Okinawa Says "No" to US-Japan Base Plan

Gavan McCormack, T Matsumoto

Okinawa Says "No" to US-Japan Base Plan

Gavan McCormack and Matsumoto Tsuyoshi

In this two-part article, Gavan McCormack and Matsumoto Tsuyoshi assess the significance of the Okinawan parliament's opposition to construction of a new US base in Henoko in light of the recent electoral defeat of the Liberal Democratic Party in Okinawan elections.

Okinawan Parliament Rejects US-Japan Plan to Expand Henoko Base

The Okinawan Provincial Assembly on 18 July 2008 adopted a resolution opposing the construction of a new US base in Henoko district of Nago City in Northern Okinawa. In one form or another, the plan to replace the obsolete and trouble-plagued Futenma US Marine facility in southern Okinawa, where it sits incongruously in the middle of Ginowan township, with a spanking new one in the waters off Northern Okinawa has been underway since 1996. The governments of both the US and Japan are committed to it, first by the Clinton-Hashimoto agreement of 1996, and then (in revised form) by the Bush-Koizumi agreements on post-Cold War military cooperation signed in 2005-6. Local authorities in Okinawa were at first extremely negative, but after heavy pressure, in 1998 both the prefectural Governor and the Nago City mayor accepted the principle of base construction and in 1999 the Okinawa Prefectural Assembly endorsed it after a bitter and prolonged 18-hour debate.

Last week's reversal was therefore dramatic, but it was non-binding, and authorities from Naha to Tokyo insisted that it would make no difference. However, although it will have little immediate national or international consequence, its moral weight is plain. Exercising their formal constitutional powers as the embodiment of the will of the Okinawan people, the Assembly members had defied the governments of the world's two superpowers and exposed the hollowness of the pretence that the reorganization of the military relationship between the two countries rests on democratic consent. The July 2008 Naha vote followed the election in 2007 of several of the staunchest members of the Okinawan movement against the Henoko base plan to seats in the upper house of the national diet and the Okinawan prefectural election of June 2008 (discussed in the following article). With it, the locus of the struggle against militarization, for protection of rare natural treasures of blue coral and endangered dugong, and in defence of constitutional principle, shifts back from Okinawa's streets and sea-shores to its parliaments, local and national.

Popular opposition to the base plan – first modestly and misleadingly described in 1996 as a "heliport" – has been manifest ever since it was overwhelmingly rejected by the Nago City plebiscite of 1997, but the government in Tokyo has concentrated on trying to change, or at least neutralize, popular sentiment. The opposition has suffered many reverses, due in large part to the vacillation and betrayal of local government authorities under the unrelenting pressure of persuasion, bribery and intimidation, but it has not yielded. In 2005, Prime Minister Koizumi recognized defeat, dropped the design to which Japan's government had been committed for a

decade, and in the US-Japan Agreements on Reorganization of US Forces in Japan (2005-6) adopted a new plan. This time, instead of a construction offshore from Henoko, the base would be built on Cape Henoko itself and would be developed out of an existing US base, where he must have assumed that construction works could more easily be screened from public protest. But no change could conceal the fact that the heliport of 1996 had evolved into a monster comprehensive sea and air-base, with twin, V-shaped, 1,600 metre runways, to be constructed on the almost pristine marine environment, where a precious colony of blue coral was only discovered during 2007, where the protected dugong graze on sea-grasses, turtles come to rest, and multiple rare birds, insects and animals thrive.

The Henoko base construction plan for twin runways

In its attempt to impose a giant military machine on this delicate environment, whose human populations were so obviously against it, the national government has steadily honed its arts of persuasion and intimidation. Okinawa became the trial ground for a new system designed to exact compliance from local authorities by fiscal pressure, rewarding the cooperative and punishing the recalcitrant by either pouring in various development funds or withholding them. Such measures were first adopted against the Nago City assembly in 1999, and funds were subsequently poured into "Northern District Development" as part of the price of persuasion. In May 2007 the system was extended nation-wide under a special law to "facilitate the reorganization of US Forces in Japan." (Within months of its adoption, the architect of the new law to assure local compliance, Defence Vice-Minister Moriya Takemasa, was arrested and imprisoned for corruption.)

