



Another Okinawa Battle

Feb. 11, 2011

In June 2009, Okinawa became the unexpected political graveyard of Hatoyama Yukio, [who quit](#) after months struggling to bear the weight of, then reversing, a pledge he made to its citizens.

He had come to power the previous September in an election that ended half a century of LDP rule, promising to tackle one of the great Cold War anomalies. For over half a century Japan, constitutionally pacifist and neutral had sheltered beneath the US military umbrella as a loyal and in recent years increasingly proactive ally. "We're still in Cold War mode," [he lamented to this journalist](#) before he took power.

Two years later, Mr. Hatoyama, who was forced out as Prime Minister over his inability to resolve the question of a new Marine air station on Okinawa as demanded by the US, appears to still recognise the long-term unsustainability of that arrangement. "The idea of having one nation's military based on another's soil and depending on its military is not something seen anywhere else in the world," [he reminded](#) the Japan Foreign Correspondents' Club on Feb. 2nd. "I felt this was something the Japanese people could not avoid confronting."

So it is with a jolt that we arrive in present-day Okinawa, where reality is sharply at odds with Mr. Hatoyama's good intentions. [Activists there](#) say the US and Japanese authorities, now under Hatoyama's successor, Naoto Kan, have begun a new push to break the 15-year-old stalemate over replacing old US military facilities.

At Henoko, sight of a proposed US military seaport, including an 1800-meter runway, to replace the Futenma Marine Air Station in the middle of Ginowan City, a concrete wall is being erected to separate civilian and military land on the beach and conceal construction from the eyes of demonstrators on the other side - likely the first move toward construction.

Meanwhile, the citizens of Takae, a 160-household village in Yanbaru Forest have been protesting round-the-clock against the renewed construction (since December 22) of six US helipads to accommodate the V-22 Osprey, an aircraft with a controversial record of accidents and protection by vested interests (see this January 11 [Air Force Times story](#) on political infighting within the Pentagon over an investigation of an April 2010 Osprey crash). The villagers say that its [forcible construction](#) would pave the way for a similar strategy on Henoko. They have accused the authorities of harassment.

Democratic Party politicians are, perhaps, more vocal about Okinawa's burden than their Liberal Democratic predecessors. "It doesn't make sense to put 75 percent of US military facilities on 0.6 percent of Japan's land," points out rising lawmaker Kiuchi Taketane. But there the hand wringing ends and the realpolitik begins: "We have already made a promise country-to-country so we have to go ahead with moving the base to Henoko," he says. Hatoyama now agrees, adding: If the Henoko facility cannot be built, the airbase in Futenma will be made permanent, and this is an option that we should avoid at all costs."

The mainland press has been quick to back this scenario, and warn of a huge spike in military spending - held at 0.9 percent to 1.0 percent of Japan's GDP for decades - if it begins uncoupling from the security alliance with the US. Opting for the Hatoyama route meant that Japan 'would have to increase its 5-trillion-yen defence budget by 10 percent annually for the next 10 years,' warned [Sentaku political magazine](#) in February 2010.

The latest push on Okinawa follows [last year's spat](#) between Japan's coastguard and a Chinese trawler in the Senkaku Islands that badly mauled bilateral relations and added to Japanese paranoia about Beijing's strategic aims in Asia. Conservatives in Japan are now increasingly vocal about China's growing military clout, with [some claiming](#) that it is operating spies and provocateurs in Okinawa as the prelude to an eventual claim on the islands.

Takesada Hideshi, executive director of the National Institute for Defense Studies, recently told the Shingetsu Institute that Chinese professors in Japan have been "spreading Chinese government propaganda" to their students, in line with Beijing's interests. Takesada expressed concern that "China will soon make a formal claim to Okinawa by citing old manuscripts of the Qing dynasty showing these territories as being tributary."

Such views may be taken as the inevitable byproduct of Japanese anxiety as it accommodates uneasily to China's growing economic and geopolitical clout - or something more sinister. As others have pointed out, there are few peaceful historical precedents for such a huge transition of power and influence from one nation to another. But whatever happens, there seems little doubt that Japan and the United States will continue to press Okinawans to keep bearing the weight of the US-Japan military pact.

This pact keeps US military forces concentrated on Okinawa largely out of sight and mind of the mainland, until a protest or particularly heinous crime in the prefecture pushes it back onto the nation's front pages. It remains to be seen how Okinawans will react to the latest initiative; in his FCCJ speech, Hatoyama appeared to offer a coded warning to the administration of Kan Naoto. While advising the government to push ahead with the relocation, he added: "We can not be too optimistic about the government's prospects (about the base on Henoko). "Many things will depend on the construction methods - it should be made in such a way that is friendly to the environment, and it shouldn't be permanent. The land needs to be returned to the people of Okinawa. What's needed before then is frank and fair discussion," he said. But the time for talking may have ended.

The Asia-Pacific Journal has published extensively on Okinawa. Some articles of recent interest include:

- Satoko Norimatsu, Mark Selden & Gavan McCormack, [New Year 2011, Okinawa and the Future of East Asia](#) 2011年 年明け、沖縄、東アジアの将来
- Satoko Norimatsu & Masahide Ota, ["The World is beginning to know Okinawa": Ota Masahide Reflects on his Life from the Battle of Okinawa to the Struggle for Okinawa](#) 「世界は沖縄のことを知り始めています」――大田昌秀の回顧、沖縄の戦闘から沖縄のための戦いまで
- Satoko Norimatsu & Ryukyu Asahi Broadcasting, [Assault on the Sea: A 50-Year U.S. Plan to Build a Military Port on Oura Bay, Okinawa](#) 狙われた海--沖縄大浦湾軍港設立50年計画
- Gavan McCormack, Ampo's Troubled 50th: Hatoyama's Abortive Rebellion, Okinawa's Mounting Resistance and the US-Japan Relationship - [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#) and [Part 3](#) 苦渋の安保改正50年-鳩山反撃の失敗、沖縄で高まる反抗運動、日米関係 第1部, 第2部, 第3部

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