Japan: Okinawa governor approves new US Marine base

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31 December 2013

Following the intervention of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the governor of Okinawa, Hirokazu Nakaima, gave the green light last Friday for the construction of a controversial new American military base at Henoko Bay in Nago in the north of the island.

The decision was immediately hailed by US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel as "the most significant milestone" in the realignment of American military forces in the region. "The realignment effort is absolutely critical to the United States' ongoing rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region," he said.

The Obama administration's "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia is aimed at undermining Chinese diplomatic and economic influence in the region and encircling China militarily. Okinawa in Japan's southern island chain is strategically located opposite the Chinese mainland and has long been the main site for US military forces in Japan, serving as a springboard for the US-led wars in Korea and Vietnam.

The Nago base is to replace the US Marine Air Station Futenma, which is positioned in a densely populated urban area and has been bitterly opposed by local residents for decades. Under the plan, the number of US Marines on Okinawa would be reduced from 18,000 to 10,000 with the remainder relocated to bases in Guam and northern Australia.

The relocation of the base, which was outlined in a 2006 agreement between the US and Japanese governments, has provoked persistent protests demanding that it be moved off Okinawa altogether. The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) came to power in 2009 promising to revise the 2006 agreement, but the Obama administration refused point blank to discuss the issue with Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama. Protests demanding the removal of the Futenma base from Okinawa culminated in a mass rally of at least 90,000 people in April 2010 that was attended by Governor Nakaima.

Hatoyama, however, came under intense pressure from Washington, which not only opposed his efforts to revise the Okinawa agreement, but his moves to improve Japan's relations with China. The US refusal to negotiate, combined with a covert campaign to undermine his influence, put Hatoyama in an impossible position. He backed down and accepted the 2006 deal, then resigned in June 2010. His replacement Naoto Kan quickly reaffirmed his full support for the US alliance.

Encouraged by the US "pivot", the DPJ government led by Kan then Yoshihiko Noda deliberately inflamed tensions with China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands to the west of Okinawa. A diplomatic row over Japan's arrest of a Chinese trawler captain in September 2011 was followed by the provocative "nationalisation" of the islands in September 2012. The escalating confrontation opened the door for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to win elections last December on a militarist platform of building a "strong Japan."

Abe has boosted Japanese military spending for the first time in a decade, established a US-style National Security Council and moved to circumvent or end constitutional restrictions on the country's armed forces. His efforts to secure the future of the US Marine base on Okinawa are part of his government's strengthening of the US-Japan alliance in preparation for conflict with China.

Abe has exploited the ongoing tensions with China, along with financial enticements, to pressure Governor Nakaima to approve the Nago base. According to the *New York Times*, "Mr Abe had pressed Okinawan officials to finally give the go-ahead." Last Wednesday,

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the Japanese prime minister announced a set of measures, including the provision of at least 300 billion yen ($US2.9 billion) to Okinawa annually until 2021.

After announcing that he had approved a landfill on which the Nago base will be built, Nakaima declared: "The Abe administration has shown more consideration for Okinawa than any previous administration." Indicating his support for the military build-up against China, he said: "Regardless of the will of the Okinawa people, the tension is heightening on [the] international front. Okinawa needs to play a certain role for that."

The *Japan Times* explained: "Firms like Kokuba Gumi Ltd., the prefecture's largest and most politically influential general contractor (Okinawa LDP Lower House member Konosuke Kokuba is the grandson of the founder), as well as Nago-based Higashi Kaihatsu, one of the city's most prominent companies, as well as their subcontractors and related businesses, are likely to directly benefit from the Henoko [Bay] base plan and the various projects that will be spawned by its construction over the next eight years."

The new base will certainly provoke opposition and protests. The prefectural assembly last Friday began discussing whether to formally condemn Nakaima for reversing his previous opposition to the Nago base. Outside the Okinawa government building, about 2,000 people gathered to voice their opposition to the announcement.

The mayor of Nago City, Susumu Inamine, declared last Friday that he was "definitely opposed" to the planned base. The issue will be central to local elections next month, when Inamine will be seeking to retain his post against a pro-base challenger. A poll in Nago City in September by the *Okinawa Times* found that 51.9 percent of residents opposed the base and another 25 percent were leaning towards opposing it.

The US military has had a heavy presence on Okinawa since the end of World War II. The region remained under direct American administration until it was handed back to Japanese control in 1972. Okinawa is currently the site for 34 American military facilities and more than half of the 50,000 US personnel stationed in Japan.

Protests over the US bases on Okinawa have flared over crimes carried out by US soldiers, particularly the rape of a 12-year-old schoolgirl by three American military personnel in 1995. Opponents of the US bases have raised concerns over pollution, accidents and the economic impact, but more fundamentally the hostility is bound up with widespread anti-militarist sentiment.

The battle for Okinawa towards the end of World War II took a horrendous toll not only on Japanese and US troops, but also on civilians. Estimates put the number of civilian dead at up to half of the population. Civilians were not only killed by US shelling and air attacks but suffered at the hands of the Japanese military, which press ganged local residents into service and shot others as spies.

In 2007, during Abe's first term as prime minister, the Education Ministry advised publishers to revise the wording of textbooks explaining that civilians had been forced by the Japanese military to commit suicide, rather than be subject to American occupation. The move sparked widespread protests on Okinawa that culminated in a rally of 110,000 demanding that the order be retracted. The Education Department backed down and an Osaka Court ruled in March 2008 that "it can be said the military was deeply involved in the mass suicides."

However, the issue is likely to be reignited as the present Abe government presses ahead with its agenda of rewriting history to whitewash Japanese military atrocities in the 1930s and 1940s. The decision to proceed with the Nago base will only compound the resentment and hostility towards the Abe government as well as the US military presence.

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