

Misunderstandings on the US Military Bases in Okinawa

By Yukie Yoshikawa

Yukie Yoshikawa (yoshikyu@pref.okinawa.lg.jp) is a fellow at the Regional Security Policy Division of the Okinawa Prefectural Government.

The relocation of Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma in Okinawa has been the source of a long dispute between the United States and Japan, with scant hope for resolution in the foreseeable future. This situation is peculiar, since all parties – the US, Japan, and Okinawa – agree that the Futenma base is dangerous (with houses close by), share the goals of removing the risk of accidents and reducing the US footprint on the local community, and have strong respect for the US-Japan alliance. Yet, despite strenuous efforts by the two central governments, the situation remains unresolved for nearly two decades.

We need to untie the knots of miscommunication or lack of communication to bring this issue to an end. Little has been said about this problem from an Okinawan point of view. Here are three widespread misunderstandings about Okinawa, Okinawa's reaction to them, and what Okinawa really wants.

Okinawa relies heavily on the base economy

US military bases contribute to the local economy through US military procurement, base employee salaries, and land fees (base-related revenue). Thus, some argue that the local community would suffer from the loss of this revenue source and the bases should stay. In fact, the percentage of base-related revenue in the total gross prefectural product (prefectural version of GDP) was as low as 5.4 percent in 2006, a marked contrast to 15.6 percent in 1972 when Okinawa was returned to Japan.

In contrast, the sightseeing industry, the leading industry in Okinawa, provided more revenue than the bases in 2008, a turnaround from 1972. For a longer time line, note that in 1972 sightseeing revenue was \$90 million, while base-related revenue was \$316.7 million; in 2008 sightseeing revenue was \$4.1 billion, while base-related revenue was \$3.3 billion. Thus, contrary to the conventional wisdom, other industries have economic potential in Okinawa, some even more than the military bases. In 2010, the number of employees in the IT industry (20,212) was more than double the number of workers on US bases (9,135).

Okinawa is applying the 'Salami technique' to US bases

Some claim that once Futenma is returned, Okinawa would go after another base, and then all of them, which discourages any compromise. This argument ignores the differences in economic potential between the north and south of the main island of Okinawa, strong sentiment regarding the marines, and does not hear what Okinawans are saying about

hosting bases. First, generally speaking, the northern part of the island is hilly, while the south, home to approximately 80 percent of the island population, is flat. The strength of Okinawan pressure to return particular land parcels reflects the economic potential of that location.

Futenma and the other four bases to be returned according to the 2006 US-Japan Roadmap for Realignment Implementation (Camp Kuwae, Camp Zukeran, Makiminato Service Area [Camp Kinser], and Naha Port), are all located in the southern part of the island, and they have high economic potential once the land is returned to the Okinawan people. An estimate by the Nomura Research Institute suggests that the total economic impact could be 33 times higher if those five bases are returned. For example, estimated annual commercial activities in dollars would skyrocket to \$5.652 billion from the current \$158 million base-related revenue, if Futenma (481 ha) is returned. After Mihama and Hamby area in Chatan (65.4 ha) were returned, annual business revenue jumped to \$695.8 million from \$0.004 million. Plainly, Okinawa has good economic reasons to seek the return of MCAS Futenma, Camp Kinser, and other bases in the south.

Second, downsizing the USMC presence will significantly impact adverse local sentiment, primarily due to their frequent crimes and accidents, compared with other military personnel. In 2011, for example, marines committed or were involved in 50 crimes and accidents, followed by the air force (27), navy (7), and army (6), according to Okinawa Prefectural Government (OPG) statistics. The fact that four of the five bases to be returned belong to the USMC is another welcome fact for Okinawa; it is worth noting that host communities of other military services, including the air force, do not share this strong sentiment.

Third, more attention should be paid to what host communities are saying: the Okinawa Prefectural Government, along with the government of Ginowan City, has consistently asked for the return of MCAS Futenma, while both the OPG and host towns of Kadena Air Base, another vital base in the south, want to reduce noise.

Okinawa just wants money

Many critics say, "Okinawa just wants money, and is being a tough negotiator." On the contrary, Okinawa has enjoyed significant economic development, and the conventional argument that Tokyo can buy off Okinawan support for the US military presence is losing effectiveness. The 2010 victory of Inamine Susumu, who opposed the Henoko plan in the mayoral election of Nago City (which contains Henoko), shows money is not the right language to persuade Okinawa. People need to face the fact that revenue per capita in Nago City has been consistently lower than that of the entire Okinawa prefecture since 1997, despite all the largesse Tokyo has provided.

