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Does the US Need a New Marine Air Station on Okinawa? Voices of Resistance

by Julia Yonetani

On 12 April, 1996, Japanese Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro and US ambassador to Japan Walter Mondale announced agreement upon the return of the US Futenma Marine Corps Air Station facilities, situated in the city of Ginowan in Okinawa prefecture, to Japan within five to seven years. This surprise declaration was the jewel in the crown of the two governments attempts to quell the surge of anti-US base sentiment that had swept the island prefecture since the rape of an Okinawan schoolgirl by three US soldiers the previous year. It came just days prior to the arrival of then US President Clinton to Japan and the reaffirmation of the US-Japan Security Treaty.

Just over eight years later, on 20 April 2004, in the remote village of Henoko, Okinawa, a group of determined locals and their supporters clashed with officials from the Naha Defense Facilities Administration Bureau (DFAB), assigned to implement policy on the US military bases in Okinawa. The officials were attempting to conduct a geological survey of the coastal area that involved drilling sixty-three designated points on the surrounding seabed. The area is known to contain seagrass of the type eaten by the highly endangered local dugong, as well as comprise a coral reef that stretches across the protected bay and is home to numerous sea creatures. The preliminary survey is in preparation to build a 2.5 kilometre long runway across the bay through a massive land reclamation project. As agreed by the US and Japanese governments, this less populated yet pristine region in Northern Okinawa is to be the site for relocating the Futenma Air Station facilities.

Eight years later, the return of the Futenma Air Station is still at least sixteen years away: the minimum designated period estimated to build the new alternative facilities. Far from providing a 'solution' to the Okinawa base issue, the decision to 'return' Futenma Air Station -- on the proviso that an alternative site be provided to relocate the facilities within Okinawa prefecture -- ignited a fierce local and international struggle that shows no sign of subsiding. From April 20th of this year, DFAB officials have been met by a group of canoes and protesters blocking the exit of the local fishing port in an endeavour to obstruct initiation of the drilling survey. Yet as the Okinawa Times pointed out, this is merely the escalation of a conflict that for the local population began at least 2,639 days previously (19 May 2004).

Since the end of the Cold War, Japanese defence cooperation with the US has intensified as Japan's political climate moves further towards greater 'burden sharing', that is the 'normalisation' (expansion) of its regional and international security roles, and an increase in voices advocating a stronger military presence at a time of a heightened sense of insecurity. These developments lead Japan in two contradictory directions: towards the further consolidation of its role as a US strategic satellite, and towards becoming an increasingly assertive military power. For nearly six decades, Okinawa has served as a US military outpost for the convenience of both the US and Japanese governments, and the Okinawa bases remain at the heart of resulting tensions between these two competing directions.

In December 1997, those opposed to the base construction plans off the coast of Henoko village, Nago City, were victorious in achieving a majority against the plans in a local referendum. However, the Japanese government continued to seek support from local politicians. At least four major new financial compensation packages were introduced to galvanise Okinawan support for the base construction plans from 1997 onwards (Kawase 2002). One more recent instance of these was an agreement that from the year 2000, 100 billion yen of extra central government funds would be distributed over ten years in economic stimulus projects in Northern Okinawa. This fund was implemented by a central cabinet resolution, passed in December 1999, the day after Nago Mayor Kishimoto Tateo announced his agreement to plans overturn the results of the local referendum result and accept base construction. The use of Tokyo's lucre to quell opposition to the US military presence is of course not a new phenomenon. Yet the compensation system laid down in the context of the explosion of the Futenma relocation issue was unprecedented in nature and in the amount of money involved (Yonetani 2003).

In short, massive economic compensation policies have been highly effective in galvanising support from local politicians and interest groups for what is essentially a highly unpopular project. Yet apart from igniting fierce divisions within local communities, the increased likelihood of corruption, and severe environmental destruction, these policies have been unable to resolve a burning contradiction. Namely, while at least some local residents are delighted to receive extra government funding, opposition towards the US military presence and the construction of the new base remains entrenched.

The contradiction is perhaps manifested at its most farcical in the so-called 'fifteen-year limit issue.' Okinawa Prefectural Governor Inamine Keiichi first announced his commitment to a 'fifteen-year limit' on US military use of any new facilities constructed in replace of Futenma in his race against then incumbent Ota Masahide in the gubernatorial elections of 1998. In the next gubernatorial elections of 2002, Inamine again reiterated his promise that construction of a new base would not begin unless the 'fifteen-year limit issue' was 'resolved.'

