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Okinawa and the Problem of Empire

A bloody military battlefield in 1945, Okinawa is the subject of an equally bitter political fight today. A majority of the prefecture's residents want the American military to go elsewhere.

The U.S.-Japan alliance is almost 50 years old. Like most of Washington's military relationships, the security treaty really isn't an alliance. The treaty's terms are simple. The U.S. agrees to defend Japan. In return, Tokyo agrees to be defended. Japan long has enjoyed the benefits of the world's second largest economy while devoting a far smaller proportion of its resources than America to defense.

Tokyo's international role has been circumscribed by Article 9 of the post-war Japanese constitution which formally bans creation of a military and use of force; domestic pacifism growing out of World War II; and regional fears of revived Japanese imperialism. Public concern over China's rising military expenditures and North Korea's ongoing nuclear program is growing, but the pace of policy change remains glacial.

In elections last August the Democratic Party of Japan ousted the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party. Five years ago the DPJ promised to "do away with the dependent relationship in which Japan ultimately has no alternative but to act in accordance with U.S. wishes." But Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama quickly moderated his party's position; the most recent platform called for a "close and equal Japan-U.S. alliance."

Nevertheless, the new government is proving less receptive to Washington's desires. For instance, the DPJ let expire authority to refuel U.S. and other allied ships in the Indian Ocean. Tokyo also has talked of renegotiating the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), cutting host nation support, and reconsidering the "don't ask, don't tell" policy as applied to U.S. nuclear weapons passing through Japanese territory.

Finally, there is the prefecture of Okinawa (the largest island of which also is named Okinawa).

Okinawa's saga is long and sad. Once independent, the territory was absorbed by Imperial Japan and treated like an untrustworthy stepchild. In April and May 1945 the island suffered through one of the most brutal battles of World War II, during which roughly 100,000 Japanese soldiers and perhaps even more civilians died (estimates vary wildly). After the war the occupying U.S. military loaded the main island with bases. Okinawa was not turned back to Japan until 1972, but with only a modest U.S. military drawdown.

Today the prefecture, Japan's smallest with just .6 percent of the country's land area, hosts roughly three-quarters of American military facilities and two-thirds of American military personnel--some 27,000 personnel stationed on 14 major bases--located in Japan. U.S. operations take up about 18 percent of the main island's territory. Although some Okinawans benefit from land rent, construction contracts, and consumer spending, for most residents the inconvenience is monumental, the limits on development costly, and the environmental consequences substantial. No surprise, the vast majority of residents want to reduce or eliminate the American presence.

The rape of a 12-year-old girl by three U.S. personnel in 1995 led to mass protests against both the SOFA (which left the accused in American custody) and the bases. A decade later the U.S. and Japanese governments agreed to move the Marines Corps Air Station at Futenma out of Ginowan to a less heavily populated area on Okinawa, and relocate 8,000 Marines (plus dependents) to Guam. Tokyo pledged to cover about \$6 billion of the relocation cost.

However, Okinawa residents want to remove, not relocate the base, and Japanese taxpayers aren't thrilled about picking up part of the moving tab. The DPJ government announced plans to revisit the 2006 agreement. The Obama administration responded by demanding that Tokyo live up to its responsibilities. More recently, U.S. officials suggested that Washington would not agree to any change that lacked local approval--which would conveniently leave Futenma unmoved. Now the Hatoyama government is holding consultations, with a decision promised for May.

Okinawa activists have brought their case to Washington and joined with interested Americans to set up a website and undertake educational activities. It's a worthwhile effort. But the primary problem remains in Tokyo.

Today both U.S. and Japanese government officials cheerfully conspire against Okinawans. When the latter complain, Washington points to Tokyo. Tokyo points back at Washington.

But, in fact, the ultimate decision lies in Tokyo. The American military is not organized to follow the will of Okinawa residents. That is the responsibility of their own national government. If Washington is going to both defend Japan and use Japanese territory as a launch pad for intervention elsewhere, troops must be stationed somewhere, and Okinawa is centrally located.

In fact, there's no reason for the U.S. to do either. Allies are a means to an end; the defense of America, not allies, is America's vital interest. Sometimes protecting other nations is necessary for U.S. security, as during the Cold War. But that world disappeared long ago. Enemy threats are far fewer and allied capabilities are far greater.

