

The National Interest *online*

Get Out of Japan

by Doug Bandow

06.18.2010

Candidate Barack Obama may have charmed foreign peoples, but President Barack Obama unashamedly cold shoulders foreign leaders he doesn't like. One of them was Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, who sought to reduce the number of U.S. bases on the island of Okinawa. The Obama administration worked diligently to frustrate Hatoyama's efforts, which helped force his resignation barely eight months into his term. It was an impressive performance in raw political power. But it likely was a Pyrrhic victory.

When World War II ended, the U.S. occupied Japan and effectively colonized the island of Okinawa, seized in a bitter battle shortly before Tokyo surrendered. The U.S. loaded Okinawa with bases and only returned it to Japanese sovereignty in 1972. Four decades later nearly 20 percent of the island remains occupied by American military facilities.

The U.S. military likes Okinawa because it is centrally located. Most Japanese like Okinawa because it is the most distant prefecture. Concentrating military facilities on the island—half of U.S. personnel and three-quarters of U.S. bases (by area) in Japan are located in a territory making up just .6 percent of the country—is convenient for everyone except the people who live there.

Okinawans have been protesting against the bases for years. In 1995 the rape of a teenage girl set off vigorous demonstrations and led to various proposals to lighten the island's burden. In 2006 the Japanese government agreed to help pay for some Marines to move to Guam while relocating the Futenma facility to the less populated Okinawan community of Henoko.

But residents wanted the base moved off of the island and the government delayed implementation of the agreement. During last year's parliamentary election the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) promised to move the installation elsewhere. Prime Minister Hatoyama later said: "It must never happen that we accept the existing plan."

However, the Obama administration refused to reconsider and threatened the U.S.-Japanese relationship. That unsettled a public which had voted the DPJ into power primarily for economic reasons. Prime Minister Hatoyama wanted to turn the unbalanced alliance into a more equal partnership but the Japanese people weren't ready. Said Hatoyama as he left office: "Someday, the time will come when Japan's peace will have to be ensured by the Japanese people themselves."

Washington's victory appeared to be complete. The Japanese government succumbed to U.S. demands. A new, more pliant prime minister took over. The Japanese nation again acknowledged its humiliating dependency on America.

Yet the win may prove hollow. Although Hatoyama's replacement, Prime Minister Naoto Kan, gives lip service to the plan to relocate the Marine Corps Air Station at Futenma within Okinawa, the move may never occur. There's a reason Tokyo has essentially kicked the can down the road since 1996. Some 90,000 people, roughly one-tenth of Okinawa's population, turned out for a protest rally in April.

With no way to satisfy both Okinawans and Americans, the Kan government may decide to follow its predecessors and kick the can for a few more years.

Moreover, there is talk of activists mounting a campaign of civil disobedience. Public frustration is high: in mid-May, a human chain of 17,000 surrounded Futenma. Local government officials oppose the relocation plan and would hesitate to use force against protestors. Naoto Kan could find himself following his predecessor into retirement if he forcibly intervened. Even a small number of demonstrators would embarrass U.S. and Japanese officials alike.

Moreover, Washington's high-handedness may eventually convince the Japanese people that their nation must stop being an American protectorate. It may be convenient to be defended by the world's superpower, but self-respect matters too. Tokyo has essentially given up control over its own territory to satisfy dictates from Washington. That is a high price to pay for U.S. protection. Kenneth B. Pyle, a professor at the University of Washington, writes: "the degree of U.S. domination in the relationship has been so extreme that a recalibration of the alliance was bound to happen, but also because autonomy and self-mastery have always been fundamental goals of modern Japan."

Yet what is most curious about the issue is the dogged insistence of American officials in maintaining the Japanese protectorate. The world in which the security treaty was signed has disappeared. Admits Kent E. Calder of SAIS, "the international political-economic context of the alliance and the domestic context in both nations have changed profoundly." There is no reason to assume that a relationship created for one purpose in one context makes sense for another purpose in another context.

The one-sided alliance—the United States agrees to defend Japan, Japan agrees to be defended—made sense in the aftermath of World War II. But sixty-five years later Japan possesses the second-largest economy on earth and has the potential to defend itself and help safeguard its region.

"All of my Marines on Okinawa are willing to die if it is necessary for the security of Japan," Lieutenant General Keith Stalder, the Pacific commander of the Marine Corps, observed in February. Yet "Japan does not have a reciprocal obligation to defend the United States." How does that make sense for America today?

