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Okinawan and Japanese Perspectives on the US Military Bases and the G8 Summit

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Okinawa Selected Summit Site

At the end of April 1999, Japanese Prime Minister K. Obuchi announced in Tokyo that Okinawa will host the major part of the Year 2000 Summit for the Group of Eight, and the G8 heads of government will meet in Okinawa.

Okinawan people was very surprised at the big news, as well as most of Japanese mainlanders. Because Okinawa was thought to be far less suitable for G8 Summit Conference especially in terms of quality of facilities and ease of security arrangement, than seven other sites proposed, in spite of the enthusiastic efforts by Okinawan Prefectural Government. The Tokyo Government explained the reason why it named the poorest prefecture Okinawa to host the G8, saying " It has had a long, painful history. We have seen the strong passion and enthusiasm of the prefectural citizens for the summit."

At first, almost of Okiawan people welcomed the major world event, because they thought that the G8 political leaders and journalists would see Okinawan facts as they are, including severe fact of US huge military bases located in Okinawa, and that it might boost local

economies. At the same time, however, a feeling of great uneasiness began to spread over the island prefecture that some hidden political motives might underlie the decision to select Okinawa, despite all its disadvantages as a site, as the summit location. The underlying motives is the issue of the relocation of US military bases within the prefecture. This relocation policy faces difficulties now because of the strong protests of the Okinawan people. Japanese government officials are trying to reduce the anxieties of Okinawans by repeatedly emphasizing, "There is no link between the Summit and the US military bases"¹.

Background

The people of Okinawa have developed outside the framework of the Japanese state for much of their history. By the twelfth century, many small local rulers had emerged, but their domains were gradually consolidated by conquest. In 1429, the Ryukyus developed into a united kingdom (the Ryukyu Kingdom), whose ruler paid tribute to the Chinese emperor. From then until the sixteen century, Ryukyu's advantageous location enabled it to carry on a lucrative entrepot trade and the kingdom prospered. However, the Portuguese then cut into its Southeast Asian trade, and in 1609, the kingdom was conquered by a feudal ruler of southern Kyushu (Japan), but the kingdom itself continued to exist.

After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the Japanese government claimed formal sovereignty over the islands and incorporated them as Okinawa Prefecture in 1879, bringing the Ryukyu Kingdom to an

end, although this was not recognized by the Chinese until the Sino-Japanese War in 1895. Toward the end of the Second World War, US forces landed on April 1, 1945. This was the only part of Japan to experience ground warfare, the Battle of Okinawa. Approximately 120,000 noncombatant lives (one third of the inhabitants) were lost and more than 100,000 US and Japanese soldiers were killed. Subsequently, the US Army occupied the islands. During the battle, the US Forces built many bases for the planned invasion of mainland Japan. After the war, the US military forces expropriated Okinawan land using bayonets and bulldozers. The US military bases were enlarged and strengthened, transforming Okinawa into a military island as the keystone of the Pacific. However, after the Okinawan people's long struggle for the reversion of the islands to Japan, Okinawa was reverted to Japanese rule in 1972. But, on the anniversary day, May 15, 1972, the Okinawan people expressed mixed feelings because as a result of the Okinawa Reversion Agreement between the US and Japanese governments, huge US military bases still existed on the islands, reducing their pleasure at returning to Japan. Commemoration festivals and protest meeting were held simultaneously on this day².

160 Ryukyu Islands form a subtropical archipelago stretching southwesterly fromkyushu to Taiwan, and are generally subdivided into the Okinawa, Miyako, Yaeyama and Sengaku groups. The main island, Okinawa, is by far the largest both in size and population, and is the prefecture's economic, administrative, and cultural center. The language is a major dialect of Japanese but it is not intelligible to speakers of standard Japanese or any of the dialects of mainislands of Japan.

Now that standard Japanese has spread throughout the Ryukyus, many young people no longer speak their native dialect. The prefecture, with a population of 1.34 million, is also Japan's poorest in per capita income.

