The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
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The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 12, Issue 1, No. 3, January 6, 2014.

Former Iwakuni Mayor Ihara Reflects on the Problem of US Bases in Japan

元岩国市長井原勝介氏が考える日本の基地問題

Ihara Katsusuke interviewed by Jin Pil-su[1]

After 9.11, the United States increased its demand for burden-sharing on the part of allies such as Japan and South Korea. In East Asia, the importance of the US presence in both of those countries as a deterrence mechanism was reinforced as political and military tensions grew due to factors including the intensification of China-Japan rivalry and associated nationalisms, territorial disputes and unsettled historical issues. Yet, even under these circumstances, anti-base movements also grew. At the root of these movements lay the impact of the bases on people's lives. Anti-base movements in Japan and Korea develop around people's everyday lives. Residents seek mitigation of the burdens of foreign military forces and bases. The case of Iwakuni City (Yamaguchi Prefecture, Japan) is one example.

The anti-base movement in Iwakuni is characterized by opposition to moves for the strengthening of base functions and changes to established practices. Some might be tempted to distinguish this movement from anti-base movements that have focused on the removal or reduction of the bases. However, what lies at the very foundation of all anti-base movements is people's consciousness to protect their peaceful and safe living environment. The experience of the people of Okinawa, and particularly those of the people of Nago City, in the struggle against the relocation of Futenma base within the prefecture, has many similarities to that in Iwakuni. Whether Nago City will repeat the Iwakuni experience and the anti-base expansion forces suffer defeat following massive state intervention, or whether, as former Mayor Ihara says in the interview, "the old methods of the central government authorities no longer work" and such intervention will be successfully resisted, will be seen on January 19, 2014 when Nago elects its mayor.

Okinawa, Japan, and South Korea all face the problem of how to maintain the principle of democracy that prioritizes peoples' sentiments in the dynamics of the East Asisn security environment. (JPS).

Jin: Mr. Ihara, you are well-known as a central figure in the anti-base movement in Iwakuni that gathered momentum from 2005. After studying your book, *Wind that Blew in Iwakuni: Realignment of US Forces—Citizens Fight*, I began to think that the most important keyword in your activities against the relocation of US aircraft carriers to Iwakuni has been "democracy." Tell us briefly about your policy objectives and your views on US bases.

Ihara Katsusuke, Former mayor of Iwakuni City

Ihara: The very purpose of my political activities has been to practice and realize democracy. That means not the democracy imposed from above by the authorities but the kind created and put into practice by local citizens at the grassroots. I believe one of the biggest problems of politics in Japan is the dysfunctioning of democracy. This is also why we cannot solve the issue of US bases. My political priority has been to enable democracy in Iwakuni, and then spread the practice to other regions in Japan.

Jin: What is your view of local politics in Iwakuni? I have heard that there are diverse opinions, and that perhaps only a small number of Iwakuni residents advocate the retrenchment or removal of the US bases.

Ihara: To this day, some political parties or citizens' organizations advocate the removal of the bases and the repeal of the US-Japan Security Treaty, but these are not objectives that I share. However, I believe it is not normal for the bases of another state to continue to exist permanently within Japanese territory. I was born after the Second World War, and the bases were there when I was born. They are still there today. If this goes on, it means they will still be there after I am dead. I think it is a pity to have to live and die in such an abnormal period. I want to see the day when the American bases are gone and we can manage peace without relying on them.

I believe it is crucial for Japan to face the Korean peninsula and Chinese continent and, by taking small steps, build relationships based on trust. If Japan continues to rely on the US and to have conflicting relations with neighboring nations, the tensions in this region will only be heightened. As history tells us, we cannot avoid conflicts if the tension is heightened and military confrontation grows. Without relying on military or nuclear capabilities, we should make efforts to build a regional community like the EU, even though it may take a long time. We must build relationships based on trust with our neighbors in East Asia.

The idea of total removal of the bases would not be shared by the Japanese people. In reality, many Japanese believe that the US military is actually protecting Japan. Realistically speaking, Japan should build trusting relationship with our neighbors under the presence of the US military. Once we solidify friendship with China and the Korean peninsula, people would start wondering why there are so many US bases in Japan and change their attitudes.

Even when I was the mayor of Iwakuni, I firmly believed that we had to cope with the bases and not expand them further. Rather than advocating their removal, I argued against the expansion of the bases in Iwakuni since that would require even more sacrifices by the people. In other words, I have always opposed the strengthening and enhancement of Iwakuni bases.

