

Yonaguni: Dilemmas of a Frontier Island in the East China Sea □□ 与 那国—東シナ海に浮かぶ国境の島の板挟み状態

Gavan McCormack

Forty years after they were “normalized,” relations between Japan and China are so abnormal that events planned to celebrate the anniversary in September had to be scrapped.

Tension rises throughout the East China Sea and especially in the vicinity of the Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands where Japanese, Chinese and Taiwanese fishing and coastguard vessels jostle, each insisting that the islands and their adjacent waters are their own sovereign territory. National, and to some extent global, attention focusses on an “Okinawa problem that has until recently, been almost entirely seen in the context of the main island of Okinawa, where the “world’s most dangerous base,” Futenma Marine Air Station, continues to sit in the middle of Ginowan City 16 years after its promised return, where works on a projected new base to replace it at Henoko in Nago City to the north remain blocked, and where plans to introduce the highly controversial tilt-rotor MV-22 Osprey aircraft have roused the entire prefecture to fierce united protest. Yonaguni opens a new front in the contest between the agenda that the governments of Japan and the United States are intent on imposing and local aspirations for an order of peace

and cooperation that would finally supplant Cold War confrontation.

On 24 September 2012, a special session of Yonaguni Island’s Town Assembly voted 3:2 against a proposal to conduct a town plebiscite on the question of whether or not to host a Self-Defense Force facility.

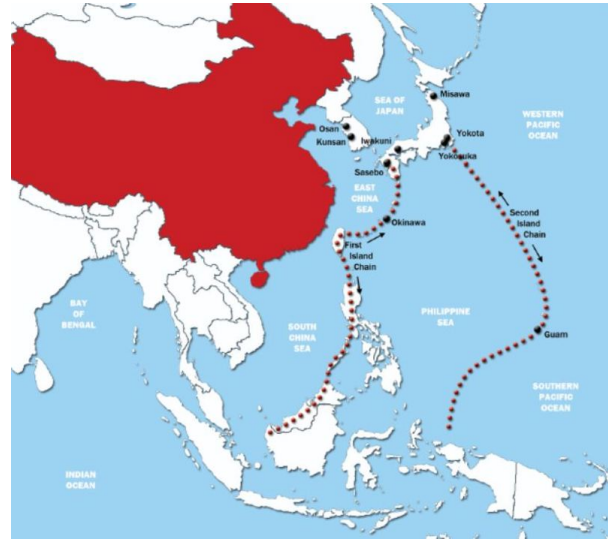
The speech delivered on that occasion to the Town Assembly by Mr Tasato Chiyoki is attached below as a document. It was a decision to which little attention was paid elsewhere, yet it shows a microcosm the way in which the Obama administration’s “pivot” to Asia is affecting local communities in the Northeast Asian region.

Yonaguni assumes – if the island’s controversial decision to host a SDF facility is carried out – the role of front line in an emerging East Asian Cold War. To China, the Japanese decision to implant a military force within the first Chinese maritime line of defense and in the closest Japanese island territories to the contested Senkaku or Diaoyu islands and to Taiwan, would inevitably be seen as a challenge. Few islands face choices of such moment.

Militarizing the Pacific

From the Chinese viewpoint the Okinawan

island chain resembles nothing so much as a giant maritime Great Wall intervening between it and the Pacific Ocean. The US commitment to concentrate 60 per cent of its navy - six aircraft carriers plus “a majority of our cruisers, destroyers, littoral combat ships and submarines” in the Pacific, i.e., primarily with China in its sights, by 2020,¹ and the further continuing build-up of force on the part of its three regional allies, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, puts these farthest islands under great new pressure. To China the outcome has the look of challenge and intimidation, but US defense planners insist they are responding to the threat posed by a Chinese build-up. They call the Chinese strategy one of “A2/AD” (Anti-Access/Area Denial). China, they say, has drawn a First Island Defence Line² from the Korea peninsula through Jeju island, the Okinawan islands, Taiwan, and the Philippines (the Yellow, East, and East China Seas, China’s “near seas”), and is concentrating on developing the capacity in the event of hostilities to deny hostile access within those seas while building also significant capacity within the seas bounded by the second line, through Ogasawara, the Marianas, Palau to Indonesia, with the long-term aim (by 2050 or thereabouts) of extending naval operational capacity to the “far seas” i.e., becoming by then something like the US, if without the acquisition of military bases and strategic allies.



First and Second Island Chains (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010)

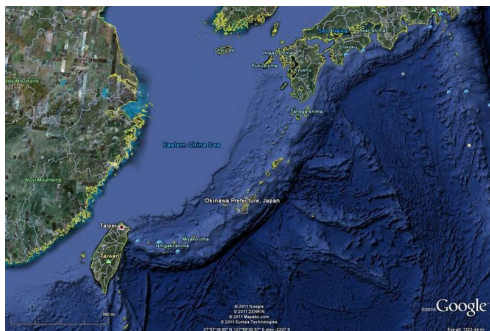
Intent on maintaining strategic and tactical superiority over China and defying its “A2/AD” aspirations in advance, the US has developed what it refers to as its “Air-Sea Battle” concept and a “Pacific Tilt” doctrine. The commitment under the former to coordinate military actions across air, land, sea, space, and cyber space to maintain global pre-eminence and crush any challenge to it, and the shift under the latter of the US global focus from the Middle East and Africa to East Asia, have profound implications for Okinawa, whose islands thereby become a “front line.” Parts of the island chain, including Yonaguni, front, or even straddle, the First Chinese line. As the role assigned to Okinawa (including Yonaguni) turns it into a front-line, it carries the heightened risk borne by all front-line states – of exposure and vulnerability, evoking memories of Okinawa’s position as a “front line” in the Battle of Okinawa of 1945, which took the lives of more than one-fourth of the civilian

population and left the islands in ruin.

