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Japan Can Defend Itself

by Doug Bandow

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World War II ended 65 years ago. The Cold War disappeared 21 years ago. Yet America's military deployments have little changed. Nowhere is that more evident than on the Japanese island of Okinawa.

Okinawans are tired of the heavy U.S. military presence. Some 90,000—nearly 10 percent of the island's population—gathered in protest at the end of April. It is time for Washington to lighten Okinawa's burden.

An independent kingdom swallowed by imperial Japan, Okinawa was the site of a brutal battle as the United States closed in on Japan in early 1945. After Tokyo's surrender, Washington filled the main prefecture island with bases and didn't return it to Japan until 1972. America's military presence has only been modestly reduced since.

The facilities grew out of the mutual defense treaty between America and Japan, by which the former promised to defend the latter, which was disarmed after its defeat. The island provided a convenient home for American units. Most Japanese people also preferred to keep the U.S. military presence on Japan's most distant and poorest province, forcing Okinawans to carry a disproportionate burden of the alliance.

Whatever the justifications of this arrangement during the Cold War, the necessity of both U.S. ground forces in Japan and the larger mutual defense treaty between the two nations has disappeared. It's time to reconsider both Tokyo's and Washington's regional roles. The United States imposed the so-called "peace constitution" on Japan, Article 9 of which prohibits the use of force and even creation of a military.

However, American officials soon realized that Washington could use military assistance. Today's "Self-Defense Force" is a widely accepted verbal evasion of a clear constitutional provision.

Nevertheless, both domestic pacifism and regional opposition have discouraged reconsideration of Japan's military role. Washington's willingness to continue defending an increasingly wealthy Japan made a rethink unnecessary.

Fears of a more dangerous North Korea and a more assertive People's Republic of China have recently increased support in Japan for a more robust security stance. The threat of piracy has even caused Tokyo to open its first overseas military facility in the African state of Djibouti. Nevertheless, Japan's activities remain minimal compared to its stake in East Asia's stability.

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Thus, Tokyo remains heavily dependent on Washington for its security. The then opposition Democratic Party of Japan promised to "do away with the dependent relationship in which Japan ultimately has no alternative but to act in accordance with U.S. wishes." The party later moderated its program, calling for a "close and equal Japan-U.S. alliance."

However, the government promised to reconsider a previous agreement to relocate the Marines Corps Air Station at Futenma elsewhere on Okinawa. The majority of residents want to send the base elsewhere.

The Obama administration responded badly, insisting that Tokyo fulfill its past promises. Only reluctantly did Washington indicate a willingness to consider alternatives—after imposing seemingly impossible conditions.

Still, the primary problem is Japan. So long as Tokyo requests American military protection, it cannot easily reject Washington's request for bases. Thus, Okinawan residents must do more than demand fairness. They must advocate defense independence.

Who should protect Japan? Japan. Tokyo's neighbors remain uneasy in varying degrees about the prospect of a more active Japan, but World War II is over. A revived Japanese empire is about as likely as a revived Mongol empire. Both Japan and India could play a much larger role in preserving regional security.

Many Japanese citizens are equally opposed to a larger Japanese military and more expansive foreign policy. Their feelings are understandable, given the horrors of World War II. However, the most fundamental duty of any national government is defense. If the Japanese people want a minimal (or no) military, that is their right. But they should not expect other nations to fill the defense gap.

Moreover, with an expected $1.6 trillion deficit this year alone, the United States can no longer afford to protect countries which are able to protect themselves. Washington has more than enough on its military plate elsewhere in the world.

Raymond Greene, America's consul general in Okinawa, says: "Asia is going though a period of historic strategic change in the balance of power." True enough, which is why East Asian security and stability require greater national efforts from Japan and its neighbors. Regional defense also warrants improved multilateral cooperation—something which should minimize concerns over an increased Japanese role.

The other important question is, defend Japan from what? Today Tokyo faces few obvious security threats. For this reason, many Japanese see little cause for an enlarged Japanese military.

