

“Unacceptable and Unendurable:” Local Okinawa Mayor Says NO to US Marine Base Plan 稲嶺進名護市長 沖縄への過重負担は「許容の範囲、受忍の範囲を乗り越えている」

Miyagi Yasuhiro

“Unacceptable and Unendurable:” Local Okinawa Mayor Says NO to US Marine Base Plan (Japanese text available

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Miyagi Yasuhiro interviews Nago City Mayor Inamine Susumu, 5 October 2011, Nago City Hall

Introduction, interview and commentary by Miyagi Yasuhiro

Translation by Gavan McCormack and Satoko Norimatsu

The Futenma Marine Corps Base in Okinawa’s Ginowan, often described as the most dangerous in the world, is situated in the midst of a densely populated area and has been the site of multiple accidents and clashes between the US military and Okinawans. The Japan-US agreement to have Henoko Village in Okinawa prefecture’s Nago City as the site

to transfer the Futenma Marine Corps Base when it is returned to Okinawa, dates back to the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) Agreement of 1996. Yet the issue of building a new base has been contested for fifteen years. Okinawa agreed to the transfer in 1999, albeit subject to several conditions, but a Japan-US agreement that was reached in 2005 to build the base on an enlarged scale ignored Okinawan conditions.¹ The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government in 2010, after reconsidering the Japan-US agreements, agreed on the same site. But popular will against relocating the Futenma base within Okinawa is so strong that the possibility of Okinawan acceptance of the Japan-US Agreement is virtually zero. I asked the Mayor of Nago City, site of the controversial planned base, for his honest opinion.

Interview

Miyagi: How do you as mayor of Nago feel about the fact that even under the DPJ government the Japan-US agreement came full circle back to Henoko?

Okinawan Opposition to US-Japan Plans to Build a Base at Henoko



Inamine Susumu, at Nago City Office
(Photo by Miyagi Yasuhiro)

Inamine: Before the DPJ took office, and for a while immediately afterwards, there was talk, even on the part of Prime Minister Hatoyama, of “a Futenma Replacement Facility being shifted outside of Okinawa.” So at the time of change of government, Okinawans rejoiced, thinking, “can it be that at last the day we were waiting for has finally come?” But in no time at all, for the reason that “nowhere else is prepared to take it,” it came back to Henoko. This was the main reason, although there was talk about “deterrence” too. If nowhere else was prepared to take it, then that was even more true of Okinawa, since the heavy burden of bases has been weighing on Okinawa for 66 years. Still today 74 percent of US bases are concentrated in Okinawa. Nowhere else is

more concerned about the human harm, material harm, all sorts of harm that bases bring. But the governments of Japan and the US turned a blind eye to these Okinawan circumstances and reached agreement. There was virtually no sign of serious effort to find any place “outside Okinawa” including outside Japan - which meant Guam. Scenarios worked out on someone’s desk, or cobbled together by bureaucrats under the LDP-New Komeito government, were just adopted without investigation by the government that followed. They seem to have just taken the easy way out, adopting the extremely simplistic idea of continuing to push for a Henoko transfer, since people outside Okinawa would not object to keeping the base in Okinawa, and since, if just Okinawans had to bear the burden, it would not much matter. As the *Ryukyu shimpo* put it in an editorial on 4 September, they just “stopped thinking.” The idea of a Henoko transfer, which is stubbornly promoted without consideration of the large changes in the political situation in Okinawa, including public opinion since I was elected, will never be accepted by Okinawa. An agreement on transfer to Henoko reached at some high level between Japan and the US is an agreement that ignores Okinawan reality and will never be accepted. We have borne a heavy burden for 66 years, including suffering human rights abuses, and will not tolerate it going on any longer. As I see it, the situation has become both unacceptable and unendurable. For that reason, whatever the two countries may promise each other, the prefecture of Okinawa and the City of Nago will never accept it.

Miyagi: When one looks at the process by which the base replacement “reverted” to Henoko, things moved first from the SACO Report (1996) to the “Realignment of US Forces in Japan” (2006), then to the “Henoko Agreement” (2010). What do you think of the view that the reason “thinking was suspended” and the realignment agreement was reaffirmed was that Nago at one point accepted the SACO

Agreement?

Japanese Government Attempts to Buy Okinawan Support for the Base

Inamine: Politicians often say that “politics is about change” or “who knows what tomorrow may bring.” And things often happen like that. It is true that there was a sequence of events in which Nago did adopt a position of acceptance. But the fact is that the various important conditions that Nago City had attached to acceptance - including revision of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) - were simply treated by the Japanese government as unworthy of attention and scrapped. At the same time, it is also a fact that people had expectations, but I think their acceptance was in anticipation of the “candy” of development funds provided by government for base acceptance. Under what was known as “Shimada Kon”² and “Northern Districts Development” plans, 100 billion yen was promised over ten years. There were development projects for Nago City alone that amounted to over 50 billion yen, or 80 billion yen if prefectural and national projects are included. But the people of Okinawa over those ten years felt none of the prosperity or the benefits they had anticipated from the development plans. Over those years, I think the people of Nago, and of Okinawa, came to understand that the “candy” of development plans did not meet their expectations. That was one consideration. Another was the change in the times and the change of government. But I think the decisive factor was the realization that such forms of development could not bring satisfactory outcomes and that we could not just continue on in this way.

