Okinawa, the US–Japan Alliance, and Asia-Pacific Security

H. D. P. Envall and Kerri Ng
INTRODUCTION

Recent tensions in Northeast Asia highlight the need for a stable regional security architecture – a role long played by the US–Japan alliance. In fact, the alliance has long been a core part of regional security politics. The United States’ "San Francisco," or "hub-and-spokes," system of alliances has contributed much to Asia’s security and economic development (Calder 2004; Tow and Envall 2011).

Today, however, the US–Japan alliance is challenged not only by regional developments, such as North Korea’s saber-rattling and the Japanese dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands (Daily Yomiuri 15 December 2012), but also by domestic concerns. In the latter context, the Japanese prefecture of Okinawa and the presence of US military bases there continues to be an irritant in US–Japan relations. The ongoing distrust and resentment of the US military presence by substantial sectors of the Okinawan population is particularly problematic for alliance stability.

Our aim, in this extended ANU–MASI Policy Background Paper, is to examine recent developments in Okinawa in light of the two allies’ changing strategic aims and explore some potential approaches to addressing these challenges. We argue that, because many of the alliance’s problems relating to Okinawa are political rather than strategic, it is necessary to integrate these political considerations more clearly into alliance relations. Although Japan should not unilaterally determine basing issues, it should assume a greater role in addressing the political problems associated with them. As Japan assumes greater responsibility in developing the US alliance’s strategic role, it should also seek to provide Okinawa with greater historical and military reassurance. In particular, it should overcome what we identify as the Japanese government’s lack of credibility in the prefecture. This stems from the Japanese government’s historical failure to manage base and land issues, and to properly recognize issues of identity and equality that are important to the Okinawan people.

THE “PIVOT” AND “DYNAMIC DEFENSE”

The importance of the US–Japan alliance, and of Okinawa, has been recently underscored by American and Japanese attempts to re-focus their attention on the new challenges in the Asia-Pacific region. For the US, such efforts have emerged in the form of the
The so-called “pivot strategy,” while Japan’s approach is encapsulated in the “dynamic defense” concept.

The pivot strategy has been a prominent feature of Barack Obama’s administration since 2010. Its main aim is to resuscitate America’s military, economic, and political engagement of the region. A crucial aspect of the policy is to reinforce the US–Japan alliance within the wider context of strengthening and diversifying Washington’s regional strategic partnerships (Clinton 2011). Despite projected reductions in US spending on defense via sequestration, the alliance remains the “cornerstone” of stability in Asia and the focus of significant plans for US expansion of regional cooperation, including joint intelligence sharing, surveillance, reconnaissance, and missile defense (Clinton 2011; Panetta 2012).

A common criticism of the pivot strategy, however, is that it represents a direct and overt counter to the ongoing military buildup of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), intensifying an already acute regional security dilemma. China’s maritime strategy has been defined in terms of projecting power over successive “island chains” stretching from South Korea to Hawaii that are seen in Beijing as being used by the US to constrain Chinese access into the West Pacific. The dispersion of US forces away from simply Japan and South Korea to increasingly access such places as Australia, Guam, and Singapore is viewed with suspicion by the PRC. Accordingly, Beijing’s recent shows of force (e.g. in the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute), and its continued reluctance to cooperate over Iran and North Korea, demonstrate that the pivot strategy is not universally acclaimed in the region (Ross 2012).

The dynamic defense concept, meanwhile, is meant to allow Japan to develop military forces that have the necessary “readiness, mobility, flexibility, sustainability, and versatility” to deal with strategic challenges in its neighborhood (MOD 2010, 7). A more flexible Japanese defense force could play a more effective role in the dispersed regional security system envisaged under America’s pivot strategy. In particular, it would allow Japan to respond better to the “gray-zone” disputes currently emerging in East Asia, notably conflicts that encompass differences over “territory, sovereignty and economic interests” (MOD 2010, 3).

