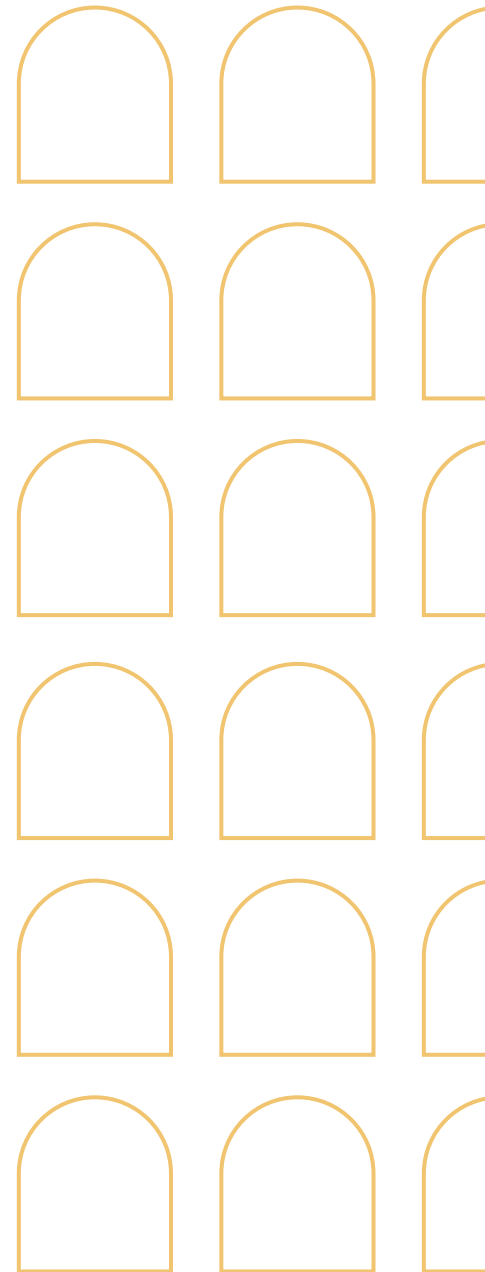


POLICY BRIEF

The future of Deterrence and the US Marines on Okinawa

Introduction

The US-Japan alliance established over seventy years ago is typically described by leaders on both sides as the ‘cornerstone of peace and security in East Asia.’ While China and North Korea may not share this positive view of the impact of the alliance on the region, the fact is that few alliances in modern international relations rival the US-Japan one in terms of durability, integration and influence. Under the terms of the US-Japan Security Treaty, the US pledges to defend Japan and in return Japan hosts a number of US military bases. Some, like Yokosuka Naval Base, are located on the so-called ‘home islands’ – the four large islands which comprise most of the land area, as well as the historic homeland, of the Japanese nation. However, the bulk of the US military bases are to be found some 1,500 kilometres southwest of Tokyo on Okinawa Island, former centre of the Ryukyuan Kingdom. Okinawa is not just remote from Tokyo, but importantly it is close to China – and even closer to Taiwan.



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1. What is the background to the Futenma Base controversy?

Although none of the bases on Okinawa are without controversy, one particular base has been the focus of a decades-old anti-base movement: US Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma. Located in the centre of densely populated Ginowan City, Futenma has witnessed several high-profile incidents and accidents. The most notorious of all was the 1995 rape of a schoolgirl by two Marines and a Navy Seaman. The US and Japan agreed that Futenma would be returned in “five to seven years” and proposed to construct a new facility at Henoko, approximately 45 kilometres to the north. That agreement was signed in 1996, but construction of the runway only began in 2015. This delay is explained by the fact that the majority of Okinawans opposed the move from the outset and called for a “*kenga*” or ‘outside the prefecture’ solution. The story of the intervening years is one of military incidents and accidents, mass protests, broken political promises, and multiple legal suits.

Opposition to the relocation of the base is overwhelming and public opinion remains steadfast in its desire to have the base moved off Okinawa. A 2019 prefectural referendum saw 72% of voters reject the relocation. As the dispute has heated up, the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), once the most powerful political force on Okinawa, has lost the governorship and seats in both houses of the Diet, while the issue has attracted the attention of US and international media. Nevertheless, successive Japanese administrations have remained firmly committed to the Henoko plan, with US support. Former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō reiterated the shared Japan-US stance that there is “only one alternative:” Henoko. Both former Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide and current Prime Minister Kishida Fumio restated this position shortly after taking power, describing Henoko as “the only solution.” The rationale, advanced not only by successive governments but also by Japanese analysts,

journalists and officials, is that the presence of the Marines on Okinawa is crucial for deterrence, and that moving the base off the island would undermine Japan’s national security. The most recent National Defence White Paper sums up the rationale clearly and concisely:

