

# Forbes

## U.S. Filled Okinawa With Bases And Japan Kept Them There: Okinawans Again Say No

By Doug Bandow  
November 26, 2014

The U.S. is over-burdened militarily and effectively bankrupt financially, but Washington is determined to preserve every base and deployment, no matter how archaic. Such as the many military facilities in Okinawa, which risks sinking under the plethora of American installations, runways, materiel, and personnel. No wonder the Okinawan people again voted against being conscripted as one of Washington's most important military hubs.

The Ryukyu Islands once were independent, but in the late 19th century were seized by Imperial Japan. Okinawans suffered terribly in April 1945 from the so-called "Typhoon of Steel" during the American invasion. The U.S. held onto the territory afterwards, filling it with bases before finally returning Okinawa to Japan in 1972. Even now the Pentagon controls roughly one-fifth of the land, including several beautiful beaches.

Opposition to the overpowering American presence crystalized nearly two decades ago after the rape of a teenage girl by U.S. military personnel. Gov. Masahide Ota led the campaign to downsize America's presence and large numbers of Okinawans turned out in protest. However, political activism eventually ebbed. The national government in Tokyo continued to pacify and pay off as many Okinawans as possible, while promoting various schemes to rearrange the local burden.

The bases remain because no one else in Japan wants to host American military forces. Thus, Tokyo politicians have every incentive to keep the U.S. presence concentrated (about three-quarters of base area and more than half of 47,000 military personnel) in the most distant, least influential, and poorest prefecture. After a decade of negotiation Tokyo and Washington agreed in 2006 to move some Marines to Guam and shift Futenma airbase to the less populated Henoko district of Nago city. Few Okinawans were satisfied.

Three years later the Democratic Party of Japan took power and promised to address Okinawans' concerns. The party also advocated a more equal bilateral security partnership. But the Obama administration proved to be as intransigent as its predecessor, thwarting the efforts of Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, whose party was divided. He eventually resigned.

Since then Tokyo has attempted to implement the relocation agreement, despite strong local opposition, with about 80 percent of Okinawans against the Henoko scheme. Last year Tokyo gained the support of Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima. However, a week ago Naha Mayor Takeshi Onaga defeated Nakaima on an anti-base platform, declaring: “The new military base will not be built.”

In fact, Onaga may only be able to slow the planned move. But he is looking for legal ways to revoke the landfill permit granted by his predecessor. Onaga announced that “I will do everything possible to prevent the construction of a new base in Henoko. Futenma needs to be moved out of the nation and out of the prefecture.”

Onaga’s victory was welcomed by Nago Mayor Susumu Inamine, who won reelection last January and visited Washington a couple of years ago to lobby American policymakers against the plan. “It’s going to be huge for us,” he said, with city and prefectural governments working together in opposition.

Before the election Yoshihide Suga, chief cabinet secretary, claimed that the controversy was “an issue of the past.” But Onaga’s victory demonstrates the depth of popular feeling. Nakaima had flip-flopped in favor of the relocation plan in return for \$2.6 billion in economic aid from Tokyo and enjoyed strong support from Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Onaga shifted the other way, campaigning against Tokyo’s attempt to buy off islanders and attacking America’s presence for impeding Okinawa’s development. Onaga won with a 100,000 vote margin in a four-way race with about 700,000 votes cast.

The Abe government promised to move forward with its relocation plan, but faces early elections on December 14. Although the Liberal Democrats are expected to win given the opposition’s weakness, they likely will possess a smaller majority and will have a correspondingly harder time overriding local opinion against the bases.

“Okinawa has suffered a lot. Why do we have to suffer more,” Onaga asked before his election? There’s no good answer.

Nakaima cited Tokyo’s confrontation with China over the Senkaku Islands. Other advocates of America’s base presence pointed to North Korea. The Marine Corps highlighted all of the nearby places where the Marine Expeditionary Force could be quickly deployed.

But Washington should not be plotting new wars. Instead, the U.S. should act more as an “off-shore balancer,” prepared to intervene only if a hegemonic power, namely China, threatened to dominate the region, which is unlikely. Washington should leave day-to-day defense responsibilities to friendly Asian states, most notably Japan, and pull its forces back to America.

