

Forbes

What Should The U.S. Do In Okinawa? Let Its Sailors Drink -- By Bringing Them Home To America

Doug Bandow

June 8, 2016

Could the U.S.-Japan alliance founder as a result of alcohol? Apparently. At least, that's the implication of the U.S. Navy's ban on drinking by personnel stationed on the Japanese island of Okinawa.

It would be far better to phase out America's military presence on Okinawa, turning U.S. bases back to the Japanese government. More than seven decades after the end of World War II, Japan's defense should be the responsibility of Tokyo, not Washington.

The independent Ryukyu Islands were conquered by Imperial Japan in the late 19th century. Residents were never considered fully Japanese by the rest of the country, but they suffered disproportionately when the allies invaded the island of Okinawa in April 1945. Nearly 100,000 civilians died in the bitter three-month battle. Afterward the U.S. government loaded Okinawa with bases, returning the island to Japan only in 1972.

America retained its facilities, however. Despite Japan's dramatic recovery, the U.S. remained responsible for that country's defense. In return, Japan's duty only was to be defended by America. At the time the status quo satisfied most everyone, including Tokyo's neighbors. Marine Corps Gen. Henry Stackpole famously explained that U.S. troops were the "cap in the bottle" to stop Japanese remilitarization. Decades later this arrangement has lost its *raison d'être*.

Washington currently maintains 85 military bases and some 53,000 troops in Japan (plus 43,000 dependents and 5,000 civilian workers). Roughly 40 percent of those facilities, half the people, and three-quarters of the base area are located on Okinawa, with just .6 percent of Japan's land mass, in the southernmost and poorest prefecture. About a fifth of the island is under U.S. control: Homes abut runways, prime beaches are off-limits to Okinawans, and island life is dramatically inconvenienced.

Nevertheless, there is little political will for change. U.S. officials desire that America remain the region's "essential power," despite Japan's ability to take over its own defense, and retain advanced bases in the Asia-Pacific. Tokyo wants to rely on America's security guarantee, despite Japan's great military potential, while incurring the least political inconvenience from hosting

U.S. forces. Both governments benefit from ignoring Okinawa's complaints and filling the island with American military facilities and largely young, male service personnel.

What could possibly go wrong?

Local anger exploded in 1995 after three American service members raped a 12-year-old girl, followed by insensitive comments from military brass. Protests raged and the Japanese government sought to placate islanders with financial transfers and plans to move Futenma airbase and relocate U.S. Marines to Guam. These schemes failed to satisfy, however. In 2009 the Democratic Party of Japan took power with proposals for a more independent, Asia-centric foreign policy and promises to address Okinawans' concerns. However, the ineffectual DPJ government failed to achieve its objectives. Far from helping, the Obama administration actively thwarted Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama's efforts to address Okinawans' plight.

His successors cared less about achieving justice for their countrymen and more about expanding support from U.S. officials. Fear of North Korea, which continued to develop nuclear weapons and missiles, and China, which adopted increasingly confrontational tactics to advance its territorial claims in surrounding waters, encouraged a tighter Japanese embrace of Washington. Taking a more independent approach to its defense was not considered.

But base opponents, bolstered by the 2014 gubernatorial victory of Takeshi Onaga, continued to resist. Declared Onaga: "The new military base will not be built." Although the national government pushed ahead, the new governor attempted to revoke the necessary building permits. In elections last weekend his allies took firm control of the Prefectural Assembly, bolstering his efforts to delay construction of new facilities.

Fueling popular anger has been a seeming spate of high-profile offenses committed by U.S. military personnel (who, in fact, have a lower crime rate than locals). Last month a sailor pled guilty to rape. Also last month a contractor and former Marine was detained in a murder case. The latter prompted the military to set a curfew and prohibit drinking off-base.

Then last weekend an apparently intoxicated sailor crashed, injuring two Okinawans. The navy confined all personnel to base except for essential travel and banned drinking on or off U.S. facilities. Explained Rear Adm. Matthew Carter: "For decades, we have enjoyed a strong relationship with the people of Japan. It is imperative that each sailor understand how our actions affect that relationship, and the U.S.–Japan alliance as a whole."

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe largely ignored the Okinawa question as he sought to bolster Tokyo's military capabilities. He pushed to revise the so-called "peace constitution," Article 9 of which technically forbids Tokyo from maintaining any military; update the so-called Self-Defense Force's 1997 "Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Cooperation," which barred the SDF aiding U.S. forces even if the latter were coming to Japan's aid; and increase military outlays, which never got much above one percent of GDP. The U.S. has applauded his efforts, but progress has been minimal.

Observed Emma Chanlett-Avery and Ian Rinehart of the Congressional Research Service, "constitutional, legal, fiscal, and political barriers exist to significantly expanded defense

cooperation. Many of Abe's initiatives have faced opposition from the public and from political parties." Less than a quarter of Japanese said they wanted their government to do more militarily. Last year large demonstrations targeted even modest legislative measures which would have received barely a second glance in the U.S.

Although Chanlett-Avery and Rinehart spoke of Abe's efforts resulting in "momentum [which] has created new energy in the alliance," that is true only measured against decades of Tokyo doing little at home and nothing abroad. First, the constitution remains unchanged, so Abe has adopted the U.S. tactic of elastic construction: like his predecessors he simply interpreted the nation's fundamental law as he wished it had been written.