The heavy US military presence on and around Okinawa's main island already constricts and challenges China, but as of now there are no military installations in the 500 to 600 kilometre stretch of sea that extends from there to the southwest, through the Yaeyama Group and as far as Yonaguni, closer that is, to both Taiwan and mainland China. Undefended, they were peaceful and secure throughout the Cold War. The new US and Japanese plans call for a fundamental change to turn these islands into a hostile barrier, with the potential to contain China within its "First" line of island defense.

Yonaguni

Yonaguni is the island farthest from Japan "proper", a good deal closer to Taiwan's capital of Taipei (less than 200 kilometres) or to the mainland city of Fuzhou (370 kilometres) than it is to the Okinawan prefectural capital of Naha (ca. 640 kilometres), much less the national capital (ca. 2,000 kilometres). On a clear day, Taiwan's mountains can be seen from its shore.



Okinawa from space. Yonaguni (the blue dot just to the southeast of Taipei) is so tiny that it is not even named.

It is by any measure a small island, with a perimeter of 27.5 kilometres and an area of 29 square kilometres. The island nevertheless boasts a rich culture and its own language, *dunan munu*, which is in fact not a "dialect" of Japanese but a distinctive language, sharing a smaller proportion of cognates with the national language than modern German with modern English. Though classified by the United Nations as "severely endangered," it is still to be heard on the island in everyday communication.³ However, Yonaguni pays a price for location at the farthest periphery and on this frontier. It has long suffered fiscal, demographic, social, and economic crises, complicated now by military and strategic pressure.

It goes without saying that Tokyo holds Yonaguni (and the other Yaeyama islands) to be unquestionable, integral Japanese territory. And yet its status has been much more ambiguous than such a term might suggest.



Cape Irizaki, Yonaguni, Westernmost Point in Japan (Photograph: Shiba Hiromoto, November 2011)

These islands were long part of the Ryukyu kingdom, but, so marginal did they once seem to Tokyo that, though only incorporated in the modern state in 1879, Japan offered them to China a year later as part of a deal: the Yaeyama Islands to China in return for “most favoured” nation access for Japan to the interior of China. In other words, Meiji Japan saw them as peripheral and would gladly have sacrificed them for recognition as a major imperialist power claiming rights in China. China, however, proposed instead a three-way division – North to Japan, South (including Yonaguni) to China, with a revived Ryukyu kingdom on the Okinawan main island. As the two sides haggled over how to split the islands to serve their respective interests, the occasion passed. The Japanese draft became a “phantom treaty.”⁴ Again in the 1951 San Francisco Treaty settlement, Japan abandoned Yonaguni (along with the rest of Okinawa), which passed under US military control for the next 19 years.

Furthermore, during the heyday of the Japanese empire Yonaguni developed close economic and social ties with neighbouring Taiwan, even thriving in the late imperial days and in the early post-war era till the US took steps to close down the then thriving black market.⁵ After 1972, since there had been no US military presence there, the liquidation of the US-controlled Ryukyu regime in 1972 left few scars on Yonaguni. Throughout the rest of the Cold War and the standoff

between (mainland) China and Taiwan, Yonaguni remained undisturbed, with just two policemen, a hand weapon apiece, to maintain law and order.

Lacking a high school, hospital, or significant industry, Yonaguni’s population declined steadily from a peak of about 12,000 in 1947 to 1,850 (780 households) in 1999 and to 1,534 (753 households) by 2012.⁶ It constitutes a highly concentrated version of the demographic attrition faced by Japan as a whole, particularly rural and insular areas. When children leave the island at completion of middle school education, the farewells are poignant because too often the departures are permanent, a phenomenon known as “departure at age 15” (*15 no tabitachi*).

As the Japanese state’s fiscal crisis deepened in the early 21st century, and neo-liberal nostrums were applied to try to deal with it, Tokyo also shrank the block fiscal grant on which the island depended for infrastructure and services, which had the effect of accelerating the cycle of contraction and decline. Mayor Hokama Shukichi late in 2011 spoke of an annual grant that in the 1990s was between three and four billion yen being reduced by ca. 150 million yen each year and standing, as of 2011, at around 2 billion yen (equivalent to \$2.5 million).⁷ The sense of decline was heightened by the decisions in Tokyo to close branch offices of national justice and immigration departments and the local weather observation station.⁸ Yonaguni became a typical

“*kasō*” or depopulated region. Despite its location at the heart of the world’s most dynamically developing region, and despite the mounting pressures upon it, Yonaguni became an ever more peripheral and neglected part of Japan.