Jin: You held a referendum in March 2006, which triggered the wide participation of ordinary residents in anti-base citizen movements. Please tell us more about the significance of that referendum.

Ihara: It is true that the people's attitudes toward the bases changed after the Agreement on the Realignment of US Forces in Japan (October 2005) and the referendum (March 2006) was held. It used to be said that the people of Iwakuni were quiet on such matters, but the truth is they never really had the opportunity to voice their opinions. Then came the referendum. A referendum is an opportunity to voice opinions about a specific national policy that impinges greatly upon the future of the city where one lives. I think people were excited about the fact that they were given the chance to say something about such a matter, and they were made aware of the importance and value of the referendum itself. In that process, people's consciousness was also liberated. The process itself nurtures people's awareness of democracy. I did not realize this before holding the referendum.

Many members of the Iwakuni Assembly opposed holding a referendum. They even initiated an anti-referendum boycott. When the proposal for Realignment of US Forces and the relocation plan for the aircraft carrier were first reported—I think it was in June 2005—the Assembly unanimously passed a resolution opposing the realignment. Within a year, however, they reversed their stand and began pushing to accept the plan. Residents, myself included, continued to oppose the idea, yet the Assembly suddenly changed its mind. As I have written in my book, the chair of the Assembly and some of its members were pressured by the central government and perhaps negotiated some sort of compensation as a condition for acceptance. It is possible that initially they only raised their voices against the realignment in the hope of gaining leverage when it came to discussing compensation. This change in the Assembly's attitude became important when I decided to hold a referendum.

Jin: Due to the municipal merger, the regulation on conduct of referenda lapsed and the referendum outcome was nullified. However, in the mayoral election of April 2006, you were reelected with overwhelming support, so the result of the referendum again became relevant. At this point, it seemed that you as mayor and the residents were on the same page regarding the issue of aircraft carrier relocation, and perhaps the opposition movement was at its peak. Afterwards, however, the central government began pressuring the people of Iwakuni as well as you, the mayor. You resigned on December 2007 and in the next election, in February 2008, you lost. How do you explain this?

Ihara: As I explain in my book, the central government did everything it could to force through the Realignment plan. It became an especially big issue when they provided a subsidy for the construction of Iwakuni City Hall. It should have been unthinkable to freeze the promised budget for a City Hall under construction just because the mayor opposed the Realignment plan. This made clear that the government would do anything to realize its goal.

Jin: In your book, you talk about the negotiation with the government around this time. In that process, was there room for compromise?

Ihara: There were occasions where I could have compromised. One of the strategies they often use is that, when the negotiation is not going anywhere, another official comes to the table and offers to take the negotiations somewhere secret. They would say things like, "Haven't we discussed enough?" or they would offer us a subsidy. If I was willing to give in or agree to cooperate, there would have been many chances for compromise. But there was not much room for discussion of the main issue. I was given little opportunity to sit at the same table with government officials and talk though the issue.

Jin: In 2007, the Iwakuni City Assembly rejected budget bills four times, pointing to the inadequacy of the construction budget. In order to overcome this confusion, you resigned to allow the bill to pass and called for an election. Then in the election in February 2008, you lost to Yoshihiko Fukuda by 1782 votes. How should we understand such a sudden change on the part of the people, especially comparing this outcome with the election result two years earlier?

Ihara: Many people from mass media and scholars have asked me the very question. Why did people change their minds? Actually, I do not believe that they did change their minds. Their true feeling, epitomized by the overwhelming opposition shown in the referendum, has not changed even to this day. Only the superficial opinions that are expressed in elections have, sadly, changed. And there are many factors that affected the election result. We may not have actually seen the aircraft yet, but once people begin to suffer as a result of an increased number of carrier-based aircraft, an opposition movement may recur.

Jin: One woman co-leader of the Society for a Successful Referendum explained to me that the 2008 mayoral election was not a result of a change in people's minds so much as of a defeat due to the election campaigning by the government and pro-government groups. What do you think?