Along with the fiscal pressures designed to buy off the opposition went the resolve to intimidate those who resisted, applying the whip when the candy no longer sufficed. In May 2007, so intense was the effort by local protesters to block survey work by state employees on the ocean floor off Henoko that Prime Minister Abe sent in the Maritime Self-Defence Force's minesweeper, the Bungo, to conduct the survey covertly, under cover of darkness. Japan Self-Defence Forces thus found themselves despatched on a mission not to defend Japan against any aggression but to coerce and intimidate protesting citizens.

The article that follows was written in June, as a comment on the Okinawan Prefectural Assembly election. Author Matsumoto, a journalist for the Okinawan daily Ryukyu shimpo, noted presciently that passage of the resolution opposing base construction would be "a severe blow to the Governor and to the national government."

The 2005-6 bilateral US-Japan agreements on reorganization of US forces in Japan were designed to transform Japan from a dependent but residually sovereign state into a "client state" (its sovereignty hollowed and empty as priority was given to service of a distant master). Japan's passive, rear support of the US in the Cold War, gradually and almost surreptitiously stretched to the Indian Ocean and Iraq in the decade that

followed the end of the Cold War, would be transformed into a British-style active and shared military commitment to US regional and global strategic interests. To this end, Japan's post-war constitution was an obstacle, to be scrapped and rewritten, or, if that proved impossible, ignored or abused, while the interests of local communities would be manipulated.

However, enforcing the deal on local communities while preserving the formal procedures of democratic governance has proved far more difficult than anyone in Tokyo (or Washington) foresaw. The burden of military reorganization since 2006 sits especially heavily on four districts:

1) Zama, on Tokyo's southern outskirts, was designated as the HQ of US forces in Japan and prospective site for relocation of the US 1st Army HQ from Fort Lewis in Washington State. At present Zama City is the sole local district penalized for non-cooperation under the under the 2007 law for facilitating the reorganization of US Forces in Japan. The mayor of Zama, who has sworn that he will stand firm even if the government (Japanese, US, or both) were to target him with a Cruise missile, faces election for a 7th term in August 2008.

Protest against base reorganization plan outside Camp Zama in 2005

2) Yokosuka, the port city in Kanagawa prefecture south of Tokyo, is the designated home-port for the US nuclear aircraft-carrier George Washington (due to arrive there in September 2008). Yokosuka's mayor, having campaigned for election on a pledge not to allow the home porting, promptly reversed himself once in office by granting consent in April 2006, despite the unanimous declaration of opposition by the municipal assembly. His decision brings the US Navy's nuclear reactors (not to mention its weapons) – over which Japanese authorities have no control - to within 5 kilometres of Yokohama and 28 kilometres from the heart of Tokyo.

3) Iwakuni is the port in City in western Honshu, adjacent to Hiroshima, originally a Japanese naval air base but an American base since 1945. It is to be substantially beefed up to allow the transfer there of 59 carrier-borne US fighters from the naval air facility at Atsugi. With a total complement of nearly 130 US fighter planes, it would then join Okinawa's Kadena as one of the largest bases for the projection of air power in Asia. Although the mayor of Iwakuni enjoyed substantial election support and his opposition to the base expansion had been vindicated by a plebiscite in March 2006 (87 per cent opposition), he was defeated in a February 2008 election by the narrowest of margins, after a fear campaign by the LDP to the effect that his re-election would lead to fiscal collapse and the withdrawal of basic services in the city. Despite the reverse, exit polls in February indicated that a substantial majority of voters remain opposed to the increased military burden on the city (only 18 per cent approving the relocation of the carrier fighters to Iwakuni and 47 opposed). The vote was plainly swayed by economic and financial pressures in the form of fiscal intimidation authorized by the 2007 law. February's election reverse is unlikely to prove the last word in achieving the US-Japan objective.

4) Okinawa, where 75 per cent of all US facilities in Japan are concentrated and where the construction of the Henoko base, the so-called

"Futenma Replacement Facility," has for 12 years enjoyed the highest priority of both US and Japanese governments. Opinion surveys show opposition to the base construction plan running consistently at 70 per cent or higher, even after the adoption of the revised plan of 2005-6. Both prefectural Governor Nakaima and Nago City mayor Shimabukuro have adopted the equivocal pose of saying as little as possible on the project (even suggesting opposition) to get elected and then consenting in principle to it while haggling over details. Governor Nakaima continues to call for the construction site to be shifted some hundreds of metres offshore, though he has offered no coherent explanation of the rationale for doing so, and US authorities have absolutely ruled it out.

