

Okinawa and the Revamped US-Japan Alliance

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By Gavan McCormack

Buddies in Kyoto

George and Junichiro, two great buddies (if the Japanese media is to be believed) meet again, on 15 and 16 November, in Japan's ancient capital of Kyoto. Since Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro is one of the dwindling band of ever-faithful Bush supporters, and since officials on both sides have been working hard to clear away all possible obstacles from the negotiating table between them, the mood may be expected to be warm: Japanese troops will remain in Iraq till September 2006; the ban on US beef imports, till recently cause of great congressional anger, is about to be lifted; the Japanese Post Office, sitting on the world's largest pool of funds, is about to be privatized; and, perhaps most important, a deal has just been done on the re-organization of US forces in Japan. The ground should therefore be clear for an untroubled meeting, plenty of windy rhetoric about the world's "closest and most important" relationship, some photo-ops, and perhaps some quiet tipping under the red and yellow-hued autumn foliage of the old Kyoto palace.



Yet the truth is that the relationship is precarious: Koizumi does what he is asked by Bush, but cannot be sure of being heard when he seeks something in return [1]. This time, in his eagerness to please, he has promised something that he almost certainly cannot deliver: a solution to the long-running dispute over relocation of the US Marine base at Futenma in Okinawa. The alliance is no stronger than its weakest link, and Okinawa today is undoubtedly that weakest link.

Over the past decade the objectives of planners in Washington and Tokyo have consistently been blocked and the initiative has passed from their hands to their opponents on the ground in Okinawa. Two major phases in the struggle over the past decade have ended in defeat of the forces of the Japanese (and behind it, American) states by local, democratic opponents. The Kyoto meeting signals a new phase in the struggle to neutralize and/or suppress such opposition to negotiating a deal on the bases behind the backs of the Okinawan people, but the odds are high against it succeeding.

Both governments, and the relationship between them, now face the concerted opposition of local island residents to their core plans. The best-laid plans of the empire's centre are challenged by apparently insignificant local fishermen, retired teachers, local residents and old people, who lack almost everything but belief in the justice of their cause. The contest is virtually without precedent in postwar Japan, and has evolved through several distinct phases. Japan's centre, and in a sense the centre of the world (because it is the pillar on which the alliance between the world's No. 1 and No. 2 powers rests, is not Tokyo but Japan's remote southern periphery: Okinawa prefecture.

When postwar Japan was first reconstituted under a "peace constitution" (1946) and sovereignty returned to the government of Japan (1952), Okinawa was excluded from both processes, remaining under US military control until 1972, the "war state" that made possible Japan's "peace state." Though Okinawans in general suffered immeasurably more than mainland Japan from the war, and that experience generated a deep commitment to pacifism, when the islands were eventually returned to Japan in 1972 the bases remained intact; constitutional pacifism and local self-government proved empty promises. When at last the Cold War ended, Okinawans hoped anew that the bases would be removed and peace-orientation substituted for war orientation, but they slowly learned that Pentagon plans were predicated on retention, even a beefing up of the facilities, and that the Japanese government was committed to doing as the US government sought. Militarism and war were to be their future, as well as their past and present.

From 1995, however, the islands have been wracked by dissent. Despite every effort at containment by the national government, local, democratic forces have inflicted successive defeats on Tokyo's (and Washington's) plans.

The Kyoto meeting between Koizumi and Bush heralds a new and more intense phase of confrontation at the very moment that the two leaders plan to unveil their expanded military ties. Despite media and commentator assumption that the two governments will have their way in disposing of Okinawa as a joint military base for the future projection of regional and global force, that outcome is far from assured.

