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Okinawa and the U.S. Military in Northeast Asia

By Tim Shorrock

From July 21-23, the Japanese government is sponsoring the 2000 Summit of the Group of Eight (G8) industrialized democratic nations in the coastal city of Nago on the southern island of Okinawa. The G8, comprising the seven largest industrialized nations plus Russia, meet every year to discuss key economic and security issues.

Staging the G8 meeting in Okinawa—home to two of the largest U.S. bases and the only U.S. Marine base outside the United States—was a deliberate strategy on the part of the Japanese government and its ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Both Tokyo and Washington hope to use the G8 meeting to demonstrate that their bilateral security alliance is stable and lasting. The Okinawa summit, Japan has said, will send out "a message of peace." But as Japanese activist and writer Muto Ichiyo says, "The underlying message is clear: Bases mean Peace."

Key Points

- The G8 Summit in Okinawa, Japan's southernmost prefecture, focuses world attention on the huge U.S. military presence in Northeast Asia.
- Okinawa is considered the "linchpin" of U.S. military strategy in Asia and is home to 75% of the 63,000 U.S. soldiers stationed in Japan.
- Okinawans resent U.S. forces for occupying precious farm land, staging dangerous and noisy military exercises, contaminating the environment and committing thousands of crimes and sexual assaults on civilians—the latest being the alleged molestation in early July of a 14-year-old schoolgirl by a drunken U.S. Marine.

Okinawa, a small island with a population of 1.2 million, has been occupied by U.S. forces since the end of World War II, when the island was the scene of a horrific, three-month battle that killed 160,000 people. For centuries, until it was annexed by Japan in 1865, it was an independent, peaceful kingdom (known as Ryukyu) with its own language and culture. Although the U.S. officially turned over the island to Japan in 1972, Okinawa has remained a massive U.S. military base—a "cold war island" in the words of Chalmers Johnson, an expert on Japanese economics and politics who has written widely on Okinawa. Starting in 1945, U.S. troops forced thousands of Okinawans off their lands to build military bases; not one piece of land has ever been returned. When landlords and farmers who lost their land challenged U.S. control several years ago, the Japanese courts ruled that Japan has no jurisdiction over U.S. military operations.

Constituting only 0.6% of Japan's land space, Okinawa houses 75% of the 63,000 U.S. troops stationed in Japan on 39 bases—one of the largest concentrations of U.S. forces anywhere in the world. The heart of U.S. operations is Kadena Air Base, the largest U.S. military facility outside of the continental U.S., occupying 83% of the territory of Kadena, a city of 30,000.

Six years ago, the brutal rape of a 12-year-old girl by three U.S. Marines sparked massive protests from Okinawans demanding the removal of the U.S. bases. In response, the U.S. and Japan promised to move one of the bases, the Futenma Marine Corps Air Station, to the Japanese mainland. When that plan fizzled, the U.S. and Japanese governments agreed to relocate the heliport in Nago—the site of the current G8 summit. The Japanese government has promised to pump 100 billion yen into Nago over the next 10 years in exchange for the base relocation. Japan's support for U.S. forces, according to the Pentagon, is the most generous of any U.S. ally, averaging about $5 billion each year.

That promise played a crucial role in Okinawan gubernatorial elections seven months ago, when Keiichi Inamine, an LDP-backed businessman, defeated the incumbent governor, Masahide Ota, a fierce opponent of the U.S. bases. Inamine's support for the base relocation plan prevented a confrontation between Tokyo and Washington and won him huge support from the LDP, which used his campaign to launch a counteroffensive against Gov. Ota and the tens of thousands of Okinawan citizens who have permanently lost their lands and farms to U.S. bases.

Many Okinawans believe the 1994 rape was just the tip of the iceberg. Since 1988, Navy and Marine Corps bases in Japan (almost all of them in Okinawa) have registered the highest number—169—of court-martial cases for sexual assault of all U.S. military bases worldwide. And despite attempts by the Pentagon to control its soldiers, the violence against women continues. In early July 2000, the island was again in an uproar after a U.S. Marine was accused of molesting a 14-year-old schoolgirl after sneaking into her unlocked apartment in Okinawa City.