The fact that the U.S. Marine Corps and other U.S. forces, which have high mobility and responsiveness and can handle a wide range of missions, are stationed on Okinawa, which has these geographical characteristics, further confirms the effectiveness of the Japan-US alliance. It enhances deterrence and contributes not only to the security of Japan but also to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.¹

Indeed, the US Marine Corp Twitter account repeated exactly the same language when it stated that the presence of the Marines on Okinawa “strengthens deterrence, and contributes greatly to the peace and stability of Japan and the Indo-Pacific region.”²

According to this argument, Okinawans must accept the base to preserve deterrence and the security of all Japan. The role that the Marines are supposed to play in deterrence is rarely explained in any detail, although it can be discerned from policy documents, official statements and media articles.³ One of the key arguments concerns Okinawa’s strategic location in the East China Sea, close to the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and Taiwan. Another is that moving the base elsewhere would undermine the alliance and show weakness to China. Other arguments are more general, including the ‘tripwire’ effect and its role in a potential conflict on the Korean peninsula.

Critics argue that deterrence is at best a convenient distraction and at worst a “myth” or “pretext.” According to this argument, relocation to Henoko would have less to do with any deterrent effect the Marines might have but instead it would be the most convenient political solution to a complex problem. Critics note that the sites at Futenma and Henoko

1 Japanese Ministry of Defence. “Nihon no bōei 2021: Bōei hakusho.” Tokyo: Ministry of Defence, available at https://www.mod.go.jp/j/publication/wp/wp2021/pdf/wp2021_JP_Full.pdf

2 III Marine Expeditionary Force. 2021. July 14. III MEF Marines on [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/IIIEMEF/status/1415101968981237767>

3 Paul O’Shea, “Strategic narratives and US military bases in Japan: How ‘deterrence’ makes the Marine base on Okinawa ‘indispensable.’” *Media, War & Conflict*, Vol 12, No. 4, pp. 450-467.

provide easy access to the large military training areas on Okinawa, while deployment in Japan means host nation support, which keeps US costs down. Under both Democrat and Republican leaderships, the US has on innumerable occasions made it clear that it will not countenance re-opening the agreement and the Henoko move must go ahead as planned.

2. What role do the US Marines play in deterrence?

So, what role does the US Marine base at Futenma actually play in deterrence? Is it really fundamental to the security of Japan, and indeed that of the broader region, or is it just that nowhere else is willing to host it? My research suggests the latter. The deterrent effect of the Marines is negligible. The Marines are a relatively small component of the overall deployment of US troops in Japan – they pale in comparison with the Fifth Air Force and the Navy’s Seventh Fleet. As for the local balance of forces, proponents of their presence argue that they would play an important role in a conflict over Taiwan or the disputed East China Sea islands. However, the truth is that the role of the Marines in such conflicts is far from clear. First, Japan, not the US, has primary responsibility for the defence of its southwestern islands. Second, if a conflict escalated to the point that the US got involved, local bases would become ‘missile magnets’ – the location of the Marines would be less strategic and more vulnerable. Strikingly, the newly formed ‘Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade’ – basically Japanese Marines – the purpose of which is to recapture islands following a presumed Chinese occupation, are located 700 kilometres away.⁴ This distant location is described by the Japanese Army as providing ‘deterrent value.’ In sum, in terms of capabilities the base could be relocated without significant damage to deterrence.

This is not to say that the Marines play no deterrent role. Instead, in US strategic thinking, the old role of the Marines, i.e. a larger concentration of forces with the ability to launch frontal amphibious attacks and hold territory, has been replaced by a pared-

down vision of smaller more agile units geographically dispersed across the region. Ultimately, the forward deployment of almost 20,000 US Marines concentrated on one small island within range of hundreds of cruise missiles and thousands of ballistic missiles is not ‘crucial’ to either defence or deterrence.

Another argument, as noted above, is that relocation of the base off Okinawa would hurt the “credibility” of deterrence. Somehow, the understanding is that the alliance would be perceived to be weakened and the US would be less likely to come to the defence of Japan in a contingency. This argument is even less plausible. The aforementioned US-Japan Security Treaty is a legal document ratified by the US Senate and the Japanese Diet, which binds the US to defending Japan. Moreover, the treaty is backed up by regular massive joint exercises, high-level interoperability and substantial US forward deployment in Japan. These other, more strategically important bases, also act as tripwires. If Japan were attacked, the presence of the bases means that the US would automatically be involved. Simply put, the relocation of a deeply unpopular strategically unimportant base is not likely to damage credibility or reduce deterrence.