The Search for an “Okinawan Way”

Yonaguni shares with the other Okinawan islands the social memory of the time predating the rise of the modern Japanese state when the Ryukyu kingdom flourished as an independent trading link between the communities of East and Southeast Asia, on the principle of open seas, demilitarized, with a vibrant culture and an open society. Such memories have political and identity, as well as trade and investment, implications. Since the end of the Cold War, Okinawa has struggled to revive some of its past glory by seeking ways to engage more closely with its neighbours, across and beyond the conventional boundaries of the state. The “Cosmopolitan City” project under Governor Ota Masahide (1990-1998), was one attempt to turn peripherality in the national space into centrality in the regional space. It projected the idea of Okinawa as a “Cosmopolitan,” or “International” City (*kokusai toshi keisei kōshi*) for the approaching 21st century.⁹

However, this “Cosmopolitan City” Okinawa depended on its policy twin, the “Action Program” to get rid of the bases on Okinawa by 2015. Cosmopolitan City Okinawa would be a

post-base, demilitarized Okinawa. Refusing to separate the two, however, Governor Ota failed to persuade Tokyo on either count. The national bureaucracy was reluctant to loosen the strings of bureaucratic control so as to make Okinawa sufficiently autonomous to be able to take the necessary initiatives. For Tokyo’s purposes, the underlying principle of all Okinawa policy has been, and remains, “base-first-ism,” the provision of military facilities for the US and the concentration of significant military might on the islands, and on that it would not compromise.

By contrast, for Ota and many – probably a substantial majority – of Okinawans, economic and social objectives called first and foremost for the bases to be reduced and eventually abolished. In March 2010, for the first time in an official document, the Okinawa 21st Century Vision, the American bases were described as “a large obstacle in the path of Okinawan development” and a burden “that Okinawa has to strive ceaselessly to overcome.”¹⁰ The “Vision” harked back to the idea of Okinawa as a regional hub, linked by free, or greatly decontrolled, exchanges of people, goods and capital between it and its neighbour territories, including a vibrant tourism.

The Search for a “Yonaguni Way”

Yonaguni Island, on a smaller scale, has striven to find a formula that would allow it to maintain island autonomy but in cooperation with

neighbour states in some form of relatively “open-border,” regional cooperation frame, eschewing confrontation and militarization. It has made a series of significant choices since the 21st century began. In October 2004 it chose, by referendum, not to merge with its Yaeyama Island neighbours, Ishigaki and Taketomi.¹¹ It then proceeded to draw up a plan for its own future, a “Vision” statement adopted early in 2005,¹² whose key themes were autonomy, self-governance, and symbiosis. It was a design to turn the island’s traditionally negative qualities of isolation and remoteness into positive qualities through adoption of a frame of regional interconnectedness. Yonaguni might be far from the national capital, Tokyo, but the coast of Taiwan and of mainland China are relatively close, and even Hong Kong and Manila are closer (800 and 1,000 kilometres respectively) than much of Japan. The island’s future under the “Vision” depended on turning that proximity to advantage.

The linchpin of the 2005 “Vision” statement was the opening (or rather the restoration) of close links with Taiwan. There had been recurrent attempts in Yonaguni (and more broadly, Okinawa) to compensate for peripherality within the Japanese nation state by engaging its neighbours, but, till the end of the Cold War the fact that a highly sensitive frontier ran through the Taiwan strait and in close proximity to Yonaguni and the Yaeyama Islands was not

propitious to any such regional project. However, in 1982 Yonaguni opened a sister city relationship with the Taiwan city of Hualien and in 2007 it became the first city or town in Japan to open its own office in Taiwan (at Hualien). For the 30th anniversary of the Hualien link, in 2012 a group of 35 Taiwanese on water-ski motor boats surfed onto Yonaguni beaches, vividly demonstrating just how bridgeable was the gap between the two, given only a political will.¹³ Although a “Joint Agreement on Border Exchange Promotion” was reached in April 1999 by the mayors of the three Yaeyama islands and their counterpart mayors of three east Taiwan cities of Hualien, Yilan and Daito, with a view to establishing a regular air link and building closer cross border ties in tourism, education and trade,¹⁴ and it referred hopefully to the relationship as one “linking two regions across national borders but maintaining family-like closeness,” exchanges remain at modest levels. Despite the dramatic gesture of the sea-borne motor-bikes in 2012, after thirteen years no regular air or sea link exists.



Yonaguni, Site for a Base? (Photograph: Shiba Hiromoto, November 2011)

Yonaguni people looked back at the integral links that used to exist between Yonaguni and Taiwan both during the colonial era, when the short crossing was a common path for education, trade, or employment, and during the interlude that followed the collapse of the empire when, in the absence of any central government authority, Yonaguni briefly flourished as an entrepot trading port, albeit technically its ports were illegal and the trade was “black.”

However, the national bureaucracy is ill-disposed to the idea of loosening the ties of the nation state so as to allow the kind of autonomy the island needs to negotiate an “open seas” special zone. They objected in 2005 to the Yonaguni project as they had objected a decade earlier to the Ota “Cosmopolitan City” project, and they were not attracted by the “one country, two systems” formula, bruited at the time as the blueprint for the reversion of Hong Kong to China and a possible model for a loosening of the ties of national integration on Japan’s part. The island’s Sonai port did not qualify as a “major” or “open” port and its opening to international traffic would call for complicated immigration, health and quarantine measures, as well as standards to meet the requirements of the ILOS (International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea) Convention.

With Yonaguni’s hopes for autonomy and self-reliance based on cooperation across national frontiers blocked in Tokyo, a different kind of

“vision” began to gather support. Following feelers put out by the Defense Agency in 2007, a Yonaguni branch of the Defense Association (*Boei kyokai*) was formed and began to press for a Self Defense Force (SDF) centred future for the island.¹⁵ The Defense Association is a national organization closely connected to the Defense Ministry and incorporating former SDF members and associates.

