

## Withdrawal of US Marines Blocked by Japan in the 1970s 海兵隊撤退 を検討 日本が引き止め 70年代

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This is the fourth in a five part series: Again Okinawa: Japan-Okinawa-US Relations in a Time of Turmoil

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•Sakurai Kunitoshi, If the Law is Observed, There Can be No Reclamation: A Mayoral Opinion Endorsed by Citizens of Nago and Okinawans ([https:// apjjf.org/ -Sakurai-Kunitoshi/ 4036](https://apjjf.org/-Sakurai-Kunitoshi/4036))

After the Vietnam War, the US Department of Defence considered withdrawing the Marine Corps from Okinawa to the mainland US. However, the Japanese government, unable to stand alone in terms of defence policy, intervened to stop it. Observing this, the US State Department thought that it could use the Marine Corps as a lever in its policy towards Japan.

These historical facts become clear from documents in the Australian Archives discovered by Nozoe Fumiaki, lecturer at Okinawa

International University.<sup>1</sup> Preserved in the Australian Archives are reports from Australian diplomats on what they had heard from State Department officials.



***“Withdrawal of Marines blocked by Japan,”***  
**Okinawa taimusu report of the Nozoe**  
**discoveries, November 8 2013.**

It was October 1972 when a report on this matter was sent from Washington to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs [in Canberra].<sup>2</sup> Five months earlier, administrative authority over Okinawa had been returned to Japan after 27 years under direct US military rule. Opposition to the US at the time was growing. American military vehicles had been burned as an expression of popular anger at the injustice of US rule in the Koza Riots in December 1970.

The strengthening of popular feeling was one factor in the consideration of withdrawing the Marines, but the most important factor was the worsening US fiscal situation resulting from pouring vast amounts of money into the war in Vietnam. The United States had itself in effect abandoned its leading role in the world economy

by President Nixon suspending the convertibility of the dollar to gold and moving the dollar to a variable exchange system. For an age of military reductions, Pentagon analysts had come to the conclusion that it would be “considerably cheaper and probably more effective” to withdraw all Marines throughout the Pacific, including Okinawa and Hawaii, to Camp Pendleton in San Diego, California.

For Australia, the US forces forward troop deployment in the Asia-Pacific was directly related to its own security policy and Australian diplomats kept reporting information on the US Marine relocation. In May 1973, one reported that transfer to Korea was under consideration, because suitable places for relocation were not available in Hawaii or the Micronesian Federation. In June, “serious consideration” was reported to be continuing on Marine relocation.

MacCullum mentioned that the systems analysis experts in the Pentagon had drawn up a study which showed that it would be considerably cheaper, and probably more effective, to concentrate all the Marine assets in the Pacific at San Diego in California; i.e. by returning to San Diego the two Marine brigades from Okinawa and the one from Hawaii and the Marine Air Squadrons from Japan and Hawaii. Although there were persuasive

economic and military arguments in favour of this, the State Department was concerned about the political aspects of such a move. Our source expected that it could become the subject of lively debate in the future.<sup>3</sup>

Whether these moves were known there or not, Japan took steps to retain the Marines. At a meeting of the Japan-US Security Treaty Consultative Group Committee in July of that same year, Kubo Takaya, head of Japan's Defence Agency, proposed that, "Given the need for a mobile force in Asia, the US Marines should be retained."<sup>4</sup>

Seeing this response from the Japanese side, Thomas P. Shoemith, chief minister at the US Embassy, reported to Washington, "Our negotiating position is improved" because the Japanese side see the US Marine presence in Okinawa as "most tangible evidence of US willingness to respond promptly to a direct threat against Japan."<sup>5</sup> Lecturer Nozoe, who dug up and analysed these diplomatic records, says that it is far from clear that the Japanese side correctly understood the functions and role of the Marine Corps. Despite the conclusion of the analysts that the Marines could be withdrawn to California, the US government explained the role of the Marines in the following terms: "They are a "strategic reserve force" ready "to respond immediately, and appropriately, to incidents

wherever they may occur;" Okinawa is the best location, geographically, for the Marines;" in the event of a major war breaking out "the location might be the Middle East or Europe but the Okinawan Marines would be counted as US military assets."<sup>6</sup>

Subsequently, the Japanese government came to refer to the need to retain the Marine Corps permanently in Japan as "a unit that constituted positive proof of readiness to act at any time in the defence of Japan." It means that "positive proof of readiness" is more important than substance. What is the basis for that?

The US side's explanation is that the Marine Corps is "a strategic reserve force" that has the possibility of being engaged in action in the Middle East or in Europe. Why must "a reserve force" for global action be stationed in Okinawa? Furthermore, the scope of the US-Japan Security Treaty is supposed to be geographically limited and the launch of operations under it in the Middle East or elsewhere was hardly envisaged.

A "Reserve Force" amounts to two or three "arrows," just an auxiliary to a main strength force. The Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines all have reserves, but they are held in the US. There is no rational explanation as to why a reserve force of Marines must be stationed in Okinawa. And though the geographical superiority of Okinawa is stressed, the ships and planes to carry the Marines would have to come

to get them. A “reserve force” does not really need to be an instant response force. If what Japan wants is “positive proof of readiness,” a mock (“papier mache”) tiger should suffice.

Since the Marine Corps was deployed in Iraq in the same way as an army, it became known as a “second army.” The last time the Marines were used to storm ashore in the way they boast as their specialty was the time of the Incheon landings in Korea in 1950. The Marines spend much effort justifying their own importance.

In the military restructuring that followed the Civil War, the Pacific War, the Korean War, and the Vietnam war, it was the Marines for whom large-scale cuts were proposed, for the reason that there were always doubts as to the need for a force to be able to launch attack from the sea. It was only shortly after their moment of glory in planting the Stars and Stripes on Mt Suribachi at the end of the Battle of Iojima (Iwojima) that the White House decided the Marine Corps should be absorbed into the army as part of the Department of Defense’s planned reorganization.

Thereafter, there has been no end to arguments about the need for the Marines, seeing them as no more than a “guard unit for the Navy,” or asking “is there a need in this day and age for a force designed for attack from the coast?” It is ironic that the Government of the US should be using the Marine Corps, that has survived by dint of its political influence, as a lever in diplomacy

towards Japan. In recent years, just in the matter of the transfer of Futenma Airport, used by such Marines, Japan’s top leader, Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio, was sacked. It really has been an effective “lever” for deploying towards Japan.

The Marine Corps occupies 70 per cent of Okinawan bases. Had Japan not stopped the process of their withdrawal to the mainland United States it seems most unlikely that the Okinawan base problem would have become such a big political issue. It is likely that the US-Japan relationship, described as one of vassalage, would have taken a different shape.

The Obama administration is now taking a scalpel to defense spending because of its fiscal difficulties. It is possible that the Marines will be cut from around 200,000 to 150,000 at minimum and presumably the Marines themselves are watching the progress of these reductions with deep anxiety. I wish we could expect some cunning from the Government of Japan in its use of the lever in negotiations with the US towards solution of the Okinawa problem, instead of just sticking to the status quo and doing whatever it can simply to retain them.

The Marines, who occupy 70 per cent of bases in Okinawa and constitute roughly half of all US forces in Japan, are the very kernel of the Okinawa base problem that now destabilizes the Japan-US relationship. The 1970s argument over the retention of the Marines, on which Nozoe has

been conducting his research, offers a fine vantage point for analysing the Japan-US alliance.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the Nozoe text, see: Nozoe Fumiaki, "Okinawa Beigun kichi no seiri shukusho o meguru Nichibei kyogi, 1970-1974 nen" (US-Japan talks over reduction of US Bases in Okinawa, 1970-1974), *Kokusai anzen hoshu* vol. 41,

No. 2, 2013, pp. 99-115. Nozoe elaborated on his argument in the following paper delivered on 9 November 2013 to Okinawa Hosei gakkai, "'Okinawa Beigun kichi no seiri shukusho mondai – rekishi teki shiten kara.'" (copy provided by author)

<sup>2</sup> Robert MacCallum, Asian desk officer in the Office of International Security Operations of the State Department's Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, discussion on 6 October 1972, Embassy of Australia, "United States Force Deployments in Asia," Secret, Memorandum 2652/72, 9 October 1972.

<sup>3</sup> Memorandum Number 4840, Embassy of Australia, Washington, to Department of Foreign Affairs, May 1973, in Nozoe.

<sup>4</sup> US National Security Archive, ed., *Japan and the United States: diplomatic, security, and economic relations, 1960-1976* Bell and Howell Information and Learning, 2000, quoted in Nozoe.

<sup>5</sup> [Thomas P.] Shoesmith to [Richard L.] Sneider, deputy Assistant Secretary of State, in US National Archives (quoted in Nozoe).

<sup>6</sup> Sources in Nozoe, November 2013 paper, cited in Note 1 above.