Iwakuni Base and Surrounding Areas

The construction project from 1997 to 2011 expanded the area of US Marine Corps Iwakuni Base by massive landfilling for the relocation/construction of off-shore runways (滑走路沖合移設埋め立て地). The necessary landfill was brought in from Mt. Atago. After the blast operation, 102 hectares of flat land area at the top of Mt. Atago (愛宕地域開発事業跡地) is currently under development. The original purpose was to utilize the area as residential districts for Japanese residents, but residences are now being built for US

Ihara: When I was running for the 2008 election, I had the feeling that I was not fighting against the opposition candidate but against the central government itself. When the government interferes with an election campaign, it takes matters to a whole different level from the kind of campaign an amateur such as myself could run. I was defeated by their methods. My campaign mainly centered in small town meetings that I organized by going around local communities. There are some occasions when only a few people would show up when I was making stump speeches. Later I found out that the opposition camp—including the district representatives and campaign staffs—was pulling strings so that the people would not participate in our meetings. I never imagined that the central government would interfere with an election campaign by pulling such dirty tricks.

Jin: What about the "base economy?" The economic boost effect of the base in the commercial district and downtown Iwakuni has been slowing since the 1980s, while starting in the 1990s it shifted its center to public works projects. How would you describe the relationship between the base and Iwakuni's economy and urban development?

Ihara: There have been two trends of thought in Iwakuni regarding the base economy. One insists that we should achieve economic gains by exploiting the bases. This has been mainstream in Iwakuni for a long time. Since the second half of the 1990s the government has spent 250 billion yen on the offshore relocation project and, starting in 2013, it will spend 65 billion yen a year for four years for the introduction of the aircraft carrier unit. Most of these construction projects are given to major general construction companies, and only 20 per cent of orders are placed with local businesses. Yet the base economy has brought large profits to Iwakuni. Although the numbers are sometimes exaggerated, we receive more subsidies for the bases than most other local governments.

However, accepting more bases is not conducive to long-term development of the local economy. As the population ages, younger people leave the community and its active energy dries up. There is another trend of thought in Iwakuni, which concentrates on policies for city development while setting the base aside as a separate entity. As I have mentioned, a mayor of Iwakuni cannot completely remove the bases, because there are a certain number of people who make their living from them. Iwakuni has good potential to develop as a residential town, because the city is surrounded by major manufacturing companies such as Teijin, Nippon Paper Industries, Mitsui Chemicals, and so on. The development of the Atagoyama area had great potential in that sense, yet they decided use the area as a residential zone for US military personnel. Also, there are important cultural

military personnel as the aircraft carrier units are being transferred to the area.

heritage sites in Iwakuni such as the Kintai Bridge. In the late 1950s, Iwakuni Airbase was once used for joint military-civilian use, and many tourists visited Iwakuni at the time. Starting in December 2012, we decided to utilize the existing runways for civilian purposes. Iwakuni should encourage the development of the city as a center of cultural tourism.

Jin: It seems that Iwakuni base began as Iwakuni Imperial Army base in 1938, later becoming the US military base. As has been revealed in the realignment plan for the Base, the situation is likely to develop in a way that interconnects Iwakuni with other bases such as Okinawa and Atsugi. How do you see these recent developments surrounding Iwakuni Base?

Ihara: Iwakuni politics has turned so pro-government that they have begun to think that it is the most cooperative city when it comes to issues like the V-22 Osprey. People think that we will remain obedient as long as we are paid money. What worries me somewhat is the Futenma (Okinawa) airbase question. The problem of the strong resistance in and around Futenma is not being handled well. What worries me is that some of the Futenma functions might be moved to Iwakuni. When they brought in the Osprey, they first landed the aircraft in Iwakuni before sending them to Futenma. The lines between Futenma and Iwakuni can be blurred in the future. Once the general public begins to discuss the need for mainland Japan to help relieve the Okinawan burden, then some may argue that Iwakuni should share that burden. The statement by Osaka mayor Hashimoto to that effect seemed to me dangerous.

In the context of the Realignment of US Forces, the connection between Iwakuni and Okinawa has grown, and the opposition movement gathered momentum in exchanges between civil society organizations in Okinawa and Iwakuni. After the announcement of the Realignment announcement, many organizations appeared in Iwakuni that were willing to work with Okinawa. The authorities called this Realignment a “package deal,” which means all of us have interests at stake. If Okinawa keeps insisting on relocation of Futenma marine base to outside Okinawa, then Iwakuni might become an option. And if Iwakuni continues to engage with the opposition movement, then Atsugi base would continue to share their burdens in the matter. The people in Atsugi told me that their problem would not be resolved even if the aircraft carrier was relocated to Iwakuni. We would both end up being used. So we agreed that the only way forward was to relocate the bases outside Japanese territory.

