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# Forced to 'Choose' its Own Subjugation: Okinawa's Place in U.S. Global Military Realignment

By Sato Manabu

August 13 was the second anniversary of the crash of a U.S. Marine Corps CH-53 helicopter into a building on the campus of Okinawa International University (OIU). The helicopter came from U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, the helicopter base located in the middle of densely populated Ginowan right next to OIU.

Okinawa International University, the site of the accident

In 1996 the Japan-U.S. agreement on the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) called for Futenma to be shut down and returned to Okinawa by the end of 2003. That never happened. In fact Futenma will operate for at least eight more years, possibly longer.

The condition that has prevented the return of Futenma is the same as the one that has kept a disproportionate number of U.S. military bases in Okinawa Prefecture. Namely, the Japanese and U.S. governments have dictated and controlled Okinawa's political and economic structure for six decades, stripping Okinawa of its resources and its ability to decide its own future.

SACO called for Futenma's return largely in response to huge anti-U.S. base rallies the year before in 1995. The sentiment erupted after three U.S. Marines raped a 12-year-old Okinawan girl.

A total of 100,000 people participated in the rallies, 87,000 on Okinawa's main island alone, enough to persuade the U.S. and Japanese governments that something needed to be done. The United States needed Okinawa's bases, and the rise of the anti-base movement threatened those bases.

The anti-base movement encompassed the whole political spectrum. Even Inamine Keiichi, now Okinawa Prefecture's conservative governor, appeared on a rally stage as head of a business group.

SACO stipulated the construction of facility to replace Futenma. Its return, in other words, was contingent on the construction of a new base in Okinawa.

It now sounds naive, but the initial plans for the replacement base called for a small, temporary facility, for helicopter use only, that could be removed easily when it became unnecessary.

That plan changed drastically when Inamine became governor. He announced plans for a large-scale offshore airport. The airport would be for dual military-civilian use for 15 years, after which it would become entirely civilian.

Known as the Henoko plan after its proposed construction site, it quickly bogged down.

Part of the problem was that the U.S. government never gave serious consideration to the 15-year military use cap. It would never accept such a clear limitation on the length of the use of a military facility in Okinawa. And the Japanese government has done nothing to persuade it to change its mind.

Henoko Ammunition Depot

There are other problems. The estimated construction time is itself about 15 years. The base would destroy beautiful coral reef. The airport would be extremely vulnerable to winds and waves from typhoons. The construction project is widely considered extremely difficult technically. And the massive land reclamation project would kill off the area's dugongs (endangered Asian manatees).

In April of 2004 the Japanese government finally began an environmental assessment, and got ready to bore into the sea bed surrounding the proposed site. These moves were interpreted as the beginning of construction, and opposition movements organized a heroic sit-in campaign to prevent it.

This nonviolent civil disobedience was hugely successful. Henoko has come to be a symbol of the peace and environmental movements.

Rather than directly face off against the protesters as the Japanese government did, the U.S. military had a different idea: Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), or global military transformation.

SACO had made Futenma and Henoko political issues, but they remained Okinawa-specific. In 2005, however, QDR transformed the Futenma and Henoko issues into part of a global military realignment.

Last October, the United States and Japan agreed on a new base now partially on Henoko peninsula, instead of entirely offshore, with a port facility attached. The new base would be fundamentally different from Futenma in its capabilities.

Last May the Cabinet passed a resolution to build not one but two runways, with an even larger port facility--perfect for Marines.

This is not a replacement of Futenma, whose main function is training. This is a new, different, upgraded facility that U.S. Marines will receive for free and will use as a forward base capable of attacking foreign territories, not just for training.

Governor Inamine has adamantly opposed this plan because his most important wish, the offshore dual-use airport, was abandoned without even nominal consultation. But his opposition is not strong enough for him to cut ties with the Liberal Democratic Party. One can assume that his current position is merely to save face in order to blunt the teeth of the Henoko issue in the upcoming November gubernatorial election, in which Inamine is not running.

Governor Inamine Keiichi

The top of the agenda now is the return to Japanese control of Futenma and two other major military facilities in Okinawa's south, where urbanization is driving up land prices.

The United States and Japan have made the new Henoko air field a precondition for the return of the southern base land. If Henoko construction stalls, they will simply hold on to Futenma and use it instead. Government subsidies to local Henoko construction businesses are also contingent on the Henoko base construction moving ahead smoothly.

Okinawans are being threatened into cooperation with the new U.S. Marine attack base. Most do not want it, yet they are being made to believe that Okinawa cannot live without U.S. bases. In fact, for the first time Okinawa is "demanding" the construction of a new base. The mayors of northern municipalities have even banded together to accept the new Henoko base.

The tragedy is that the base will not bring the economic development that those mayors and conservative politicians seek. Rather, it will simply make permanent Okinawa's lowly status. Okinawa will be forever seen and treated as weak, a region that trades military bases for cash.

Sixty-one years after the battle of Okinawa, the region is about to surrender again--and this time Okinawa is being forced to appear as if it is voluntarily choosing to do so. This is no accident. It is a true crime story written and directed by the governments of both the United States and Japan.

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