.S. soldiers' crimes — that caused the major reversal in the prefectural elections.

The Struggle Goes on: Henoko Sit-in Protest and the Dugong Lawsuit

On May 25, 2008, just before the election day, a meeting was held on the beach of Henoko commemorating the 1,500th day of the daily sit-in protest there. The anti-base sit-in has continued without letup since April 19, 2004. That day, local people staged the first sit-in to protest against officials of the Naha Defense Facilities Administration Bureau (currently Okinawa Defense Bureau) and its contractors who descended on Henoko to launch a hydrographic survey for the projected offshore base.

In parallel with the struggle in Henoko, residents in Takae Hamlet, Higashi Village, up in the mountain area near Henoko, have been on a 24-hour sit-in against the construction of military helipads in their area. On June 30, 2008, they held the first anniversary meeting of their action. The helipads are to be located surrounding Takae, which is close to the U.S. Jungle Warfare Training Center (former Northern Training Center). Linked to Henoko, the helipads will be a serious source of noise and human hazard from the traffic of soldiers, jeopardizing the neighboring communities and the fauna and flora unique to this area.

One remarkable feature of these anti-base struggles is that they have grown into international campaigns. Appeals for support issued from Okinawa went to the rest of the world and enlisted growing support. The appeal to help save the precious local fauna and flora, dugongs living in the sea of Henoko, in particular, has been heard and met with supporting responses. In the U.S., a lawsuit was filed against the U.S. Department of Defense, in which the plaintiffs claimed that the Henoko base construction jeopardizing the dugong habitat was violating the National Historic Preservation Act. On January 24, 2008, the District Court of Northern California handed down an epoch-making decision in favor of the plaintiffs, ordering the DOD to produce measures to avoid adverse influences of the base construction on dugongs. (See the U.S. court decision below.)

The Henoko Dugong Lawsuit

— The Decision by the District Court of Northern California

Plaintiffs' motion for summary judgment is GRANTED. Defendants' motion for summary judgment is DENIED. It is hereby ADJUDGED and ORDERED that:

1. Defendants have failed to comply with the requirements of NHPA section 402, 16 U.S.C. §70a-2, and this failure to comply is agency action that is unreasonably delayed and unlawfully withheld, 5 U.S.C. §706(1).
2. Defendants are ordered to comply with NHPA section 402, and this case is held in abeyance until the information necessary for evaluating the effects of the FRF on the dugong is generated, and until defendants take the information into account for the purpose of avoiding or mitigating adverse effects to the dugong.
3. Defendants are ordered, within ninety (90) days of the date of this order, to submit to the court documentation describing what additional information is necessary to evaluate the impacts of the FRF on the dugong; from what sources, including relevant individuals, organizations, and government agencies, the information will be derived; what is currently known or anticipated regarding the nature and scope of Japan's environmental assessment and whether that assessment

will sufficient for meeting the defendants' obligations under the NHPA; and identifying the DOD official or officials with authorization and responsibility for reviewing and considering the information for purposes of mitigation.

4. If the plaintiffs desire to respond to this submission, they shall file their response within forty-five (45) days of the defendants' filing. (Dated: January 23, 2008)

Currently, the Henoko base issue is in a state of deadlock between the national government and the Nakaima administration.

Inside the prefectural assembly, despite their policy differences, all the local opposition parties, now the majority force in the assembly, share the same stance on the reduction of U.S. bases in Okinawa and opposition to the Henoko base construction.

The leap forward of the Democratic Party of Japan in the prefectural elections, however, should be seen as a potentially worrisome factor. Having but a weak support base in Okinawa, the DPJ national headquarters and president Ozawa Ichiro himself energetically backed the local DPJ effectively during the election campaign. The DPJ thus won but it was at the cost of the Okinawa Social Mass Party, Okinawa's endogenous party that has represented the community people for half a century. The party suffered a serious loss, its seats in the Prefectural Assembly halved, even its executive secretary and other influential candidates failing to be elected. This trend may well be a sign of a turning point of Okinawa politics where the two conservative party system, now the mainstream practice in Japan's national politics, is landing on Okinawa. We should base our resistance to the central government firmly on Okinawan history and rally people around it.

The Tokyo government, allied with national media, is spreading slanderous whispers that the real concern of the base opponents in Okinawa is money. Some community leaders, having given up struggle as hopeless, are after money. This is in a circumstance imposed on Okinawa that deliberately inhibits resistance to bases. What we need to do is to continue to send a different message telling people all over Japan and the world that our concern is not money but the universal principles of peace, environment, and human rights. To carry this task out, we need to break the stifling myth of the permanence of a U.S. military presence.

P.S.

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