Efforts from the mid-2000s to the latest White Paper (MOD 2012) to reform the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) have been termed a “compromise between the necessity of coping with new security challenges and a limited budget” (Takahashi, T. 2012). Japanese strategic thinkers have focused on developing a JSDF that would be more multi-functional and more interoperable with the US (NIDS 2012; Takahashi, S. 2012; Yamaguchi 2012). A transformed JSDF would, therefore, be more capable of responding to
major disasters, would have improved force attributes, and would provide more effective deterrence in the space surrounding Japan. But the prefecture nevertheless remains central to much of the new strategic planning inherent to both the pivot and dynamic defense concepts. This is especially true as Japan refocuses its national security strategy southward. If the basing issue in Okinawa destabilizes the alliance, it could undermine the development of these strategies. Recent history suggests that the basing issue is indeed critical. In 2009–10, for example, Okinawa became a major source of tension between the Hatoyama Yukio and Obama administrations over the relocation of the Futenma airbase (Envall and Fujiwara 2012, 65–6).

Base politics resurfaced in 2012 to disrupt the alliance again, even as the US and Japan agreed in April to delink a planned transfer of Marines out of Okinawa from the plan to relocate Futenma (MOFA 2012). Early in the year, the planned deployment of the MV-22 Osprey vertical take-off and landing aircraft to Okinawa became the focus of large local demonstrations due to concerns regarding the aircraft’s safety. The Osprey aircraft were dispatched to Okinawa as a replacement for the earlier CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters, an aging fleet with a more limited flight range (Envall 2012). The newer Ospreys would be able to access some of the main hotspots in the region, particularly the

To date, however, Japan has made only moderate improvements to its security capabilities. Institutionally, the country’s primary defense posture continues to be based around strict limits on its capacity to defend itself. The Japanese government maintains an interpretation of Article 9 of the Constitution such that force can only be used to defend the country under certain conditions (MOD 2012, 109). The government also maintains that, although Japan theoretically has the right to collective defense, the actual exercise of this right is “not permissible” under current Japanese law (MOD 2012, 110).

Yet change may be coming on this front. Recently elected Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has indicated his support for modifying Article 9 so as to enable Japan to engage in collective defense (Japan Times 11 April 2013). Tokyo will still have to confront budgetary constraints and political resistance that have seen it allocate only limited resources into strengthening its defense capacity. However, the announcement in January 2013 to raise defense spending potentially signals a reversal of this trend, even if the increase remains marginal (IISS 2012; Asahi Shimbun 30 January 2013).

OKINAWA’S BASING ISSUE

Compared to these wider strategic considerations, Okinawa is sometimes viewed as a “third-order issue” (e.g., Armitage and Nye 2012, 14).
Senkaku islands, as well as North Korea and Taiwan (Daily Yomiuri 27 September 2012; Japan Times 3 October 2012). However, many in Okinawa quickly focused on recent accidents involving the Osprey in Morocco and in the US (Kyodo News 12 July 2012).

Then there was the alleged rape of an Okinawan woman in October 2012 by two US sailors. The two sailors, who had arrived in Japan earlier in October, were quickly apprehended and soon admitted their guilt to police (The Mainichi 7 November 2012). The Japanese government responded by summoning the US ambassador and lodging a complaint, while Okinawan officials, including Governor Nakaima Hirokazu and the prefectural assembly, were highly critical of the US (Envall 2012). The US issued an official apology, implemented a curfew on all military personnel in Japan, and subsequently banned the off-base purchase and consumption of alcohol in Okinawa (The Mainichi 7 November 2012; Asahi Shimbun 3 December 2012).

The emotional impact of such crimes and accidents on Okinawa’s population can act as a major driver of Japan’s security politics. The prominent location of America’s bases in the prefecture, and the newsworthy nature of any accidents that do occur, combine to make the foreign presence more visible and controversial (The Australian 15 November 2012; Watanabe 2012). Likewise, the negative impact of such crimes on the perceptions of Okinawans regarding US forces in Japan consistently impedes the ability of US forces to promote the constructive work they do in Japan, such as disaster relief operations carried out during Operation Tomodachi following the Tohoku disaster in March 2011 (Japan Times 3 March 2012).

