

The Okinawan Alternative to Japan's Dependent Militarism [Japanese translation available]

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1) Okinawa as Periphery and Centre

Okinawa is simultaneously Japan's periphery and its centre. It is peripheral for obvious geographical reasons, being much closer to the China coast and Taiwan than to Tokyo, but it is also peripheral in the historical sense that its links with the main Japanese islands, and eventually with the modern Japanese state, have been thin, fraught, and relatively recent. Only belatedly incorporated as a prefecture in the Japanese state in the late 19th century, it was then excised from it between 1945 and 1972, and only half restored to it in 1972, since the US bases remained intact. It has continued since then to be governed as if the US-Japan Security Treaty mattered more than the Japanese peace constitution, half-in and half-out of the country, so to speak. Though thus peripheral, Okinawa is also "central" in that it constitutes the fulcrum on which the key security relationship between the US and Japan rests.



Okinawa's culture, with this "half in and half out" quality and the blend of the pre-modern, modern, and post-modern, reflects this ambiguity. With only relatively faint traces of Yamato, Tenno, samurai, imperialist/militarist, and salaryman cultures, and with strong elements of shamanism and sense of affinity with Asia and the Pacific, Okinawa appears as both "Japan" and "non-Japan." Because of its difference, mainland elites have tended to look on Okinawa as backward, but the same qualities may rather signify Okinawa's strength, offering the mainland a glimpse of what its multicultural future and bonds to Asia Pacific nations might look like.



Ryukyu embassy to Edo, 1710

The contradictory forces that surround Okinawa are burdensome, but they generate a tension and openness, and a level of hope, civic responsibility and energy unequalled elsewhere in Japan. Without such qualities, Okinawa could never have become the byword for grassroots democratic struggle that it has become.

2) Okinawa and the US-Japan Relationship

In the post-Cold War world, the US has called for Japan to play a greatly stepped up military role (from the 1996 “Guidelines” to the 2005-6 “Beigun Saihen” or US military realignment), and governments in Tokyo have done their best to comply. My understanding of this is that these measures deepen and reinforce Japan’s dependence and therefore its irresponsibility, transforming the long-term dependent and semi-sovereign Japanese state of the Cold War into a full “Client State.” [1] Far from pursuing its own “values, traditions, and practices,” (as other scholars have argued) 21st century Japan scraps them in order to follow American prescriptions, and the present political confusion stems at root from this identity crisis.



US planes over Southern Okinawa during the 1945 Battle

US Officials such as Richard Armitage (former Deputy Secretary of State), Thomas Schieffer (ambassador) and Defense Robert Gates (Defense Secretary) offer Japan a steady stream of advice - pushing, pulling, and manipulating it in the desired direction, to “show the flag” and “put boots on the ground” in Iraq, to send the MSDF to the Indian Ocean (and keep it there), to revise Ampo de facto and the Constitution explicitly. Yet few ordinary Japanese people share these priorities. It is as much these days as most can manage to cope with livelihood problems - pensions, welfare, and jobs - and so governments, torn between their desire to serve Washington and their need to seem to be serving their own people, always incline to attach priority to the former.

In the post Cold War decades, the contest in Japan between civil society and state power has nowhere been sharper than in Okinawa. Okinawa’s modern history is commonly seen as a series of acts of shobun, or disposal, in which Okinawan people had no say and their interests were disregarded, first in 1879, when the Ryukyu kingdom was abolished and the islands incorporated, as Okinawa, in the Japanese state; second in 1952, when sovereignty was restored to the rest of Japan but Okinawa, its land and population having been devastated in

the Battle of Okinawa, was turned into a US military colony, “Keystone of the Pacific,” a center for the cultivation of “war potential,” and preparation for “the threat or use of force” such as was forbidden under Article 9 of the Japanese constitution; third in 1972, when the islands were returned to Japan, but with bases and the island’s military mission in the service of American power intact; and fourth in 1996, when the return of Futenma base was promised “within five to seven years” but with the catch that it would have to be replaced, the replacement facilities would also have to be located in Okinawa, and Japan would have to foot the bill. The Japanese state has struggled since 1996 to secure the compliance of the Okinawan people to an agenda whose core is priority to the US alliance over the constitution, priority to military over civil or democratic principle, and priority to the interests of the Japanese state over those of the Okinawan people. The cycle of shobun (disposition) and teiko (resistance) has been almost endless.

The contest that has evolved especially since 1995 seems to me to be the defining, still unresolved, struggle of Japanese democracy. Priority to military over civil is what is known in neighboring North Korea by the term Sengun. Nobody, so far as I know, compares Okinawa with North Korea, but is the analogy not apt, at least in this respect? The state demands Sengun, and civil society attempts to articulate Senmin, the priority to citizen values and lives and to peace. For the US and Japanese government, the priority to Sengun is plain.

