

## Introduction: The Continued Saga of the Henoko Base and Japan-US-Okinawa Relations 五部作への序章 辺野古基地と日米沖縄関係という長編物語

Gavan McCormack

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

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**Gavan McCormack**

Okinawa may have temporarily receded from the headlines, but the contradictions and conflicts that have roiled it for most of the post-War era, in acute form now for 17 years, have not been resolved. Rival forces steadily mobilize for a perhaps decisive phase in the contest over whether or not US military design should continue to be the prefecture's *raison d'être*. The standoff may not last much longer in its current form, but how it will be resolved is far from clear.

On January 19 2014, the people of Nago City in Northern Okinawa (population ca. 60,000) go to the polls to elect a new mayor. It is the quintessential local political event, yet this particular election has significant national and international implications. Previous elections, at roughly 4-yearly intervals, attracted intense outside attention, and this one is no different. The "Nago election" file must sit close to the top of urgent and ongoing matters on the desk of Prime Minister Abe Shinzo.

The reason is that within Nago City lies the hamlet of Henoko, facing Oura Bay, and it is there that the United States and Japan decided in 1996 that a "replacement base" would be constructed to accommodate the existing Futenma Marine Corps Air Station from Ginowan City in the densely populated centre of the island. The City's first response to that announcement was a plebiscite on 1997. The outcome was a clear "No" to the plan, but then-mayor Higa Tetsuya took it upon himself to reverse that decision, accepting the plan on the

City's behalf and promptly resigning.<sup>1</sup>

Since then, however, not one peg has been planted at the designated site. The implacable, non-violent opposition of the people of Okinawa as a whole and Nago City in particular, has presented the governments of Japan and the United States with a challenge, so far intractable. The two powers could, of course, go ahead and build the military complex by force, but that would likely overall weaken rather than strengthen the alliance defences (and possibly the alliance itself). So, every effort has been made to secure the consent of the elected representatives of the Okinawan people, in Nago City and in Okinawa prefecture. Monies under the pretext of "Development of Northern Districts" flowed in to the City, and national politicians cultivated their Nago contacts and sought every means to secure their cooperation.

Through mayoral elections in 1998, 2002, and 2006, conservative candidates were returned but, notably, none of them campaigned on the base issue. They concentrated instead on promises of jobs and fees that a pipeline to Tokyo would ensure. *Hakomono* (boxed, i.e. freestanding building) projects constructed with subsidy monies understood to be the "carrots" for compliance with national base-related planning were scattered here and there throughout the City. However, generated by Tokyo's desire to divide and subdue local opposition rather than as part of any coherent plan, they were unable to lift it out of the economic doldrums. One of the longest "sit-in" demonstrations of modern political history evolved at the site to prevent any works (it still continues) and the only expressions of consent that were adopted by the mayor or Town Assembly (in 1999) were so hedged by conditions as to be tantamount to rejection. It was taken as obvious that no candidate who declared support for the Henoko project could possibly win office.



**Author at Henoko, November 2011**

That changed in 2010. Following the national swing to install Hatoyama Yukio's Democratic Party government (one of whose policies was "removal of Futenma to somewhere at least outside Okinawa") in August 2009, Nago citizens took heart and installed the explicitly anti-base Inamine Susumu ("no base on either land or sea under my city government"), who secured 17,950 votes to incumbent mayor Shimabukuro Yoshikazu's 16,362 in a 76.96 per cent voter turnout. It was an epoch-making decision. Nago City was not for sale. Inamine thereafter, unprecedentedly, refused base-related subsidies from Tokyo.

For the forthcoming round, there appear at this stage to be three candidates: incumbent Inamine, who sticks to his anti-base principle, offering instead a development policy rooted in local initiatives and consultation; the LDP-supported Suematsu Bunshin, who hedges his stance on the Henoko project and whose campaign does not so much as mention the word "base" although he is thought likely to yield to Tokyo pressure to build it if elected; and former mayor Shimabukuro, defeated in 2010 but retaining strong Tokyo governmental and party connections, who this time, for the first time, has made base construction his prime platform plank: without it, he says, there can be no Nago development.

By some accounts at least, Inamine's local government has succeeded over three and a half years in opening itself to public scrutiny and participation and imbuing a sense of purpose and identity to the city.<sup>2</sup> However, the city also houses significant corporate, especially construction industry, interests, some of whom have benefited hugely from the monies that flowed from cooperative governments in the past, who now stand to benefit, again very substantially, from the public funds expected to flow if and when the base construction project is approved. In the past, traditional influence-peddling techniques, tantamount to vote buying, were prevalent. At elections, the LDP made every effort to avoid a focus on the base issue, while stressing its ability to provide jobs and money.

Since Prime Minister Abe has promised President Obama that this base will be built, he cannot brook defeat. But likewise, Mayor Inamine, and the Okinawan residents of his city and of Okinawa as a whole, have not struggled for 17 years in order to give up now. The stage is set, therefore, for a gargantuan struggle between grossly unevenly matched opponents.

