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Dilemma of a Japanese Island: Territorial Defense in the East China Sea and Yonaguni Island 与那国自衛隊配備　国境交流こそ深化すべきだ
Jul. 08, 2013

Introduction by Gavan McCormack

The pain of Okinawa's main island, forced to accept US military installations nearly seven decades after the end of the war, is relatively well-known. It took many years for it to resolve the splits and tensions created by base imposition and to adopt a united stance of opposition to any new base and demand for withdrawal of the US Marine Corps' Osprey vertical takeoff and landing aircraft. A similar pattern – imposition, split of local communities, heavy pressure from Tokyo – is being repeated in the islands deep in the East China Sea.

The Okinawan island of Yonaguni may be small (population as of 2013: 1,570 people in 783 households) and remote. Till very recently it was the ultimate Japanese backwater. Set deep in the East China Sea, it is much closer (111 kms) to the coast of Taiwan–though there is no regular mode of communication–than to anywhere else in Japan. It lies about 300 kms south of the contested island territory known in Japan as Senkaku and in China and Taiwan as Diaoyu. Attention now focuses on Yonaguni because of the proposal to establish a Self-Defense Force base there.

For an introduction to Yonaguni Island's recent history and the origins of the base problem, see the earlier (October 2012) essay: Yonaguni: Dilemmas of a Frontier Island in the East China Sea

In reading the accompanying short article the following basic facts should be kept in mind:

2005. Yonaguni Island (administratively Yonaguni Township) adopted a "Vision" statement calling for the establishment of a special frontier zone, with regular communications to be opened especially with Taiwan. The national government in Tokyo refused to allow this project. The short sea gap between the island and Taiwan remains unbridged and Yonaguni a remote Japanese frontier.

2008-9. The Yonaguni Defense Association (founded 2007 as a branch of the national organization closely connected to the Defense Ministry and incorporating former SDF members and associates) called for the SDF to be invited to set up a base on the island. Its petition was signed by 514 people. The Town Assembly in September 2008 adopted [4:1] a resolution to that effect and in June 2009 formal invitation was issued to the Ministry of Defense and the Ground Self-Defense Forces (GSDF) command.

2010. The national government adopted in December the Defense Program Guidelines which for the first time included specific reference to defense of the outlying southwestern islands (including Yonaguni).

2011. The Yonaguni Reform Association organized and circulated a petition seeking cancelation of the invitation to the SDF. It was signed by 556 people (roughly 46 percent of the island electorate).

The Democratic Party government declared (August) its intention to send a small (100 person) coastal surveillance unit of the Ground Self Defense Forces to Yonaguni and stated (late 2012) the defense of the Southwestern islands was its "highest priority."

2012. A petition calling for a local plebiscite on the base issue, organized by the Yonaguni Reform Association, was signed by 588 people. The Town Assembly voted (24 September) to reject the request.

A 21 hectare site of town-owned grazing land on the southern corner of the island, currently leased to the Minami Bokujo (South Ranch) was identified as preferred site.

In December 2012, Abe Shinzo heading an LDP-Komeito government took over from the DPJ.

2013. In negotiations between Yonaguni mayor Hokama Shukichi and the national government over implementation of the base plan, Tokyo initially offered five million for annual rental fee but Hokama demanded an annual fee of twelve million yen plus a "nuisance" (later changed to "cooperation" or "special subsidy") fee of one billion yen. In June, Hokama dropped the lump sum payment demand and the two sides came to agreement on a rental fee of 15.01 million yen, justifying the three-fold increase on grounds of change in the zoning category of the land from "agricultural" to "residential."

On 20 June, the Town Assembly voted 3:2 to confirm that agreement. The accompanying editorial was published in the Okinawan daily, *Ryukyu shimpo*, on the day following that decision.[1]

On 11 August 2013 Yonaguni Town is to conduct a mayoral election. Opponents of the project have nominated Sakihara Masakichi, the head of the Yonaguni Reform Association, a prominent opponent of the base. Mayor Hokama is yet to indicate whether he will seek a third term, and the Yonaguni Defense Association, which expressed outrage with Hokama over his earlier request for a "nuisance" fee, withdrawing its support from him and pledging to nominate their own candidate, has also yet to indicate what its stance will be in August. (GMcC)

Yonaguni Island and its horses

[Editorial] Yonaguni should promote exchange with Taiwan instead of accepting SDF

June 21, 2013 Ryukyu Shimpo

Original here in English and Japanese

Members of the Yonaguni Town Assembly have unanimously passed a bill leasing land owned by the town to the Ministry of Defense. This will enable the Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to station a coast guard unit on the island. We question such a plan being pushed forward, with almost half of local voters opposing it.

The municipal office will lease 21.4 hectares of the town's farmland to the ministry for about 15 million yen a year.

The ministry wanted to rent the land for five million yen a year, but this month it agreed to the town's demands that they pay an amount equal to that for land used for building on. This has increased the amount due by three times. In the use of public funds, is it acceptable that the ministry pays building land rental fees for farmland?

There is a reason the ministry accepted the rent increase. This March, Yonaguni Mayor Moriyoshi Hokama demanded an increase in rent and one billion yen as compensation for the inconvenience the town will face. However, on March 14 the mayor withdrew his demand for compensation, and with this, the ministry accepted the rent increase.

Hokama retracted his demand despite claiming in April that the price proposed by the ministry would not bring about positive economic benefit to the island. While Hokama stated that he "would not budge an inch" on this demand, there is a reason for the retraction.

The ministry has started considering measures to promote the island by improving infrastructure for the fishery industry and solid waste management. Hokama said, "In a deal carried out behind the scenes, the ministry will pay a billion yen toward the cost for improving these buildings." Is it acceptable for the municipal office to be swayed by money politics into accepting this plan to station an SDF unit on Yonaguni?

While the town claims that the unit will bring benefits to the island and revitalize the local economy, the SDF states that this will reinforce the defense in the southwestern region. The town and the ministry are working toward different goals.

Hokama has claimed that the stationing of SDF personnel there will benefit the island economically. However, on Tsushima Island, which hosts a SDF base, the population continues to decline. It is an illusion to think that an SDF unit on the island will promote the local economy.

The ministry plans to station a 100-man strong coast guard unit on Yonaguni. On June 2, the number of eligible voters was 1,212. Some of the SDF personnel will bring family members with them. The SDF personnel and their families will account for ten percent of all the voters. This will influence the island's politics, undermining local autonomy.

We would prefer to support the proposal from the town in 2005 of creating a special zone for exchange with Taiwan, but the Japanese government dismissed this idea. It is distorted politics that the central government forces Yonaguni to accept an SDF unit. An island located on a national boundary should be promoting international exchange. It is counter-productive to cause conflict by stationing a military force on the island.

(English translation by T&CT, Mark Ealey)

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[1] "Yonaguni jieitai haibi, kokko koryu koso shinka subeki da," editorial, *Ryukyu shimpo*, 21 June 2013. http://ryukyushimpo.jp/news/storyid-208289-storytopic-11.html/

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