

Okinawans want dignity, not just development: Prime Minister Abe, go to Okinawa by Nanae Yamashiro

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The US base relocation process in Okinawa has made progress in recent months, although it has been fitful. At the end of last year, Okinawa Gov. Nakaima Hirokazu approved the landfill application, signaling his acceptance of the move of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma to the northern part of the main island of Okinawa. One step forward.

Two weeks later, the Okinawan Prefectural Assembly released a memorandum calling for Nakaima's resignation. Ten municipal assemblies have released similar memorandums, and 24 of the 41 municipal mayors are on record opposing the decision to build the Futenma Relocation Facility (FRF) near Henoko. Shortly after, the people of Nago City re-elected Inamine Susumu, a fierce opponent of the move, as their mayor, a reminder that public sentiment has not shifted. Two steps back.

There is, however, one important and powerful shift in the politics of the Futenma relocation: the Tokyo government has finally decided to spend the political capital needed to make the move a reality. For decades, central government officials have talked about relocating Futenma, but they have been reluctant to force the issue. Prime Minister Abe Shinzo appears ready to break with the past. At the end of 2013, he forced the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Okinawa branch (including National Diet representatives) to support the move, and then he sweetened the pot with \$3 billion in financial and economic assistance to Okinawa from the central government coffers, an offer that exceeded the prefecture's original request for aid. Another step forward.

The demand for party discipline is new; efforts to buy the support of the Okinawan people are not. Since Okinawa's reversion to Japanese control in 1972, Tokyo has provided a large budget for economic development to gain local acquiescence for the base presence. (In fact, Tokyo has been providing development aid to Okinawa since 1963 as a result of the 1961 Ikeda-Kennedy agreement.) Okinawans have taken the money – although they increasingly question whether it is a fair exchange and what economic opportunities have been lost – but it has not changed local sentiment. Mayor Inamine's re-election suggests that money no longer soothes local anger.

Three recent events have compounded Okinawan irritation. The first was Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio's unfulfilled promise to reassess the Futenma move, a call that raised – and then dashed – Okinawan expectations. The second was the decision to proceed with the deployment of the

MV-22 Osprey, an aircraft whose safety record has aroused concern around the world, in October 2012 to Futenma. The third was Prime Minister Abe's decision to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the San Francisco Peace Treaty on April 28, 2013. Since Okinawa was under US Civil Military Administration until 1972, the day is known as a “day of humiliation” among Okinawans. Three steps back.

These events compounded the sense of discrimination that is widely felt among Okinawans. A 2012 opinion poll conducted by the Okinawan Prefectural Government Planning Department showed that 73.9 percent of Okinawan people consider the fact that 74 percent of US bases in Japan are located in Okinawa to be “discrimination.” Ironically, the use of “back doors” such as economic inducements to buy support or bureaucratic mechanisms such as the Defense Bureau to coordinate between individuals or interest groups in host communities for US bases in Okinawa, largely shielded from the view of the majority, have compounded local grievances. The strong-arming of elected officials on Okinawa to support Tokyo's agenda and the repeated disregard for assertions of local will through democratic processes such as mayoral elections magnifies the feeling among Okinawans that they are being marginalized and ignored. The call at a Budget Committee meeting by an Okinawan member of the House of Councillors (from the LDP) to “control” the Nago City mayor's “abuse of power in disturbing the governmental decision” adds fuel to the fire.

No wonder then that Okinawans continue to try to make end runs around Tokyo. That strategy was evident when US Ambassador to Japan Caroline Kennedy made her first visit to Okinawa in early February. The two major local newspapers published their lead editorials in English, asking her to help “save dugongs, not just dolphins” – a reference to her Tweet condemning the annual Taiji dolphin hunt; local dugongs are reportedly endangered by the FRF construction near Henoko. Okinawan experts increasingly visit Washington to make their case. In both cases, the intent is to outflank Tokyo and maintain pressure on the US to reconsider the Futenma relocation plans.

It is ironic that efforts to reduce the security burden on Okinawa have only raised Okinawan people's distrust toward Tokyo. Ultimately, the failure rests on a political culture that seems unwilling to hold a public debate over national security. Although the Abe administration seeks to play more active role in international security issues by changing the constitution and rules governing the use of the Self-Defense Force, the Japanese public isn't paying attention to the larger context in which these policy changes occur.

In this environment it is understandable, but lamentable and unjust, that Okinawa's geographical and psychological distance from the Japanese main islands reduces the

significance of Okinawa's problems for most Japanese. Okinawans must feel connected to the political decision-making process. Their feeling of discrimination must end.

A key test for Tokyo will be the upcoming negotiations on the proposal to supplement the US-Japan Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). Okinawan governors have been requesting a change to the SOFA as one of the options to reduce the "security burden" of Okinawa for a long time. Although Okinawan politicians have repeatedly requested a revision of the SOFA following the rape incident in 1995, Tokyo and Washington have responded to the request by agreeing to "operations improvements" in 1995 and 2004 on procedures regarding delivery of the suspect, but did not change the agreement itself. Since the SOFA has not been revised since its acceptance in 1960, conclusion of the supplemental agreement would be a significant step forward even though the target of the change is limited to environmental protection. Indeed, Gov. Nakaima was asking for a change in the provisions regarding delivery of the suspect because Okinawans think US military personnel in Okinawa should be subject to Japanese law as the "operations improvement" is not enough). The Abe administration at least needs to conclude a supplemental agreement to gain trust from Okinawa as well as to provide cover to Nakaima in the November gubernatorial election.

So far, Tokyo has failed to explain the military value of Okinawa to Japanese security and to show a commitment to protecting the daily life of Okinawans. They must frame this not by repeating Washington's rhetoric, but in their own words. In 1965, Prime Minister Sato Eisaku, Prime Minister Abe's uncle and the first prime minister to visit Okinawa during the postwar period, declared at Naha airport that, "For Japan, the post WW II period will continue until the reversion of Okinawa." Abe should visit Okinawa and describe the rationale for the FRF construction in front of Okinawans, to show his respect for them for "accepting" the "security burden" of Japanese defense. He should have done this instead of visiting Yasukuni Shrine. NHK should cover the speech as they cover the annual "memorial ceremony of war dead during the Battle of Okinawa" so that the mainland Japanese understand the real significance of the decision made by Gov. Nakaima.

In addition to Abe's visit, President Barack Obama could address the relationship between the "US rebalance to Asia" and the proposed Marine Corps realignment when he visits Japan. He, along with Japanese politicians, must help transform thinking among Okinawans about US bases on their island. They should no longer be seen as spoils of war, but as critical tools to protect the security of Okinawans, Japanese, and the United States. It would be extraordinary if the president would visit Okinawa to offer this explanation. Indeed, if such a visit was realized, it would help change the perception of installations like Futenma from being seen as remnants of the occupation to ones that support and promote shared US-Japan values and interests. That would be a genuine step forward for Okinawa.

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