The U.S. still should promote emergency base access, intelligence sharing, and joint training. There undoubtedly would be other fruitful areas for military cooperation in East Asia and beyond. But 70 years after the end of World War II, 60 years after the end of the Korean War, 40 years after America’s departure from Vietnam, and 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, there’s no longer any need for permanent U.S. garrisons in the region.

Devoting only one percent of its GDP to defense has allowed Tokyo to create a potent “Self-Defense Force.” Spending more would enable Japan to build a military well able to deter Chinese adventurism. South Korea has twice the population and 40 times the GDP of the so-called Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, as well as about every technological, financial, and diplomatic advantage imaginable. Seoul does not need America’s assistance.

Australia, Vietnam, Singapore, and other countries have been boosting their military outlays in response to increasing Chinese assertiveness. India is expanding its involvement in Southeast Asia, acting as another counter to Beijing. While America should be watchful and wary, nothing on the horizon looks likely to overwhelm Washington’s friends and allies.

Nor does America’s Okinawa bastion have much military utility. Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Ronald Fogelman admitted that the Marines “serve no military function. They don’t need to be in Okinawa to meet any time line in any war plan.”

No one imagines the U.S. invading the Chinese mainland in the unlikely event of war. Indeed, a dumber idea is hard to imagine. Air and naval forces guarantee Japan’s security. South Korea is manpower-rich and does not require U.S. assistance from Okinawa-based forces.

More mundane contingencies involving secondary powers—border clashes, civil disorder, sectarian violence, secessionist activity, humanitarian relief—are precisely the sort of conflicts in which America’s most proficient warriors should not be deployed. Burma, Cambodia, Fiji, Indonesia, the Solomon Islands, and Thailand to name a few, are unstable or otherwise insecure, but with little potential impact on America. Washington should not be the 911 number for everyone everywhere.

Pulling U.S. forces back from Japan—there’s no reason to stop with the units deployed in Okinawa—would shift the basic responsibility for that country’s defense to Tokyo. Japanese citizens then could decide how to fill the gap. It’s not America’s place to tell its friends how much to spend on what, how many soldiers to recruit, and where to station military forces. The Japanese people should assess the importance of national security objectives, from enforcing contested territorial claims to preserving national survival, and decide what they need and how much they are willing to spend. Without Washington as a convenient scapegoat, Japan’s leaders would have to more seriously weigh fairness to Okinawans in deciding where to base whatever forces Tokyo chose to maintain.

A genuine “rebalancing” by America, not the fake transformation heralded by the Obama administration, which merely intends a little more of the same, almost certainly would impel Tokyo to do more, though exactly what would be a matter of debate. In fact, attitudes in Tokyo are changing. Prime Minister Abe is more of a hawk than many of his predecessors, though he still values the U.S. defense umbrella. Even more independent was Prime Minister Hatoyama, who fell victim to pressure from Washington. He observed: “Someday, the time will come when Japan’s peace will have to be ensured by the Japanese people themselves.”

Such a shift would place greater pressure on Japanese officials to forge better relations with their neighbors, starting with South Korea. Regional cooperation should become a primary tool of

Tokyo's defense policy. As long as Japan can hide behind the U.S. fleet, Japanese politicians can play the nationalist card at home. Left on its own, Tokyo would have to weigh the international cost of such behavior much more seriously.

Of course, the Japanese people could decide to do nothing more, which would be their right. But the consequences of making that choice would be their own as well. Japanese pacifists also would have to demonstrate the courage of their convictions instead of being shielded from the consequences by the American military.

Washington's defense commitments and force deployments should be adapted to circumstances. The Cold War required an unnaturally aggressive U.S. military presence overseas. But America's enemies have collapsed and allies have prospered. There's no longer any need for Washington to defend Japan and its neighbors. Which eliminates the only excuse for burdening the Okinawan people with America's extraordinary military presence. After nearly 70 years Okinawans deserve relief. So do Americans, who pay to defend most of the globe.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties. He worked as special assistant to President Reagan.*