The Okinawa summit is the first meeting of world leaders following April's World Bank and IMF meetings in Washington and November's gathering of the World Trade Organization. It will draw thousands of protesters, including a few groups eager to repeat the antiglobalization demonstrations that disrupted the WTO meeting last fall. But the primary focus of the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) coming to Okinawa will be the U.S. bases.

Problems with Current U.S. Policy

According to a 1998 statement by the Department of Defense (DOD), U.S. bases in Japan and Korea "remain the critical component of U.S. deterrent and rapid response strategy in Asia" that "enables the U.S. to respond more rapidly and flexibly in other areas." In addition, "Japanese peacetime host nation support remains the most generous of any of America's allies around the world, averaging about $5 billion each year."

Strangely, the climate shrouding the U.S.-Japanese military alliance, is more warlike than during most of the cold war. What should have logically followed the demise of the Soviet Union (and the subsequent economic collapse of North Korea) was a peace dividend that would take the form of a reduction in forward-deployed U.S. troops and bases, a review of cold war-based alliances, a search for alternative security arrangements, and steps toward denuclearization and demilitarization of the region.

At one point, such a scenario was in the works; a decade ago, the Pentagon was planning to cut back to "a minimal presence" in Japan by 2000. But exactly the opposite has happened. Under new U.S.-Japanese defense guidelines approved in May 1999, the bilateral military relationship between Japan and the U.S. has deepened significantly. Japan has agreed to make its ports, airports, hospitals, and transportation system available to U.S. forces during a war in Korea and join U.S. military operations in "areas surrounding Japan"—a broad description that U.S. officials say could involve Japanese involvement in situations from East Asia to the Persian Gulf.

The turning point for U.S. policy in Asia came in 1995, when the DOD, in a major reversal, committed the U.S. to an indefinite "forward deployment" of 100,000 troops in Northeast Asia, subject to review in 2015. The author of the Pentagon's study was Joseph Nye, a former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs during the Bush administration. Nye explained that U.S. officials had decided to halt the reductions because of a reassessment of "the realities of the region" following the demise of the Soviet Union. These realities include the rise of China, new dangers from North Korea, and a new set of concerns led by uncertainty, regional conflicts, and rogue states.

"Alliances can be adopted for a post-cold war era, not against a particular enemy but as a guarantor of security," Nye told the Tokyo Foreign Correspondents Club in September 1994. He explained that "the U.S.-Japan alliance is not against a particular adversary but against a situation where countries in the region might feel pushed to arm themselves against each other and against uncertainty." Nye concluded that there is a "need for a strong forward United States military presence in the Asia-Pacific region to protect vital American interests."

U.S. policy has not changed despite the vast changes under way in Asia, particularly the historic rapprochement between South and North Korea. In June, South Korean President Kim Dae Jung and North Korean President Kim Jong Il met in Pyongyang and established a framework to end the state of war between the two Koreas, to begin economic cooperation, and to create institutions that will allow the two countries to slowly begin the process of unifying into a single nation.

After those meetings, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright argued against any changes in U.S. policy. "With the American forces in Okinawa, there are forces here in the region that help provide stability," she said. Pressed on the need for U.S. troops after peace comes to Korea, she said: "It is very clear the United States is a Pacific power…that our forces, when they are stationed somewhere, provide evidence of American interest." Regarding U.S. alliance structures with South Korea and Japan, she said "it is essential that we fulfill our responsibilities, and I don't think we put a time limit on our responsibilities or on pursuing our national interest."

While North Korea is fading as the primary focus of the U.S. military alliance with Japan and South Korea, the possibility of a future conflict with China is emerging as a threat in the eyes of U.S. military planners. In its latest planning document, "Joint Vision 2020," the Pentagon for the first time listed China as a potential adversary (couched in the phrase "peer competitor"). The document also foresees closer coordination with Japan and projects U.S. troop presence in Korea even after unification, and it concludes that Asia will replace Europe as the key focus of U.S. military strategy over the next 20 years. The *Washington Post*, called the policies a "momentous change from the last decade of the cold war."

