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Understanding Okinawa's Role in the U.S.-Japan Security Agreement

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East Asia has played an important role in the security considerations of Western nations, particularly since the nineteenth century. Whether those security interests were seen in strategic or economic terms, China, Japan, and to a lesser degree Korea, are of key interest to the United States. One area that does not usually garner a great deal of attention, however, is the tiny island group of the Ryukyus, or the present-day Japanese prefecture of Okinawa. Yet Okinawa has been integral to regional security concerns since the seventeenth century.

Mention of Okinawa to most American and Japanese citizens evokes myriad images. Some picture mental images of nearly pristine landscapes and coral beaches. Others will recall that Okinawa is the only place within the Japanese home territory on which a ground battle was fought during World War II. Finally, for those associated with the U.S.-Japan security relationship, it represents the area of Japan where almost 50 percent of all U.S. military personnel in Japan is assigned.

Okinawa is, at once, all these things, yet none of them adequately describes the true complexity and richness of its history and culture or its contributions to the broader East Asian legacy. Until the beginning of the seventeenth century, Okinawa flourished as an independent maritime nation among East Asian and Southeast Asian nations, but voluntarily entered into and remained a faithful tributary state to China. After Satsuma's invasion of Okinawa in 1609, it deftly served both China and Japan, and later staved off the coming of the West through its diplomatic acuity. Today, as Japan's poorest and smallest prefecture, Okinawa has come to earn the dubious honor of serving as a bastion of U.S. military power in the Pacific.

This digest focuses on Okinawa's role within the larger U.S.-Japan security relationship during the second half of the twentieth century: how and why there is a strong U.S. military presence on the island, how it has become a symbol of the larger U.S.-Japan security relationship, what local issues and concerns have arisen because of U.S. military presence on the island, and what Okinawa's future prospects are in light of the U.S.-Japan security relationship.

Overview: Okinawa. Okinawa, Japan's southernmost prefecture is comprised of 160 islands, of which 50 are inhabited by approximately 1.5 million residents. The island of Okinawa, the largest island in the prefecture, is 68 miles long and about 19 miles wide at its widest point. The prefecture comprises 0.6 percent of Japan's total landmass. Okinawa is located about two and a half hours by plane from Tokyo and within one and a half hours of Shanghai and Taiwan. In other words, it is strategically located for access to other countries in East and Southeast Asia.

The map gives some indication of the strategic advantage enjoyed by Okinawa. Its central location has plagued the island since the seventeenth century, when the Satsuma clan of Kyushu invaded the islands and used them as an outpost to guard against Spanish incursions from the Philippines into Japanese territory. During the closing days of World War II, the Japanese Imperial Army fortified Okinawa with the Thirty-second Army in hopes of thwarting the Allied advance on mainland Japan, in effect sacrificing the island. U.S. forces, prior to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, saw Okinawa as an ideal location from which to launch potential ground and air attacks against Japan. Okinawa's location continues to be a problematic issue under Japan's contemporary security arrangement with the United States. As the map indicates, Okinawa has retained its strategic value vis á vis current potential hotspots in East Asia: Taiwan, the PRC, and the Korean Peninsula.

The Years after World War II. At the close of World War II, large numbers of U.S. military units remained on Okinawa, the battle for which was one of the most fiercely fought in the Pacific during the war. After Japan's surrender, the U.S. government needed to decide what to do with these units. In Washington, the debate centered around two arguments. The War Department considered Okinawa vital to regional U.S. security interests. Forces on Okinawa would allow for power projection throughout Asia, address the growing Soviet threat, and permit the United States to keep a closer eye on Japan (over which fears of revived militarism still existed). The State Department viewed retention of the islands as a liability. The islands would be expensive to administer, complicate citizenship issues, and leave the United States vulnerable to criticisms of colonizing the islands. Washington's innovative response was to apply the concept of residual sovereignty. The United States would administer the territories, but its inhabitants would retain Japanese citizenship.

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed a confluence of several factors and events leading to major growth of the U.S. military on Okinawa. First, the San Francisco Peace Treaty (1952) led to downsizing the U.S. military on the four main islands of Japan. However, to maintain what was considered a viable regional force, some of those units were transferred to Okinawa. Second, the wars in Korea and Vietnam required greater numbers of combat and support units which Okinawa was strategically positioned to provide. Along with military units came their families and the infrastructure to support them, such as clubs, commissaries, schools, churches, theatres, and ballparks. This lead to a greatly increased U.S. footprint. Although in May 1972 the United States relinquished control of the islands and Okinawa reverted to Japanese ownership, the U.S. military presence remained.

Okinawa's Role in the U.S.-Japan Security Relationship. Today, Okinawa plays host to over 52,000 U.S. military and civilian personnel, the majority of whom live in central Okinawa. Conversely, 57,000 U.S. personnel are assigned throughout the islands of Honshu and Kyushu. Thus, roughly half of all U.S. forces in Japan are concentrated in a land area representing less than 0.6 percent of Japan's territory. It is also useful to note that nowhere else in Japan is there such a dense concentration of either Japanese or U.S. military units.

