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Okinawans Facing a Year of Trial: the Okinawa-Japan-US Relationship and the East China Sea 沖縄が直面する試練の年ー沖日米関係と東シナ海

Sakurai Kunitoshi with an introduction by Gavan McCormack
The original Japanese text is available here.

Translated and introduced by Gavan McCormack

For a number of years, The Asia-Pacific Journal has paid attention to Okinawa as the point where major contradictions within the national, regional, and global system are sharpest, and to Okinawan civil society as the seed-bed of some of the most advanced democratic thinking in contemporary Asia, with great significance for the future of Japan, the region and the US-Japan relationship.

Years of gradually intensifying struggle over the base issues have culminated in the extraordinary phenomenon of an "all-Okinawa" resistance to the designs of Tokyo and Washington. Professor Sakurai argues in the following short essay that a special "year of trial" now lies ahead.

The magma (as many Okinawan commentators have described it) of Okinawan anger and resentment has bubbled with renewed force in recent months. In October 2012, when the Japanese and US governments brushed aside the protest of all Okinawan local governments, the regional parliament and the Governor, and imposed the controversial new vertical take-off and landing aircraft, the MV 22 Osprey, on Okinawa, the response was a sit-in at the gates of Futenma Marine base that briefly immobilized the base, a siege that could only be lifted by bringing in a heavy police contingent and detaining (probably illegally) protesters.

It was an act of desperation, but with the "normal" avenues of democratic decision-making closed by Tokyo's refusal to heed Okinawan views, Okinawans felt they had no choice. In late January, as this mood of desperation deepened, they took the further extraordinary step of forming themselves into a delegation, some 150 strong – comprising 38 city, town and village heads, 41 heads of city and town assemblies, 29 members of the Okinawan parliament (the Prefectural Assembly) the handful of Okinawan members of the national Diet, together with representatives of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and of the Prefectural Women's Association – to carry their demands to Tokyo to deliver to government authorities in person. Prime Minister Abe granted them just 4 minutes of his time, in which he told them, "I plan to listen to your opinions and do my best from now on to reduce the base burden" (code for expanding the base burden by insisting on construction of the massive new base complex at Henoko in exchange for the return of Futenma).

The delegation entitled their statement of demand a Kempakusho, a word of heavy historical resonance, implying not so much "petition" as righteous and insistent demand. It spoke bitterly of "the US and Japanese government's trampling on the will of the Okinawan people" and of the 6,000 crimes committed by US servicemen and women in Okinawa since it reverted to Japan in 1972. Its demands were simple and unequivocal: withdrawal of Osprey; closure of Futenma, and abandonment of plans for a new Marine Corps base at Henoko or anywhere else on Okinawa.

Okinawan leaders conduct press conference after submission of the Kenpakusho (Photograph: Kyodo)

When the mainly elderly, conservative, and respected Okinawans who made up the delegation marched through Ginza to a meeting in Hibiya Park, they faced jeers and insults. Abused as "traitors" they were told to "leave Japan." Naha city mayor, the conservative and sometime head of the LDP party in Okinawa, Onaga Takeshi, spoke for the group: "Prime Minister Abe speaks of 'taking back' Japan, but is Okinawa part of that Japan?" To the Okinawan media, Onaga posed the rhetorical question: "can the Japan and the people of Japan that treat the views of Okinawans with such contempt be regarded as a country worthy of the respect of Asia and the world?" (editorial, Ryukyu shimpo, 29 January)

20th century Japan has no precedent for any such solemn expression of outrage and rejection of state policies, let alone one so plainly representative of an entire region. Yet the event, subject of special editions of the Okinawan papers, was dismissed with brief descriptive paragraphs in the national media.

No sooner had the delegation departed from Tokyo than the National Diet approved the budget for 2013, slightly expanding Okinawa's grant by 2.2 per cent (with implications that Sakurai discusses). The pressure on Okinawa to submit is evident not only in the formulation of such "carrots" as the second runway for Naha Airport (a project to be funded under the budget) but in overt intimidation and attempts to split Okinawan society. Even as the Kempakusho delegation was in Tokyo, a prominent right-wing publicist and supporter of the Prime Minister, Sakurai Yoshiko, addressed a meeting in Ginowan City ("home" to Futenma Marine base) in which she attacked the Okinawan media for "misleading" the people and entangling them in a Chinese trap. Sakurai also briefly refers to this event.

Also at the end of January, the Government of Japan announced that it would proceed with steps to have the region it calls "Amami-Ryukyu" (including both Okinawa's main island and the adjacent Amami Islands to the north), listed as a World Heritage site. Announced even as the government moved inexorably towards filling in a large section of the bio-diverse and precious Oura Bay and constructing a chain of Osprey-pads through the Yambaru forest, it assumed there was no contradiction between intensive militarization and nature conservation.

