

Resisting U.S. Bases in Okinawa

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(Photo: Ojo de Cineasta / Flickr)

They come in kayaks and canoes to protect the bay, maintain a tent city on the beach, and hold candlelight vigils. From posters to marches, songs, and a petition expressing international solidarity, Okinawan residents have left no question about their fierce opposition to construction of a new military base for the U.S. Marines on their island.

Overriding these emphatic voices, the Japanese and United States governments have begun work on a new facility at the Nago City site of Henoko—initiating offshore drilling, tearing down buildings, and bringing in construction supplies.

The building of this base has broad ramifications: it will destroy local marine life, pollute natural resources, and put residents in danger. Even more disturbingly, it reflects the long-term violation of Okinawans' democratic rights—namely, their ability to set the policies that affect their lives. And more globally, it signifies Japan's slippery slope toward further militarization, and solidifies Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's support of U.S. military activity in Asia.

Nonetheless, despite intense crackdowns to suppress resistance, Okinawan activists remain determined to continue their opposition to this base.

“Reducing the Burden”

It all began with a violent incident: In 1995, three U.S. servicemen abducted and raped a 12-year-old Okinawan girl. This episode rekindled a fierce opposition movement among Okinawans who had long objected to U.S. bases in their midst.

Facing an angry and mobilized population, in 1996 the United States and Japan set up the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO), ostensibly to “reduce the burden on the people of Okinawa and thereby strengthen the Japan-U.S. alliance.” Under SACO, 20 percent of military-occupied land was to be returned to Okinawan control. This included the Futenma Marine Corps Air Station in the city of Ginowan.

But there was a catch: the air station would need to be *relocated* to a fortified and multi-functional “sea-based facility.” Despite intense Okinawan opposition to the creation of a new base, the two governments agreed to build the Futenma Replacement Facility in the Camp Schwab area at Henoko, near Oura and Henoko Bays. Chosen in 2006, the location was confirmed in 2010.

For nearly two decades, Okinawan activists have impeded the construction of the replacement base in Henoko. In 2004 and 2005, for example, residents taking to the sea in fishing boats and kayaks disrupted offshore test drilling for many months. Meanwhile, a sit-in on Henoko beach, initiated by elders who had survived the terrible Battle of Okinawa by taking refuge there, marked its tenth year in April 2014.

Lately, however, events have been moving in the other direction. In December 2013, the governor of Okinawa accepted a package of subsidies from the Japanese government and gave the go-ahead for offshore landfill work in preparation for construction.

Residents responded at the ballot box. In January 2014, the citizens of Nago City re-elected the incumbent mayor, Susumu Inamine, who had run on an anti-base platform and won against a candidate heavily backed by the Japanese government. Inamine has vowed to resist construction by all means within his power and has refused permission for Nago City property to be used for construction purposes.

However, the project is advancing over all objections. On July 1, the Okinawa Defense Bureau started demolishing buildings at Camp Schwab. Okinawans responded by organizing a day-and-night blockade outside the base. Nonetheless, at dawn on July 20, the government brought construction materials into Camp Schwab in 30 trailers. On July 27, more than 2,000 people, including business leaders and elected officials, gathered to form an all-Okinawa body to prevent the construction. Ignoring public opinion, the Defense Bureau began offshore drilling on August 18.

Meanwhile, authorities have been combating the protesters. Police arrest demonstrators, while Japan's coast guard harasses those trying to impede offshore drilling from the sea. To prevent a replay of the successful protest against offshore drilling 10 years ago, the Abe cabinet expanded the restricted area for fishing from 50 meters to 2 kilometers offshore, and has tightened security for Henoko, despite opposition from Mayor Inamine and the Nago City Council.

The blatant disregard for popular will has only strengthened the anti-base activists' determination. On September 20, 5,500 people gathered in protest, and they continue to mobilize despite government attempts to crush them.

A History of Repression

For the Okinawan people to have their rights trampled upon is nothing new.

The story goes back at least to the 1870s, when Japan overrode China's objections and annexed the independent Ryukyu kingdom, which it re-named Okinawa. The Japanese government banned the Okinawan language, curtailed indigenous religious practice, suppressed local cultural activities, and enforced education in Japanese language and customs. Okinawans who migrated to the mainland were often met with prejudice and discrimination in jobs and housing, while restaurants displayed signs saying, "No Okinawans Welcome."

During World War II the Japanese government conscripted Okinawans into the Imperial army. As the war reached a crescendo in the spring of 1945, Allied powers waged a three-month-long battle in Okinawa. In order to protect its major population centers, Japan localized the violence in Okinawa, thereby sacrificing it to spare the mainland. As much as a third of the population died in the Battle of Okinawa, often described as a "Typhoon of Steel." Some perished in the fighting, while others succumbed to Japanese soldiers' orders to commit suicide rather than submit to Allied forces. Survivors took shelter in caves and gravesites, barely subsisting on wild plants. The fighting pulverized much of the main island into rubble and left residents with indelible memories of the brutality of war. These experiences underlie Okinawa's strong peace movement to this day.

After Emperor Hirohito's surrender on August 15, Allied forces occupied Japan. The United States created the post-war Japanese constitution, enacted in 1947, and continued to occupy the country until 1952, when the San Francisco Peace Treaty signed the previous year went into force. In signing the Peace Treaty, Japan sacrificed Okinawa once again by agreeing to leave it under direct U.S. military rule. While Japan's new constitution declared popular sovereignty, guaranteed basic human and civil rights, and embraced pacifism as a national credo, Okinawa was excluded and forced to serve as a U.S. military outpost. Under a 1953 law that permitted land acquisition without signed leases, the U.S. military forcibly expropriated land from Okinawan residents for military bases by expelling those resisting eviction at bayonet point and destroying their homes with bulldozers.

