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Doug Bandow: Give Okinawa Back To The Okinawans 沖縄を沖縄人に返還せよ

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Introduction

Late January saw a 24-member delegation of Okinawans in Washington to convey Okinawan sentiments to the US. The delegation included elected representatives from national, prefectural and local assemblies.

The delegation protested the continuing efforts by the Governments of Japan and the United States to foist a new Marine Corps base on the pristine environment of northern Okinawa despite the clear and consistently expressed opposition to that design on the part of almost all the Okinawan people's elected representatives, from the Governor down. They point out that the democratic order in whose defence Okinawa supposedly plays a key role cannot rest on denial of democratic rights to Okinawans themselves. They protest against the persistent neglect of Okinawan thinking in discussions and plans drawn up by the two governments, and against the deception, exploitation, prejudice and denial of democratic rights that has long been their experience. Sovereignty, they insist, rests with the people. How much of that message will be communicated to the policy circles in Washington remains to be seen. One early and notable response has been the following essay, published by Forbes on 23 January.

The Cato Institute's Doug Bandow is not the first American to call attention to the injustice of the present system and to urge cancelation of the plan to construct a new Marine base, but he goes further than most. He calls for the US to "remove … its military facilities in Okinawa and elsewhere in Japan." That, he believes, is "the only way [for Japan] to escape its status as an American protectorate." The Marine Corps serves no military function either as deterrent or as potential war fighting force, he contends. If China has to be contained, he says, then Japan should figure out how to do so, taking "whatever steps they deem necessary to see that their region remains secure and stable." In short, the US should not just cancel the Henoko project but liquidate its entire structure of bases, in mainland Japan as well as Okinawa. Elsewhere, he has adopted the same stance towards the US bases in South Korea. Paradoxically, it takes a conservative to articulate these most radical of demands.

Bandow is no pacifist, and his formula for dissolution of the US-Japan military alliance implies a greatly stepped up Japanese military role, Japanese substituting for US forces. He appears to see Japan's constitutional proscription (Article 9) on the possession, use, or threatened use, of armed force as anachronistic and/or irrelevant.

While Okinawans might therefore at first glance welcome the Bandow message, it carries sobering implications. It would be a bitter, even Pyrrhic victory for the Okinawan resistance movement if its outcome was to be the substitution of Japanese for American military bases and forces on their islands. The dilemma, and the tactical challenge, the Okinawans face is how to combine right-wing "support" for their cause by figures such as Bandow, himself a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan and a prominent figure in the conservative Cato Institute's libertarian think-tank, with clarification and deepening of their own vision for a formula of regional peace and security that does not rest on militarization.

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Give Okinawa Back To The Okinawans

By Doug Bandow

January 23, 2012

Please view the original here.

The U.S. is overextended and overburdened, but Washington policymakers are determined to preserve America's dominant military presence around the globe. Financial pressure is forcing the administration to finally slow a massive, decade-long increase in military spending, but American garrisons overseas remain inviolate. Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates declared: "The U.S. remains committed to maintaining a robust forward presence in East Asia."

That means preserving multiple bases in Okinawa, which have burdened island residents since the U.S. defeated imperial Japanese forces there in mid-1945. Nearly seven decades later Washington refuses to take any meaningful steps to lighten the load. Indeed,

Administration pressure in 2010 helped force the resignation of Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama over the issue.

The American government insists that it is and always will be the senior partner in any alliance. Washington will protect you, but only on its terms. In this case, the U.S. wants bases in Okinawa, and wants them forever. Nearly 30 Okinawans, ranging from elected officials to students, are visiting Washington, D.C. this week to tell Americans about the resulting burden on the people of Okinawa.

Okinawa's travails have a long history. The Ryukyu Islands, of which Okinawa is the largest, were independent throughout most of their history. Only late was the territory conquered by imperial Japan. Okinawans were never fully trusted by Tokyo and suffered horribly in the closing stages of World War II.

The so-called "Typhoon of Steel," as the American invasion campaign was called, ran from April through June in 1945. Combat was brutal. Estimated civilian casualties ran up to 150,000. The U.S. occupied Japan after the war and turned Okinawa into a veritable colony. Only in 1972, 27 years after the conclusion of the war, was the island turned back to Japan.

However, the U.S. military continues to control much of the island, roughly 20 percent of the land mass. Long fences separate residents from property owned by their ancestors. Air bases crowd civilian neighborhoods. Prime beaches remain under U.S. military control. Thousands of young, aggressive foreign men transform local life—and often not for the good.

Frustrated Okinawans have been asking for relief for years. Anger exploded in 1995 after the rape of a teenage girl and insensitive comments of the U.S. military commander. But nothing changed, despite large demonstrations. Okinawans faced a hostile partnership between the American and Japanese governments.

The U.S. military likes Okinawa because of its central location. Nor does the Pentagon want to pay to relocate the Marine Expeditionary Force. Inconvenience for Okinawans is not a concern in Washington, other than the extent to which it complicates the U.S.-Japan relationship. Gen. Burton Field, commander of U.S. forces in Japan, dismissed the "resistance in Okinawa" with the observation that "the sooner we are able to build a better place for the Marines to operate, the sooner we will put some of this animosity behind us."