Twelve years after the threat of construction of a new base was first unveiled, in the guise of a promise to return Futenma, still no politician in Okinawa could survive an unequivocal public endorsement of the base plan that is at the heart of the Washington-Tokyo design for the future of Asia. So long as democratic governance survives, stubborn and principled local governments, backed by a determined public opinion, can block their implementation.

On the eve of the election discussed in the following article, the national daily, Asahi shimbun (3 May 2008) described the situation as a three-way standoff: the Fukuda government, anxious to fulfil its deal with Washington but enfeebled as its support wavered in the 20 per cent range; Okinawan Governor Nakaima, wanting to appease Tokyo but fearful of the local political consequences (and rightly so as the election outcome showed); and the US government, insistent that the relocation deal be carried through but anxious that excessive pressure might instead imperil it. (GMcC)

Heavy Defeat for Ruling Liberal Democratic Party in Prefectural Elections

"I've always voted for the LDP (Liberal Democratic Party) but this time their new health insurance system for the advanced elderly [requiring compulsory deductions of insurance from pensions in the case of those over 75 years of age] was just too much ." "The TV commercial that Hamada Koichi appeared in was the turning-point. I was overcome with anger at such arrogance, and so cast my vote for the reform camp."

In mid-June, in a park to the east of Naha, I was chatting with the old folk who had gathered for an early morning round of croquet, asking how they had voted in the 8 June Okinawa prefectural assembly elections. According to the leader of the group, One member, according to the group's leader, was a keen supporter of Komeito, and so many of them felt a kind of familiarity with the LDP-Komeito majority in the Provincial Assembly. However, only two of the ten over 70s in the group that I asked had stuck to their guns and voted for LDP-endorsed candidates. Of the eight who had voted for opposition candidates, three LDP supporters had voted for opposition candidates as an admonition, and in all three cases it was because of their strong resentment at the "introduction of the system of medical care for the advanced aged."

The TV commercial that one of these old folk referred to was a promotion for the "Long Life Welfare System" that the LDP showed in Okinawa during the Prefectural Assembly election campaign, before showing in the rest of the country. It featured Hamada Koichi, 79, a former LDP House of Representatives member also known as the "wild man of politics," in what might have been taken as either scolding the LDP or urging it on over its indecisiveness in the face of negative public opinion. Ending with the words, "If something is wrong, it can be fixed; for the sake of our sweet children, the LDP begs you for support," it was supposed to be a call for a review of the system but was seen to have rubbed voters the wrong way and so got a bad

reception.

On the night of June 8th, in the electoral office of Governor Nakaima Hirokazu in downtown Naha, Governor Nakaima and Deputy Governor Nakazato Zenki sat grim-faced as they watched the count in the prefectural assembly election. In the outcome, the opposition won 26 seats (including one independent), and the LDP and Komeito-centred coalition was reduced by five to 22. The reversal, and the severity of the popular judgement, was an incalculable blow for the Nakaima prefectural government and for the national government. There was no doubt that the ruling party's lapse into minority status would be a factor complicating moves to transfer the US Marine Air station from Futenma to Henoko in Nago City, for so long now a headache.

Governor Nakaima

There were 74 candidates for 48 seats in this first Prefectural Assembly election since Nakaima became Governor [in December 2006], and the contest was fierce. Apart from the pre-existing issues of the transfer of Futenma within the prefecture, employment, and the economy, the question of "the system of medical care for the advanced aged" emerged as a crucial issue. The Okinawa election raised questions of national politics, and so attracted nationwide attention. Conscious of the winds being averse to the government over the re-imposition of a petrol tax and the resulting increase in gasoline price, Governor Nakaima emphasized at every possible occasion that "[t]his Okinawan prefectural assembly election is a mid-term evaluation of my administration" and made every effort to have his support groups, including the business community, treat the election as an evaluation of the prefectural government. But the construction industry's vote-gathering capacity was weakened because of the slowdown in construction and groups such as the elderly that had hitherto supported the LDP distanced themselves from it. With the added difficulty of finding replacements for retiring Assembly members, the outcome was a defeat, with Komeito just managing to hold its five seats but the LDP losing four seats. A wide gap opened between ruling party candidates, on 44.1 per cent of the vote, and the opposition with 55.9 per cent.