Henoko Mark One - The Heliport Plan, 1996-1998

In 1995, Okinawa exploded in outrage when a 12-year old Okinawan girl was raped by three US soldiers. That anger threatened the US position in Okinawa and therefore in a sense the entire US-Japan East Asian military posture, of which it was and still is the "cornerstone." To appease the anger, the Clinton administration promised in April 1996 to return to Japan Futenma Marine Air Station, a huge sprawling base that sits in the middle of Ginowan township, a major base over half a century for US wars in Korea, Vietnam and Iraq, where war planes constantly circled menacingly around the town's schools, hospitals and residences. The most recent major incident in Ginowan occurred in August 2004, when a US helicopter crashed onto Okinawa International University. The Futenma return promise had a catch, however. The US and Japanese governments agreed that Futenma would be replaced by equivalent, indeed significantly upgraded, facilities which, as Okinawa soon learned, would also have to be located in Okinawa. It would be a reshuffle resulting in an upgrading rather than a return.

The next phase of the Okinawan struggle occurred from 1997, when the fishing village of Henoko in the administrative unit of Nago city, in the north of Okinawa's main island, was chosen as the site for construction of the replacement base. In the first place, it was conceived as a huge, 1500 meter long, offshore,

floating pontoon platform resting on steel poles. The word “heliport” was deliberately deceptive, suggestive of something like a rooftop when actually it would be several city blocks in area. Despite the appearance of a newly thought out plan intended to facilitate return of Futenma and satisfy the longing of the Okinawan people for a release from military burdens, actually the idea of concentration of US military functions was rooted in the US military pursuit of rationalization and reinforcement and dates back to 1966, the height of the Vietnam war. In 1996, therefore, plans for an offshore airport, ammunition store and port facilities in the Henoko area drawn up thirty years earlier were simply dusted off [2].



30,000 rally demanding an end to Henoko Base in August 2004

In response to demand from Nago citizens, a plebiscite was in due course held, and despite heavy-handed intervention from Tokyo, a majority decisively rejected the idea of construction of the base. However, in an astonishing show of contempt for democracy, the mayor of the city announced that he would accept the base plan on the city’s behalf, immediately resigning to take responsibility for having done so. His outrageous action, however could bring only a temporary stay of execution on the heliport plan. In February 1998, however, prefectural governor Ota Masahide announced that he would honor the statement of local principle and not accept the planned construction. When he refused to sign

compulsory lease renewal agreements for continuing US military use of Okinawan land, he was taken before the Supreme Court and ordered (in a peremptory, two sentence judgment) to submit. For his stubbornness, the Tokyo government thereafter refused to cooperate or even to talk with him, making administration of the prefecture virtually impossible. He was eventually defeated by a more compliant figure in elections in December 1998. The first phase of the 10-year war ended in a moral victory for the opposition forces and an ambiguous, soon to be proven pyrrhic, victory for the state in securing nominal local assent to its plan.

Henoko Mark Two - On the Reef, 1999-2005

The new Governor, Inamine Keiichi, a local Okinawan businessman backed by both the major national conservative parties, Liberal-Democratic Party and the Buddhist Komeito, assented to the plan to construct an offshore base at Henoko, but only on three conditions: it would be a joint civil-military use airport, US military use would be restricted to 15 years, and there would be appropriate assurances that the construction and usage of the airport would not result in environmental damage. After long negotiations between his administration and the national government, a revised plan was drawn up during 1999. This airport would be a grander structure than originally conceived, with a runway of 2,500 meters. It would take over a decade to complete, require prodigious expense (330 billion yen just for the land reclamation, and a likely total cost of around one trillion yen), and sit astride the relatively unspoiled coral in waters frequented by the internationally protected dugong. Futenma would only be returned when the new facilities were in place, and the Japanese taxpayer would meet all costs.

Massive political and economic (sweetener)

pressures were brought to bear to try to soften and divide the Okinawan opposition. Money was poured into various “Northern Development” projects in and around Nago City, the 2000 G-7 “Kyushu-Okinawa Summit” was held in the City, and a new two thousand yen note was issued that featured the gate of Okinawa’s Shuri castle in an effort to buy local support. Tokyo even sought to reconstitute Okinawan identity so that it would “grow out of” its pacifism and opposition to the island’s military role by learning to understand and take pride in maintaining the peace and security of East Asia [3]. That campaign, known as the “Okinawa Initiative,” proved fruitless, but the economic pressures and incentives had an effect, inevitable given the straightened circumstances of the islands, with their high unemployment and structural dependence on Tokyo and the bases. With the progressive parties in disarray nationally, conservative candidates were elected to office in one after another local governing body during this period of intense economic pressure.