The state’s design was disguised first as a “Futenma return,” that turned out to require the construction of a major new base. The base was disguised first as a “helipad,” then as a removable, offshore pontoon with a runway, initially 1,500 meters but gradually stretching to 2,500 meters, before eventually assuming the current form of dual 1,800m runways stretching out from Cape Henoko into Oura

Bay, plus a deep sea naval port and other facilities, and a chain of helipads scattered through the forest - a comprehensive air, land and sea base. The people of Nago rejected the designs in their plebiscite of 1997, only to be betrayed by their mayor. They persisted in rejecting the offshore Henoko design until in 2005 Prime Minister Koizumi announced that the state had given up because of “a lot of opposition,” whereupon, however, the state drew up the current design. The helipad of 1996, has now evolved into a design for the comprehensive militarization of Yambaru, the northern reaches of the main island.



Yambaru

The outcome remains uncertain. Governments and bureaucrats continually renew their strength and, backed by the resources of the state, often seem omnipotent. In 2007, even the MSDF was mobilized to take part in an almost certainly illegal survey and to intimidate local protesters. The people, on the other hand, tire, age, and sometimes surrender. Yet, despite everything, for this struggle to be able to stall implementation of a project prioritized by the governments of the world’s two most powerful countries for a decade indicates its profound historical significance.

In July, the Prefectural Assembly took an unequivocal stance of opposition to the new base. [2] Yet Governor Nakaima Hirokazu now quietly abandons both the conditions on which

his predecessor had insisted (joint civil-military use, a 15 year limit, and assurance of no harm to the environment) and those which he himself had demanded (a shifting of the base site offshore into Oura Bay), and argues that “realism” demands viewing the project as a fait accompli - a kind of “reluctant realist” pose - and so the construction at Cape Henoko should go ahead, under the subterfuge that what was to be constructed would not be really a “new” base because it would in part be constructed on the site of an existing one. [3]

Mainland civil democracy is so enfeebled that the Beigun Saihen process of incorporation of Japan's Self Defense Forces under American command in the global “war on terror” passes with little debate or protest. For Okinawa, stepped up militarization is likely to lead, as it did 63 years ago, not to increased but to diminished security, and it is certain to increase conflicts between the US military and Okinawan people, so civil society is compelled to respond.

3) Okinawa and the Constitution

Okinawa is a litmus test of Japan’s constitutionalism. From 1945 to 1972, “Japan” was divided into the mainland “peace state” under the Constitution and its Article 9 on the one hand and the Okinawan “war state” on the other, both tied symbiotically within the US’s Pacific and Asian Cold War system. Since the “reversion” of 1972, the reinforced Okinawan “war state” has begun to erode the fabric of the “peace state” mainland. As Article 9 is steadily emptied out, the “peace” and “war” functions merge, Ampo trumping Kempo.

Although the Nagoya High Court held in April 2008 that the Japanese intervention in the Indian Ocean in the form of dispatch of MSDF to refuel US and allied ships was unconstitutional, the politicians who represent

the Japanese state treated it as a kind of joke. The Foreign Minister said he would read the judgment if he had time and the head of the Air SDF dismissed it with a vulgar comic expression as something that had “nothing to do with us.” Such contempt for the constitution is plainly in breach of Article 99, but it is an attitude that has permeated the higher echelons of state ever since the landmark US intervention of 1959, of which details have only recently come to light. [4] Outside the state bureaucracy, however, civil society strongly mobilizes (at the grass-roots) to protect and demand adherence to Article 9. The “Article 9 Society,” founded in 2004, has blossomed into a nationwide movement with over 7,000 branches. The power of such grassroots mobilization was evident in the Upper House election of 2007, when the revision-intent Prime Minister suffered a humiliating electoral rebuff.

The Okinawan experience also raises large questions about other clauses, notably those on Local Self-Government, especially A 93 and A 94, since Okinawan self-government has repeatedly been subordinated to the requirements of the US alliance.

Recently, instead of seeking the informed consent that a democratic society demands, governments have sought instead to gain formal consent, by fiscal manipulation that combines incentives and threats. It is a stratagem developed over the past decade by the bureaucrats at the helm of the nation state to impose their base project on Nago City. Since Nago opposition to the new Henoko Base was plain, and the formal consent of local self-governing bodies was necessary, money was poured in to secure it under the 10 year, 10 billion yen per year, “Northern Districts Development” policy adopted in 1999.