Why did the U.S. military presence on Okinawa not decrease with reversion of the islands to Japan? The 1960 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States, or the Mutual Security Treaty, contains two key points that impact Okinawa. First, Japan and the United States will respond to an attack against either party within Japan's territory. Second, Japan will provide land for U.S. military installations in its dual mission to provide security for Japan and the "Far East." The first point results from Article IX of Japan's "Peace Constitution" (the 1947 constitution) which renounces Japan's sovereign right to wage war as a means of settling disputes and provides the rationale for a U.S. military presence in Japan. As a result, U.S. forces, along with Japan's own Self-Defense Forces, satisfy Japan's security requirements. To address the second point and its impact on Okinawa one must consider the historical relationship between Japan and Okinawa.

Although Okinawa is a Japanese prefecture, it does not always stand on equal footing with other prefectures. Perhaps a combination of its history as an independent maritime nation, its longstanding formal ties to China, or its late admission in 1879 into Japan's administrative structure, Okinawa has historically been viewed in varying degrees as not being "of Japan" and its inhabitants not being "truly Japanese." Okinawa's unique island culture with its many Chinese elements, distance from mainland Japan, and its inhabitants' slightly different physical appearance, has also added to the Japanese perception that Okinawa lacks an ethnic and cultural affinity with Japan. This results in sometimes subtle, and other times not so subtle, social and economic discrimination, a result of which is the U.S. military concentration on Okinawa. The U.S. military on Okinawa has a high ratio of combat and aviation units to administrative headquarters and support units. Relocating them to the mainland would require accepting combat units and supporting their operational training requirements, the by-product of which is sometimes excessive noise.

Problems resulting from U.S. military on the island manifest themselves in several key areas. First, given the trend toward urbanization in central Okinawa since the end of World War II, many U.S. military installations now sit in highly populated areas, where they once did not. For areas hosting installations with ground units, this poses an irritant; for areas in which aircraft constantly take-off, land, and train, it poses a potential danger. Second, U.S. military concentrations give rise to a sizeable number of complaints from local governments and citizens, such as the negative impact on the tourist industry and economy, environmental issues, training accidents, and crimes committed by U.S. servicemen and their family members against local citizens. Finally, because of the Government of Japan's dual responsibilities to Okinawa as an administrative prefecture and its obligations to the U.S. under the Mutual Security Treaty, it is often placed in the role of "middleman," trying to accommodate U.S. military operational needs and local concerns, with varying degrees of success.

After the September 1995 rape of a 12-year-old girl by two U.S. marines and one U.S. sailor, the United States and Japanese governments undertook the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) discussions. These negotiations were designed to identify ways to reduce transgressions by U.S. military and examine broader issues related to U.S. military presence. The discussions outlined 27 steps the U.S. government is responsible for implementing in order to reduce Okinawa's burden under the security relationship, which include land return, noise abatement, and training modification measures. Many of these steps have already been implemented or are in various stages of implementation. The numerous land return initiatives, however, are a notable exception. Because land return and relocation issues require agreement from local municipalities with interests at variance with those of the central government and the United States, progress can be very slow. While all land return and relocation initiatives have planned completion dates sometime during the first decade of the twenty-first century, most will likely be delayed because of the difficulty in negotiating with various local municipalities.

Further complicating land return initiatives is the fact that much of the land on which U.S. military facilities are located is privately owned; the Japanese government pays landowners for the use of their land. As Japan's poorest prefecture, Okinawa and its citizens are particularly susceptible to economic rewards and sanctions from the government. Consequently, many Okinawans have a vested interest in keeping the U.S. military in place. These payments, particularly for the island's farmers, represent a substantial portion of their annual income. The government uses an "economic carrot-and-stick approach," at times offering economic rewards to the prefecture to garner local support for security initiatives and at others threatening withdrawal of economic support to force consent. Economic self-interest then mitigates some opposition to a U.S. presence on the island.

In the aftermath of the rape, there was also a domestic call for the mainland to share the defense burden with Okinawa. In the end, this amounted to a symbolic movement of a few aircraft from Okinawa to mainland Japan and relocation of field artillery live-fire training exercises to five sites throughout mainland Japan—each site hosting training once annually. Most units on Okinawa will remain in their current locations or move to other sites on the island. While Japanese government statistics indicate that the majority of Japanese citizens support the security alliance between the United States and Japan, it appears they prefer to do so from a distance—not on the main islands. Under the Mutual Security Treaty, Japan is obligated to provide land for U.S. military bases. Where these bases are located within Japan is not spelled out and is purely a domestic issue. Given the alternatives, U.S. units will likely remain where they are—on Okinawa.

What then does this all mean for Okinawa? Given Japan's reluctance to relocate U.S. military units to the mainland and Okinawa's dependence on governmental economic support, the island's situation is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. As the members of the larger Okinawa community, U.S. military commanders should ensure their units are the best neighbors they can possibly be. This includes working actively with Japanese government and local officials to further reduce training intrusions and crimes against local citizens as well as working to understand local issues and concerns within the broader framework of Okinawan culture, not just operational requirements.

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