During U.S. military rule, Okinawans sought to return their island to Japanese sovereignty, hoping that under the democratic and pacifist constitution they would enjoy constitutionally guaranteed rights, and that the heavy burden of U.S. military bases would be reduced. However, their hopes were dashed when Okinawa's reversion to Japan in 1972 was conditioned on maintaining U.S. forces there.

Contrary to the people's wishes for a peaceful Okinawa, the Japanese state—aided by widespread popular indifference to “the Okinawa problem”—has continued to impose a disproportionately heavy burden on the island. Around three-quarters of all U.S. military facilities in Japan are in Okinawa, which comprises just 0.6 percent of Japan's total land area. As Japan's poorest prefecture, Okinawa is used for U.S. military training and served as a launching pad in the wars against Vietnam and Iraq.

To this day, the United States—rather than Okinawans or even the Japanese government—makes the decisions about military bases. In an interview on July 29, Nago Mayor Susumu Inamine summarized the situation in this way: “The core problem is that the Japanese government doesn't have a say when it comes to operations of U.S. bases. ... Under the agreement with the U.S., Japan is obligated to provide sites for U.S. bases.” He adds, “There is no fundamental discussion of why we need a replacement facility in Henoko. ... The argument is always: ‘We may need the U.S. bases in time of war.’”

Yet even when the Japanese government does have some leeway to curb the bases' negative impact, it doesn't exercise it. According to [Keiko Itokazu](#), a member of the Japanese Diet elected from Okinawa and co-chair of Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence, “The government does not pressure the U.S. to clean up hazardous chemicals polluting the land. ... Okinawan voices are consistently suppressed as if we are not part of the nation.”

The U.S.-Japan Alliance and Remilitarization

The new base has implications far beyond its impact on local residents—it facilitates U.S. military activity throughout the Asia-Pacific region and enables the further militarization of Japan.

Although the 1947 constitution prohibits Japan from engaging in acts of war, the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, signed at the same time as the peace treaty, stipulates that Japan must allow the United States to maintain military bases there. After China's communist revolution in 1949, the two governments united against communism and were particularly intent on countering “Communist China.” Japan took a first step toward rearmament as early as 1950 by creating, at U.S. behest, an armed force called the National Police Reserve, later reorganized as the Self-Defense Force (SDF) in 1954.

Since then Japan has gradually twisted and distorted Article 9, the non-military clause in its constitution, often in support of the United States. It has expanded the SDF's role outside Japan, starting with minesweeping in the Persian Gulf in 1991. In 2004, Japan

sent 9,600 SDF personnel to Iraq on support missions. In 2009, SDF vessels were dispatched to police pirate activity off the coast of Somalia, and the SDF's first overseas base was established in Djibouti in 2010. The SDF has been deployed in 13 peacekeeping operations, starting in Cambodia in 1992 and currently in South Sudan.

On July 1, 2014—disregarding public opinion and sidestepping the procedure for constitutional amendments—Prime Minister Abe's Cabinet adopted a resolution, supported by the United States, approving the latest reinterpretation of Article 9. This allows Japan to exercise the right to “collective self-defense” and to aid a friendly country under attack. Although there were divisions in the Cabinet over what military actions would be permitted, and though a majority of Japanese people opposed it, this constitutional revision signaled a marked departure from Japan's past reluctance to send troops abroad on combat missions. Now, the SDF is legally permitted to engage in combat overseas alongside U.S. forces.

In practice, combined military training is already occurring, as the U.S. military and the SDF conducted joint exercises in the United States in 2013 and 2014, and the SDF participated in the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) in Hawai'i earlier this year.

Amid it all, Okinawan protestors have used every possible means to express their opposition to the increasing militarization of their islands.

Back in 1997, a majority of Nago City voters opposed the new base in a non-binding referendum; apoll conducted in August 2014 showed that 80.2 percent of respondents are against the construction. Over the years, citizens have tried to elect anti-base candidates at city, prefectural, and national levels. They have also turned to the legal system: U.S. and Japanese environmental organizations brought a lawsuit in the United States, where a court ruled that the Henoko construction plan violated the National Historic Preservation Act by not protecting a Japanese “national monument”—in this case, the endangered Okinawan *dugong* manatee and its marine habitat—but both the U.S. and Japanese governments have ignored the ruling.

Recently, environmental groups returned to court to continue their attempts to stop the construction on environmental grounds. Meanwhile, Okinawan activists have sustained a prolonged and creative campaign of direct action through sit-ins, flotillas, and marches. A recent slogan sums up their approach: “We will win if we never give up.”

Seeking Genuine Security

Rather than an alliance between the United States and Japan based on militarism, we call for an alliance that will foster genuine security among all our communities. This includes making apologies and appropriate reparations for atrocities committed during the Second World War. The United States has yet to apologize or provide compensation for the atomic bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki that caused instantaneous devastation of those cities. Meanwhile, the Japanese government has not made amends for the brutal terror that their troops committed during the Battle of Okinawa. Genuine

security requires respecting the will of the Okinawan people and stopping construction at Henoko, as well as reducing the militarization of the Asia-Pacific region by—among other things—enacting a moratorium on all new bases.

The Okinawan people's struggle is at a critical juncture. U.S. citizens can help by contacting members of Congress to impress upon them that a new Marine base at Henoko is unacceptable, and that construction must be stopped. People of other nations are urged to contact the nearest Japanese embassy to show solidarity with Okinawans against the construction plan. Okinawan activists also request that messages of support be sent to nohenokotakae@gmail.com.

As Diet member Itokazu said, recalling the Battle of Okinawa and the people's enormous suffering, "Life is a treasure. We are against war. We do not want to lose our precious lives by getting involved in war." It's time for the international community to join Okinawan citizens in mobilizing toward that end.