In June of that same year, two US mine counter measures ships, the USS Guardian and the USS Patriot, docked in Yonaguni’s Sonai port for the first such military visit to an Okinawan civilian port since reversion in 1972. What then took place under the pretext of a port visit for “crew rest” was essentially a US covert mission to collect intelligence and advance a design to militarize Japan’s China frontier and embroil Japan in the China-Taiwan confrontation. The US Consul General in Naha, Kevin Maher, reported that the “operationally significant” event set an important “precedent ... for USN port calls to civilian ports in Okinawa,” and that the port was deep enough to accommodate four “USN mine countermeasures ships” at one time, while its commercial airfield was close by and could be used by support helicopters “in the event of a contingency in the Taiwan Straits.”¹⁶ Precisely as Maher had urged, other US military port visits followed, to Ishigaki Island in 2009 and Miyako Island in 2010, and Maritime Self Defense Force vessels also visited Ishigaki and Taketomi.¹⁷

In May 2008, while the LDP government still held sway nationally, the newly-established Yonaguni Defense Association organized a petition (in due course signed by 514 people) calling on the island authorities, the Town Assembly (*chogika*), to issue an official invitation to the Self Defense Forces (SDF) to establish a base on the island. Months later (in September), the Town Assembly adopted (4:1) a resolution to that effect and in June 2009 the town formally approached the Ministry of Defense and the chiefs of the Ground Self Defense Forces. During this period, Mayor Hokama Shukichi, elected in 2005 and re-elected in 2009, shifted from being a passionate supporter of the Yonaguni “Vision” project to being a proponent of the base idea. He was re-elected in August 2009, but did not campaign on the base issue other than to promise explanation and debate prior to any decision. It is now clear that the national bureaucracy in 2009 was working frantically to tie in key alliance and military decisions prior to the anticipated collapse of the Liberal-Democratic Party government (as duly happened at the end of August), and pressure on Hokama was stepped up before and after his re-election in that same month, August 2009.¹⁸ But the issue was never central to the election, and the outcome therefore carried no mandate.

When the Democratic Party (DPJ) government took office under Hatoyama Yukio in September, in keeping with its agenda of re-negotiating its

relationships with the US and focussing on the creation of a regional East Asian Community, it initially opposed any SDF deployment to the border islands. Defense Minister Kitazawa Toshimi declared that such a step could be construed as unnecessarily provocative by neighbour countries.¹⁹ But the DPJ soon shifted ground. The bureaucratic forces that resisted, and eventually destroyed, the Hatoyama government in 2009-2010 were determined also to impose their priorities on the crucial island frontier. The Hatoyama agenda of close and friendly relations with China and commitment to construction of an East Asian Community soon receded to the point of being virtually forgotten. Instead, reinforcement of the US bases on Okinawa Island was matched by SDF build-up on the outlying islands.

Tensions in the East China Sea ratcheted up following the September 2010 collision between the Chinese fishing vessel and the Japanese coastguard ship in waters adjacent to the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands, helping to strengthen the case for not only occasional SDF visits but for permanent SDF stationing in the islands such as Yonaguni. The general principle of such deployment was then spelled out in the National Defense Program Outlines adopted by cabinet in December 2010. The Guidelines identified the military modernization of China as part of the “security environment surrounding Japan,” stressed the enhancing of existing security links

with the US, proposed a “dynamic defense force” to substitute for the existing “basic defense force” concept, and outlined the plan to substantially reinforce the SDF presence in the outlying Okinawan islands.”²⁰ The notion of “Japan-US dynamic defense cooperation” was defined (October 2011) as designed to close “windows of deterrence” against China by increasing Japanese SDF activities in the East China Sea.²¹ Yonaguni’s 1,500 people were assigned the ambiguous role of “window of deterrence” against China’s 1.3 billion.

In August 2011 the DPJ announced the decision to deploy SDF forces (a coastal surveillance unit) to Yonaguni and set aside a one billion yen budget appropriation for survey, selection, and acquisition of a site on Yonaguni. Initially, the numbers involved would be small, likely one hundred for Yonaguni and perhaps twice that number for Miyako and Ishigaki.

Mayor Hokama believed that the island had no alternative. It was not, he insisted, that he feared any “China threat,” but simply that it seemed the only way to focus national attention on the island and to bring in government resources and new blood in the form of young people who would stimulate local businesses and help keep the island economically float.²² Hokama pointed out that, although Yonaguni (and the islands of the adjacent Yaeyama group) had escaped the force of land invasion, occupation and base imposition under which Okinawa (and other islands)

suffered, they also missed out on the compensatory public and infrastructural investment by which successive Japanese national governments had attempted to sweeten the base burden. Ironically, even as Ginowan and Nago were making clear their refusal to tolerate further the base burden, Yonaguni’s Hokama seemed to have concluded that in the early 21st century crisis, the only way to “catch up” with Okinawa Island in terms of economic development was to follow their path and bring in, not the Marines but the Self Defense Forces.