True, politicians and analysts alike routinely term America's alliances "cornerstones" and "linchpins" of U.S. security, regional stability, and world peace. In reality, today's alliances are unnecessary at best and dangerous transmission belts of conflict and war at worst.

Consider Japan. President Barack Obama says that "America's commitment to Japan's security is unshakable," but does that mean the U.S. forever must defend that nation? The 1951 military treaty committed Japan to "increasingly assume responsibility for its own defense against direct and indirect aggression."

In fact, Tokyo is capable of defending itself. Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada recently expressed doubt that "Japan on its own can face up to such risks" as China, but Tokyo needs a deterrent capability, not superiority. That is well within Japan's means. Certainly the U.S. would be far more secure if its allies and friends created forces to discourage aggression and worked together to encourage regional stability, rather than depended on Washington.

If the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force located on Okinawa is not needed to defend Japan, then what is it for? South Korea vastly outranges the North on virtually every measure of power and can do whatever is necessary to deter North Korean adventurism. There also is much talk, offered unceasingly and uncritically, about maintaining regional stability. But what invasions, border fights, naval clashes, missile threats, and full-scale wars are the Marines preventing?

And if conflict broke out, what would the Marines do? Launch a surprise landing in Beijing's Tiananmen Square during a war over Taiwan? Aid Indonesia, really the Javan Empire, in suppressing one or another group of secessionists? Help Thailand in a scrape with Burma triggered by the latter's guerrilla conflict spilling over the border? America has no reason to enter conflicts which threaten neither the U.S. nor a critical ally.

Still, if the U.S. government desires to defend Japan and Japan wants to be defended, Washington inevitably must deal with the national government in Tokyo and ask for the best possible lodgings for its forces. Okinawa's travails will always be irrelevant from the U.S. government's standpoint. It's up to Japan to decide on where to place foreign bases and then to work with its prefectures and towns accordingly. Kurt Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, stated the brutal truth: "local conditions come to play, but these big decisions are at the level of our central governments."

The Japanese government prefers to blame the U.S., since most Japanese don't want to change the status quo. Okinawans--from the smallest, poorest, and most distant prefecture--pay to host U.S. forces, leaving the rest of Japan free to enjoy the benefits while suffering little of the inconvenience. Okinawan opposition is undercut through subsidies from the central government and overridden by raw political power, since the prefecture has just a handful of seats in the national Diet. Explained Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirofumi Hirano: "It's not necessary to have the understanding and agreement from the local people."

Thus, the issue of fairness to Okinawa is tied to the more basic question of Japan's foreign policy and military posture. If Tokyo demands alliance equality, it must behave in a way that justifies being treated as an equal. Which means Japan must take over responsibility for its own defense, as well as contribute to regional and global security.

The Japanese people may decide that the threats they face are small--as, indeed, they are today. However, the future might not be so safe. Brad Glosserman of the Pacific Forum CSIS argues that "Northeast Asia, from a Japanese perspective, is a scary place." A threatening North Korea and aggressive China are much bigger potential threats to Tokyo than to Washington.

The Japanese government needs to assess future dangers and decide on appropriate responses--without assuming that the U.S. Marines will show up to the rescue. It is Japan's decision, but it should not be based on the presumption of American intervention. Having made its decision, then Tokyo should reconfigure its forces. Fairness suggests a major drawdown from Okinawa irrespective of whose military is protecting Japan. If the U.S. disengaged militarily, these decisions could be made without pressure from Washington.

The two countries would still have much to cooperate about, including security. Leaving responsibility for Japan's defense with Tokyo would simply eliminate the unrealistic expectations engendered by the alliance on both sides. The governments could focus on issues of mutual

interest, sharing intelligence, preparing emergency base access, and otherwise cooperating to meet international challenges.

The best way for Americans to help residents of Okinawa is to press Washington to reshape U.S. foreign policy, making it more appropriate for a republic than a pseudo-empire. With the rise of numerous prosperous allied and friendly states--most notably Japan, but also South Korea, Australia, India, and others--the U.S. should step back, prepared to deal with an aggressive hegemon should one arise but determined to avoid being dragged into routine geopolitical squabbles.

Then Tokyo could chart its own destiny, including deciding what forces to raise and where to base them. The Japanese government could no longer use American pressure as an excuse for inaction in Okinawa. Then Okinawans finally might gain justice--after 65 long years.

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