However, North Korea's uncertain future and China's ongoing growth should give the Japanese people pause for concern. East Asia might not look so friendly in coming decades. Richard Lawless, assistant secretary of defense for Asian and Pacific security affairs in the Bush administration, claimed: "observers perceive a Japan that is seemingly content to marginalize itself, a Japan that appears to almost intentionally ignore the increasingly complex and dangerous neighborhood in which it is located." Nevertheless, only the Japanese can assess the threats which concern them rather than Washington. And only the Japanese can decide how best to respond to any perceived threats.

Moreover, so long as Japan goes hat-in-hand to the United States for

protection, Washington is entitled to request—or, more accurately, insist on—bases that serve its interests. And Tokyo cannot easily say no.

Before the demonstration Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama said that "It must never happen that we accept the existing plan." Afterwards he visited Okinawa and indicated that he planned to renege on his government's earlier promises: "we must maintain the Japan-U.S. alliance as a deterrent force, and . . . we must ask Okinawa to bear some of that burden." He added that "It has become clear from our negotiations with the Americans that we cannot ask them to relocate the base to too far-flung a location." Apparently his government intends to move some facilities elsewhere on Okinawa as well as to the small island of Tokunoshima.

With Tokyo retreating from its commitment to chart a more independent course, it is up to the United States to reorder the relationship. Washington policy makers long have enjoyed America's quasi-imperial role. But U.S. citizens are paying for and dying in Washington's quasi-imperial wars. An expansive American role made sense during the Cold War in the aftermath of World War II. That world disappeared two decades ago.

Promiscuous intervention in today's world inflates the power of Washington policy makers but harms the interests of U.S. citizens. American forces and personnel are expected to be at perpetual risk guaranteeing the interests of other states, including Japan.

Thus the U.S. reliance on Okinawa. Lieutenant General Keith Stalder, the Marine Corps Pacific commander, said the island deployment is "the perfect model" for the alliance's objectives of "deterring, defending and defeating potential adversaries."

For years the most obvious target of the American forces was North Korea, with the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) expected to reinforce the Republic of Korea in the event of war. Yet the ROK is both financially and manpower rich. More recently some Americans have talked about deploying the MEF to seize Pyongyang's nuclear weapons in the event of a North Korean collapse. Alas, so far the North has proved to be surprisingly resilient, so the Marines might wait a long time to undertake this mission.

Checking China is next on the potential Okinawa mission list. However, no one expects the United States to launch a ground invasion of the People's Republic of China irrespective of the future course of events. Thus, the MEF wouldn't be very useful in any conflict. In any case, a stronger Japanese military—which already possesses potent capabilities—would be a far better mechanism for encouraging responsible Chinese development.

There's also the kitchen sink argument: the Marines are to maintain regional "stability." Pentagon officials draw expanding circles around Okinawa to illustrate potential areas of operation.

The mind boggles, however. Should U.S. troops be sent to resolve, say, the long-running Burmese guerrilla war in that nation's east, a flare-up of secessionist sentiment in Indonesia, violent opposition to Fiji's military dictator, or border skirmishes between Cambodia and Thailand? It hard to imagine any reason for Washington to jump into any local conflict. America's presumption should be noninvolvement rather than intervention in other nations' wars.

Making fewer promises to intervene would allow the United States to reduce the number of military personnel and overseas bases. A good

place to start in cutting international installations would be Okinawa.

America's post-Cold War dominance is coming to an end. Michael Schuman argued in *Time*: "Anyone who thinks the balance of power in Asia is not changing—and with it, the strength of the U.S., even among its old allies—hasn't been there lately."

Many analysts nevertheless want the United States to attempt to maintain its unnatural dominance. Rather than accommodate a more powerful China, they want America to contain a wealthier and more influential Beijing. Rather than expect its allies to defend themselves and promote regional stability, they want Washington to keep its friends dependent.

To coin a phrase, it's time for a change. U.S. intransigence over Okinawa has badly roiled the bilateral relationship. But even a more flexible basing policy would not be enough. Washington is risking the lives and wasting the money of the American people to defend other populous and prosperous states.

Washington should close Futenma—as a start to refashioning the alliance with Japan. Rather than a unilateral promise by the United States to defend Japan, the relationship should become one of equals working together on issues of mutual interest. Responsibility for protecting Japan should become that of Japan.

Both Okinawans and Americans deserve justice. It's time for Washington to deliver.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Reagan, he is the author of *Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World* (Cato) and co-author of *The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea* (Palgrave/Macmillan).

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