Yet the Futenma Return, supposed in 1996 to occur “within five to seven years,” made little progress. It was 2002 before the two governments signed off on a basic construction plan. Environmental assessment and preliminary test drilling at the site were expected then to take three years and construction a further ten. There would be no Futenma return till 2015 at the earliest. Inamine’s three conditions were left unresolved even in this agreement. Rumsfeld and the Pentagon found the Japanese failure to push ahead with construction increasingly irksome.

The environmental assessment was intended to be perfunctory, its outcome assumed in advance to be favorable even though the site was known to be home to the internationally-protected dugong, the sea shores home to a colony of sea turtles, and the reef to comprise some of the island’s few remaining live, relatively healthy, coral colonies. The local and

international movement to protect the dugong, and nature in general, spread, with Greenpeace taking up the cause. In September 2003 a suit was launched (which still continues) in the US to restrain the US Department of Defense from any action likely to be prejudicial to the dugong.

It was not till April 2004 that the Japanese government decided to hasten the process by overriding local objections and enforcing the preparatory engineering works, test-drilling etc. Local resident and opposition groups therefore launched a land-based protest with a sit-in conducted at a makeshift tent village at the site, where Okinawan elders, some of them in their 80s or even 90s, mingled with fishermen and townspeople from around the island as the central importance of the struggle was gradually appreciated, together with a “blockade” by fishing boats, canoes, and even hardy swimmers, of the offshore site. Over the next period of more than five hundred days, the state’s survey team managed only to erect four lighting beacons, which had to be dismantled with each typhoon, as the sit-in and blockade continued [4]. Otherwise, the major finding of the environmental survey was that the dugong population was much greater than had been originally assumed: between 30 and 50 of the marine mammals regularly grazed the sea-grasses of the bay. That fact alone should have been enough to put an end to the idea that the construction could proceed without deleterious environmental consequences.



Day 110 of the Henoko blockade

In October 2005, the two governments struggled to resolve these issues in advance of the planned Bush visit to Japan. Late in the month, senior US and Japanese officials had to concede that all efforts to break the opposition had failed. Prime Minister Koizumi acknowledged that the government had been “unable to implement the (initial) relocation (plan) because of a lot of opposition. [5]” Suddenly, and dramatically, the Henoko offshore plan was dropped; the second (1998) Henoko plan thus went the way of the first (1996). In nine years, all that had been accomplished to implement the SACO agreement was that the dugong had been counted and four lighting towers had been erected and then dismantled. The 29 October outcome was an admission of defeat by those nominally possessing almost absolute power, and a tribute to the determination and persistence of the local coalition, the “Association to Defend Life”. Okinawa, strictly speaking the fishing village of Henoko (population: 1,458), had defeated the nation state for a second time.

Henoko Mark Three - 2005-

The state would, however, concede no such defeat, and a new stage in the epic struggle was immediately launched. As part of the

comprehensive realignment of US forces in the context of revised global military posture, the Foreign and Defense Ministers of Japan and the US signed their “Interim Agreement on the realignment of US Forces in Japan” on 29 October 2005 and the Cabinet approved it two weeks later [6]. Despite the absence of public or parliamentary debate, the agreement amounted to a major new step in the transformation of the Cold War security relationship, in which, at least nominally, the defense of Japan had been the major orientation, to a military alliance of partners in support of US regional and global objectives. It amounted to the forging of a true military alliance, formally transforming the limited cooperation of the 1951 and 1960 versions of the security alliance [7]. “Interoperability” was one key word of the new agreement. The Japan Ground Self Defense Force (Army)’s “Rapid Reaction Force” would be moved to Camp Zama in Kanagawa prefecture where it would share facilities, and coordinate activities, with the headquarters of the US Army’s First Corps, to be transferred there from Fort Lewis in Washington State; a joint US and Japan air force command would be set up at Yokota Air Base in Tokyo, a US nuclear-powered aircraft-carrier would be stationed permanently at Yokosuka, a substantial force, 7,000 US Marines to be transferred from Okinawa to Guam, with the Japanese government footing half the costs (estimated at more than four billion dollars). However, the precondition for this latter transfer was that the marine facility at Futenma be first transferred to a new base to be built in the vicinity of Camp Schwab, in close proximity to Henoko. Part of the existing camp facilities on Cape Henoko would be demolished and a runway of 1,800 meters constructed across the Cape, stretching northeast into Oura Bay and southwest onto the reef. This plan was, if anything, even more ambitious than its predecessors and it included all three of the elements of the 1966 design - airport, ammunition supply, and port facilities. It amounted to a concentration of hitherto

scattered US military functions and services, reinforcing them in a single giant northern Okinawa military complex at the same time that other US forces were being concentrated in Japan.

US Defense Secretary Rumsfeld described the Interim Agreement with satisfaction as marking an end to the long-running debate over Futenma. Japanese Foreign Minister Aso Taro said it was final and beyond review. President Bush himself took note of it, describing the agreement overall as a “good faith agreement” and “positive” despite the fact that “in a democracy, it’s hard to satisfy all the people all the time,” hinting at the difficulties that lay ahead in securing agreement.

In Okinawa, the reaction was universally negative. Outrage would not be too strong a word to describe it. Hitherto, governments in Tokyo had always pledged consultation, at least gone through the motions of honoring local sentiment, and promised no deal that would go against Okinawan wishes. It was possible, as Nago Assemblyman Miyagi Yasuhiro puts it, to “refer to a logic of agreements, laws, environmental assessment principles, and argue point by point. [8]” This new agreement, however, was reached over the heads and without any consultation at all with the Okinawans. The Governor, supposedly a conservative and a reliable ally for the LDP authorities in Tokyo, described the plan as “totally unacceptable” and said that “everyone in the prefecture and in Nago City opposes it. [9]” Around the island, local government authorities, the mayor and local governments of Ginowan and Nago prominent among them, denounced the agreement. During 2004 and until October 2005, prefectural opposition to the Futenma transfer to Henoko, or indeed to any place in Okinawa, had been running at around 80 per cent. It jumped briefly at the end of October to 90 per cent against the new deal [10]. Another survey in mid-November measured opposition at 72 per cent (compared

with 15 per cent in favor) [11]. In Tokyo, the Koizumi government spokespersons could only splutter that they would make the utmost effort to explain the position sincerely and seek Okinawan cooperation.

The government of Japan has rarely if ever faced anything like this resistance from an entire prefecture, in effect a rebellion. The respected Okinawan scholar, Hiyane Teruo, sees the islands now as in a state similar to that of the shimagurumi toso, the island wide struggles of resistance that marked the seizure at bayonet-point of agricultural lands for base construction during the 1950s [12]. Koizumi’s task in Kyoto is to assure Bush that the October agreement will be carried out, the Okinawan governor has spoken repeatedly of the magma of discontent rising in the prefecture, and his own anger now suggests that that an eruption may be close. The November 16, Kyoto press conference by Koizumi and Bush made plain that issues remain to iron out over the coming half year, presumably referring above all to the Okinawan impasse.

The October Japan-US deal showed a harshness on the part of the Koizumi government and a readiness to ride roughshod over Okinawa that was new. Till October, Inamine as Governor and Kishimoto Tateo as mayor of Nago had been seen as crucial allies in the process of persuading Okinawans to accept the base. Now their anger matched, even exceeded, that of Governor Ota in the Clinton-Hashimoto era. Watching now the fury and bitterness of Governor Inamine, it is hard to recall that this is the man set in place by the Tokyo government only six years ago to replace the recalcitrant Ota. Despite being the LDP’s chosen man in Okinawa, however, Inamine knows the strength of Okinawan feeling, and cannot help but feel concern over how his name and reputation would be remembered in history if he were now to surrender to what Okinawans see as unjust, unreasonable and unconstitutional demands.

Faced with the opposition of Governor Ota in the mid-1990s, when his cooperation was required to enforce the renewal of lease agreement with the US forces over Okinawan land, Tokyo first took the Governor to the Supreme Court and went to the lengths of passing a special law to obviate his opposition [13]. That legislation was endorsed by around 90 per cent of members in the Lower House and 80 per cent in the Upper House, even though flying in the face of the constitutional provision (Article 95) that “A special law, applicable only to one local public entity, cannot be enacted by the Diet without the consent of the majority of the voters of the local public entity concerned, obtained in accordance with law. [14]” When the 2005 deal was announced, and knowing that Governor Inamine was certain to oppose it, the Japanese government made known that it was again considering resort to such a “Special Measures Law,” this time to remove administrative powers over the sea around Okinawa from Governor to Prime Minister, so that the reclamation of the waters adjacent to Cape Henoko could proceed without local approval [15]. Already the prefecture is deprived of control over 20 per cent of the land of its main island’s land and 40 per cent of its air-space (for US military purposes), so such a law to strip it of sea rights too would be an extremely bitter pill, tantamount (as Hiyane Teruo puts it) to a denial of the history and culture of Okinawa [16].

Former Governor Ota commented that such special laws designed to strip the powers of a prefectural governor would arouse uproar if directed at one of the major metropolitan prefectures, but little support for Okinawa could be expected elsewhere in Japan. Former Deputy Governor Yoshimoto Masaki says, “it is as if there were no constitution. [17]” While the Koizumi government and LDP spokesmen speak of establishing new rights and advancing regional autonomy under a new constitution, in fact they move to curtail local government

autonomy, shuffle off restraints on the possession and use of force, and demand that citizens prioritize their duties to the state over their rights from it and at the same time love it (by compelling “patriotism”). Okinawa, excluded from constitutional order for 25 years from 1947 under direct US military rule, and then offered a watered down version of it in which US military prerogatives were entrenched and pacifist and regional autonomy clauses emptied of substance, is now to be stripped of further rights and harnessed even more decisively to the requirements of a revamped military alliance, as permanent, joint US-Japan military colony.

Prospect

How this third phase of modern Okinawan struggle will evolve is hard to predict [18]. The Japanese state having twice conceded defeat by abandoning its airport construction plans in the face of sustained and principled opposition, facing Pentagon impatience and the deadline of the Bush visit to Kyoto, seeks to impose a solution in the teeth of almost universal Okinawan opposition. Unlike Prime Minister Hashimoto, who in 1998 said that “the heliport will not be built without local consent, [19]” Koizumi is promising Bush that it will be built despite almost universal dissent. Tokyo officials talk of patience, persuasion, and sincerity, but their patience and their persuasive powers seem to have been exhausted, their sincerity is dubious, and their readiness to apply force when and if necessary is implicit. If or when the state orders riot police to clear the land-based site of protesters, or uses force to end the sea-based resistance, and if or when local governments are reduced to expressing their opposition by denying the national government the use of highways, electrical power and water in order to block the construction, the affair could quickly spiral out of control. That, needless to say, would bring the Japanese state system and the alliance of the world’s No. 1 and No. 2 powers into unprecedented crisis.

Despairing of accommodation within the Japanese state (and the US-Japanese condominium) Okinawa might attempt again to flourish as an independent (and demilitarized) centre of culture and trade. The notion of Okinawan independence is to be heard again in Okinawa these days. It has deep roots, since Okinawa, or the Ryukyu Kingdom as it was then known, enjoyed independence, at first real and then largely nominal, as an East Asian centre of culture and trade for half a millennium before being assimilated within the modern Japanese state in the late 19th century. With its population of 1.3 million, contemporary high levels of education and culture, and pivotal geopolitical location, it could, if it so chose, seek to become an independent state larger than more than forty of the current UN states. Alternatively, some Okinawans propose the idea of “special administrative status, as an “autonomous prefecture. [20]” Such projects, needless to say, are utterly at odds with the designation in Tokyo and Washington of a central Okinawan role in the projection of regional and global force in the interests of their superpower alliance. Okinawan prize-winning novelist Medoruma Shun wrote recently that Okinawa’s problems would only be resolved when its people stood up, overcoming their fear of being cut loose by Japan and the US, and themselves took active steps to remove the Japanese and US heel from their islands [21].

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Notes

[1] See my previous essays, "[Koizumi's Japan in](#)

[Bush's World](#)" and "[Koizumi's Kingdom of Illusion](#)".

[2] “Beigun 66 nen ni no keikaku,” Asahi shimbun, 4 November 2005. Okinawan architect and activist Makishi Koichi has posted key US archival documents on this plan on his [blog](#).

[3] See Gavan McCormack, “Okinawa and the structure of dependence,” Glenn D. Hook and Richard Siddle, eds, *Japan and Okinawa - Structure and Subjectivity*, London and New York, RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, pp. 93-113.

[4] Urashima Etsuko, a local activist, author, and environmentalist, has written a powerful chronicle of the local movement in the monthly journal *Impakushon*. Her final chapter details recent events: Urashima Etsuko, “Zoku - Okinawa dayori - furidashi ni modoru,” *Impakushon*, No 149, October 2005, pp. 108-115.

[5] Kanako Takahara, “Japan, U.S. agree on a new Futenma site,” *Japan Times*, 27 October 2005.

[6] Full text of the Interim Agreement in *Asahi Shimbun*, 30 October 2005.

[7] Asai Motofumi, “Bigun kichi hantai ni okeru shiten tenkan o,” *Ryukyu shimpo*, 6 November 2005.

[8] Interview, Nago, 5 November 2005.

[9] *Asahi shimbun*, 9 November 2005.

[10] Opinion surveys, *Okinawa Times*, 14 September 2004; *Ryukyu shimpo*, 22 June 2005; and *Okinawa Times*, 5 November 2005.

[11] “Engan-an ‘hantai’ 72% Futenma isetsu,” *Okinawa Times*, 15 November 2005.

[12] Hiyane Teruo, “Kawaru kokka zo - Okinawa no kiki,” *Ryukyu shimpo*, 7 and 8 November 2005.

[13] Koji Taira, “The Okinawan charade: The United States, Japan and Okinawa: Conflict and Compromise, 1995-1996,” *Japan Policy Research Institute, Working Paper, No 28*, January 1997.

[14] Ota Masahide, lecture, *International Christian University, Tokyo*, 14 November 2005.

[15] “Kyoken - Okinawa neraiuchi/hanron

fusatsu ni tsuyoi ikari,” Okinawa Times, 27 October 2005.

[16] Hiyane, cit,

[17] “Kyoken,” Okinawa Times, 27 October 2005.

[18] In focusing here on the distinctive Okinawan experience, I set aside the rising resentment and anger in other prefectures, notably Yamaguchi and Kanagawa, over the burdens assigned them in the new military arrangements.

[19] BBC, 6 August 1998, quoted in Aurelia George Mulgan, “Managing the US base issue in Okinawa: A test for Japanese democracy,” Working Paper No 2000/1, Department of International Relations, Australian National University, Canberra, January 2000.

[20] See, for example, Hamazato Masashi, Sato Manabu, and Shimabukuro Jun, Okinawa jichishu - anata wa do kangaeru? Okinawa jichi kenkyukai, Naha, 2005.

[21] Medoruma Shun, Okinawa sengo zero nen, Tokyo, NHK seikatsu shinsho, 2005, p. 189.