In Ishigaki City, Yonaguni Island’s closest and most important island neighbour, a conservative mayor and City Assembly was elected in September 2010, pledging radical change and ending 16 years of “reform” government. Where local governments in Ishigaki and throughout the outlying Okinawa islands had preserved their exclusively civilian status during the Cold War, resisting either troop stationing or calls by US or Japanese military vessels, the new city administration under mayor Nakayama Yoshitaka opened the island to SDF port visits and began to issue calls to enforce Japanese sovereignty and control over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Throughout Japan, talk of filling the 500-600 kilometre long “gap” in Japan’s defenses between Okinawa Island and Taiwan began to feature in nation-wide rightist discourse.²³

As for Yonaguni, however, it began to have

second thoughts. Residents began to wonder what economic benefit could be expected from an SDF presence and to fear that the military presence might raise suspicion and prompt counter-measures on the part of China. One newspaper pointed out that “defense nationalism” would not necessarily arrest economic decline, pointing to the case of Tsushima Island, between Kyushu and South Korea, where the SDF had been based for 50 years while the island population steadily declined.²⁴ An anti-base (and pro the principles of the “Vision”) organization formed under the name “Yonaguni Reform Association,” had two of its members elected to the town assembly in 2010, and in 2011 mobilized 556 people (roughly 46 per cent of the electorate) to sign a petition seeking cancelation of the invitation.²⁵ Since 514 people, roughly 43 per cent of the electorate, had signed the earlier pro-base petition, the island seemed split. An *Okinawa taimusu* survey in late August 2011 found Yaeyama Island opinion against introduction of the SDF to Yonaguni running at 56.6 per cent.²⁶ A subsequent survey, conducted in early September by *Ryukyu shimpō*, found the level of opposition on Yonaguni to be 73.3 per cent.²⁷ Late in 2011, an “explanatory meeting” jointly sponsored by the Department of Defense and Yonaguni City heard that potential sites were under review with a view to enabling selection, development, and SDF deployment by 2015.²⁸

In 2012, opponents of the base project organized a second petition, this time calling on the town authorities to conduct a local plebiscite to determine the island’s stance. It was signed by 588 (later reduced after scrutiny to 544) people, just under 45 percent of the island’s voters.²⁹ It was that petition on which the Town Assembly voted on 24 September, dismissing the petition and refusing a plebiscite.³⁰ It was an outcome that Mayor Hokama made clear he found “extremely regrettable.” Although he himself favoured the base plan, he feared that island divisions would deepen around it.³¹

The next step, immediately foreshadowed by opponents of the project, is to demand a “recall” election. Under the Local Government Authority Law, if one third of the electorate join in seeking it, fresh elections must be held within 60 days. Given the far greater numbers who already joined in seeking the plebiscite, that requirement could be soon met. As for the national government, it faces the decision of whether to enforce the project against the explicit opposition of almost half the island’s people, or, conceivably, to postpone or abandon it. Since Defense Minister Morimoto says that the defense of the southwestern region “has now become the highest priority,”³² and the plan to open the new base by 2015 remains unchanged, it is highly unlikely that the state will back down. The struggle over the project is likely to continue and intensify.

Conclusion

The Yaeyama (which includes Yonaguni) daily *Mainichi* editorializes the island's concern that

“the DPJ has, on base matters, been even more subservient to the US than its LDP predecessors,” and while talking of reducing the base burden seems intent instead on spreading it through the frontier islands too, turning the whole into a US-Japan fortress.”³³

East Asia's territorial issues, notably centred now on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, will either be solved, as part of a comprehensive settlement and the construction of a regional order of peace and cooperation in the interests of the surrounding states and peoples, or they will fester and feed heightened confrontation and militarization. It is hard to see evidence of the former at present. As for the latter, it will mean places like Yonaguni becoming more vulnerable and divided.



Anti-base poster, Yonaguni, November 2011 (Photograph: Shiba Hiromoto)

Yonaguni Island may be tiny, with a population of just 1,500, but it and its adjacent Yaeyama island group find themselves facing pressures for which history has no precedent and the rest of Japan little understanding. What Yonaguni residents really want is not a detachment of soldiers but a High School, which would help slow the outflow of the island's 15-year olds, and a freeing of controls to allow regular commercial, tourism and educational exchanges with Taiwan and East China. Neither Japan's national planners nor its Washington allies have any sympathy for such aspirations. Instead regional defense plans on which both agree call for steady increase in military presence and confrontation with China throughout the frontier sea zone. Yonaguni town joins Ginowan City, Nago City, and Takae hamlet, and indeed all Okinawa, on the frontier of a struggle that grows in intensity and has implications for the whole of Japan and the surrounding region.

Document

Yonaguni: Whose Island? What Future?

Tasato Chiyoki

Speech delivered by Mr Tasato Chiyoki to the Yonaguni Town Assembly, 24 September 2012, at the special session to debate the question of a Plebiscite on the issue of invitation to the Self-Defense Forces to establish a base on the island.

Mr Tasato is a member of the Yonaguni Town

Assembly and a prominent figure in the Yonaguni Reform Association. The motion for a plebiscite on the question of whether to invite the Self Defense Forces to set up a base on Yonaguni Island was defeated 3:2.

I rise in support of the motion for a Plebiscite.

Through the 67 years of the post-war era, not one single inch of Yonaguni Island was ever given over to military base purposes. Our forebears built on this island a distinctive culture and an island of peace, striving to live in harmony with the richness of Yonaguni nature, overcoming all sorts of difficulties. We must not forget our obligation to pass on to future generations the wisdom and the spirit of independence and self-government evolved in the course of this history.

