

Opinion – What a Stronger Japanese Military Posture Means for Okinawa

Written by Carmina Yu Untalan

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CARMINA YU UNTALAN, FEB 22 2023

Fumio Kishida's premiership marks a significant development for Japan's military posture. On 16 December 2022, the Japanese government released a revised National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy and Defense Buildup Program. A week later, the Prime Minister unveiled unprecedented military spending targets, raising this year's budget by 26.3 percent (6.82 trillion yen or \$51.4 billion). Japan's revised defense outlook also aims to meet NATO standards of allocating 2 percent of the country's GDP by 2027, which will make it the third largest military budget next to the US and China. The abrupt changes toward strengthening Japan's military posture signals the country's readiness to face the changing regional and global security environment, particularly the perceived tripartite threat from China, North Korea and Russia.

As expected, the Biden Administration, which pledged to straighten out Trump's erratic relations with its Indo-Pacific allies, welcomed Japan's proactive defense policy. In the 2023 Kishida-Biden statement, the long-term allies reiterated their commitment to the Japan-US Alliance and to defending the international rules-based order. As both sides celebrate these developments, neither seems willing to confront the elephant in the room: what about Okinawa?

If the Japan-US alliance is dubbed the "cornerstone" of Indo-Pacific security, Okinawa, also known as the Ryukyu Islands, is considered the "keystone" of the Pacific. Located 300 miles from mainland Japan and 444 miles from Taiwan, Okinawa is part of the First Island Chain in the U.S. Island Chain strategy during the Cold War. It was a vital supply and containment hub against possible Soviet and Chinese incursions and continues to be a major site of American power projection in the region and Japan's first line of defense against China. At present, the island group that makes up only 0.6% of Japan's land mass but hosts 70% of the American bases in Japan and approximately 25,000 active American military personnel. Suffice it to say, Okinawa's strategic location makes it a permanent and indispensable asset to the security objectives of the Japan-US alliance.

Nevertheless, Okinawa has also been a bane for the alliance. Okinawans have persistently contested the unfair burden of hosting the majority of American military bases, and the slew of hazards and criminality that come with it. While most policymakers and pundits from Washington and Tokyo justify this in terms of "national" and "regional" security, many Okinawans see this as an issue of unfair burden, human rights, welfare, and persistent subjugation from Tokyo. This is clearly summarized in the September 2022 petition letter Hideki Yoshikawa, Director of the Okinawa Environmental Justice Project, addressed to the Chair of the US Senate Armed Services Committee. The letter outlines the base-related concerns Okinawans have been raising for decades, including the constant fear of falling military aircraft parts, noise pollution, water and land contamination and the controversial relocation of Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma to Henoko.

In all these problems, Tokyo has been a willing accomplice, if not an enabler. The letter was addressed to Jack Reed, not to the Head of the Okinawa Defense Bureau (ODB) Hirofumi Takeda for one reason: the Okinawan civil society are demanding the Americans to investigate how the Japanese government provided misleading information about the safety of building offshore base in Henoko. In 1996, the Japanese and American governments decided to MCAS Futenma, considered the world's most dangerous military facility on the condition that another facility within

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Okinawa replace it. They chose Nago City, which already hosts two military installations, Marine Camp Schwab and Henoko Ordinance Depot, as the best candidate, to which the majority of Nago locals opposed. In 2019, in response to the Okinawa-wide referendum which reflected the consistent opposition of the Okinawan majority to the FRF, then Prime Minister Abe stressed that Henoko is the “only viable solution”.

Kishida, who served under the Abe Administration as Minister of Foreign Affairs (2012-2017) is parroting his former boss. Just a day after the re-election of anti-military base Okinawa Governor Denny Tamaki, who categorically rejected the revised FRF construction plan due to ODB’s inadequate assessment studies, Kishida cabinet announced that his administration would continue the relocation of bases to Henoko. Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa stated in his remarks during his recent visit to the White House that Henoko is the “only solution”. What is puzzling is that despite several scientific evidence proving the infeasibility of completing the project due to the seafloor’s “mayonnaise-like” consistency, and the irreversible environmental damage it would cause, Tokyo keeps harping on Henoko as the definitive solution to alleviating the impact of base-hosting to local communities.

As the construction continues, Tokyo and Washington conducted the opening ceremony of a new base in Guam, which is part of the Second Island chain and considered as the Pacific “springboard” for American forces. The plan involves relocating 4000 Marine troops from Okinawa. Although officials declare this as a move to help the Okinawans, it skirts Guam citizens’ anti-military base sentiments. It is, in reality, part of a broader military strategy to disperse Marines around the first and second island chains to revamp the US Marine Corps’ defensive and offensive capabilities. The ultimate goal is to remind the Chinese that the US has not left Asia, with the support of its devoted Japanese Indo-Pacific ally.

It is as if Japan and the US are trying to evade the complexity of the “Okinawa Problem” by reducing it to the issue of base and Marine personnel relocation and sees the solution to the problem of base hosting by distributing it to other communities. As Tokyo ups the ante of Japan’s defensive capabilities amidst growing tensions in the region, Okinawans are again catapulted into the frontliner position, reminiscent of their experience during the Battle of Okinawa and the Cold War. Reports show that the Chinese have been conducting naval and aerial drills and have plans to practice long-range missile strikes near Ryukyu waters. Okinawans not only have to endure the problems attached to hosting military bases, but they also must brace themselves for possible missile attacks and an impending conflict among big powers. Ironically, the more Japan flexes its muscles to protect its citizens and territory, and to prove that it’s a worthy ally to the US, the more it puts Okinawan lives in danger. In thinking about Japan’s recent military re-posturing, aside from asking its impact on regional security, scholars and analysts might want to consider asking “whose lives matter?” as well.

About the author:

Carmina Yu Untalan is a research fellow at the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), Leiden University, where she is working on her manuscript on Okinawa and Muslim Mindanao’s significance to American hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. Her research areas include postcolonial international relations, US-Japan, and US-Philippine relations and democracy. She holds a PhD in International Politics from Osaka University.