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People Power: Have Okinawan protests forced Tokyo and Washington to rethink their base plan?

By David McNeill

After nine years of stalling and prevarication over the replacement of Futenma Air Station in Okinawa, and nearly eighteen months of protests against its proposed replacement, a solution of sorts is finally stirring in the dusty halls of power in Kasumigaseki.

On September 24, the Yomiuri newspaper reported that the Japanese government is backing the relocation of Futenma's Marine chopper base to the Marines Camp Schwab in Nago. Tokyo had initially supported the construction of a joint civil-military airport off the coast of Henoko village to replace Futenma.

At an estimated cost of 330 billion yen, the Heneko project would have lined the pockets of local and national construction firms – key backers of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party -- and settled one of the rawest issues in the US-Japan security alliance: reducing [by 21 percent, according to Stars and Stripes] the American military footprint in Okinawa Prefecture, which reluctantly hosts three quarters of all US military facilities in Japan. There was just one serious problem: many local people strongly opposed the idea.

According to the Yomiuri, the latest decision was prompted mainly by a rethink over the "environmental impact" of the base on pristine coral reefs off Heneko, home to the endangered dugong, but there is every reason to believe that the real reason was a remarkably successful grassroots protest campaign.

In 1996, Tokyo and Washington agreed to close Futenma, which occupies the heart of the densely populated Ginowan City, by December 2003 at the latest and replace it with one of three options: move the helicopter functions to Kadena, the biggest and most active US Air Force base in East Asia; build an airstrip in Camp Schwab or construct an entirely new offshore facility. All three options would maintain the base in Okinawa.

The 1996 agreement was forced on the two governments by the largest protests in Okinawa history following the kidnap and rape of a 12-year-old girl by two Marines and a sailor, an incident that capped years of sex crimes by military personnel.
In July 2002, after years of wrangling, Tokyo announced it would build a joint military-civilian airfield with a 2.5 km runway over coral reefs about 2km off the coast of the Henoko district of Nago, all paid for by the Japanese taxpayer. The main outstanding issue was the Japanese demand for a 15-year limit on US use of the base. The issues gained urgency in summer 2004 when a US helicopter crashed into densely populated Ginowan next to the base, touching offer the largest anti-base demonstrations since 1996.

1. 30,000 rally to eliminate the US base at Ginowan
on September 9, 2004

The transfer of the base to Heneko was backed by Nago Mayor Kishimoto Tateo and the local business community. But amid the buildup to the US 'war on terror' and another spike in tensions between locals and the military, the offshore plan predictably sparked outrage among anti-base campaigners and environmentalists and was reportedly scaled down to a 1,500-meter exclusively military facility.

In June 2004, a small group began demonstrating against test drilling for the construction of the new base. The protestors set up camp on a roadside close to the beach at Heneko, blocking government surveyors. When the surveyors tried approaching from the sea, the demonstrators took to canoes or scaled construction scaffolding to obstruct them. By September 2004, an Okinawa Times-Asahi Shinbun survey indicated that 81 percent of Okinawans opposed the building of the new heliport.
As of September 27, 2005 the Heneko protest is 528 days old. It has been joined in spirit and sometimes in body by dozens of international groups campaigning on antiwar and environmental issues. Several civil lawsuits have also been filed, including one against the US Defense Department.

2. Henoko anti-base activists at day 110 of their protest

But its core remains a relatively small number of determined elderly locals. The demonstrations have been grueling and occasionally dangerous but remain a model of non-violent protest that has had an enormous impact on policies crafted in Tokyo and Washington with virtually no reference to local sentiments. "There is absolutely no doubt that this protest has forced the reconsideration of the base," says Chibana Shoichi, local councilor and anti-base activist.

The morale of the protestors has also been boosted by news that the BBC's World Earth Report team has made a documentary about the area, which will be broadcast, according to the Futenma-Heneko Action Network, to over 200 countries and territories around the world every day for a week beginning on September 30. (For schedule in Japan and North America see http://www.fhan.org/news.html). "We'll stay here forever if we have to," says one of the protest leaders Rev. Taira Natsume.

Few of the anti-base protestors are complacent, however. Despite a 2002 pledge by Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro to reduce the US military burden on Okinawa, there are signs that Washington is digging in amid a major realignment of US forces around the world and an increasingly outward-looking Japanese military stance.

A congressional report by the Overseas Bases Commission released in August 2005 recommended maintaining current US troop levels in the prefecture, saying: "Okinawa is the strategic linchpin to operational capabilities in East Asia. Diminishing our combat capability on the island would pose great risk to our national interests in the region."

Some activists also wonder whether the latest move is such a major compromise. "You have to remember that Camp Schwab is right beside Heneko, even if the base is built inland," says Chibana. "Nago City and the Chamber of Commerce are against moving to Schwab, and the US side still wants to build a shorter runway in shallower waters, so everything is still up in the air." Either plan would keep the Marines and the air base in Okinawa.

Nevertheless, the closing of the accident-prone Futenma base together with cancellation of the Heneko project, if confirmed, would energize those who have long called for a reduction of US bases and forces on Okinawa, and who ultimately want their total removal. The question now being asked is: whither Futenma? One option floated in a recent Kyodo article suggested that Kadena might host Futenma's assets, but an anonymous Pentagon source said this was 'hardly a desirable solution' considering "the noise problems and operational hazards of helicopters and U.S. Air Force fighters using the same base."

The source, who made clear that Heneko is still the preferred US option, also raised problems with any move to Camp Schwab, including: "helicopters flying over communities and a tremendous amount of moving earth and destroying mountains to build the airport." Over the last six months, as the protest has dragged on, a number of other solutions have been floated in the national

press, including a move to Iwakuni Marine Corps Air Station in Yamaguchi Prefecture and even to distant Guam. However, Japanese government resistance to any transfer of US forces to the main islands, and US insistence that the base be located in Japan, leave the future of the base in limbo.While the maintenance of the base in overcrowded Ginowan constitutes a major source of friction with Okinawan citizens, from a US military perspective base functions continue unimpeded nearly a decade after the pledge to transfer.

Okinawa will have to wait until October and an interim report by Defense Agency Director General Ono Yoshinori on the result of the latest Tokyo-Washington negotiations to hear whether the new Tokyo position is official, but for now at least the campaigners are relishing their role as a slightly graying David versus the flat-footed military Goliath. And promising to fight on.

"Of course we're happy that the government has changed its plan, and that we might have had an impact," says Rev. Taira. "But our demonstrations are not about where the base will be or what shape it will take, but against the building of the base in the first place. We will continue until this plan is completely scrapped and the military is gone from here." It seems unlikely that this will be any time soon.

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