This is the third time that the Okinawan prefectural government has been in the hands of a minority ruling party, but this time the circumstances are quite unique. It is the first time for the ruling party to lose its majority during the Governor's term, as distinct from times when the prefectural government was switching between conservative and reform control or when the prefectural government fell into a minority in the course of one conservative grouping replacing another. Even in Okinawa, where an atmosphere of confrontation between government and opposition tends to prevail in the provincial assembly, for the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) to make such a great leap by having all four of its candidates elected at the top of the poll was an unprecedented expression of popular will.

It becomes conceivable now that the opposition, having gained a majority in the prefectural assembly, might adopt a "resolution of opposition to the transfer of Futenma Air station within the prefecture." In 1999, when Cape Henoko in Nago City was chosen as the site for the transfer of Futenma, the political ground had been cleared for then Governor Inamine Keiichi

and Nago mayor Kishimoto Tateo to decide in favour of a shift within the prefecture by the conservative majorities in the assemblies of Ginowan City (where Futenma is located), Okinawa prefecture, and Nago City railroading opinions in favour of allowing, promoting, or accepting it. The national government's scenario was "let the local government authorities spell out their wishes autonomously," and the provincial assemblies did what was expected of them.

If the new prefectural assembly were to adopt a "Resolution of Opposition to Transfer within the Prefecture" of the revised "V-shaped" plan for reorganization of US forces in Japan, the impact would be huge. Governing authorities are terrified that if a resolution of opposition were passed now, both the prefecture and the national government would be hobbled. It would be a payback for the stratagem the national government adopted nine years ago when it held that "the will of the provincial assembly cannot be ignored," taking the will of the provincial assembly as an expression of "the will of the Okinawan people to allow the transfer of the base within the prefecture" (as then Prime Minister Obuchi put it).

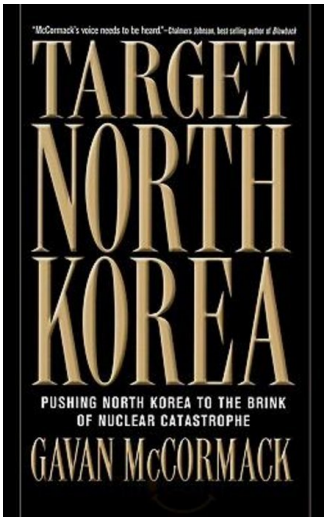
Before the election, Governor Nakaima had pressed Chief Cabinet Secretary Machimura Nobutaka to come to an agreement to adopt the "V-shaped" offshore base design that he had been promoting, buttressing his case by referring to his authority to grant permission for reclamation works, but it came to nothing.

According to Egami Takayoshi, Waseda University Graduate School professor of comparative politics and an expert on Okinawan public opinion concerning the base issue, "if the reversal of control of the prefectural assembly were to be followed now by a resolution of opposition to transfer within the prefecture, it would be a severe blow to the Governor and to the national government." Egami takes the view that "it would be difficult for the government just to ram the transfer through," but he points out that "the possibility cannot be ruled out that, with its back to the wall, it might resort to a special law to strip the Governor of his reclamation licensing powers. That would be an outrage against local government and democracy, but from now on we must be on guard against it." (MT)

Matsumoto Tsuyoshi is a journalist with the Ryukyu shimpo in Okinawa. His article, "Okinawa kengisen yoto sanpai no tsugeki," was published in Sekai, August 2008. Translated by Gavan McCormack.

Gavan McCormack is a coordinator of Japan Focus. His 2007 book, Client State: Japan in the American Embrace, is to be published in Japanese translation by Gaifusha in August, with Korean and Chinese translations to follow in September.

Published at Japan Focus on July 21, 2008.



(http://www.amazon.com/dp/1560255579/?tag=theasipacjo0b-20)

Click on the cover to order.

(http://www.amazon.com/dp/184467133X/?tag=theasipacjo0b-20)

Click on the cover to order.