



# The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

in-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

## How Long Will US Forces Continue to Occupy Japan and Korea? China, the US and the New Division of Power in the Asia-Pacific

Tanaka Sakai

Translation by Kyoko Selden

Japanese original text is [available here \[PDF\]](#).

### Introduction

*In a [May 7, 2010 report](#) that was among the first-and most controversial-anywhere to dissect the South Korea-US verdict on the sinking of the South Korean warship Cheonan, Tanaka Sakai posed compelling questions about the official claims. The present article looks forward rather than back to assess possible regional and global ramifications of the Cheonan Incident for emerging power relations in the Asia-Pacific. Tanaka argues that, together with the failure to resolve the issue of the transfer of the Futenma base that is at the heart of the impasse in the US-Japan-Okinawa relationship, the stalemate over the Cheonan Incident illustrates the multipolarization of power that is part of the decline of American power and a redefinition of power relations in the Pacific consequent on China's rise. --Mark Selden*

In late May this year, the government of the Republic of Korea (South Korea), instigated by the United States, publicly blamed the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) for the Cheonan incident, which took place in late March, leading to intensification of the conflict between North and South. Influenced by this, the handover of occupational command (OPCON), from the US to the South Korean military, which had been expected to occur in 2012, has been postponed until 2017 or sometime thereafter. In Japan, the move of the US military in Okinawa to Guam, which had been planned to take place by 2014, is likely to be postponed until sometime after 2015, because of the inability to resolve the Futenma Base issue and the delay of base construction on Guam. [60 Years Into War, US Delays South Korea Forces Handover](#)



Figure 1: A giant crane lifts the stern of the Cheonan

The Cheonan Incident embodies the scheme of perpetual conflict similar to the Cold War and the War on Terror, so that the more the US and South Korea criticize North Korea, the angrier North Korea becomes, with the result that the North-South conflict deepens. Therefore, the Japanese and South Korean governments, which had been hopefully reconsidering their continuing dependence on the US, began to think that withdrawal of the US military from Japan and Korea would be greatly postponed as the US and South Korea propounded the theory that North Korea was the culprit in the Cheonan Incident.

However, the structure of blaming North Korea for the Cheonan Incident is beginning to sway unexpectedly quickly. In local elections in South Korea, on June 2, ten days after the South Korean government announced the North's culpability, the Grand National Party (Hannara) of Lee Myung-bak was surprisingly unsuccessful. Pursuing the idea of the North's culpability, South Korea imposed strong controls of speech and propaganda strategy on the media. When South Korean veterans held meetings to criticize North Korea, despite the fact that the gatherings were not large, the media reported on them as if they reflected the majority view of South Koreans. Such speech control proved

counterproductive, leading to setbacks for Lee's party in the June 15<sup>th</sup> South Korean local elections. [[At polls, South Korea conservatives pay for response to Cheonan sinking.](#)]

In response to the defeat, the Lee administration stepped back from the policy of confronting the North and instead advanced a policy of friendship (yūwa) with the North. The industrial complex in Kaesong, which is the symbol of economic cooperation between North and South, continued operations. Already at this point the South Korean strategy aiming at perpetual conflict with North Korea, "South Korea's 911," was weakened. The South Korean government's position further declined as weaknesses in the Cheonan report were pointed out one after another. [[South Korea softens tone with North](#)]

In contrast to South Korea losing the advantage, North Korea gained the advantage, loudly criticizing the results of the investigation into the Cheonan Incident as a fraud concocted by the US and ROK at international meetings such as those held at the United Nations and ASEAN + 3. North Korea, from the time that Kim Jong Il took office, did not adopt the strategy of openly speaking out in international society, such as the UN, but tended to follow the strategy of a "guilty state," which does not participate in international society, but earns foreign currency by furtively smuggling, guns, counterfeit currency and drugs. [[North Korea Expected to Steal ASEAN Spotlight](#)]

However, after the false charge over the Cheonan Incident, North Korea completely changed its attitude. Having the great cause that the US and South Korea were to blame for the false charge, it began to openly criticize the evil acts of the US and South Korea in forums like the UN. A high Iranian official, who has repeatedly criticized US for falsely charging that Iran was developing nuclear weapons in the UN and elsewhere, began to praise North Korea, saying that Iran and North Korea "are both independent revolutionary nations, trying to resist the world's 'greedy powers.'" [[Iran, North Korea share common goals](#)]

On July 9, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution criticizing the Cheonan Incident, but it was the product of compromise after the debate between the US and South Korea, which insisted that the North was the attacker, and China, Russia and North Korea who denied it. The UN resolution denounces the attacker that sank the Cheonan warship, but does not say who the culprit is. North Korea proclaimed that the resolution was its victory because it was not named. South Korea, too, proclaimed victory because the culprit was the North. [[Creative UN papers over the Cheonan incident.](#)]

### The reversal of superiority/inferiority between North and South Korea

Following the UN resolution, North Korea announced its willingness to participate in the Six-Party talks. Comments quickly spread to the effect that North Korea's starvation is worsening, so, to obtain food aid, it agreed to attend the talks, which it had previously refused. However, that is not in fact the case. North Korea probably intends to raise the Cheonan issue, demanding a new investigation. (The North's economy is improving. It is not in a state of starvation.) [[North Korea takes desperate measures - Donald Kirk](#)]

Among participants in the Six-Party Talks, already Russia is denying North Korean responsibility and is siding with the North. China must be the same. But China apparently intends to mediate between the North and the South to help them reconcile. Consequently, China made no comment, choosing to maintain neutrality without endorsing either side. China and Russia will support the North Korean demand to redo the investigation of the Cheonan Incident with the participation of North and South. If a reinvestigation is conducted, then the theory of North Korean culpability will be undermined, so the South does not wish



Figure 2: Kim Jong Il with China's Hu Jintao on May 20, 2010

to hold Six-Party Talks. North and South have become reversed in their positions of superiority and inferiority.

The US insists that the North is to blame, but the Council on Foreign Relations of the US urges that "The United States should put pressure on North Korea by holding Six-Party Talks and take back from China the leadership on Korean peninsula issues." In reality, if Six-Party Talks are held, the Cheonan Incident verdict will be exposed, which will put the US at a disadvantage, and the leadership of the Korean peninsula will further pass from the US to China. As usual the conduct of the Council on Foreign Relations is along the lines of covert multipolarization theory. [\[US looks within, Pyongyang looks to war\]](#)

The US military has repeatedly held talks with the North Korean military at Panmunjom on the North-South border. Reportedly, there was no confrontation over the Cheonan Incident, but the talks were conducted in a friendly atmosphere. [\[Amiable Mood for North Korea-UN Military Talks: Officials\]](#)

The fact that the Lee Myung-bak administration of South Korea charged the North in the incident has made the North more powerful, weakening the South. Lee, who did not even win in the June local elections, must be regretting having announced the theory of the North's culpability. However, he cannot retract now, because it would further strengthen the North and his own political responsibility would be severely questioned.

The theory of the North's culpability was not arbitrarily announced by the South Korean government. Rather, South Korea was made to go along with the US strategy of heightening conflict and thus it landed in the quagmire of failed plans. The theory of the North's culpability was a product of consultation among the US, England, Australia, Sweden, that is, representative of the "United Nations Forces," and South Korean military officers and scholars. With the Swedish representative unwilling to support the theory of NK culpability, the countries that made up this camp were the Anglo Saxons. [\[South Korea in the line of friendly fire\]](#)

They say that they prepared a 400-page report on the Cheonan Incident. What has been made public, however, was only a summary of five pages, which claims that there is no other power that plausibly might have done the deed except the North, and does not present conclusive evidence that the North actually did it. The South Korean government announced that, just five days before the press conference, at the bottom of the sea, it had discovered the wreckage of the torpedo. Suspicion remains, however, that the evidence was faked for the press conference. [\[LATimes: Doubts surface on North Korea's role in ship sinking\]](#)

The US and England are a duo who, after dividing the peninsula into two and forcing Russia to take the Northern half after World War II, induced Kim Il Sung's invasion of the South, which started the Korean War and created the Cold War structure in which US and England on one side, and China and the Soviet Union on the other, continue perpetual conflict in East Asia. The American-British strategy of inducing war and preparing for perpetual conflict is the same now as it was sixty years ago. But this time, the weakness of the strategy was exposed quickly and is creating trouble for the South Korean government.

#### **Why North Korea announced willingness to attend the Six-Party Talks.**

Even if the Six-Party Talks are not reconvened after this, the prospect is low that South Korea will recover from its position of weakness over the Cheonan Incident. The US made false charges against both Iraq and Iran, and it has remained calm, even when publicly exposed. Therefore, it will probably stick to the theory that the North was the attacker. If the situation worsens, the US may blame South Korea for having framed the theory. South Korea can have change course only by distancing itself from the US. The South Korean left is strengthening its claim that South Korea's dependence on the US meant that it had to blame the North for the Cheonan Incident. "Because our country remains dependent on the US, we had to accept the forced argument. We should stop depending on the US." [\[South Korea reels as US backpedals\]](#)

In the future, if South Korea has to change course, stopping its hostility toward the North, at that point the South will be dependent on China rather than on the US. We can imagine a scenario in which South Korea resumes its friendly strategy toward the North and renews economic aid, leaves Cheonan issues vague, and North and South reconcile. The reason that China keeps silent about the Cheonan is probably that it is prepared to act as a moderator. When China, for the first time in history, stands between North and South, if it succeeds, the possibility exists that South Korea ends its dependence on the US, recovers command of South Korean forces, and asks US forces to withdraw from the South.

When this development may start cannot be predicted. It varies by the degree to which the US and South Korea experience setbacks around Cheonan issues. The change of administration after the Lee administration ends in 2013 may be one such chance.

As for the internal administration of North Korea passing from Kim Jong Il to his brother-in-law Chang Sung-taek, it will promote a Chinese style free economy (reform and opening). At the conference of Labor Party representatives to be held in September, the new structure may become clear. China concluded a new economic agreement with North Korea some days ago and is strengthening the North Korean economy's entry under China's umbrella. If South Korea remains hostile toward the North, then China will replace South Korea in gaining a foothold in the North Korean economy. [\[Tanaka News\]](#)

Recently, North Korea guided Hong Kong investors to the Kaesong Industrial Zone, which was created by South Korean investment. This implies a message directed to South Korea that North Korea may take it from South Korea and transfer it to the Chinese. In economic strategy, too, the position has been reversed with the North in a position of strength and the South of weakness. The contradiction of South Korea's continued dependence on the US is increasing.

#### **The relationship between China and the US redefining their spheres of influence and the Cheonan Incident**

As I wrote in my previous article concerning jurisdiction of hegemony on the high seas, the Yellow Sea (West Sea) on Korea's side is west of the first demarcation line and it is moving from the sphere of influence of the US to that of China. The two demarcation lines define the spheres of influence on the sea, but these are connected to spheres of influence on the land. The fact that the US sphere of influence is retreating toward the second demarcation line (Guam) means that the peninsula, especially the South, is passing from US influence to Chinese influence. [\[Tanaka News\]](#)

It's not clear how long the US military will continue to remain in South Korea, but ultimately it will withdraw to Guam and further east. The gradual exposure of the false charge over the Cheonan Incident may turn out to be one clue to this trend.

The withdrawal of the US military from South Korea will occur not at US instigation but by South Korea changing its national strategy and requesting US military withdrawal. However, the US has already decided on a long-term strategy for withdrawal. That is apparent in the two demarcation lines which redefine the spheres of US and Chinese influence. The US regards China as one of the countries that exercise regional hegemony. So the US redefines the spheres of influence in the western Pacific through talks with China. However, the US regards neither South Korea nor Japan as a state exercising regional hegemony. Nor does South Korea or Japan wish to become a regional hegemon. Therefore, the redefinition of the spheres of influence was done entirely through talks between the US and China.



Japan and South Korea for the past half century have made subordination to the US their national strategy. Even if the US put Japan and South Korea outside their sphere of influence, and decided to cede that sphere of influence to China, Japan and South Korea have no way to complain to the US. If they're dissatisfied with US strategy, the only route is to become independent. But right now, Japan and South Korea seem to have no national will to move toward independence. Both cling to dependence on the US while pretending not to see that they are beginning to be distanced by the US. In this situation, the Cheonan problem tripped South Korea.

#### The US military in Japan issue can be expected to reach deadlock

During the former administration of Hatoyama Yukio, Japan tried to break its dependence on the US and shift to a new system based on cooperating with China. But in the face of the bureaucracy's powerful resistance and efforts to overthrow the administration, Hatoyama stepped down, and as the Kan administration took over, it entered a chaotic situation of secret strife. In Japan's case, the Futenma base problem of Okinawa may trigger the end of dependence on the US, and that is unlikely to change in the future. However, the Futenma problem is deadlocked while the power to maintain dependence on the US, and the power to break out of that dependence, are about equal.

Those favoring continued dependence on the US are trying to solve the problem by shifting the Futenma base to Henoko and keeping the US military in Japan, the symbol of dependence. However, during the Hatoyama era, those seeking to break dependence incited Okinawan citizens who want to cut back bases in Okinawa. The islanders' anger has made unrealizable the plan favored by the dependence group to move the base within Okinawa. The Kan administration is too weak to resist the bureaucracy, so the path to withdrawal via political leadership is closed. But at the same time, it's impossible for the bureaucratic puppet power within the Democratic Party of Japan

(DPJ), under the umbrella of the bureaucracy, to persuade Okinawan citizens and solve the Futenma problem. For the time being, there is no choice but the status quo on Futenma.

In the Okinawan prefectural Governor's election in November, it's possible that Iha Yōichi, Mayor of Ginowan City, who has strongly demanded closure of the Futenma base, will run and be elected. Last year Iha pointed out that the Japanese and US governments consulted to mislead the public on the number of military personnel, making it seem that only a portion of the Okinawan Marines would actually move to Guam. Iha saw through the deception based on mutual agreement of both governments. If Mayor Iha succeeds in the Gubernatorial election, the Futenma Base problem may seem to be resolvable. But that's not the case. The Governor has no power over diplomatic policies. He can, however, halt the new construction of the base within the prefecture. Here, too, deadlock looms. Tokyo is trying to resolve the Henoko situation prior to the November election, but it will be difficult to do so. [\[Tanaka News\]](#)

The US is increasingly beset by financial difficulties. But even if these worsen, that alone will not cause the US to withdraw from Okinawa. That is because Japan is paying most of the costs both for the US to remain in the form of the 'sympathy budget' and the expenses for moving to Guam. Even if the dollar and US bonds collapse and the US military withdraws from other areas of the world, it can continue to stay in Okinawa (However, if the US collapses financially, Japan will also fail, given its huge holdings in US bonds, so it may no longer be able to cover the expenses for the US military to stay in Japan.).

The American military has three Marine Expeditionary Forces. The First and Second are based on the East and West coast of the US, and the Third is on Okinawa. Some US-military specialists point out that, even if they don't use the Marines, because of the enhancement of military technology, they can carry out surprise attacks on enemy countries with the newest fighter planes and other high tech weapons such as unmanned spy planes; the entity called the Marines itself is no longer needed. But of the three forces, even if the first and second disappears, the third will not disappear. That is because the Japanese government pays large sums to maintain US forces in Japan. If the US military abolishes the Marines, then there will be no money from Japan to support them. [\[Get Out of Japan by Doug Bandow\]](#)

The Marines, whose function is attack, are useless for the defense of Japan. The idea that preemptive attacks are the best measures for defense collapsed as a result of the failure in Iraq and Afghanistan. The proponents of sustained dependence on the US are not giving money for the Marines because they are indispensable for Japan's defense. They are committed to retaining the Marines because the Japan-US alliance hinges on the presence of the US military in Japan and Japan can thus continue its strategy of dependence on the US. This is a very expensive approach, but if the US military leaves Japan, the framework for dependence on the US will no longer exist. The power of the politicians (diet members) would then increase and the power of bureaucrats would diminish.

#### For Japan the good opportunity for East Asian Community has passed

The first demarcation line, which indicates the Eastern edge of China's new sphere of influence sea/sky area extends into the west side of the Japanese sea territory of Okinawa's southwest island (or a little further west over the Okinawa trough). Okinawa's US military base is located just east of the first demarcation line. Until recently, the US military was not even conscious of the first demarcation line. The US was able to move freely throughout the East China Sea off China and the Korean peninsula. However, in the future, when the two demarcation lines come to have effect for US-China spheres of influence, the US military's sphere of actions to the west of Okinawa will be narrowed, the Okinawan bases will become hard to use and, indeed, they will become valueless for the US.

The US plans to move the majority of US forces in Japan and Korea by 2014, but because of financial difficulties, it is no longer able to pay for the Guam facilities to house the forces to be transferred from Japan and Korea. There has also been opposition in Guam calling for investigation of environmental influences. The possibility is growing that Guam will not accept the move of the US military from Japan and South Korea as planned. As long as they cannot move to Guam, the US military will have to remain on Okinawa to the secret delight of those Japanese favoring dependence on the US. [\[U.S. Senate panels cut outlays for relocating Okinawa Marines to Guam\]](#)

However, for the US, if the move to Guam is blocked, it would be better that the troops not continue to stay in South Korea but return to the US or disband. That is because the instability on the Korean peninsula, the greatest *raison d'être* for US forces in Japan and South Korea, is expected to be reduced. North Korea will gain stability through the Chinese style reform and opening, and the US too will, at some point, abandon the strategy of opposing the north based on the Cheonan Incident and reconciliation between North and South will resume with Chinese intervention. Foreseeing such stability in East Asia, the US and China have drawn the two demarcation lines to determine the new spheres of influence.

The idea that the US and China will not redefine their spheres of influence, that the two lines of demarcation were initiated by China, and that the US will oppose this, may still be strong among readers. However, I anticipate that the redefinition of the spheres of influence of China and the US by the two lines of demarcation will, in future, become clear. The reason is that, for ten years US plans for military reorganization (*saihen*) have called for withdrawal of forces from Japan and South Korea to Guam. Second, powerful groups like the Council on Foreign Relations are saying that it is impossible to avoid US retreat to the second line of demarcation while China advances to the first line of demarcation. Third, Chinese government policymakers also recognize that the US military plans to retreat to Guam. Fourth, the US is inducing polarization of power worldwide, and the redefinition of the spheres of influence of the US and China are consistent with that.

Several years ago, when I began to anticipate "multipolarization of power" many people didn't get it. But subsequently, multipolarization has come to pass to a

fair extent. In the same way, the redefinition of the spheres of influence of the US and China on the basis of the two lines of demarcation, I anticipate, will some day become clear.

The question is when this will take the concrete form of the moving the Futenma Base outside the country or the abolition of the Marines on Okinawa. In the case of South Korea, both the strategy of continuing dependence on the States and opposing the North, and the strategy of reconciling with the North and stabilizing the peninsula, exist. So it's possible that South Korea will abandon the former and take the latter, telling the US to withdraw. However, unlike South Korea, Japan has no clear national strategy to replace dependence on the US.

Until a while ago, the strategy of teaming up with China to create an East Asian Community was possible. But if Japan is going to team with China, unless Japan and China are equal, this is meaningless for Japan. In recent years, China has become more and more powerful in economic and international political aspects. In international politics, China is already a far greater presence than Japan. This summer China passed Japan in size of GDP and rose to second place in the world, following the US. Because China already holds predominance over Japan, the future concept of the East Asian Community will not be based on the combined efforts of Japan and China, but will be primarily led by China. Japan can only be subordinate to China along with South Korea and Southeast Asian countries. For Japan, the last chance for the East Asian Community occurred last summer, when the Hatoyama administration hammered out that plan. [[China overtakes Japan as No.2 economy: FX chief](#) ]

East Asia, after the decline of American hegemony, will involve an East Asian community with China at the center. Japan, which cannot assume an advantageous position in Asia as before, may not be particularly eager to participate in Asia's political unification, and is likely adopt a position of 'semi-sakoku' (han sakoko) or quasi closed-door policy in which Japan passively accepts the new situation. Until then, Japan will maintain dependence on the US as long as possible and the mass media will choose not to report to the extent possible on US decline and increasing multipolarization. (They gloss over multipolarization, 'takyokuka,' by calling it 'mukyokuka', non-polarization.) Japanese people, while holding the sense of blockade (heisokukan), will not understand the reasons for the situation and will have no clue about breaking through the situation.

Since Japanese readers probably don't want to read a dark story about their country, I will stop here. The preceding discussion suggests that, withdrawal of the US military from Japan will be concretely discussed only after South Korea requests the US military to withdraw from South Korea. When the stabilization of the Korean peninsula becomes visible, no matter how ignored or distorted by the Japanese mass media, Japanese people will realize that the raison d'être for the US military in Japan has been lost. In order for the US military to withdraw, the Diet can simply pass a resolution. The procedure is simple. Previously, many countries have resolved the closure of US bases through a single parliamentary resolution.

Before then, Ozawa Ichirō may regain power within the DPJ, rekindle a great reversal or mutiny on matters such as the US military in Japan and decentralization, which were aborted by the resignation of Hatoyama. However, there is as yet no sign of that happening. Things are not clearly visible, and the question posed by this article-how long will the US military stay in Japan and South Korea?-remains unanswerable in specific terms. Still, I hope this article bears some significance in that I have thoroughly explained the situation surrounding Japan and South Korea.

This report was filed at Tanaka News on August 5, 2010.

*Tanaka Sakai is the creator, researcher, writer and editor of Tanaka News ([www.tanakanews.com](http://www.tanakanews.com)), a Japanese-language news service on Japan and the world.*

*Tanaka Sakai's new book is 『日本が「対米従属」を脱する日-多極化する新世界秩序の中で-』*

[The Day Japan Breaks with "Subordination to the US": Amidst the Multipolarizing New World Order](#)

*Kyoko Selden is a translator whose works include Japanese Women Writers. Twentieth Century Short Fiction, Kayano Shigeru's [Our Land Was a Forest](#), Honda Katsuichi's [Harukor: Ainu Woman's Tale](#) and [The Atomic Bomb: Voices From Hiroshima and Nagasaki](#). An Asia-Pacific Journal associate, she taught Japanese language-literature at Cornell University. She translated this article for The Asia-Pacific Journal.*

*Recommended citation: Tanaka Sakai, "How Long Will US Forces Continue to Occupy Japan and Korea? China, the US and the New Division of Power in the Asia-Pacific," [The Asia-Pacific Journal](#), 33-1-10, August 16, 2010.*

#### Articles on related subjects:

Seunghun Lee and J.J. Suh, [Rush to Judgment: Inconsistencies in South Korea's Cheonan Report](#)

Kensei Yoshida, [Okinawa and Guam: In the Shadow of U.S. and Japanese "Global Defense Posture"](#)

John McGlynn, [Politics in Command: The "International" Investigation into the Sinking of the Cheonan and the Risk of a New Korean War](#)

Gavan McCormack, [Ampo's Troubled 50<sup>th</sup>: Hatoyama's Abortive Rebellion, Okinawa's Mounting Resistance and the US-Japan Relationship](#)

Peter Lee, [The New Face of U.S.-China Relations: "Strategic Reassurance or Old-Fashioned Rollback?"](#)