Eight years ago in 2004, at the time of the “Heisei Amalgamation” [of local governments] we went through a prolonged process of intense debate over how to think about “the island’s future” and “what kind of Yonaguni will we bequeath to our children” when facing the similar issue of how to face the future in the context of the question of amalgamation with Ishigaki City and Taketomi town.

At that time, Mayor Otsuji Yoshikane carefully explained to the people of Yonaguni the advantages and disadvantages of merger and non-merger. Convening a “Town Meeting to Reflect on the Future of the Island,” he provided the opportunity for the various strata of island

society, including all those above middle school age who would be the island’s future, to publish their views. Providing the information on which each and every individual citizen could make a fair and impartial judgement, he then conducted a plebiscite that attracted nation-wide attention by extending the franchise to everyone above middle school age. Achieving thus a majority view among the Yonaguni people based on a consensus within the electorate, the town assembly adopted a declaration of commitment to autonomy and self-government, maintained its existing electoral boundaries unchanged, without merger and accordingly withdrew from the Yaeyama District Merger Council.

Based on the wishes of the residents of the island, in whom rests sovereign power, the problem of merger that had divided the island was resolved in a democratic and peaceful manner. Now, we must implement the lessons from that time, and the people of the island, one by one, must address sincerely the problem of Self Defense Force deployment.

There is another aspect to what is on the surface a matter of the deployment of the Self-Defense Forces to Yonaguni. It is the US military.

It all goes back to 24 June 2007, when two US minesweepers from Sasebo naval base docked in Yonaguni. The entry of these naval vessels into Yonaguni’s civilian Sonai port was the first in Okinawa since reversion. We learn, from a “Top

Secret” telegram from the Consulate General dated 27 June 2007 released by the whistleblowing site, Wikileaks,³⁴ that the US Consul-General in Okinawa had said Yonaguni “foreseeably could become a hub for mine countermeasures operations in the event of a contingency in the Taiwan Straits,” and had recommended to his government study into the possibility of use of Sonai port in a crisis. This was three years before the Japanese cabinet decided on 17 December 2010 on the New Defense Guidelines.

Kevin Maher, who was then US Consul-General, writes about this in his subsequent book *Ketsudan dekinai Nihon* (The Japan that Can’t Decide). In the event of a struggle breaking out in the Taiwan Straits, Senkaku islands, or the Yaeyama Islands, it could become operationally necessary for the US military to have use of the harbours of Ishigaki and Yonaguni islands which are so close to Taiwan. Therefore,

“The port visit was carried out based on the judgement that a survey was necessary in advance to grasp the state of Yonaguni island port facilities. An additional purpose was that of rest for crew members and friendly exchanges with local people. However, knowing the sensitivity of such a US naval visit to ports in these islands,

naturally explicit reference to the real reason for the port visits was avoided at journalist briefings.”³⁵

Maier adds that the US presumably “wanted to let the Japanese side know that naval vessels might want to use the port facilities.”³⁶ Yonaguni at its closest point is just 110 kilometres from Taiwan. It would be too late to wait for a crisis to break out and then trying to make last minute arrangements for port use.

According to Maher,

“Of course, the fact is that prior to US vessels entering Yonaguni harbour relatively high level exchanges had been conducted over timing. It was during the George W. Bush administration and it was Assistant Secretary of State Negroponte who actually gave the go ahead for the US ships to enter the harbour. The Government of the United States made clear its stance that ‘since Yonaguni is Japanese territory it really does not matter if China opposes such entry; in fact let them oppose it.’”³⁷

In other words, Maher’s words “make Yonaguni a mine-sweeping base for the contingency of any crisis in the Taiwan straits” mark the beginning

of Yonaguni's tragedy. Since the US military and the problem of Self-Defense Force deployment to Yonaguni are closely related we should not overlook the real design behind the Ministry of Defense's insistence on the deployment of a coastal surveillance unit to Yonaguni.

Also, as the report of the "Center for Strategic and Budgetary Analysis" (CSBA) of 18 May 2010 put it, "The geography of the Ryukyu island chain may prove particularly advantageous for anti-submarine warfare (ASW)."³⁸ It stresses the importance of military reinforcement of the line that runs from Sasebo through Kagoshima, the Amami islands, Okinawa main island, Miyako Island, to Ishigaki and Yonaguni Islands. This too helps explain the Kevin Maher comments.

We islanders need to take a long hard look at the reality behind the US mine-sweepers' 2007 forced entry into our harbour for purposes of military investigation and to reconsider the case for SDF deployment in the light of that. We must strive for a consensus and a common understanding among islanders around a conclusion that seems inescapable.

At present, the governments of Japan and the United States, ignoring and actually discriminating against Okinawans, are moving to impose by force the dangerous Osprey, even as early as this month. They do so by force because of military necessity, irrespective of the livelihood of the people who live there. The

deployment of Osprey to Futenma and of the SDF to Yonaguni is structurally very similar, and if once the Osprey is deployed at Futenma it is clear as day that it will soon be flying to Yonaguni.

In other words, the problem of the SDF to Yonaguni is part of a design to expand the use of Okinawan bases and to make use of Yonaguni as part of America's Asian strategy and based on the alliance between the two countries. It is a problem that gives rise to concern that there are deep shadows over the island's future.