3. Why do Tokyo and Washington insist on keeping the Marines on Okinawa?

All this begs the question of why push ahead with relocation of the base under obviously false pretences? The answer is complicated. Domestic politics plays an important role: conservative Japanese media along with the ruling conservative LDP have used the deterrence narrative to shut down the debate and silence the predominantly left-wing opposition. After all, deterrence is said to be fundamental to Japan’s national security, and so those who oppose the base – opposition politicians and activists – are depicted as “naïve,” “reckless” or even “dangerous,” putting Japan’s national security at risk.⁵

Furthermore, Okinawa is geographically and politically remote from Tokyo. It has long suffered

4 Scott Harold, Koichiro Bansho, Jeffrey Horning, Koichi Isobe and Richard Simcock. 2018. “U.S.-Japan Alliance Conference: Meeting the Challenge of Amphibious Operations.” RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF387.html

5 Paul O’Shea, *ibid.*

second-class status, and the issue has relatively little resonance on the ‘home islands.’ The central government has been skilful in its use of compensation politics, often at the micro-level, bypassing the prefectural government and making direct payments to landowners and others affected by the bases – a practice which continues to this day.⁶ In other words, Tokyo exploits the relative poverty and structural dependence of the region – itself a legacy of colonisation, destruction and militarisation – with targeted compensation in order to maintain the Marine bases under a dubious pretence. This also serves a bigger purpose: Tokyo plays down Okinawan opposition due to fear of abandonment by the US. Fear of abandonment has driven Japanese strategic thinking for over fifty years, and the Trump administration served to sow doubt over US commitment to the region.

4. Could the issue undermine the US-Japan Alliance?

This practice has succeeded, for now at least, but it could also lead to severe long-term consequences for the alliance. Over the past two decades Okinawa has emerged once more as a strategically crucial location in East Asia. Most of the population is against the relocation and the issue dominates Naha-Tokyo relations. Okinawa has suffered over a century of second-class treatment by Tokyo, and the relocation plan is clearly iniquitous. Beyond the morality of the relocation, or of Okinawa’s base burden issue more broadly, the relocation does not even make sound strategic sense. Policymakers in Tokyo and Washington ought to be concerned about the long-term sustainability of other deployments on Okinawa. Relocating the base off Okinawa would do much to soothe public opinion and reduce anti-base sentiment, including the credibility lost by advancing the unsubstantiated deterrence claims examined in this article. Furthermore, by framing the decision to relocate off Okinawa as part of a long-term plan to ensure the sustainability of the bases and resilience of the long-term presence of the US, such a relocation could in fact contribute to credibility and ultimately to deterrence. Conversely, continuing with the Henoko relocation would not only perpetuate the unjust treatment of

Okinawa and its residents but it would undoubtedly cause long-term damage to both Okinawa-Japan and Okinawa-US relations, potentially undermining the long-term resilience of the US-Japan alliance.

Note: A longer version of this policy brief can be found in the winter 2023 edition of *Social Science Japan Journal*. ([link to follow](#))

6 Ryota Hiyane and Long Piao. “Stabilization of Anti-U.S. Military Bases Sentiment: Japan’s Evolving Compensation Policies and Base Politics in Okinawa.” *Armed Forces and Society*, 2023 OnlineFirst. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X2311677>

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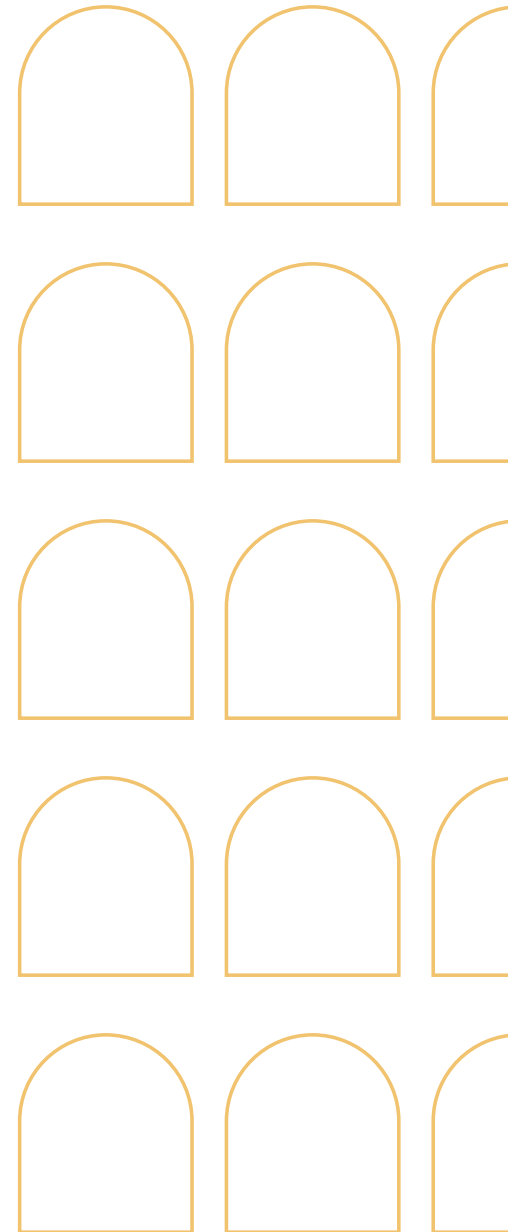
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