Jin: In our discussion a few days ago, you emphasized the Nago mayoral election which will be held in January 2014 in terms of solving base-related issues. And you also mentioned your hope that what you experienced would bring leverage to the election campaigning for Mr. Inamine, the current mayor of Nago. Could you explain your thinking a little more?

Ihara: What we have learned from our experiences in Iwakuni is that security policy is under direct control of the central government, and its pro-American standpoint determines everything, including which local area must share which burdens. We ask the central government to practice democratic decision-making, recognizing that the Japanese people suffer damages from the presence of US bases. Forcing burden-sharing on local residents just because the two governments agree on it without our consent is no longer valid. People’s conceptions have changed, and they no longer remain silent. Although we in Iwakuni used to be called “obedient,” the opposition movements are rooted deeply and could explode anytime.

In that sense, Okinawa is more advanced than Iwakuni. After long experience of dealing with the bases, many people, including those engaged in business, are united in opposing base policy, and the old methods of the central government authorities no longer work. In order for the government to change the situation, they must change the way they handle the issue. Otherwise, the issues concerning the US bases will never be resolved. Okinawa has to some degree succeeded in building a consensus which cannot be easily subdued by force. If the people of Okinawa somehow manage to maintain this trend by showing their will in the forthcoming elections for mayor of Nago and governor of Okinawa, then the central government—as well as the US—would have no choice but to look for alternative policies. In that sense, the next election in Nago holds considerable importance.

Campaigning has already started. If the government wins, Okinawa again would fall into confusion. But if the current mayor wins, and, in the subsequent election for governor of Okinawa a candidate who opposes the relocation to Henoko wins, then Tokyo would be made aware of the reality that the Futenma issue has reached a dead end. Okinawa’s victory would be reflected on Iwakuni, and it could affect the question of bases in Korea as well. I hope that the people of Nago as well as Mayor Inamine will not surrender to the pressures of the central government and that the election results there will truly reflect the people’s will.

Brief History of Iwakuni Base

Date/Year	Events
1997-2011	Off-shore relocation construction of Iwakuni Base aircraft runways
Oct. 29, 2005	Announcement of interim report of the Realignment plan for US Forces in Japan: 57 carrier-based planes to be transported from Atsugi, Kanagawa, to Iwakuni
Mar.12, 2006	Iwakuni City referendum: 84,659 constituents; 58.68% turnout rate (49,682 voters); 48,802 valid votes; 43,433 opposition votes (98.2%)
Mar. 20, 2006	Municipal merger of Iwakuni City, Yu-cho, Guga-cho, Hongo-son, Shuto-cho, Nishiki-cho, Mikawa-cho, Miwa-cho into Iwakuni City
Apr. 23, 2006	Iwakuni mayoral election: 122,079 constituents; 65.09% turnout rate (79,464 votes), 78,888 valid votes; 54,144 vote counts for Ihara Katsusuke (68.6%)
May 1, 2006	Announcement of final report on the realignment plan of US forces: substantiation of the interim report, determination of 59 aircraft carriers to be relocated to Iwakuni
Dec. 20, 2006	Japanese government suspending the construction subsidy for the Iwakuni City Hall.
Dec. 26, 2007	Resignation of Mayor Ihara
Feb. 10, 2008	Iwakuni mayoral election: 121,717 constituents; 76.26% turnout rate (92,826), 92,380 valid votes; 47,081 vote counts (51.0%) for Yoshihiko Fukuda, 45,299 (49.0%) for Katusuke Ihara
May 29, 2010	Opening of new airstrips in Iwakuni
Jan. 29, 2012	Iwakuni mayoral election: 118,398 constituencies; 64.01% turnout rate (75,785), 75,385 valid votes; 42,257 vote counts (56.1%) for Yoshihiko Fukuda, 30,656 (40.7%) for Katusuke Ihara
July-Sep. 2012, July-Sep. 2013	Landing and practice operations of Osprey in Iwakuni

Dec. 13, 2012	Opening of Iwakuni Kintaikyo airport as joint military-civilian airport

Author (Interviewer)

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Recommended citation: Ihara Katsusuke interviewed by Jin Pil-su, "Former Iwakuni Mayor Ihara Reflects on the Problem of US Bases in Japan," The Asia-Pacific Journal, *Vol. 12, Issue 1, No. 3, January 6, 2014.*

[1] Interview on July 12 and 14, 2013, at Office of Iwakuni Citizen's Party Kusanone ("grassroots"), Iwakuni City.

Created by Datamomentum