However, the real author of the Okinawans' distress is Tokyo. The U.S. government negotiates with the national Japanese authorities, not the Okinawan prefectural government. From Washington's perspective, responsibility to accommodate local preferences lies with Tokyo, not the U.S.

But the Japanese government also favors concentrating bases in Okinawa because of its location—its distance from the rest of Japan. Roughly three-fourths (by area) of U.S. military facilities, with half of American military personnel are located in Japan's most distant and poorest prefecture, making up just .6 percent of the nation's territory. Although nearly six of ten Japanese is critical of the resulting burden on Okinawa, none of them wants another U.S. base near *their* neighborhood.

Proposals abound for tinkering with the American presence. In 2006 after a decade of negotiation the Japanese government agreed to pay to help move some Marines to Guam and relocate Futenma airbase to less populous Henoko elsewhere on the island. The initiative was designed to satisfy no one: inconvenient to the U.S., expensive to Japan, and unhelpful to Okinawa. In Japan's 2009 election the opposition Democratic Party of Japan opposed the proposal. After taking office, DPJ Prime Minister Hatoyama declared: "It must never happen that we accept the existing plan."

The new government's intentions were good, but it did not expect the Obama administration's unyielding refusal to reset Washington's military relationship with one of its closest allies. The DPJ had spoken of creating a more equal partnership, but that is not how America conducts alliances. Nor were Japanese policymakers—and people—ready to challenge the relationship. The first DPJ government collapsed under U.S. pressure.

Yet the Futenma plan appears to be no more viable than the Hatoyama premiership. The Government Accountability Office figures that relocating the Marines to Guam likely will cost more than $29 billion, nearly triple the initial estimate. Congress cut all money for the project this year. Senators Carl Levin (D-Mich.), John McCain (R-Ariz.), and Jim Webb (D-Va.) called the proposal "unrealistic, unworkable and unaffordable."

Japan also slashed 2012 financial support for the move. Tokyo is inclined to simply kick the can down the road, so to speak. Doing so "worked" after the 1995 rape; protests eventually died down. Large demonstrations erupted again in 2010 but then ebbed.

Japanese leaders hope that doing nothing will work again, at least in the short-term, since Okinawans still have little clout in Tokyo. Prime Minister Naoto Kan last year told island residents that "We have reviewed [moving operations out of Okinawa] from every angle, however, and the current situation would not allow it." For years Tokyo has attempted to simultaneously bribe and browbeat local residents into submission.

Civil disobedience is a potential game-changer. In May 2010 17,000 Okinawans created a human chain surrounding Futenma. More recently roughly 200 demonstrators delayed delivery of an environmental impact report on a new runway from the defense ministry to the prefectural government. Using force against protestors would threaten a future Japanese government's survival and embarrass Washington.

Rather than resist Okinawan demands, the U.S. should voluntarily reduce its military presence on the island. Jeffrey Hornung of the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies observed: "Given how much problems this is causing in Okinawa, it's finally time to rethink things."

But American military facilities are a symptom, not a cause. The bases exist to support the defense of Japan. The MEF also is available for deployment elsewhere, most obviously in a war on the Korean Peninsula.

It is unreasonable to expect Washington to defend Japan without bases in Japan. But the U.S. should end its security guarantee and then remove, rather than relocate, its military facilities in Okinawa and elsewhere in Japan. Indeed, instead of augmenting its forces elsewhere in East Asia, such as in Australia, Washington should withdraw and demobilize troops and close bases throughout the region. World War II ended 67 years ago. America no longer need guarantee the security of its many prosperous and capable allies.

Japan should endorse this step as the only way to escape its status as an American protectorate. Tokyo has essentially relinquished control over its own territory to comply with U.S. demands. Although the Obama administration frustrated the 2009 DPJ campaign pledge to create a more equal security partnership, Japanese citizens will inevitably raise more questions about the bilateral relationship as they debate security issues.

Prof. Kenneth B. Pyle of the University of Washington argued that "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." Even as Prime Minister Hatoyama was beaten by Washington he looked to the future, observing: "Someday, the time will come when Japan's peace will have to be ensured by the Japanese people themselves."

That many Japanese still look to America for their defense is hardly surprising. Relying on a friendly superpower for protection frees domestic resources for other purposes. The alliance also eases Tokyo's diplomatic burden, which otherwise would include reassuring neighbors still obsessed with Imperial Japan's military depredations.

More curious is Washington's determination to keep paying for Japan's defense. The U.S. government is broke, having run deficits exceeding $1 trillion three years running. Unfunded liabilities for Social Security and Medicare alone exceed $100 trillion. A potpourri of other financial obligations account for another $100 trillion. Yet most U.S. policymakers presume the necessity for a permanent, even enhanced American military presence in East Asia.

There are two different rationales for Washington's paternalistic role. The first is to contain China. Pointing to the People's Republic of China, Gen. Field declared: "Most of the countries in this region want to see this remain a secure and stable region."