US Military Bases in Okinawa

Although 55 years have passed since the end of war, there is still a heavy concentration of US bases on Okinawa under the Japan-US Security Treaty. 75% of the installations used exclusively by US Forces in Japan are located in this prefecture, which comprises only 0.6% of all Japanese territory. These military facilities occupy about 11% of the prefectural land, and in the main Okinawa Island, where most of the population and industries are located, the bases in fact take up 20% of the entire island. The high density of military bases on the island hampers the expansion of transportation networks, the systematic development of cities, and the procurement of lands for industrial use. Furthermore, there are 29 sea zones and 15 areas of airspace around Okinawa which are controlled by US military forces. As a result, Okinawan people live under unusual conditions where they lack the freedom to use their own lands, airspace, and sea zones³. The most widely recognized problems of the bases is noise pollution which affects a wide area around airfields. In 1982, about 1,000 residents around the Kadena Air Base filed a lawsuit against the Japanese government asking for compensation for the effects of noise pollution and demanding the suspension of military night flight. Last

March, over 5,500 residents took action to sue the Japanese and US Government for noise pollution again. Incidents involving murders, rapes, injuries, and thefts are frequent. There were as many as 4,790 criminal charges brought against US military personnel during the 23 years since Okinawa Reversion in 1972. Among the worst cases, were 12 murders, 355 thefts, and 111 rapes.

In September 1995, the rape of a schoolgirl by US military servicemen triggered the Okinawan citizen's anger, and the "October 21st Okinawan People's Rally" was held. The rally, in which over 85,000 people participated, united all parties and called attention to Okinawa's US military base issues at home and abroad. On September 8, 1996, the first prefectural referendum in Japan was held at the initiative of prefectural residents. The referendum clearly indicated the people's desire for the revision of the Status of Forces Agreement and the reduction and realignment of the US military bases in Okinawa. The Okinawan residents have been shouldering a great burden for a half century, brought on by the Japan-US Security Treaty. The prefectural referendum was held not only to express the people of Okinawa's will, but also to spur both US and Japanese Governments and the citizens of these two countries to give serious thought on the present situation in Okinawa⁴.

Tokyo and Washington set up the Special Action Committee on Okinawa(SACO), in order to soothe down the Okinawan anger following the rape incident. SACO agreed the return of 11 facilities. According to the SACO report, the total area of US military bases in Okinawa will be reduced by 20%. However, most of the facilities on the final

report must meet the precondition of relocating to other facilities or areas within Okinawa. Above all, the relocation of Futenma Air Station within Okinawa has become the focal issue. Although the prefectural governor and Nago mayor have accepted the alternative base, voices of disapproval have led to a swirl of controversy. The well-known phrases, "Okinawa within US bases" and "the Keystone of the Pacific", are still realistic⁵.

Significance of Okinawa G8 Summit

First, it was decided to hold the 2000 summit in provincial cities. In Japan, so far, the Summit meetings have been held in Tokyo three times. Then, only Tokyo has been well-known in all the world. The name of Okinawa is not known in the world. Only a few people remember it as US military islands. Therefore, Okinawan people are very glad to see that their own unique culture, history and beautiful nature would be introduced all over the world through the G8 Summit. Keiichi Inamine, Governor of Okinawa Prefecture, said, "many people think of Japan as a homogeneous nation, but we believe our traditions and arts will show world leaders how diverse Japan really is."⁶ It is also expected that Okinawa's tourism and resort industries will further develop following this.

Second, Japan is the only Asian nation attending the G8 Summit, and then has the important duty to send Asian messages to G8 meetings. Okinawa is the nice place to do so, which has had deep historical ties to Asian nations. As I mentioned before, taking

advantage of its key position in linking the Japanese mainland and continental China with the various nations of Southeast Asia, Okinawa has carried out a lively trade with these nations for a very long ago. During this long history of interaction with the nations of the region, Okinawa developed its own unique and original culture. Okinawa is now again striving to be a base for international exchange in the south of Japan⁷. I have to add that Okinawan people have wanted China to participate in G8 Summit meetings somehow.

By the way, almost Asian nations are developing countries. Japanese government announced three paramount themes on April 28 - on economic, political, and social issues - for Group of Eight leaders to discuss when they gather for their July 21-23 summit in Okinawa. The three themes are international cooperation aimed at enabling "all people in the world to enjoy prosperity, achieve deeper peace of mind and live in a more stable world", government officials said. Then, one of the underlying goals of G8 Okinawa Summit is to attain a "glovalization for all people" by bridging the widening gaps between developed and developing nations, dealing with detrimental aspects of economic globalization, and promoting cooperation for development in developing nations⁸. I think Okinawa is the suitable place for G8 leaders to talk about this theme.

Third, Okinawa is closely related to other two themes, "deeper peace of mind" and "a more stable world". The chance to hold the G8 summit has led to various plans throughout these islands to project the "Okinawan Spirit" and inspire peace worldwide. Those who experienced the Battle of Okinawa and the postwar hardships

have strongest desire for global harmony⁹. According to the Prefectural Opinion Poll Survey in October 1999, asking “what is the most important issue Okinawa should appeal to the world about on the occasion of the Summit?”, the largest number of respondents chose “US base problems”(44.6%), followed by “the peace-loving heart of the Okinawan people”(33.2%)¹⁰. Frankly speaking, Okinawan people is expecting that G8 leaders will discuss on the problems of US military bases in Okinawa, and find out a solution to the severe problems. However, it goes without saying that until now, Japanese and US governments are clearly negative about this, saying that those problems lie between US and Japanese governments, and they are not global problems.

But, almost of Okinawan people don't think so, because both of the governments have continued to mention them over half a century that US military bases in Okinawa is very, very valuable for Asia-Pacific security as the “Keystone of the Pacific”. For US government, US-Japan Security Treaty must be no less important than NATO in Europe. Okinawan people is not asking for the abolition of the Treaty, but asking for the resolution of the base-related problems from the viewpoints of protecting the life and property of the residents. There is no provision in either the US-Japanese Security Treaty or the Status of Forces Agreement which states that the US military bases must be built in Okinawa. The Okinawan people feel that if both US and Japanese governments believe that The US-Japan Security Treaty is important for the two nations, the burdens of US military bases must be shared equally by all Japanese citizens and US government

must realign the bases and reduce the number of troops in Okinawa".

I myself think Okinawa is the very suitable place for G8 Summit Conference, because the difficulties which Okinawa is now confronting, have relation to "sustainable development", "environment", "information technology", "unemployment" and etc, which are now the main agenda of G8 Summit Conference. Anyway, Okinawa might be the most unique place, compared to any other places where G8 Summit Conferences have been held till now. On the other hand, for Okinawan people, the G8 Summit might be just like a typhoon from the West. Therefore, Okinawan people were looking forward to G8 leaders' response to Okinawan US military problems. If there is no response, and the problem is perfectly neglected, Okinawan people must be disappointed deeply, and might think that in conclusion, G8 Summit would be unwelcomed guests for them, in spite of their traditional hospitality. It might well be said that Okinawan people had been waiting for the Summit with their feeling of ambivalence, owing to their historical trauma and severe realities.

After G8 three-day summit in Okinawa

The Okinawa Summit presented three big events to Okinawan people. The first is, of course, three-day summit conference itself.

The second is US President's speech delivered to Okinawan residents at a memorial to the more than 200,000 people who died during the 1945 Battle of Okinawa. The last US President to visit Okinawa was Dwight Eisenhower in 1960. Bill Clinton was the second since then,

and the first President to visit Okinawa since its reversion to Japan in 1972. In his address, the President, as widely predicted, acknowledged that the people of Okinawa had been bearing most of the burden of the US military bases in Japan.

While stressing the strategic importance of the US-Japan alliance, Clinton also claimed to be making an effort to reduce the US military presence. Many Okinawan people thought his speech was appreciated good because he referred to their historical difficulties, present heavy burden, and above all, the US effort to lessen the burden¹². However, some people criticized his speech severely. For example, Mr. Seigen Miyazato (representative, Okinawa External Affairs Study Group) commented on his speech that the Cornerstone of Peace Memorial was hijacked to prop up the US-Japanese military alliance, but we are not easily misled by speeches which preach the necessity of maintaining an indefinite military presence in Okinawa¹³.

The third is "Human Chain" which encircled military bases just before G8 Summit conference. A crowd of 27,100 people linked hands around the perimeter of the island's largest military facilities during the afternoon of July 20 in a protest designed to appeal for a future free of military bases, and for the island to follow a different destiny as a bastion of peace. Some mainland NGOs also took part in the pacifist demonstration. The resulting "Human Chain encircled the 17.4 km circumference of the base, encompassing Okinawa City and the two towns of Kadena and Chatan.