US plans for the Henoko Base runway

That procedure, codified in May 2007 under the Special Measures Law on the Reorganization of US Forces in Japan (Beigun saihen tokubetsu sochiho) was then applied nationally, so that in that additional sense mainland Japan experienced “Okinawa-ization.” The “Nago model” has proved singularly effective, as shown during 2008 by the defeat of Mayor Ihara Katsusuke in Iwakuni and the surrender of Mayor Hoshino Katsushi in Zama to plans for expanded US military presence in their cities. But even as the state seemed to triumph by using the new law to eliminate opposition to the Beigun Saihen at the local government level, the Okinawan prefectural assembly adopted its historic resolution, showing that that was far from being guaranteed. The employment of fiscal pressures to break popular will and buy consent encourages cynicism and corruption, blocks true development rooted in local needs, and is plainly contrary to the spirit, even if within the letter of democracy (cf. the regional self-government clauses, especially A93 and

A94).

4) Okinawa and Life

It seems to me as a historian that the roots of the present “Okinawan problem” are embedded in a past that goes back long before the US-Japan Security Treaty. It is just 400 years since the Okinawan (Ryukyuan) king enunciated the principle of Nuchi du takara or non-resistance, in the face of the Satsuma samurai’s Sengun, initiating the process of forceful incorporation by Japan. Sengun militarism has been the bane of Okinawa ever since - under Satsuma, the modern Japanese state, the US, and now the joint US-Japan regime. Article 9 was in 1946 a new and astounding reversal for mainland Japan, but for Okinawa it was a reversion to an ancient ideal, and to the centuries when the culture of these islands was a byword for sophistication, culture and peace.

If it were indeed the case that Nuchi du Takara principle encapsulates some Okinawan essence, then it is up to present-day Okinawans to spell out ways, not just for Okinawa but for humanity, to come to terms with nature, finding a way beyond both war and rampant developmentalism with its environmental destruction. I have said enough about war. In the public works-centred economy that has prevailed in Okinawa for the three and a half decades since reversion, nature has come to be seen as something to be “fixed” (by seibi) in a process that has virtually no limit. [5] As a result, the natural environment, notably in the form of the coral, the dugong, the noguchigera, is under siege. Only a recovery of Nuchi du takara values (and within them, presumably, a reassertion of cooperative, non-market, yuimaru values) can hope to save it. Plainly the Yambaru can be either militarized or protected, can follow either “Sengun” or Nuchi du takara, not both.

Gavan McCormack is emeritus professor at Australian National University and a coordinator of Japan Focus. His most recent book is [Client State: Japan In the American Embrace](#), London and New York, Verso, 2007, with Japanese, Chinese and Korean translations published in 2008.

This is a slightly abridged English version of a talk delivered in Japanese ([see attached text](#)) at the offices of the Ryukyu Shimpo in Naha, Okinawa, on the occasion of the award of the Ikemiyagi Shui Prize to Japan Focus on 18 September 2008. An abridged version of the Japanese text was published in Ryukyu shimpo on 22 September 2008. It was posted at Japan Focus on October 13, 2008.

Notes

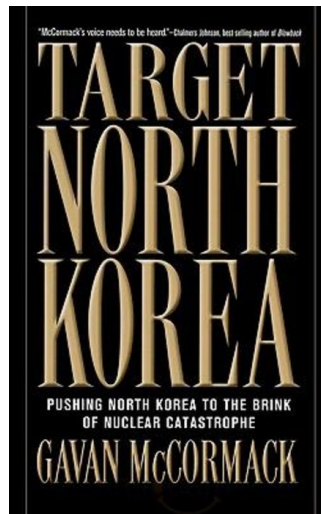
- [1] [Client State: Japan in the American Embrace](#), London and New York, 2007.
- [2] Gavan McCormack and Matsumoto

Tsuyoshi, "[Okinawa Says "No" to US-Japan Base Plan](#)", [Japan Focus](#), 21 July 2008.

[3] Ryukyu shimpo, 5 September 2008.

[4] When a district court in the Tachikawa Case in 1959 found the US military presence in Japan in violation of the war-renouncing constitution, the US government applied intense pressure to have the judgment set aside. In due course it was, opening the path that has been followed ever since: the judiciary abstaining from questions of legitimacy of the security treaty because of its highly political nature and successive governments stepping up military commitments under the principle of "interpretative revision" of the constitution. ("Judicial independence infringed," editorial, Japan Times, 3 May 2008; Odanaka Toshiki, "Shihoken dokuritsu e no oson kodo," Sekai, August 2008, pp. 113-121.)

[5] See my "Okinawa and The Structure of Dependence" in Glenn Hook and Richard Siddle, eds, [Japan and Okinawa: Structure and subjectivity](#), New York and London, RoutledgeCurzon, 2003.



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