Miyagi: By “could not just continue on in this way” you mean could not go on and allow the base construction?

Inamine: Yes.

‘Development’ Gone Awry

Miyagi: If, as you say, there was no sense of benefiting from those development measures, could that be turned around to ask, if there could be a development that could deliver such a sense, might there then be scope for base acceptance?

Inamine: I don’t think so.

Miyagi: Why?

Inamine: Because such funds are not earned by the sweat of the people. Monies that come easily just for accepting base construction can be used without restriction to do all sorts of things, so that projects get launched even though they are not really needed but are just things that we would like to have.

Miyagi: You mean the so-called “box” (white- elephant) projects?

Inamine: Yes. Also people came to realize that although these things could be done without much initial burden, later the burden comes crashing down. Take for example a development fund of around three billion yen. Nago City’s agricultural output in the early 1990s was over nine billion yen, highest in all Okinawa, but now it is only six billion, a drop of three billion. Just by regaining that three billion we can obviate the need for three billion yen in development funds. And that would be a benefit that we would have earned for ourselves, produced by Nago citizens and recycled among Nago citizens. Furthermore, and I can say this because we have such an abundance of high quality agricultural lands, this would be sustainable, this year, next year, and so on. In that sense, it becomes unnecessary for us to rely on “development measures” once we decide that we can accomplish this by our own efforts and without “development measures.”

Miyagi: The people of Nago did indeed come to understand that development funds tied to bases did not lead to the development of Nago City. However, the Northern Districts

Development funds that you mentioned were not classified as special development funds tied to base construction, were they?

Inamine: In the beginning that was the case, but later people such as former Higashi Village mayor Miyagi Shigeru had no hesitation in saying, “I think there is no question that these funds are linked to base construction,” or “we thought we could just get these monies by taking trips to Tokyo.” It is my personal conviction that you cannot deny a connection between these funds and base construction. Moreover, half of the “Northern District Development” funds just went for accelerated public works projects and you can hardly claim that these projects benefitted the northern-district municipalities with weak financial capability.³ I think there was little sense that what they were getting was worthwhile in return for base acceptance.

Miyagi: It seems that, despite the opposition of Okinawa prefecture and Nago City, Japan and the US have reached formal agreement on Henoko and are set on proceeding with the environmental assessment and other procedural steps. How do you as mayor intend to respond?

Inamine: I think the present situation is not one in which the base construction can be carried forward. However, there is concern that the government might decide to press ahead using force. As Governor Nakaima put it recently, if they press ahead with construction using force, the whole of Okinawa will turn hostile and a prefecture-wide movement to demand the return of all the currently existing bases might develop. I don’t think the governments of Japan and the United States will do that, but we have to take steps to dissuade them before it reaches this point. It is a national problem and a problem of protection of nature, not something to be trivialized by referring narrowly to an “Okinawa problem” or a local, Nago problem. Considering that Okinawa is being

incorporated in a global strategy that goes beyond the bounds of the Japan-US Mutual Security Treaty, the matter is not trivial. We must work at a national level or even at a global level to communicate this and to persuade the governments of Japan and the United States.

Debunking the Myth of Needy Nago

Miyagi: It seems that some Nago people, including a former mayor, calling themselves “the pro-base faction,” are in close touch with leading figures in the ruling party. What do you as mayor think of this?

Inamine: Since there is actually no movement or organization within Nago calling for bringing the base to the City, there is nothing that Nago City can do about it. Although there might be such a trend, I think it amounts to nothing more than a push by a few powerful leading individuals, together with followers comprising groups and individuals connected to special interests. I doubt if individuals following that leadership have calculated whether it really is in their best interest. It is more likely that they do not think especially about it but feel under some kind of obligation because of favours rendered. If these people could be made to recognize more of what is involved, and of where the fifty billion yen has gone, they would understand. So in my view this is just a collection of people tied to special interest groups.

Miyagi: These people have had enough traction to be able to win Nago mayoral elections three times in the past and they include supporters of your opponent, the former Nago mayor, at the time of your election in 2010. Such people might be few in number but many citizens seem to agree with them. What sort of plea for understanding do you make to such people?

Inamine: This is something that also comes up in question-time at the City Assembly, when it is said that we are unable to get money from

government or that the number of public works projects is declining. The allegation that Nago City cannot balance its books circulates. The question of what is happening to public works is pursued. To that I respond, citing actual statistics, “there is hardly any difference in the trend of investment expenditure,” or “within Okinawa, Nago City investment expenditure exceeds that of Urasoe City or Ginowan City.” Many citizens do not realize this and are just made to dance to the tune of demagogic attacks. I think it is not impossible to win their understanding if we show them actual figures, explaining for example that we give priority to education and welfare, which are closely connected to people’s livelihoods, and that rather than public works investment declining, education and welfare expenditures are increasing.

Miyagi: Mayor Inamine, thank you for your time.