The US side rejected any fifteen-year time limit on utilising facilities immediately after the proposal was floated. More recently, US government officials in Okinawa have been more discreet, refraining from commenting on the issue. Yet it is clear that neither the US government nor even in fact the Japanese government appears concerned about a hypothetical fifteen-year limit on use of the new facilities. Even local politicians in Okinawa within the Inamine camp are hesitant to clarify or comment on the issue. In a narrative not unlike that of the 'emperor's clothes,' the absurdity of even attempting to negotiate a fifteen-year limit of use on a massive runway that is going to take at least sixteen years and hundreds of billions of yen to build is blatant, yet left unmentioned.

Herein lies the delicacy of the 'base issue' as it now stands. For to totally renege on the fifteen-year limit would be to admit the obvious -- namely, that the building of a massive new base to house facilities currently stationed at Futenma does not amount to the 'consolidation and reduction' of the US military presence as promised by the SACO (Special Action Committee on Okinawa) seven years ago, but its fortification. While no doubt unrealistic and blatantly impractical, Inamine clearly fears that the 'fifteen-year limit' is the furthest the Okinawan electorate will go in compromising on the base issue. This is confirmed by recent events. While a member of Inamine's 'brain trust', Takara Kuroyoshi, was ready to suggest at a recent international symposium in Washington the need to do away with the fifteen-year limit condition, Inamine has yet to directly make such a proposal to Okinawans in the face of local intellectuals outraged by his comments (Medoruma Shun in Okinawa Times, 4 May 2004).

As the US reassesses its military presence throughout the globe, various voices from within the nation have begun to call for a more flexible stance towards the relocation of Futenma. US officials have repeatedly declined to comment on the Henoko project,

contending that the issue is a Japanese one. Yet recently former assistant secretary of defense Kurt Campbell, who was a central figure in the very negotiations that led to the marking of Henoko as the alternative site for Futenma, damned the Henoko project as 'hopelessly stalled.' He stated that if he became part of a newly elected Democratic administration, he would reassess the entire project and work towards integrating Futenma's facilities into an already existing base (Interview with Okinawa Times, 14 April 2004, also cited in Stars and Stripes, 13 June 2004). At the end of April, journalist and US-Japan relations expert, Funabashi Yoichi, also concluded that in the context of US reassessment of its military commitments, including the planned withdrawal of up to one third of the 37,000 troops stationed in South Korea, the Japanese government should be able to negotiate a means to return Futenma that does not require the building of a massive new base in Henoko (Okinawa Times, 1 May 2004).

Yet in spite of these movements and fierce local opposition, the Japanese government appears to remain determined to implement the Henoko plans. Thus Japanese DFAB officials have repeatedly refused to set up a forum to answer residents' questions on either the drilling survey or the environmental assessment. Locals were given only until 16 June to comment on the environment assessment method without any such forum having taken place. The assessment proposed by the Japanese government, moreover, has been severely criticised for failing to include essential details such as exactly what kind of aircraft will be used at the new facilities. A resolution was passed at the World Conservation Congress in Jordan in October 2000 that expressed serious concern over the potential environmental consequences of the proposed base construction. At the end of April 2004, WWF Japan, the Nature Conservation Association of Japan (NACS) and the Dugong protection campaign centre called for the cessation of the drilling survey plans and the revision of plans to relocate Futenma to Henoko. By May, Nichiben, Japan's Bar Association, also announced opposition to the drilling survey, which would transform the environment before an assessment of the relatively unspoilt area had even taken place.

Political pressure to accelerate the return of the unpopular Futenma base has continued to mount. In the Ginowan City Mayoral elections of 2003, progressive candidate Iha Yoichi was elected on an anti-US base and anti-corruption platform. In mid-May, 16 000 protesters calling for the prompt return of Futenma formed an 11.5 kilometre human chain around the entire base. Mayor Iha Yoichi was present, and pledged to take a video of the protest to the US to make his case to government and military officials in Washington.

Meanwhile, tensions remain high in the coastal village of Henoko. In the past few months, unrelenting monsoon rains have transformed Okinawa's drought-stricken landscape, filling its once near-empty dams to full capacity. Yet in day after day of torrential downpour, groups of locals and their supporters gather in canoes, wetsuits, and raincoats to block any attempt by DFAB officials to initiate the drilling survey. Many local residents opposed to the plans are over seventy, eighty, or even ninety-years of age, yet remain determined to keep up the struggle. Faxes, letters, and calls of support continue to arrive from across Okinawa, from other areas in Japan, and beyond. At the time of writing, on 19 June 2004, the sit-in at Henoko had reached its sixtieth day.

On 12 April 2003, the seventh anniversary of Clinton and Hashimoto's announcement to return Futenma within five to seven years, an editorial of the Okinawa Times concluded: "The solution to the (Okinawa) base issue does not lie in the building of a new base, but in return of Futenma through a reduction in US marines. Seven years after the agreement to return Futendma was reached, this should be reconfirmed" (12 April 2003). Yet over one year later, the question remains: When will the US and Japanese governments accept this? And will it be too late for the people and the crystal clear coral waters of Henoko?

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