Early in February, the Naha District Court dismissed a suit by 621 Okinawans questioning the environmental impact study process on the new base project, meaning that legal obstacles to the process have now been removed (save one still pending in San Francisco). The Naha court refused to address detailed objections to the process raised by environmentalists, experts and citizens, or the Governor's fundamental objections that Sakurai cites below. It simply dismissed all complaints.

Both executive and judicial branches of Japan's government have therefore now dismissed social protest. The National Diet pays no attention to its handful of Okinawans. The national media turns a deaf ear to Okinawa, and prominent figures from Tokyo do their best to stir fear of China with the aim of softening and splitting the "all Okinawa" movement. It is remarkable that Okinawa today maintains the unity evident in the Kempakusho movement, but Sakurai plainly worries that this might gradually erode if the Senkaku dispute with China is not settled and if the growing anti-China mood of mainland Japan spreads to Okinawa.

Prime Minister Abe appears set on implementing his promises to the government in Washington by delivering the new base at Henoko, finally sweeping aside

the civil protest movement that has blocked it for 17 years. Okinawa, having borne so much over past decades, faces a new kind of "High Noon" when some time during March Prime Minister Abe submits his anticipated request to Governor Nakaima to license the reclamation of the seas off Henoko, first step in the construction of the new base. Professor Sakurai has good reason for warning that the coming months will test the Okinawan mettle.

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Japanese Society in State of Mental Freeze – Questioning the Value of the Naha Airport Second Runway

With the Chinese warship radar reportedly locking-on to a Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force vessel (31 January 2013, in the vicinity of the Senkaku Islands), the worsening of Japan-China relations occasioned by the statement of former Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro about buying the Senkaku islands reached the brink of explosion. By the concerted action by all Okinawa's leaders in the joint mission of demand to Tokyo at the end of January, the prefecture showed with unprecedented clarity the opinion of its people calling for an end to the deployment of the Osprey and for abandonment of the plan to construct a replacement Futenma Marine Base within Okinawa. But the Abe government turned a deaf ear to Okinawan opinion, just as it had to Japanese opinion in the case of the nuclear reactor issue.

Prime Minster Abe addressing Air Self Defense Forces, Naha Airport, 2 February 2013. (Photograph from PM's Department)

Not only that but, as the East China Sea waves rose higher, a worst case scenario for Okinawa was gradually taking shape in which an avalanche of militarization threatened the South-West Islands. As was the case in regard to nuclear power, the Abe government pays no attention. And, with the North Korean nuclear test further reinforcing the Japan-US alliance, 2013 becomes a year of trial for Okinawa.

Public Opinion Ignored on both Nuclear Energy and Okinawa

Japanese society is in a state of mental freeze in relation to Okinawa, just as it is in relation to nuclear power. According to a survey conducted on the eve of the elections to the Lower House in December, more than 80 per cent of successful candidates responded to a pre-poll survey that they favoured "transfer" of Futenma marine base to Henoko. Yet the Okinawan people are 90 per cent opposed to this "transfer," as are the heads of all local governments, town and village authorities and assemblies and the Governor and the Prefectural parliament (Prefectural Assembly).

In a democratic society it would be impossible to ignore such popular opinion, yet in today's Japan this unimaginable thing is happening. Even if all sorts of concessions were called for and it was really necessary for the sake of Japan's security that Marines be deployed, why must they be in Okinawa? Is it not wrong that 74 per cent of US bases in Japan are concentrated on Okinawa's 0.6 per cent of its land?[1] Morimoto Satoshi, former Minister of Defense and an acknowledged defense expert, said,

"There is no military need for Marines to be in Okinawa, but in political terms Okinawa is the most suitable place,"

adding in terms that were really easy to understand,

"it is only Okinawa where this could be allowed."

In other words, they could not be imposed forcefully anywhere other than Okinawa, but because Okinawa is Okinawa, it could be done there.

This extraordinary statement was taken up by the local Okinawan media but not in mainland Japan, where it did not become an issue. To the contrary, mainland mass media manipulates public opinion to encircle and put pressure on Okinawa to accept the Henoko base by saying, "Okinawa got the full amount it was asking for in the 2013 budget including the requested sum for a second runway at Naha airport. It is not going to be allowed to escape without giving something in return."[2]

Militarization of the South-Western Islands Proceeding Apace

We Okinawans also need to reflect on these frozen thought processes. Though there has been virtually no debate on the merits of the project the Naha Airport Second Runway has been treated as if it was a long-term earnest desire of Okinawans. But is that really the case? Won't we be subject to blackmail by the government to accept the Henoko transfer as part of a trade-off precisely because our thought processes are frozen over the second runway being a long-cherished desire?

In my November column in this paper, I wrote of the loss of the precious coral of the Omine coast of Okinawa main island, but that is not the end of the problem. Naha Airport is a joint civil-military airport and the construction of a second runway reinforces the functioning of Air Self Defense Force's Naha base. There is a real risk that the airport will become part of the militarization of the South-West Islands, along with the planned deployment of the Self Defense Forces to Yonaguni and Miyako islands.