Washington officials naturally want to believe that their role is essential. Countries which prefer to rely on America are happy to maintain the pretense. However, keeping the United States as guarantor of the security of Japan—and virtually every other populous, prosperous industrial state in the world—is not in the interest of the American people.

The days when Uncle Sam could afford to maintain a quasi-empire are over. The national debt already exceeds \$13 trillion. America is running a \$1.6 trillion deficit this year. Red ink is likely to run another \$10 trillion over the next decade—assuming Washington doesn't have to bail out more failed banks, pension funds and whatever else. Social Security and Medicare have a total unfunded liability in excess of \$100 trillion. In short, the U.S. government is piling debt on top of debt in order to defend a country well able to protect itself.

Some Japanese see little danger and correspondingly little need for much defense. Others are not so certain. It's a decision for the Japanese people.

North Korea's military abilities remain uncertain and its aggressive intentions remain unpredictable. Prime Minister Hatoyama cited "the current situation in the Korean peninsula" as a reason to maintain the base on Okinawa.

Moreover, China's power is growing. So far Beijing has been assertive rather than aggressive, but increasingly seems willing to contest islands claimed by both nations. The best way to keep the competition peaceful is for Tokyo to be able to protect itself.

Of course, several of Japan's neighbors, along with some Americans, remain nervous about any Japanese military activity given the Tokyo's wartime depredations. However, the Japanese people do not have a double dose of original sin. Everyone who planned and most everyone who carried out those aggressions are dead. A country which goes through political convulsions before it will send unarmed peacekeepers abroad is not likely to engage in a new round of conquest.

Anyway, the best way to assuage regional concerns is to construct cooperative agreements and structures between Japan and its neighbors. Democratic countries from South Korea to Australia to India have an interest in working with Tokyo to ensure that the Asia-Pacific remains peaceful and prosperous. Japan has much at stake and could contribute much. Tokyo could still choose to do little. But it shouldn't expect America to fill any defense gap.

The claim is oft-made that the presence of American forces also help promote regional stability beyond Japan. How never seems to be explained. Bruce Klingner of the Heritage Foundation contends: "the Marines on Okinawa are an indispensable and irreplaceable element of any U.S. response to an Asian crisis." But the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), while packing a potent military punch, actually has little to do.

The MEF isn't necessary to support manpower-rich South Korea, which is capable of deterring a North Korean attack. The Marines wouldn't be useful in a war against China, unless the Pentagon is planning a surprise landing in Tiananmen Square to seize Mao Zedong's mausoleum. If conflict breaks out over Taiwan or various contested islands, America would rely on air and naval units. Where real instability might arise on the ground, only a fool would introduce U.S. troops—insurgency in Indonesia, civil strife in the Solomon Islands or Fiji, border skirmishes between Thailand and Burma or Cambodia.

General Ronald Fogleman, a former Air Force Chief of Staff, argued that the Marines "serve no military function. They don't need to be in Okinawa to meet any time line in any war plan. I'd bring them back to California. The reason they don't want to bring them back to California is that everyone would look at them and say, 'Why do you need these twenty thousand?'"

Do U.S. bases in Okinawa help dampen regional arms spending? That's another point more often asserted than proven. Even if so, however, that isn't necessarily to Washington's benefit. The best way to ensure a responsible Chinese foreign and military policy is for Beijing's neighbors to be well-armed and willing to cooperate among themselves. Then local or regional conflicts would be much less likely to end up in Washington.

None of this means that the Japanese and American peoples should not be linked economically and culturally, or that the two governments should not cooperate on security issues. But there no longer is any reason for America to guarantee Japan's security or permanently station forces on Japanese soil.

The Obama administration's foreign policy looks an awful lot like the Bush administration's foreign policy. The U.S. insists on dominating the globe and imposing its will on its allies.

This approach is likely to prove self-defeating in the long-term. U.S. arrogance will only advance the point when increasingly wealthy and influential friends insist on taking policy into their own hands. Before that, however, Washington's insistence on defending prosperous and populous allies risks bankrupting America.

Washington must begin scaling back foreign commitments and deployments. Japan would be a good place to start.

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The National Interest is published by The Nixon Center

The Nixon Center
1615 L Street, Suite 1250
Washington, DC 20036
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