Such episodes inevitably demand a response from the Japanese government. Prime Minister Abe recently insisted that the government would make “all-out” efforts to reduce the burden of US bases on Okinawa (Japan Times 20 March 2013). As he delivered this “all-out” statement, Abe also announced that the central government would seek to gain approval from the prefectural government to begin transforming work for the airstrip at the replacement location for Futenma (Japan Times 20 March 2013). However, many in Okinawa remain adamantly opposed to any such development (Asahi Shimbun 5 April 2013), while Abe’s request that plans for the return of land be fast-tracked was met with an ambiguous response from the US (Japan Times 22 March 2013). Controversially, a recent agreement to return land from Futenma by 2022 included the caveat “or later” (DOD 2013; Asahi Shimbun 6 April 2013).

**OUTLOOK**

The politicization of such issues, combined with the alliance’s strategic importance, turn
these otherwise “third-order” issues into major problems. These problems in turn create the potential for a “vicious and endless cycle” of distrust and resentment over Okinawa’s bases that could undermine the wider alliance (Eldridge 2012). Even if the Ospreys had not been deployed, the Futenma basing controversy would “still be a powder keg threatening the Japan-US security arrangements” (Watanabe 2012).

What, then, needs to happen in order to put the US–Japan alliance on a more even keel and reduce the scope for Okinawan issues to act as a destabilizing force? The removal of US bases from Okinawa would threaten the overall credibility of the alliance and precipitate the likely failure of the strategies described earlier. Such a development, moreover, could lead to a rapid deterioration of security in Northeast Asia. Yet the events of 2012 also highlight how America’s successive attempts to persuade Okinawans of the value of the US military contribution appear to have had only a limited impact.

What is required is an integrated approach directed not by the US but by Japan. The problem here is that Tokyo suffers from a “credibility gap” in its dealings with the prefecture, just as it lacks credibility in its relations with other Asian countries (Envall 2000). In Okinawa, controversies over the Imperial Army’s role in Okinawa during the Second World War, and how that war should be commemorated, have repeatedly disrupted contemporary Okinawan politics (Yonetani 2003). The prefecture’s negative reaction to Abe’s plans for a “National Sovereignty Day” once again demonstrates a failure on the part of Tokyo to recognize and address the historical issues that are negatively affecting center–prefecture relations (Japan Times 9 March 2013).

A key plank in Japan’s approach to resolving the problems of Okinawa, therefore, should be to undertake substantial efforts at historical and military reassurance (Midford 2002). Greater acceptance of a more objective historical narrative of Japan’s actions in Okinawa during the war would begin the process of providing historical reassurance to the prefecture. Any such initiative would, of course, generate controversy within Japan. Military reassurance would also be more difficult. It would depend on historical reassurance as a starting point, but would also require a process of defense normalization on Japan’s part. Japan needs to demonstrate to Okinawa, however, that it is part of a “normal nation” that will act in its defense. To do this, it needs to build a “track record” as a provider of national defense, potentially in the face of the Chinese implying that Japan’s claim over Okinawa could be questionable (Japan Times 8 May 2013; New York Times 8 May 2013; Asahi Shimbun 9 May 2013). Japan lacks this record today because its military reassurance strategy for the region has relied on the US providing a conditional deterrent – one predicated upon “capping the bottle” of Japanese militarism to reassure Japan’s neighbors. Japan now needs to move away from this legacy, in the process taking up more of its own defense (including of Okinawa) and not simply relinquishing the task to the US. Acknowledgement and recognition of historical issues by the Japanese government, as painful as it may be, along with a clear commitment to the defense of Okinawan waters, may help assuage the opposition in Okinawa.