Exactly how the Marines help contain Beijing is not clear. As Robert Gates observed, U.S. policymakers would have to have their heads examined to participate in another land war in Asia. If a conflict with China improbably developed, Washington would rely on air and naval units.

Moreover, despite persistent fear-mongering about Beijing, the PRC is in no position, and for many years will not be in position, to harm the U.S. Chinese military spending remains far behind that of America. Beijing is working mightily to deter the U.S. from attacking China, not to attack America.

Japan and its neighbors have greater reason to worry, being closer to and weaker than the PRC. However, it is up to them, not Washington, to assess the risk and respond accordingly. They should take whatever steps they deem necessary to ensure that their region remains "secure and stable," as Gen. Field put it. Just as China is seeking to deter the U.S., they should seek to deter Beijing.

Japan already has constructed a capable military, called a "Self-Defense Force" to get around a constitutional prohibition originally enacted at the insistence of Washington during the American occupation. But Tokyo has never invested resources commensurate with its capabilities; in fact, the government recently announced that it was reducing SDF outlays. If Japan believes itself to be threatened by China, as well as ever-unpredictable North Korea, then Tokyo should do more.

There also is good reason for Japan to work more closely with like-minded states such as the Republic of Korea. This bilateral relationship, like others involving Tokyo, remains tainted by history. But so long as Washington essentially smothers the region with its security blanket, allied states have little incentive to eschew taking domestic political advantage of nationalistic sentiments and work through historic difficulties. Take away the American guarantee, and other states have a much greater incentive to cooperate.

Indeed, in recent years Beijing has exhibited sharp elbows in its relationship with other states over territorial claims. The response has been to exacerbate regional concerns over Chinese behavior and spark increased military spending, and in particular naval procurement programs. That is far better than expecting Washington to build more ships to deploy to the region.

Some policymakers talk more broadly about promoting regional stability, but it's hard to imagine a contingency requiring deployment of the Okinawa-based MEF. Manpower-rich South Korea doesn't need a few thousand Marines if the North invades. Even if "something," whatever that might be, happened in Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Indonesia, Burma, or Cambodia—among the least stable states in the region—it is hard to imagine why the U.S. would consider intervening with ground troops. Not every geopolitical problem warrants an automatic American military response. Then-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."

The second purpose of the U.S.-Japan alliance is to contain Tokyo—or as Maj. Gen. Henry Stackpole famously but inelegantly put it, to maintain "the cap in the bottle" preventing "a rearmed, resurgent Japan." It is a claim that even Japanese officials have used on occasion: protect us, since surely you don't want the Imperial Japanese navy wandering the Pacific again.

But the "stop us before we aggress again" argument has grown thin after decades of peace and democracy. While there are no certainties in life, there is no evidence of resurgent militarism among more than a fanatic few. Deploying even a few peace-keeping troops has proved to be highly controversial for Tokyo. The Japanese should not be treated as if they possess a double dose of original sin.

Moreover, Washington could help ease regional concerns by promoting military transparency and multilateralism. Tokyo should adapt its forces and relationships to defense and deterrence against a superior power. Without a large army, Japan could not occupy anyone even if it wanted to.

But whether Tokyo does more and, if so, precisely what it does, and with whom, should be up to the Japanese people. It is not America's place to dictate.

Dropping the U.S.-Japan military alliance would not mean abandoning the U.S.-Japan relationship. Economic, family, and cultural ties would remain strong. Moreover, the two countries should cooperate militarily. Shared intelligence, emergency base access, training maneuvers, pre-positioned materiel, and other forms of cooperation would remain appropriate. The U.S. could act as an "off-shore balancer," ready to aid allied states such as Japan if threatened by a potential hegemon. But Washington no longer would attempt to micro-manage regional disputes of lesser consequence.

Adopting such a stance would be in the interests of the American and Japanese people. And especially in the interest of the Okinawan people. The U.S. should begin transforming its alliance relationships. Now is a good time to do so with Japan.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he also is a Senior Fellow in International Religious Persecution with the Institute on Religion and Public Policy. He is the author and editor of numerous books, including Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire, The Politics of Plunder: Misgovernment in Washington, *and* Beyond Good Intentions: A Biblical View of Politics. *He is a graduate of Florida State University and Stanford Law School.*

Gavan McCormack is a coordinator of the Asia-Pacific Journal, author of many studies previously posted at this site on aspects of US-Japan relations and Okinawa, and emeritus professor at Australian National University in Canberra. He is the author, most recently, of Client State: Japan in the American Embrace(New York, 2007, Tokyo, Seoul and Beijing 2008) and Target North Korea: Pushing North Korea to the Brink of Nuclear Catastrophe (New York, 2004, Tokyo and Seoul 2006).

Other Asia-Pacific Journal articles on related issues include:

Gavan McCormack, Deception and Diplomacy: The US, Japan, and Okinawa

Steve Rabson, Henoko and the U.S. Military: A History of Dependence and Resistance

Gavan McCormack, Sakurai Kunitoshi, Urashima Etsuko, Okinawa, New Year 2012: Tokyo's Year End Surprise Attack

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