Okinawans want dignity and fairness when sharing with the rest of Japan the obligation of providing the US military with land. Okinawans don't accept Tokyo's explanation that Okinawa must host the military simply because other communities do not want a US footprint. Why doesn't Tokyo give Okinawa's 'no' as much weight as that of other localities? While Tokyo said it had considered 25 sites, it leaked the news to media in advance, allowing those communities time to ramp up "Not-In-My-Back-Yard" sentiment, accepted their complaints, and moved on. This isn't serious consideration.

Prime Minister Hatoyama destroyed the trust that Okinawans had in Tokyo's claim that US military bases in Okinawa were crucial for the security of Japan and East Asia. Okinawa needs clear and sincere answers to their questions.

Why does Okinawa have to bear 74 percent of the hosting obligation of the US military, which has been mostly unchanged since 1945? It would seem to make sense to disperse US military bases to several points along the western coast of Japan, including Okinawa, as tripwires, rather than concentrating that presence on one island. Such relocations should be in alignment with the recent US strategy to disperse its military presence in East Asia, including Australia, Singapore, and the Philippines.

What Okinawa Wants

As mentioned, Okinawa has strong economic reasons to want the return of Futenma and the other four bases, and welcomes strenuous efforts by both Tokyo and Washington to move in that direction. Okinawa appreciates the recent announcement to delink the Futenma move and the relocation of forces, although Okinawa is reluctant to say anything out loud as the devil is in the details, and little has been disclosed.

Gov. Nakaima believes that in order for the Henoko plan to move forward, both the Nago mayor and governor have to approve the plan. With Nago citizens choosing a mayor who opposes the plan, and with little hope for a change in the political climate to allow him to change position at least until the end of the governor's tenure at the end of 2014, the governor has asked the two capitals to revise the plan.

Some might think it is better to wait until the next Nago mayoral election, which might result in a more accommodating political environment for the Henoko plan. This won't happen until 2014, which is too long for Okinawans. Furthermore, the gubernatorial election is scheduled for the same year, and no one can tell if the political climate would be such that the governor and the mayor support the plan.

The silent majority in Okinawa is moderate, with mixed sentiments that include admiration for American culture and economic benefits, especially in the past, and anger and sorrow toward crimes by US soldiers, especially marines, and all the inconvenience the bases create, including noise. Once and if a tragedy happen, which is not a rare thing unfortunately, however, they would express anger and frustration. Likewise, Prime Minister Hatoyama's betrayal against his initial campaign pledge of bringing the FRF out of Okinawa, which brought his party a landslide victory in

Okinawa, triggered their anger and disappointment. It is expected to take some more time for their feelings to be subsided.

For Okinawans, a tangible reduction of the US military presence at the earliest possible time, while giving deference to Okinawa's political climate, is the highest priority. Okinawans appreciate the intellectual exploration of alternatives to the Henoko plan, including those of US Sen. Jim Webb, Mike Mochizuki at George Washington University and Michael O'Hanlon at the Brookings Institution, and encourage others to follow suit.

Ideas worth pursuing further include: merging MCAS Futenma marines into Kadena Air Base, while shrinking the US footprint to a smaller level than that currently at Kadena – The OPG currently opposes this plan as it could enhance the base. And strict adherence to the noise reduction regulations that the USAF has agreed in 1996 ("operational necessity" usually does not happen every day!) and regulations on the overwhelming number of visiting aircraft from other bases are musts in order to win credits of locals--; a considerable reduction of marines in Okinawa to fill vacancies back home in alignment with marine corps downsizing; and a two-step measure to first, temporarily move marines to a few bases including MCAS Iwakuni, Kadena, and/or Self-Defense Force bases to clear MCAS Futenma while allowing Tokyo more time to find a suitable Futenma Replacement Facility (FRF) site, and then to relocate them to that site.

In April 2012, the Okinawan Prefectural Government created a new division, the Regional Security Policy Division, to develop an Okinawa version of alternatives, and to discuss them with distinguished external experts and with the two capitals. This is a bold step for a Japanese local government. The OPG thought out of the box and decided it had to do so as a responsible host to US Forces in Japan, a sincere contributor to regional security, and as a proud representative of Okinawans who have suffered enough and continue to do so.

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