Addressing all of these issues will require a level of skill in diplomacy and policy calibration that may be beyond the capacity of the Abe administration to cultivate (e.g., Japan Times 9 March 2013). Indeed, there is much to suggest that Japan’s current government has a limited understanding of the historical issues, let alone a clear approach to resolving them. Abe’s behavior during his first stint as prime minister was deeply problematic on this front (Envall 2011). Worrying signs have also appeared early in his second term, such as the Restoration of Sovereignty Day and the so-called “comfort women” issue (Asahi Shimbun 1 February 2013). They are being compounded by the more extreme nationalism in Japan, which has become highly critical of Okinawan protests over the base issue (Asahi Shimbun 30 April 2013).
Nonetheless, there are multiple areas where the government could pursue a more proactive policy. Initially, the Japanese government must shift its engagement of Okinawa from simply one of “stick and carrot” developmentalism to one where economic development is buttressed by proper historical reassurance involving some form of national reconciliation. The government should extricate itself from the orbit of what Kazuhiko Togo (2010, 82) terms the “assertive conservative right” in Japan, “those politicians and intellectuals whose political capital is based on justifying and honoring prewar Japan.” If the government were to distance itself from this assertive right and separate itself more clearly from debates over history, tensions in Okinawa could be reduced. Recent signs of this trend occurring have, in fact, been promising. After the uproar created in the mid-2000s as a result of the Japanese government deleting references to the role of the Imperial Army in mass suicides of Okinawans during the war, reference to these episodes was clearly included in the new round of textbook approvals. But the government should go further and begin removing itself more substantively from the approvals process (The Mainichi 27 March 2013). It should also seek to publicly repudiate whenever possible the kind of nationalist sentiments that have been directed towards Okinawans in recent times, as illustrated by nationalist protests in Tokyo in January 2013 (Asahi Shimbun 30 April 2013).

If more is done in terms of historical reconciliation, Okinawa’s opposition to the military presence in the prefecture might be reduced over time. More then becomes possible in terms of national strategy and defense. Building a better “track record” could be achieved if Japan were to assume greater responsibility for the country’s defense (in accordance with the new “dynamic defense” thinking). This might include a greater joint American–Japanese use of facilities in Okinawa, but it should also encompass the expansion of facilities operated by the JSDF. It should also entail the expansion of Japan’s alliance roles beyond surveillance and monitoring and more into areas of deterrence and defense. The process of base consolidation (excluding Futenma) that has occurred over the past decade might then become less arduous. Likewise, plans to deploy the JSDF to Yonaguni and Ishigaki islands southwest of the main Okinawa island might also be pursued more vigorously. These plans could be further developed to include broader Marines-type operations (Asahi Shimbun 1 September 2010).

**CONCLUSION**

Even during this period of great change in Asia, Okinawa remains strategically important. It is central to the US–Japan alliance, and thus forms a key part of the United States’ “pivot” towards Asia and Japan’s “dynamic defense” strategy. The interests...
of the alliance, however, would benefit from greater internal tranquility, suggesting that resolution of the type of political problems discussed here needs to remain a priority for the two governments.

We have argued here that the Japanese government needs to take a more active role in alleviating these political problems. Indeed, the central challenge for Tokyo is to overcome the country’s “credibility gap” in Okinawa, which is the result of the government’s unwillingness to extend adequate sensitivity toward Okinawa’s historical identity or to consolidate current defense commitments. We have outlined some broad suggestions that might be adopted as part of such a “reassurance” strategy, including historical reconciliation and defense normalization. If the Japanese government developed a more balanced and judicious approach to these issues, it might reduce these persistent problems in Okinawa and deliver a greater level of stability to the region. Reorienting national strategy and strengthening the alliance would be demonstrably easier under such conditions, although the political courage needed to undertake such reforms in the face of domestic opposition need to be significant.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHORS

H. D. P. (David) Envall is a Research Fellow in the Department of International Relations at The Australian National University. Dr Envall’s research interests include Japan’s post-war security politics and Asia-Pacific security.

Kerri Ng is a PhD Candidate in the Department of International Relations at The Australian National University. Ms Ng’s research interests include the US–Japan alliance, the Okinawan base issue, and foreign policy analysis.

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CONTACT THE EDITOR

David Envall
Editor
ANU–MASI Policy Background Paper Series
Department of International Relations
School of International, Political & Strategic Studies
College of Asia & the Pacific
The Australian National University
E-mail: anumasi@anu.edu.au
http://asi.anu.edu.au/papers


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