Taking these facts into consideration and thinking about the future of this island five, ten, or even fifty years from now, can we really just focus on the immediate future, turning Yonaguni into a "Self Defense Force Island" in order to "put a stop to population decline" or "to stimulate the local economy?"

Base-hosting places tend not only to get caught up in war but incidents and accidents also occur in them and the victims are always local people – people such as us, our families, children and grandchildren, relatives and friends. If Yonaguni becomes a Self Defense Force island and if Yonaguni people suffer as a result, those politicians who agreed to support the base project and those connected with them will in future have to face the island's criticism. Our forebears built this island as an island of peace in the spirit of independence and autonomy,

whatever the difficulties they faced. We Dunanto (Yonaguni) people must not forget this.

Pro-base people say the mayoral election of 2009 and the town assembly election of 2010 resulted in mostly victories by those in favour of bringing in the SDF, but is that really the case?

The mayoral and town assembly elections concentrate on many issues involving links between people, agriculture and tourism promotion, welfare, and the SDF deployment was not treated as particularly important. Townspeople, including us, have sought explanation from the mayor and the town assembly of the SDF deployment problem, the “merits and de-merits of SDF deployment,” the “reasons why SDF deployment would arrest depopulation of the island,” the “risks involved in joint US-Japan use of military bases.” But there was no response to countless requests. The mayor and the pro-SDF forces in the assembly got together to say that the question of SDF deployment was settled. “We are the elected majority and that is how democracy works,” they said, and “it is too late now for a signature majority to make any difference.” But that is just the self-righteous evasion of politicians and bureaucrats.

The island is in fact now split over SDF deployment and the Yonaguni people, in whom resides sovereign power, have exercised their right of petition under the Local Self-Government

Law. Almost half the electors, 544 people, signed to ask the mayor to establish a “Local Plebiscite Ordinance” “on a major matter concerning their future that the island people themselves should decide.”

Those entrusted by the people of Yonaguni with government should take this seriously. Since it is the duty of those who carry out political and administrative tasks in a democratic state to govern in accordance with the wishes of the majority of the electorate, it is highly desirable now that this ordinance be implemented in accordance with the draft before us.

Should it be rejected, it would be a blow against democracy, further enraging the Yonaguni people in whom sovereign power resides. If they feel driven to “seek the dismissal of designated members of the assembly” under the principle that “the assembly is not functioning as an assembly,” the split in the island would widen and local government functions be affected. That should be avoided.

Therefore, I call for the unanimous passage of the resolution on the Plebiscite draft, based on the consensus of the people of Yonaguni, its sovereign rulers. Strongly demanding a democratic and peaceful solution to this SDF deployment problem, I support this motion.

Gavan McCormack is an emeritus professor at Australian National University, a coordinator of The Asia-Pacific Journal, co-author (with Satoko

Oka Norimatsu) of *Resistant Islands – Okinawa* the First Plenary Session, The 11th IISS Asian Confronts Japan and the United States Security Summit The Shangri-La Dialogue, (http://www.amazon.com/dp/1442215623/?tag=theasipacjo0b-20) (Rowman and Littlefield, 2012) and author of recent studies on this site concerning Okinawa, US-Japan relations, and territorial disputes in the Pacific and East China seas.

Recommended citation: Gavan McCormack, "Yonaguni: Dilemmas of a Frontier Island in the East China Sea," The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol 10, Issue 40, No. 1, October 1, 2012.

Articles on related subjects

- Gavan McCormack, [Troubled Seas: Japan's Pacific and East China Sea Domains \(and Claims\)](#).

(<https://apjif.org/-Gavan-McCormack/3821>)

- Gavan McCormack, *Small Islands – Big Problem: Senkaku/Diaoyu and the Weight of History and Geography in China-Japan Relations* (<https://apjif.org/-Gavan-McCormack/3464>)

Notes

¹ Leon Panetta, Secretary of Defense, United States, "The US Rebalance Towards the Asia-Pacific" (<http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2012/speeches/first-plenary-session/leon-panetta/>), "Keynote presentation to

Singapore, June 2, 2012. .

² See, for example, Jan Van Tol, et al, *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept* Washington, D.C., Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, 18 May 2010, pp. 11-13.

These notional lines may or may not reflect some corresponding Chinese strategic concepts, though the general thrust – to concentrate on establishing naval dominance within the First Line (its "near seas"), followed by freedom to manoeuvre within the Second (its "mid-far seas"), and eventual global naval presence – seems soundly based.

³ Fija Bairon, Matthias Brenzinger, and Patrick Heinrich, "The Ryukyus and the new, but endangered, languages of Japan," *The Asia-Pacific Journal – Japan Focus*, 9 May 2009.

⁴ For details, see chapter 1 of Gavan McCormack and Satoko Oka Norimatsu, *Resistant Islands: Okinawa Confronts Japan and the United States* on the "phantom treaty," Sato Masaru, "Nihon seifu ni yoru 1952 nen no Okinawa kirisute o kangaeyo," *Shukan kinyo* 11 May 2012, pp. 24-25.

⁵ Ouchi Taro, *Mitsuboekijima: waga saisei no kaiso* Naha, Okinawa taimususha, 2002.

⁶ "Dunan no kuju," part 2, *Ryukyu shimpo*, 8 July 2012.

⁷ Mayor Hokama, interview with this author, 15 November 2011.