Military outlays have risen only modestly since Abe took power in 2012. They went up just two percent in 2015, when Japan devoted about \$41 billion to defense (actually down in dollars due to a falling yen). Although expenditures have been enough for Japan to assemble a capable military, the amount falls far short of the roughly \$180 billion China, Tokyo's main potential nemesis, spends annually. Indeed, between 2004 and 2013 Chinese defense spending rose 270 percent—compared to *falling* five percent in Japan.

Moreover, Japan's expenditures remains an anemic one percent of GDP, compared to around three percent for Beijing and about 3.5 percent for the U.S., which Japan expects to make up its deficiencies. Critics may see Abe as a dangerous nationalist, but his government's military budget doesn't reflect such ambitions.

Last year Tokyo adjusted the defense guidelines so that its forces could join collective security operations and assist the U.S. when the latter aided Japan. But the changes were marginal. Tokyo's previous participation in international non-combat activities had been quite limited. In Iraq, for instance, Japanese personnel were forbidden to defend themselves; other nations' soldiers had to act as de facto bodyguards.

Thus, it won't be hard for Tokyo to do more in the future. In speaking to the U.S. Congress last year Abe cited his nation's "proactive contribution to peace based on the principle of international cooperation." Japan, he said, would confront "terrorism, infectious diseases, natural disasters and climate change." However worthy such endeavors, they are largely irrelevant to the U.S.-Japan alliance. Even the "security" activities cited by the guidelines remain resolutely non-combat: cyber warfare, logistics, mine-sweeping, reconnaissance. Thus, Tokyo's new role will do little to reduce America's military duties.

Moreover, the revised standards merely allow Japan to better defend Japan, not assist the U.S. For instance, the guidelines highlight "emerging threats to Japan's peace and security" and "an armed attack against Japan." American interests are an afterthought, subsumed in a short section on "cooperation for regional and global peace and security."

Most Americans probably never realized that until last year—under a supposedly bilateral military alliance—a Japanese ship on patrol with an American vessel could not assist if the latter was attacked. Now the Japanese vessel can act, *but only if it too is threatened*. And Japanese analysts warn against expecting Tokyo to allow such situations to occur. Explained Japanese scholar Jun Okumura, "We will wait a long time before a destroyer is conveniently nearby when

the Chinese [navy] attacks the U.S. 7th Fleet.” Some alliance.

Of course, Prime Minister Abe told the Congress that he wanted to “make the cooperation between the U.S. military and Japan’s Self-Defense forces even stronger, and the alliance still more solid.” By that he meant tying Washington even more tightly to Japan’s interests, including territorial disputes with China. The U.S. remains responsible for Japan’s defense including, as before, all the heavy lifting—meaning anything really dangerous and expensive.

In fact, the new guidelines appear to envision an even stronger U.S. guarantee for Tokyo. Said President Barack Obama: “I want to reiterate that our treaty commitment to Japan’s security is absolute, and that Article 5 covers all territories under Japan’s administration, including Senkakus Islands.” Which means, in theory, that the U.S. is prepared to risk Los Angeles to safeguard Japan’s disputed title to a few worthless, unpopulated pieces of rock.

There’s more. The Joint Statement of the Security Consultative Committee reported that officials from both governments “confirmed the strategic importance of deploying the most modern and advanced U.S. capabilities to Japan”; “welcomed the deployment” of American aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles, and ships; and “stressed the importance of sustained cooperation in enhancing Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) capabilities” with additional U.S. weapons deployments. Under the “bilateral” treaty Washington’s obligations apparently only increase.

How can this be to America’s benefit? The U.S. has an obvious interest in Japan’s continued independence, but Japan’s interest in its own security is even greater. If Tokyo believes it faces serious threats, it should do more, much more to defend itself.

In fact, no one expects a Chinese armada to show up in Tokyo Bay. Nor the Chinese navy to interdict Japanese commerce. If conflict erupts, it likely will be over disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Only Tokyo can decide how much it is prepared to spend and risk defending its claims. But nothing at stake is worth war, at least for America.

Of course, Beijing is not justified in using force there or elsewhere. But the Abe government refuses to even acknowledge an issue, despite legitimate Chinese territorial claims. A seeming blank check from the world’s superpower apparently has discouraged Tokyo from considering negotiation and compromise.

A serious Japanese military build-up is opposed by some of its neighbors, especially those needlessly antagonized by Tokyo over the years. But other countries, most notably the Philippines, now welcome a larger Japanese role in the region. In any case, no one seriously suggests that Japan is about to embark upon a new round of imperial conquests, especially against nuclear-armed China. More than seven decades after World War II Japan should finally act like a normal country—defending itself, guarding its region, and ending its dependence on America for its security.

The U.S. should turn its security guarantee to Japan into a framework for future cooperation. That should include potential assistance if a genuine hegemonic threat arises in Asia. But Beijing does not pose such a danger today and hopefully never will. In the meantime Tokyo should take the lead in confronting day-to-day security challenges in its region.

Which means the U.S. should leave Japan to decide on its own defense and foreign policies, without hectoring or pressure. No doubt the debate in Tokyo would be sharp. Some Japanese are pressing their government to do more because they worry about foreign threats and recognize that the U.S. might back down from a confrontation with China. Other Japanese dismiss such fears and uphold the country's post-war pacifist heritage. The decision is up to Japan.

As American forces returned home Okinawa's bases would empty. What came next—use by the SDF, turnover to the Okinawa government, return to private owners—would be up to the Japanese, especially those living on the island. The latter above all deserve to enjoy the peace that the bases long were supposed to help guarantee. And American military personnel could continue to enjoy a drink ... back home in their own country.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties.