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Futenma: Tip of the Iceberg in Okinawa's Agony

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Introduction

While well aware of strong local opposition, Washington and Tokyo as early as 1996 agreed to relocate the U.S. Marine air base at Futenma to Henoko, Nago, in northern Okinawa. Eventually, in 2009, in the final days of the Aso Taro cabinet, with the Democratic Party on the eve of power, a hastily concluded bilateral agreement of Februry 9, 2009 committed Tokyo to carry out the 2006 relocation plan.

On July 16, 2011, former Defense Minister Kitazawa Toshimi and newly appointed U.S. Defense Minister Leon Panetta held a telephone conference and again reaffirmed that "Tokyo and Washington will move forward with the plan to relocate the controversial Futenma base within Okinawa."
On September 7, the Noda cabinet's newly-installed Foreign Minister Gemba Koichiro, in an inaugural telephone call to U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, assured her that Japan would "stick to the accord reached last year to relocate" Futenma to Henoko. Gemba also said at his inaugural news conference that he would do his best to persuade Okinawa residents to accept the bilateral accord.
How is he going to do this? By lavishly bribing Nago residents to consent? But recent elections in Nago, and throughout Okinawa, have confirmed strong opposition to the new base. Alternatively, Tokyo would have to resort to police force, invoking state power, an approach certain to result in bloodshed and social turmoil. Meanwhile, continuing to ramp up the pressure, Washington repeats its stock phrase: "It's Japan's domestic problem. It has nothing to do with the U.S."

The meeting in New York on September 21 between Japan's new Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko and U.S. President Barack Obama on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly session was the culmination of an array of such reassurances. Noda told Obama that he would do his utmost to implement the accord between Tokyo and Washington. And at an Upper House Budget Committee meeting on September 28, he expressed his desire to visit Okinawa as soon as possible.

Futenma's history

Futenma Air Base (official nomenclature: U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma) was constructed toward the end of World War II to transport troops, supplies and ammunition in the forthcoming attack on mainland Japan (Operation Downfall). But the war ended before that plan was executed. Futenma should then have been returned; but, instead, it has remained in the firm grip of the U.S. military all these years to this day.

The U.S. military seized the land in clear violation of Article 46 of The Hague Convention, which states: "Family honor and rights, the lives of persons, and private property, as well as religious convictions and practice, must be respected. Private property cannot be confiscated."

There are presently more than 3,000 so-called "military base landowners" for Futenma Air Base alone and more than 40,000 for all bases and installations in Okinawa (Cf. Registered members with the Federation of Military-Base Landowners Associations number 38,000 as of October 2011). These figures provide crucial information about how these bases came into being. For example, Futenma Air Base with a total land area of 4.806 square km, and with private land accounting for 93%, was constructed during the Battle of Okinawa and afterwards, while area residents were herded into concentration camps.

When they were finally freed and allowed to return home, they found that their villages and rich farmland had disappeared without a trace, incorporated within a vast air base. Reluctantly, they settled down outside the fenced-off compound in areas designated by the U.S. military as settlement areas with no regard to property rights of landowners.

Iha Yoichi, former Ginowan City Mayor and a native of Ginowan Village (now Ginowan City), writes in his book (*Futenma Air Base is in Your Neighborhood -- Let's Remove It Together*, p.15), that "when the war was over and people were allowed to go home, they found their villages had disappeared completely, the area transformed into a vast base."

The area where the Futenma Air Base sits was an important traffic junction connecting the north and south of Okinawa. Along a beautiful pine tree-lined highway five villages formed Ginowan Village (now Ginowan City) with a total 1944 population of 12,994 -- Ginowan, Kamiyama, Aragusuku, Nakahara, Maehara and Aragusuku. Ginowan was the largest with numerous houses and stores, where public offices including a post office, a school (Ginowan Elementary School) and the village hall, were located. They were all swallowed up into the 2,400-meter runway (later extended to 2,700 meters) and other facilities and appurtenances.

Some of the other U.S. bases and facilities in Okinawa, officially totaling 33, have a more or less a similar history. Iha says that more than 60 villages disappeared into U.S. bases in this way. Only Kadena Air Base has a somewhat different history in that it was initially constructed by the Japanese Imperial Army just before the invasion of the Allied Forces. After taking control of what the Imperial Japanese Army called Naka Hikojo (Central Air Base), the U.S. forces expanded it sevenfold, expropriating land in the surrounding area encompassing Kadena, Chatan and Koza (later Okinawa City) and renaming it Kadena Air Base (area: 19.9 square km). Adjoining the air base, just across the Okinawa/Kadena Route, is the vast Kadena Ammunition Storage Area (26.6 square km).

Okinawa as a U.S. military colony

Before proceeding, let me present some data on the bases from *Kichi no Gaiyo* ("Summary of Bases") published by the Okinawa Prefecture Military Base Affairs Division.

As of March 2009, the total land area in the prefecture occupied by the 33 U.S. bases and installations was 229.2 square km. Since the area of exclusive U.S. military bases nationwide is 310.1 square km, Okinawa's share accounts for 73.9%, nearly three fourths. In other words, U.S. military bases and installations predominantly concentrate in Okinawa, whose land mass is only 0.6% of the whole of Japan.

The following are some of the major bases and installations for exclusive use by the U.S. military (all in square km):

Northern Training Area (78.2), Iejima Auxiliary Air Base (8.0), Camp Schwab (20.6), Henoko Ordnance Ammunition Depot (1.2), Camp Hansen (51.2), Kadena Ammunition Storage Area (26.6), Camp Courtney (1.3), U.S. Army Garrison Torii Station (1.9), Kadena Air Base (19.9), Camp Zukeran including Camp Butler and Camp Foster (6.4), White Beach Naval Facility (1.6), USMC Air Station Futenma (4.8), Makiminato Service Area (2.7), US Army Fuel Storage Facility (1.6). [Subtotal: 225.8 square km]

Camp Seals (0.7), Camp Kuwae (0.7), Ginbaru Training Area (0.6), Naha Military Port (0.6), Awase Communications Facilities (0.6), Okuma Rest Center (0.5), Kin Blue Beach Training Area (0.4), Camp McTureus (0.4). [Subtotal: 4.4 square km]

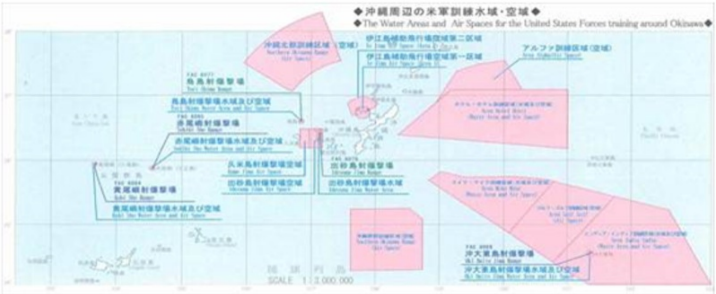
The remaining 11 installations consist of 8 firing ranges, among which are Kitadaito Firing Range (1.1) in Kitadaito-Son and Kobisho Firing Range (0.9) in the Senkakus; Kin Red Beach Training Area (0.17 km2), Tengan Pier (0.31 km2) and Tsukenjima Training Area (0.2), etc., with the total area of 2.4 square km.

US. military bases and installations on Okinawa. Areas in colors other than green are the sites of U.S. installations on land (red, orange, bright blue) and water (pale blue). (Source: *Beigun no Sugata* (English title: "U.S. Military Issues in Okinawa") published by Okinawa Prefecture Military Affairs Division.

The grand total of the 33 installations used exclusively by the U.S. military amounts to 229.2 square km. [The figure excludes 5 joint use areas with the SDF.] However, U.S. military-only areas are not limited to those 33.

According to Executive Response No. 6 (October 10, 2008), in reply to inquiries submitted by Representative Kantoku Teruya, there are 19 water areas reserved for exclusive U.S. military use, some directly connected to installations on coastal land and others located farther offshore. There, according to the Okinawa Prefecture Military Base Affairs Division, commercial fishing and mozuku seaweed farming are prohibited and the areas are off limits during military drills. The total area of these 19 coastal water areas is 1172.6 square km. The others are water areas partially included in international waters with a total area of 53,755 square km.

In addition, there are 20 designated areas of airspace, including some exclusively for use by the USAF and others for joint use by USAF and JASDF. Executive Response No. 6 states that it is inappropriate as well as impossible to specify their area. But the map prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (see below) shows approximate sizes of the areas designated as USAF training airspaces.



Water areas and air space for U.S. forces training around Okinawa. Air spaces(pink) are reserved for exclusive use by the U.S. Air Force. Some air spaces overlap with water areas.

Okinawa is thus contained and encroached by the U.S. military from land, sea and sky to a degree that one can call virtual occupation. Of course, these bases and installations were formally offered to the U.S. military under the bilateral agreement called the Japan-U.S. Mutual Security Treaty. Yet the situation is nothing more nor less than occupation or pseudo-occupation.

This continued pseudo-occupation of post-war Okinawa by the U.S. military does not stop at the hardware aspects like military installations; it goes beyond to the software, as well.

The Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) stipulates that the Japanese authorities cannot take a suspected U.S. service member into custody if he or she was "in the hands of the United States" or succeeded in entering a US military base, as was often the case.

When a CH-53D helicopter crashed on the campus of Okinawa International University on August 13, 2004, the crash site was immediately cordoned off by the Marines before Japanese police and fire fighters could act. This incident, together with the crash landing of a Kadena Aviation Club-owned small plane in a Nago sugarcane field in 2008, clearly attest to the fact that Okinawa (or Japan) is still under practical U.S. military occupation. In both cases, the area was cordoned off by the U.S. military and the wreckage was carried away while the Japanese police stood idly by.

Land Struggles and their Consequences

The regional tensions created by the Korean War (1950-1953) may have been a motive for the further expansion of the existing bases in the early 1950s. Land was requisitioned forcefully, often at bayonet point and by bulldozer. Jon Mitchell writes about how land was requisitioned in Iejima in 1953:

> "With all of Okinawa under U.S. administration, the authorities started by tricking the landowners into signing voluntary evacuation papers… But then, when some families refused to leave, 300 U.S. soldiers with rifles and bulldozers dragged women and children from their beds, tore down their homes and slaughtered their goats." ("Iejima: an island of resistance," *The Japan Times*: May 22, 2011)

Isolated from the main island by the sea, Iejima islanders had no other means than marching across the length and breadth of Okinawa Island with straw mat placards in hands, appealing their plight, like a band of vagabonds.

The struggle in Iejima in 1953, however, was only one of numerous struggles against forceful land requisitions by the U.S. military in those days. That year, multiple forceful land expropriations were carried out by the U.S. military government (USCAR): first in Aja and Mekaru districts (the current Shin-Toshin area) in Naha City (April), then in Mawashi (now part of Naha City, also in April), then in Iejima (July) and finally in Oroku (now part of Naha City, in November). Two years later, in January 1955, the Isahama district in then Ginowan Village (now Ginowan City) experienced the same forced confiscation. All these land requisitions were executed at bayonet-point and by bulldozer, leveling houses and destroying farms in the face of protesting farmers, mothers, children and their supporters. (See *Supplement* to *Okinawa Encyclopedia*, pp. 168-170.)

Attempts at forceful land expropriation were also made on several occasions in 1966 for the expansion of the facility of Tengan Pier in Gushikawa (now part of Uruma City) but the plan failed in the face of a storm of local residents' life-risking protest.

On January 7, 1954, U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower made it clear in his State of Union Message that the U.S. intended to keep Okinawa indefinitely. Then, on March 17 of that year, Washington announced plans to make lump-sum payments to military base landowners for the requisitioned lands. On April 30, the Legislature of the Ryukyu Islands unanimously adopted a "Petition on Military Use of Land," setting forth the following four principles: (1) no lump-sum payments, (2) appropriate compensation for lands taken, (3) compensation for damages, and (4) no new land expropriation.

Confronted with worsening public opinion on the land question, U.S. Congressman Melvin Price led an investigation team from the U.S. House of Representatives to Okinawa during October 23-26, 1955. In June 1956, the congressional team submitted their findings to the U.S. House Committee on Armed Services, recommending that the U.S. acquire fee titles for the land used for the military purposes in Okinawa, approving and supporting Washington's plan for lump-sum payments and betraying the Okinawa people's high expectations. It was the last straw. On July 28, 1956, a "Prefectural Rally to Win Four Principles" was held in Naha with more than 100,000 angry participants from all over the island.

