

The Iwakuni Referendum and the Future of the U.S. Military Base Realignment Agreement

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By Eric Johnston

When U.S. President George W. Bush and Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro took a friendly stroll through the quiet grounds of Kyoto's Imperial Palace last November, it was easy to assume that things just couldn't have been better between the two countries. Yes, there was the issue of U.S. beef, which Japan had banned in 2003 after mad-cow disease was discovered in U.S. cattle. But bilateral trade issues have always taken a back seat to the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, and it was clear Bush and Koizumi were in Kyoto to celebrate an agreement, signed in October, that would be the first major realignment of U.S. forces in Japan since the end of the Cold War.



Koizumi and Bush met to discuss beef imports and base realignment

Asked by reporters at the brief, staged photo-op that called itself a press conference about "local difficulties" in Japan that might put a damper on Tokyo's ability to live up to its side of the bargain, Bush said that, as far as the U.S. was concerned, there was an agreement in place and how Japan carried it out was up to Japan.

But as the Iwakuni referendum on March 12th showed, the question is no longer how Japan can carry out the agreement but if it can, and at what cost, financially and politically to both countries.

Nearly 59 percent of eligible voters turned out that chilly, slightly rainy day to vote whether or not Iwakuni would accept the transfer of about

1,600 Marines and 57-carrier based jets to the Iwakuni Marine Corps Air Station from the base at Atsugi, which Tokyo and Washington agreed to last year as part of a sweeping realignment of U.S. troops and the recasting of the U.S.-Japan strategic alliance. Nearly 90 percent of those who did vote said "No" to the agreement.

The road to the referendum began last October. As Japanese and American Defense officials were proclaiming a new era of bilateral military ties, local townships that host U.S. military facilities were declaring their opposition to the realignment agreement.

Okinawa, which hosts 75 percent of all U.S. forces in Japan, came out strongly against the plan to move Futenma Air Station to Henoko, off the waters of Nago. The central government knew Okinawa would be a tough sell, but they were surprised to learn that Iwakuni was also strongly opposed. Already home to about 3,000 U.S. Marines and 53 fighter aircraft, the mayor, Ihara Katsusuke, was furious at Koizumi and Defense Agency officials for not adequately consulting with Iwakuni before agreeing to double the number of noisy aircraft and increase the number of Marines by more than 50 percent.

Ihara was joined in his anger by residents who live near the base and are subjected to the noise, and by the anti-base movement in Iwakuni and neighboring Hiroshima. Over the autumn and winter months, the mayor attempted to get the

central government to reconsider its agreement with the Americans, to no avail. Finally, Ihara decided in late January to take the issue directly to voters before the central government issued its "final report" on the base realignments in late March.

Ihara ran into opposition right away from other city council members who realized that a referendum would produce a vote opposing hosting more troops. Anti-referendum politicians and business leaders believed that, with time, a deal could be struck with the central government whereby in exchange for accepting additional Marines and aircraft, Tokyo could be convinced to pump lots of money into the local economy, money which was desperately needed to prop up an aging industrial infrastructure.



The Iwakuni air base

The pro-referendum movement, meanwhile, was worried about two deadlines looming that might adversely affect their efforts. On March 20th, Iwakuni was to expand by merging with seven neighboring municipalities. Although it was uncertain how Iwakuni's newest citizens felt about the realignment agreement, speculation

was that the addition to the rolls of so many new voters would not help the pro-referendum movement because it would make it more difficult to get at least half the electorate out to the polls. Ihara had publicly declared that he would only respect the results of a nonbinding referendum if turnout exceeded 50 percent of Iwakuni's pre-March 20th 85,000 eligible voters.

The other deadline was the Iwakuni mayoral election on April 23rd. The anti-referendum movement argued that Ihara was pulling a pre-election stunt by calling for an early referendum, and that the proper forum to debate whether or not to host the bases was not a quick referendum with a few voters, but a mayoral campaign that would be open to the newly expanded Iwakuni electorate.

But the anti-referendum movement understood that anger at the central government in Iwakuni over the way the central government had negotiated the realignment agreement without any meaningful dialogue with local residents was deep and widespread. Throughout February and early March, Ihara and the pro-referendum faction were careful to urge voters to simply go to the polls and cast their votes. But most of those who pushed for a referendum clearly opposed the realignment plan, and there was little doubt as to what the outcome would be if the turnout was more than 50 percent.

Ihara and the pro-referendum movement also

had to deal with an openly skeptical national media, especially at NHK and the Yomiuri Shimbun, where strong doubts were raised that the 50 percent figure would be reached.

Undaunted, pro-referendum forces continued to canvass local residents and businesses, handing out flyers urging people to go to the polls.

Perhaps placing too much trust in slightly hostile media reports that told them what they wanted to hear rather than finding out for themselves what the mood of voters really was, the anti-referendum councilmen and business leaders didn't bother to launch a campaign to keep people away from the polls until the last minute.

Yet it was the almost unbelievable arrogance of the central government towards Iwakuni in the days before the referendum that likely convinced the majority of Iwakuni voters that they had to make a statement. On March 8th, the Defense Agency announced that, essentially, it didn't care what local municipalities thought about the realignment plan, as it wasn't going to seek prior consent from any of the municipalities involved before visiting the United States in early April, when the final report was due out.

When March 12th came, the streets of Iwakuni were bustling with volunteers and signs urging people to go to the polls. A lone soundtruck cruised the streets, calling the referendum "inappropriate", but it was a half-hearted, clearly dispirited effort. Even so, the pro-referendum

movement was nervous about the turnout until well into the afternoon. Finally, at 4 p.m., with polls still open for another four hours, the 50 percent mark was reached and a visibly relieved Mayor Ihara told a press conference that the democratic process had worked. When the ballots were counted, about 90 percent had voted against hosting the additional Marines.



Iwakuni voters voting in the referendum

The first battle against the base realignment agreement was thus won by the local anti-base movement. Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe Shinzo put on a brave face afterwards, saying the central government “accepts the results” of the Iwakuni referendum. But he also indicated they would make no difference, at least as far as the final report was concerned.

Yet Abe is walking a political tightrope. With Koizumi stepping down as Prime Minister in September, attention in both Japan and the U.S.

has turned to who will be his successor. Abe is considered a likely choice, but a slip of the tongue or a wrong political move vis à vis Iwakuni or other municipalities could send him running for cover.

But whoever sits in the Prime Minister's chair come September will have to deal with the fact that even local municipal governments where opposition to hosting more troops may not be as strong as Iwakuni are going to have to be diplomatically finessed into accepting an agreement that they had no direct say in. As one anti-base activist in Iwakuni said, Koizumi can promise the Americans, and his good buddy George W. Bush, whatever he wants at this point because he won't have to take responsibility for implementing any of those promises. Rather, it will be his successors who will have to beg, plead, bribe, sweet talk, threaten, and twist political arms to actually implement the realignment agreement - as well as guarantee what are certain to be huge amounts of central government subsidies to local politicians and businesses in exchange for their support. If nothing else, the Iwakuni referendum and Okinawan resistance to the base transfer to Henoko have shown that this is going to be far more difficult, and possibly far more expensive to the central government, than it appeared to Koizumi, Bush, and their advisors in Kyoto last November.

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