⁸ According to Mayor Hokama, speaking with Sakurai Yoshiko, 2 September 2009. Sakurai Yoshiko, “Tokushu – kokubo saizensen o ninau saihate no shima ‘Yonaguni’ rupo (http://yoshiko-sakurai.jp/index.php/2009/10/01/),” *Shukan shincho* 1 October 2009.

⁹ <http://www.pref.okinawa.jp/96/kokusaitoshi/>.

¹⁰ “Okinawa 21 seiki bijon (http://www.pref.okinawa.jp/21vision/index.html/),” Naha, Okinawa Prefecture, March 2010.

¹¹ 62.8 per cent to 33.7 per cent, in a 70.5 per cent poll. Glenn D. Hook, “Gurobaruka, chiikika e no oto – Okinawa ken oyobi Yonaguni cho no baai,” in Furuki Toshiaki, ed., *Rijon no jidai to shima no jichi*, Tokyo, Chuo University, 2006, pp. 93-123, at p. 111.

¹² Okinawa ken Yonaguni cho, “Yonaguni, jiritsu e no bijon – Jiritsu, jichi, kyosei – Ajia o musubu kokkyo no shima Yonaguni,” Hokokusho, March 2005.

¹³ “‘Jumin tohyo jorei hiketsu’ jumin kan no daiwa no michisagure,” *Okinawa taimusu* 26 September 2012.

¹⁴ “‘Kokkyo koryu sokushin kyodo sengen’ ni choin, Taiwan tobu chiiki to 3 shicho cho,” *Yaeyama mainichi shimbun* 16 April 2009.

¹⁵ “Dunan no kuju,” part 4, *Ryukyu shimpou* 12 July 2012.

¹⁶ Revealed by Wiki-leaks in 2011. “First USN civilian port call in Okinawa a success (http://www.wikileaks.ch/cable/2007/06/07Naha89.html),” Kevin Maher, secret despatch, 27 June 2007. See also McCormack and Norimatsu, op. cit.

¹⁷ Maeda Sawako, “Yureru Yaeyama no kyokasho erabi (http://peacephilosophy.blogspot.com/2011/09/blog-post_16.html),” *Peace Philosophy Center* 16 September 2011.

¹⁸ Details in McCormack and Norimatsu, op. cit.

¹⁹ Kitazawa on 24 September 2009, “Rikuji Yonaguni haibi o hitei, ‘rinkoku shigeki suru’ boeisho kyo raiken,” *Okinawa taimusu*, 25 September 2009.

²⁰ Japan, Ministry of Defense, Summary of National Defense Guidelines (http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/d_policy/pdf/summaryFY2011.pdf), FY2011.

²¹ Sugio Takahashi (Japanese Ministry of Defense), “Counter A2/AD in Japan-US Defense Cooperation – Toward ‘Allied Air-Sea Battle’,” http://project2049.net/documents/counter_a2ad_defense_cooperation_takahashi.pdf

²² Interviewed by this author, 15 November 2011.

²³ Sakurai Yoshiko, "Tokushu – kokubo saizensen o ninau saihate no shima 'Yonaguni' rupo (<http://yoshiko-sakurai.jp/index.php/2009/10/01/>)," *Shukan shincho* 01 October 2009.

²⁴ "'Tsushima to Yonaguni', kokkyo no shima o koryuten ni," editorial, *Okinawa taimusu* 14 October 2011.

²⁵ Total signatories were 2,331, of whom 1,775 were non-Yonaguni citizens. "Rikuji yuchi no ketsugi tekkai o," *Yaeyama mainichi shimbun* 21 November 2011.

²⁶ Quoted in Maeda, op. cit.

²⁷ *Ryukyu shimpō*, 07 September 2011, quoted in Watase Natsuhiko, "Yonagunijima ni jieitai wa hitsuyo ka," *Sekai* February 2012, pp. 144-152, at p. 150.

²⁸ "Jieitai kohochi shimesu machi to boeisho jumin setsumei ka, Yonaguni," *Ryukyu shimpō*, 18 November 2011.

²⁹ "588 ninbun no shomei teishutsu," *Yaeyama mainichi shimbun*, 25 July 2012.

³⁰ "Yonaguni jumin tohyo joreian, hantai tasu de hiketsu," *Okinawa taimusu*, 24 September 2012.

³¹ "Yonaguni, min-i tou kikai tonoku," *Okinawa taimusu* 25 September 2012.

³² Quoted in Chico Harlan, "With China's rise, Japan shifts to the right," *The Washington Post* 21 September 2012.

³³ "Asu wa kenpo kinenbi. Shizuka ni natta kaiken rongi, sono ippo de," *Yaeyama mainichi shimbun* 2 May 2012.

³⁴ Kevin Maher, Consul-General, Naha, "First USN Civilian Port Call In Okinawa A Success (<http://wikileaks.org/cable/2007/06/07NAHA89.html/>)," 27 June 2007, Naha. Secret.

³⁵ Kevin Mea (Kevin Maher), *Ketsudan dekinai Nihon* (The Japan that can't decide), Bunshun shinsho, no 821, 2011, p. 163.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ *Ketsudan dekinai Nihon*, 137

³⁸ Jan Van Tol, et al, *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept* Washington, D.C., Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, 18 May 2010, p. 32. The CSBA Report also includes the line: "prepare plans in cooperation with the US Navy for establishing ASW barriers that take advantage of the geography of the Ryukyu island chain." (p. 92)