All these events, unforgettable for prefectural residents, are recorded in Okinawan memory as "Island-wide Struggles against Land Expropriation."

As a consequence of this prefecture-wide movement to secure land rights, in 1958, USCAR (US Civil Administration of the Ryukyus) finally agreed (1) to raise land rents to twice the appraisal values of 1956 and (2) make payments in annual installments or 10 years' advance payments if so desired by individual owners.

Concurrent with recovering sovereignty over Okinawa in 1972, the Japanese government took over responsibility for paying land rents to military base landowners for the U.S. government. In response to the Federation of Military Base Landowners Associations' petition for a land rent increase, the Sato government raised payments 6.4 times to the surprise and deep satisfaction of the landowners (*Okinawa Encyclopedia* Vol. 1, p. 1014). Since then rents have been raised on a yearly basis, totaling 91 billion yen in 2011, an increase of 31 times from 1972 (disregarding inflation).

The central administration in this way succeeded in quenching the flames of the land struggle, thus guaranteeing the stable use of bases by the U.S. military as stipulated under the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty. It goes without saying that Washington has been quite satisfied and pleased with the measure with all payments by the Japanese government.

What then would become of military base landowners if the bases were completely eliminated or moved out of Okinawa? Certainly, there are quite a number of landowners who are uneasy about how the current Futenma problem will be resolved. I have the personal experience of being called by a Yomitan military base landowner, who loudly criticized my call for the reduction of the U.S. military footprint. What he and others like him ignore is the the fact that the military base landowners owe much to the general public, which strongly supported their cause at the time of the 1956 prefecture-wide struggles, making it possible for them to retain their property rights intact to today while receiving extraordinary rent increases from the Japanese government.

Some military-base landowners call attention to economic ill effects that would result from reduction or removal of military bases. Condoleeza Rice, former U.S. Secretary of State, echoed a similar caveat in the face of a mounting call for Futenma's unconditional closure. There may be some truth in what they say. But it is worth noting that, since the total withdrawal of U.S. Navy and Air Force from the Philippines, the former sites of Subic Bay Naval Station and Clark Air Base (both closed in 1991) have become thriving business centers (renovated as the Subic Bay Freeport Zone and Clark Special Economic Zone), creating far more jobs than when there were the bases. The return of Okinawa's most fertile and central land areas could result in similar or greater gains that would not be limited to the military base landowners.

Indeed, some areas that were returned at the time of Okinawa's reversion to Japan have become thriving business districts: for example, the Shin-Toshin business center in Naha the site of a sprawling U.S. military housing area until 1972. The areas, under the old names of Aja and Mekaru, and Mihama District in Chatan-Cho are now sites of recreation centers, shopping malls and gourmet restaurants. Naturally, land prices there are now much higher than before.

Futenma must be moved out of Okinawa immediately

For more than fifteen years Japan and the U.S. have agreed to close the Futenma base. The base must not only be closed, it cannot be transferred to Henoko or anywhere elsewhere in Okinawa. On this point, the Okinawan people across party lines are unified and have made plain in successive elections at every level and in repeated demonstrations of massive scale.

It is up to governments in Tokyo and Washington to recognize this political reality and search for an alternative solution, whether to move the base to the Japan mainland, Guam, elsewhere in the Pacific, or, preferably, to the U.S. mainland.

U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma sits dangerously in the heart of the crowded housing area of Ginowan City. The Bush administration's Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, when he visited Okinawa and observed the base from a helicopter in November 2003, cautioned that "there's an accident waiting to happen" there any time. His worry proved correct when the CH-53D helicopter crashed on the nearby campus of Okinawa International University on August 13, 2004.

The time has come to close this hazardous base. Certainly, there is no basis for reclaiming the pristine coastal waters off Henoko to construct a new fortified military complex that includes port facilities for the U.S. Marines. The U.S. violated international law when its military encroached upon private lands with impunity and built the base. On what legal and moral basis, then, can it demand its replacement?

Protesters link hands encircling Futenma Base

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