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Bring U.S. military forces home from Okinawa

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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 its personnel stationed in Japan. It would be far better to phase out America's military presence in Okinawa, turning U.S. bases back to the Japanese government. More than seven decades after the end of World War II, Tokyo should take over responsibility for Japan's defense.

Washington currently maintains 85 military bases and some 53,000 troops in Japan. Roughly 40 percent of those facilities, half the people and three-quarters of the base area are located in Okinawa, with just 0.6 percent of Japan's land mass.

Local anger exploded in 1995 after three American service members raped a 12-year-old girl. The Japanese government sought to placate islanders with financial transfers and plans to move the Futenma air base and relocate U.S. Marines to Guam. These schemes failed to satisfy, however. Base opponents, bolstered by the 2014 gubernatorial victory of Takeshi Onaga, continued to resist. Although the national government pushed ahead, Onaga attempted to revoke the necessary building permits.

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. That month, a contractor and ex-marine was detained in a murder case. Then 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.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe largely ignored the Okinawa question as he sought to bolster Japan's military capability. He pushed to revise the so-called peace Constitution — Article 9 of which

technically forbids Tokyo from maintaining any military — update the Self-Defense Forces' 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 1 percent of GDP.

The U.S. has applauded his efforts, but progress has been minimal. Less than a quarter of Japanese want their government to do more militarily. Last year large demonstrations targeted even modest legislative measures.

The Constitution remains unchanged, so Abe simply interpreted it as he wished it had been written. Military outlays have risen only modestly since Abe took power, up just 2 percent in 2015. Japan then devoted about \$41 billion to defense, compared to roughly \$180 billion by China, Tokyo's main potential nemesis.

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 Tokyo's international activities will be noncombat and do little to reduce America's military duties.

Moreover, the revised standards merely allow Japan to better defend Japan, not assist the U.S. Now a Japanese ship on patrol with an American vessel can assist if the latter is attacked — so long the Japanese vessel too is threatened. And Japanese analysts warn against expecting Tokyo to allow such situations to occur. Yet the new guidelines appear to envision an even stronger U.S. guarantee for Japan and deployment of additional weapons. Under the "bilateral" treaty Washington's obligations apparently only increase.

The U.S. has an obvious interest in Japan's continued independence, but Japan's interest in its own security is even greater. Tokyo should do more to defend itself. In fact, no one expects a Chinese armada to show up in Tokyo Bay. If conflict erupts, it likely will be over the disputed Senkaku Islands. Of course, Beijing is not justified in using force there or elsewhere, but nothing at stake is worth war, at least for America.

A serious Japanese military buildup is opposed by some of its neighbors, but no one seriously suggests that Japan is about to embark upon a new round of imperial conquests. 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.

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 Tokyo should take the lead in confronting day-to-day security challenges.

Which means Washington should leave Japan to decide on its own defense and foreign policies. As American forces returned home, Okinawa's bases would empty. What came next would be up to the Japanese. And American military personnel could continue to enjoy a drink ... back home in their own country.

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