Okinawa now confronts two imminent deadlines, however, of which this is one. The other is the decision that Okinawan Governor Nakaima must make on the request from Prime Minister Abe that he license the reclamation of the relevant parts of Oura Bay as first step in the construction process. Nakaima has indicated that he will answer Yes, No, or possibly something in between ("chukan mo ariuru"), either late in 2013 or early in 2014.<sup>3</sup>

With those two crucial decisions pending, Tokyo late in 2013 was engaged in a determined effort to intervene to secure its desired outcomes in both Nago and Naha, the city and the prefecture. A stream of high-level national government figures flew in to Naha to pile the pressure on the Governor, while hoping that "generous" responses to his requests for

budgetary allocations to the prefecture would also serve to soften the opposition. Tokyo also attempted to negotiate a truce between the two conservative candidates in the Nago election in order to avoid splitting the pro-base vote, and it brought pressure to bear on the Okinawan branch of the Liberal Democratic Party to accept the national government (and national LDP) plan. That the two were at odds is itself the plainest evidence of the depth of Okinawan sentiment. The LDP Okinawa branch had distanced itself from the national (and government) party and adopted a Futenma "replacement only outside Okinawa" stance from 2010, in recognition of the strength of Okinawan feeling and the virtual impossibility of any candidate declaring a pro-base position being successful at election. From that time, its members were elected to prefectural or national office on that platform of opposition to their party's national policy, including four representatives elected to the national Diet in July 2013. As its senior party figures were summoned to Tokyo in November 2013 to face the ultimatum: submit, abandon your opposition to the Henoko project and your party pledge to that effect, or face expulsion,<sup>4</sup> it was clear that to renege under pressure on a core policy platform would surely be to erode further, perhaps fatally, the party's electoral prospects. The Okinawan paper, *Okinawa taimusu*, warned the prefectural LDP that it stood before "the court of history" as it prepared to make this judgment.<sup>5</sup> Still, Tokyo evidently calculated that the chance of Governor Nakaima falling in line would be greater if the LDP itself first fell in line.

Apart from these two obvious fronts of activity, there could be no doubt that the country's best advertising agencies and political organization brains were working overtime on ways and means to assure "good" outcomes on both prefectural and city fronts. The secret discretionary funds at the disposal of the cabinet secretary (*kambo kimitsuhi*) to which resort had been made on crucial electoral

occasions in the past would be tapped again to ensure no possibility for influence was neglected.

Yet there was nothing to indicate that Okinawan prefectural or Nago City opinion was weakening in its opposition to expansion of the base system in the prefecture. As of April 2013, 75 per cent of people opposed any Futenma Replacement facility being constructed in the prefecture.<sup>6</sup> One of Okinawa's two dailies, the *Ryukyu shimpo*, editorialized in October 2013 that the Okinawa policy being conducted by the US and Japan had become "almost completely colonial" and, since the views of the Okinawan people and of all of its governing authorities up to and including the Governor were being ignored, the Governor should launch a special appeal for assistance to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Committee (human rights) of the United Nations.<sup>7</sup>

In August 2013, facing the prefectural call for a formal statement of city thinking, Mayor Inamine invited residents of the city to submit statements of opinion. Over the span of several months, he received over 2,500 of them, 99 per cent of them opposing reclamation and construction. Based in part on those citizen views, he drew up a City statement and submitted it a few days in advance of the 29 November deadline.<sup>8</sup> Nago City urged Governor Nakaima to reject the national government's request on grounds that it would be impossible to protect either the natural environment or the human livelihood of Nago citizens if the project went ahead.<sup>9</sup>

Among the statements of views of Nago citizens was the one below from Urashima Etsuko.

The comment on the mayoral "Opinion" by Okinawa University's Sakurai Kunitoshi in *Okinawa taimusu* is also attached below.

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*Okinawa versus Japan and the United States*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2012.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Details in Gavan McCormack and Satoko Oka Norimatsu, *Resistant Islands: Okinawa Confronts Japan and the United States*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2012, pp. 140ff.

<sup>2</sup> For a brief account by Higashionna Takuma, member of the City Assembly, see *Keshifu*, No 80, October 2013, pp. 25-27.

<sup>3</sup> Nakaima on 1 November raised for the first time this possibility of something in between.

<sup>4</sup> "Henoko isetsu-an kyoyo, Okinawa wa mada suteishi na nio ka," editorial, *Ryukyu shimpo*, 20 November 2013. The Okinawan LDP is to make a decision on this matter by 5 December 2013. Some believe that a switch by the prefectural party would open the way for an early switch by the Governor too, and the "yes" answer that Tokyo is determined to get.

<sup>5</sup> "Jiminto koyaku, 'kuju no sentaku' wa tsuyo shinai," *Okinawa taimusu*, editorial, 23 November 2013.

<sup>6</sup> *Okinawa taimusu*, April 2013.

<sup>7</sup> "Ospurei haibi 1-nen, kokuren ni jinken kyusai uttaeyo, zenki tesshu koso inochi mamoru michi," editorial, *Ryukyu shimpo*, 1 October 2013.

<sup>8</sup> "Koyu suimen umetate shonin shinseisho ni kansuru iken," *Okinawa ken Nago shi*, 22 November 2013, [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> "Futenma hikojo isetsu mondai, Nago shicho



iken-an o kettei, Henoko umetate shinsei fushonin motomeru,” editorial, *Okinawa taimusu*, 19 November 2013.