The protest represented a groundswell of anti-base opinion and an intensification of activities designed to oppose the controversial plan to

relocate the Futenma Marine air station in Ginowan City to the north of the island. Demonstrators also sought to bring about the reduction and eventual removal of US forces. Peace Declaration was issued by the No-Base Human Chain Executive Committee. Kadena witnessed similar protests in 1987 and 1990, while the smaller Futenma air station has been encircled by human chains on two occasions in 1995 and 1998. Previous actions, however, have not occurred under the glare of publicity afforded by the G8 summit¹⁴.

By the way, while President Clinton paid a courtesy call at the Cornerstone of Peace Memorial, other heads of state visited other municipalities where they were invited for the exchanges of friendship.

To the familiar music of the Beatles, British Prime Minister Tony Blair appeared at the gym at Chatan Elementary School, and chatted with pupils. EU President Romano Prodi and his wife were welcomed by the local children of Yomitan at the accommodations where the Prodis were staying. The couple enjoyed the Okinawan traditional dances performed by the children. German Chancellor Gerhart Schroeder visited the German Village in Miyako Island to enjoy friendship with local people. Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien visited Okinawa's only ice rink to watch the junior game between the Wolfpack from Ottawa and The Dragonfires from Haebaru. He played unexpectedly with the youngsters¹⁵. Okinawan people enjoyed the friendly communication with heads of states through those events and ceremonies.

Okinawa Governor Keiichi Inamine expressed delight the G8 summit in Japan's southernmost prefecture proved successful. "There were

different ways in which the G8 leaders individually took part in cultural exchanges with the local people,” Inamine said after the three-day event concluded. He said, “we were able to introduce Okinawan culture and art during a reception by the prefecture and included local gifts to the top leaders. regarding Okinawa’s burden of hosting US military bases in Japan, Inamine expressed confidence that Japanese people’s awareness of the issue has been increased as many people signed up for a press tour of US military bases and tourist spots. “People from all over Japan took part in the tours and saw the actual situation here. In that sense, the program was a big success,” Inamine said¹⁶.

According to the opinion poll survey by the Okinawa Times on 29,30 July 2000, asking “ Do you think that Okinawa summit was successful?”, 66% of respondents answered “Yes”, while 15% answered “No”. Concerning the question “ Which issue could Okinawa appeal to the world?”, the largest number of respondents(39%) chose “the peace-loving heart of the Okinawan people”, followed “heavy burden of US military bases”(24%), “Okinawan hospitality”(11%), “International sightseeing area”(9%), and so on¹⁷.

In conclusion, many Okinawan people think the Okinawa summit was succeeded, because they are confident that their message of hope for peace could be sent to the world fairly well through the summit.

Notes

- 1 Moriteru Arasaki(ed), Profile of Okinawa, TECHNO MARKETING CENTER, 2000, p.221.
- 2 Takayoshi Egami, "Politics in Okinawa Since the Reversion of Sovereignty", Asian Survey Vol.34, No.9, September 1994, p.832.
- 3 Military Base Affairs Office and Public Relations Division of Okinawa Prefectural Government, A Message from Okinawa, 1996, p.11.
- 4 Ibid., p.17
- 5 A Message from Okinawa, p.11.
- 6 International Herald Tribune, 17 March 2000.
- 7 Keiichi Inamine, "Toward the holding of the Kyushu-Okinawa Summit", Summit Homepage of Foreign Ministry of Japanese Government.
- 8 The Japan Times, April 29 2000.
- 9 The Ryukyu Shimpo, Okinawa Summit 2000, April 2000.
- 10 The Okinawa Times, October 23 1999.
- 11 A Message From Okinawa; p.20.
- 12 The Ryukyu Shimpo, Okinawa Summit Special Edition, July 23 2000.
- 13 The Ryukyu Shimpo, Okinawa Summit Special Edition, July 22 2000.
- 14 The Ryukyu Shimpo, Okinawa Summit Special Edition, July 21 2000.
- 15 The Okinawa Times, 2000 Okinawa Summit Edition, July 22 2000.
- 16 The Ryukyu Shimpo, July 31 2000.
- 17 The Okinawa Times, August 1 2000.