Comment

In Japan, where there had been no real change of government through the long post-war period, a new coalition government emerged with the overwhelming victory of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan in the lower house elections of 2009. During the election the DPJ called for reconsideration of the terms of the Japan-US Agreement for a transfer of the US Marine Corps base at Futenma, proposing a transfer “outside Japan, or at least outside Okinawa.” Since this is the biggest of all issues for Okinawa, Okinawan expectations for this election ran high. Two new DPJ candidates were elected and neither the Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP) nor its ally New Komeito won any seats at all.

Nago City, designated site for the Futenma Replacement Facility, had on three occasions returned pro-base mayors subsequent to the final SACO report of December 1996, despite the fact that a majority opposed base relocation here in the Plebiscite of 1997. But in 2010, it

chose a mayor who opposed base construction. In the Okinawa gubernatorial election in the same year, the incumbent Governor was re-elected after calling for “relocation outside Okinawa.”

After a confused process of search for an alternative Futenma transfer site, in 2010 the DPJ reverted to the 2005 agreement on realignment of US Forces in Japan. Although the stationing of US forces overseas has been under review within the US, there has been no sign by the Japanese or US governments of any reconsideration of the agreement to transfer the Futenma Marine air station to Nago City (Henoko).

In the implementation of the 1996 SACO report, there was a failure of mutual trust between Government of Japan and Okinawa, because the Okinawan side’s pre-conditions for acceptance of a Futenma transfer – joint civil military usage, revision of SOFA, and limited term US military usage – were ignored. As a result, popular, non-violent resistance obstructed and delayed the base construction, and after 10 years of this Kabuki theatre, in 2005, turning a blind eye to the Okinawa side’s proposals, Japan and the US agreed to retain the Henoko site and even expand its scale. Nago City, with its pre-conditions ignored, in the mayoral election of 2006 returned the incumbent mayor on an anti-base platform. After his election, however, he agreed with the Government of Japan to accept this expanded version of the base subject only to some slight revisions. The electorate passed judgement on this behaviour in 2010, when a new mayoral candidate [Inamine Susumu], a former Nago City official who had held various posts including head of the Education Department, was elected on a consistent anti-base position.

Astonishingly, after the Japan-US Agreement of 2010, the DPJ government made no effort to secure the understanding of the Nago City mayor to the designated site. Even when the

mayor went up to Tokyo, his requests for meetings were rebuffed. Instead, Tokyo continued to maintain close contact with the former mayor who had been defeated.

Presumably the Government of Japan maintained close contacts with the former mayor in the hope of persuading Nago City, which in the past had accepted the SACO agreement, but at the time of the Kabuki theatre, the Government of Japan had at least responded to the Okinawa side's "conditions for acceptance." It was the Government of Japan that walked away from the negotiating table and ignored Okinawa at the time of the 2005 Japan-US Agreement. The former Nago City mayor alone cooperated with the Government of Japan, but judgement was passed on that mayor with his defeat in the election. The political fact is that now even conservative political parties on Okinawa which endorse the Japan-US Security Treaty call for relocation of Futenma "outside Okinawa."

In order to maintain US bases in Okinawa, the Government of Japan took various steps including provision of special development measures for base-hosting municipalities, but after 10 years, those measures have borne no fruit. The reality is that even the conditions for construction of the base imposed by those who support the Japan-US Security treaty were not accepted. If the Government of Japan does not assess this reality and devise policies accordingly, the Japan-US relationship is likely to suffer severe damage.

The interview with Nago City's mayor shows vividly how the development measures designed to achieve base acceptance have failed to bear fruit, and allows us to understand how the excessive base burden on Nago City has come to be seen as a breach of human rights. There will be no good outcome if the Governments of Japan and the United States take lightly the words of the Nago mayor, that "the situation has become both unacceptable

and unendurable."

Miyagi Yasuhiro

Inamine Susumu is Mayor of Nago City. After working at Nago City Office for thirty-eight years, including school superintendent from 2003 to 2007, he was elected Mayor on January 24, 2010 on a platform that included opposition to the plan to build a new Marine base in Henoko.

Miyagi Yasuhiro is former Nago City Assembly member (1998-2006). He was instrumental in the 1997 Nago citizens' plebiscite that resulted in the majority voting against the new base plan.

Gavan McCormack and Satoko Norimatsu are coordinators of the Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus.

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Notes

¹ For details of the development of “Futenma Relocation Facility” plans, see Ota Masahide (<https://apjff.org/-Norimatsu-Satoko/3415>), “‘The World is beginning to know Okinawa’: Ota Masahide Reflects on his Life from the Battle of Okinawa to the Struggle of Okinawa,” *the Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, under subheading “On the ‘Futenma Relocation” and plans to build a new base at Henoko, Oura Bay.”

² *Shimada kon (Shimada kondankai)*: the “Shimada Advisory Group”, set up under Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro in 1997, headed by Shimada Haruo, to disburse special development funds to stimulate growth in base-hosting Okinawan towns and villages.

³ Projects subsidized by the central government are never subsidized 100 percent; local municipalities must bear part of the expense including post-construction maintenance. The Northern District development funds encouraged Nago to undertake projects beyond its financial capability.