And even if the militarization of the frontier islands is for the defense of Japan, it is not for the security of Okinawa. In the *Ryukyu shimpo* of 7 February, Tonaki Morita reported on a Self Defense Force internal circulation journal that envisaged remote island defense strategy in terms of a repeat of the Battle of Okinawa. He stressed, "Within the SDF, zero attention is paid to the safety of the ordinary residents." If tensions around the Senkaku Islands were to lead to accidental war, it would be Okinawa first of all that would be engulfed in it.

Is it just a groundless fear to think that Japanese society, under the Abe government with its talk of "constitutional revision" and a "National Defense Army," is rolling downhill and heading once again towards return to the pre-war? In the Japan that had been enjoying Taisho democracy (1920s), martial law was declared after just ten years and the country declined into the aggressive state that victimized the people of Asia and engulfed Okinawa in a typhoon of steel. We must not forget this tragic history.

Advent of the Net Society

The Okinawan people and mass media, sounding alarm bells to warn Japanese society that is thought-frozen in the face of this crisis, constitute a veritable canary of warning. For precisely that reason, critics close to the Abe government come to Okinawa, treat the Okinawan mass media as an enemy, and lecture about "Okinawa's mass media as viewed from Tokyo." According to sponsors of the event, these are no mere lecture meetings but part of a declaration of war in which the people of Okinawa are supposed to be standing up against Okinawan mass media that has been driving Okinawan public opinion and controlling Okinawan politicians. Although from Okinawa's viewpoint the real problem is the Tokyo mass media, Japanese society has come to the point in which twisted views such as this are rampant.

A point worth attention in this respect is that the youth who are Okinawa's coming generation do not read newspapers and rely exclusively on the net for

information. Ours is a net society and this trend is likely only to gather strength in future. Looking at the "Arab spring" and confusion that prevails over media control in China in regard to the censorship of the *Nanfang zhoukan* (Southern Weekly), we can readily understand this. However, the net-based information that young people see is overwhelmingly generated in Tokyo and almost all of it is rooted in structural discrimination against Okinawa.

Nevertheless, in the recent Urasoe mayoral election, Matsumoto Tetsushi was elected without any political party backing, completely unaffiliated, following a net-based campaign. Mr Matsumoto's reformism includes opposition to the transfer of Naha military port to Urasoe and calls for reconsideration of the plan for offshore reclamation at Camp Kinzer. In this, he goes beyond the established frame of politics. All limits on net campaigning have been lifted for the House of Councillors election scheduled for this coming summer, so the net society will then be arriving in real earnest.

The Department of Defense has submitted its Henoko assessment supplementary report and the public gazetting and review process was completed on 29 January. That supplementary report gave no response to the problems raised by the Governor in relation to the initial scoping document and completely ignored the Governor's conclusion that "these works would destroy the environment and the conservation measures proposed by the Department of Defense would not be able to protect the local environment." In formal terms, however, the review process is now complete. The Abe government, having declared that it attaches highest priority to the Japan-US agreement and supports the "transfer" to Henoko, now waits for the moment to pounce with its application for reclamation of the seas off Henoko.

How are we to cope with this government that pays no attention to Okinawan opinion, the mainland mass media that constructs a noose around Okinawa, and Japanese society that is stuck in thought-freeze? Now, more than ever before, Okinawa's mettle is being put to the test.

Author

Sakurai Kunitoshi is professor and former president of Okinawa University. This is his tri-monthly column in the Okinawan daily, *Ryukyu shimpo*, published 25 February 2013, under the title "Higashi Shina kai isshoku sokuhatsu - Okinawa shiren no toshi."

Sakurai is a well-known specialist on environmental assessment law, an environmentalist, and a prominent figure in court challenges to the legality of the environmental impact study on the Henoko projected site for marine base construction. The Asia-Pacific Journal has published several of his essays in the past and acknowledges with gratitude his permission to translate and post this one.

Translator

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Articles on related subjects

- Sakurai Kunitoshi, "Japan's Illegal Environmental Impact Assessment of the Henoko Base," February 27, 2012.
- Gavan McCormack, "Abe Days are Here Again - Japan in the World," December 24, 2012.
- Jon Mitchell, "Herbicide Stockpile" at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa: 1971 U.S. Army report on Agent Orange
- Gavan McCormack, Yonaguni: Dilemmas of a Frontier Island in the East China Sea

Notes

[1] The 83 US bases and facilities in Japan sit on 309 square kilometres of land, of which 74 per cent, 228 square kilometres, is Okinawan (Japanese government figures).

[2] The allocation to Okinawan prefecture in the 2013 budget was 300 billion yen, up 2 per cent from 293 billion in 2012.

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