U.S. hostility toward China is not confined to the Pentagon. A few months ago, China became the lightning rod for critics of U.S. trade policy, when the House of Representatives voted to approve permanent normal trade status for China. A coalition of unions, religious organizations, and consumer groups led by the AFL-CIO and Public Citizen joined with groups on the right such as the Family Research Council and the Veterans of Foreign Wars to mount a vigorous campaign that portrayed China as a "rogue" nation and an enemy of the United States.

Their arguments went far beyond trade. "This is the same communist China we faced 50 years ago in Korea," George Becker, president of the United Steelworkers of America said in a speech to business groups before the vote. "Tens of thousands of American boys are now in military encampments around China, on the sea, in the air and on the ground. And for good reason." By using language like that, opponents of trade with China—unwittingly or not—have allied themselves with the Pentagon and with proponents of keeping American forces in Asia.

Key Problems

- The U.S. decided in 1995 to retain and bolster the 100,000 U.S. troops in Northeast Asia indefinitely, subject to review in 2015.
- Washington justifies its continued deployment by citing the danger of war in Korea, alleged threats from China, a vague need to "provide evidence of American interest," and potential future problems, such as general uncertainty and regional conflicts.
- Despite the historic peace summit between the leaders of North and South Korea in June, the U.S. continues to argue for an indefinite presence of U.S. troops in Korea.

Toward a New Foreign Policy

The vast U.S. military infrastructure in Northeast Asia is a remnant of the cold war. But it also supports U.S. economic interests like multinational corporations and banks—the primary forces behind globalization. Those interests were neatly defined in the 1997 DOD study, *A National Security Strategy for a New Century*. In its global security policies, the Pentagon said that the U.S. seeks "a climate where the global economy and open trade are growing." "The overall health of the international economic environment directly affects our security, just as stability enhances the prospects for prosperity," the Pentagon contended. "This prosperity, a goal in itself, also ensures that we are able to sustain our military forces, foreign initiatives and global influence," it added.

Key Recommendations

- The Okinawa G8 meeting provides an opportunity to rethink U.S. security policies in Asia and begin the process of withdrawing forward-based U.S. ground forces from Japan and Korea.
- The U.S. should begin the process by renegotiating Status of Forces Agreements with Japan and South Korea, so U.S. soldiers can be tried by local courts for crimes against civilians in those countries.
- U.S. policymakers and activists concerned about U.S. policy in Asia should focus on how the U.S. military is used to protect the global system of corporate trade.

Over the past several years, trade unionists, human rights organizations, students, and religious groups have built a movement to create an alternative to globalization by ending labor exploitation and imposing rules to protect workers and the environment. Instead of promoting positive change, these critics say, globalization is destabilizing.

While laying bare the implications of corporate domination of trade, however, the center-left coalition of U.S. groups opposing free trade has focused almost exclusively on the socioeconomic implications of globalization, ignoring its military aspects. In other words, the nexus between economic globalization and military globalization has not been identified and exposed—in fact, it has hardly been criticized.

But it is clear from recent events in Asia that U.S. military strategy further destabilizes as it seeks to "shape" the world in its interests, suppressing expressions of instability by employing nuclear deterrence, selective armed intervention, economic sanctions, and diplomatic pressures.

In a post-cold war world—where peace is being negotiated in Korea and the U.S. has the capability of bombing Kosovo with warplanes from Missouri air bases—the military logic of keeping tens of thousands of U.S. Marines, Army, Air Force, and Navy personnel on mainland Japan and South Korea is quickly disappearing. And despite talk of missile threats from both China and North Korea, the U.S. retains an enormous arsenal of atomic and conventional weapons that could overwhelm both countries. In any case, even if there were a missile threat in this region, the Third Marine Division in Okinawa would be helpless to prevent it.

The Okinawa G8 meeting is thus an opportunity to rethink U.S. policies in Asia, analyze the relationship between economic and military globalization, and devise new definitions of security. As a first step, the U.S. should use the peace process now under way in Korea to begin reducing the U.S. force structure in South Korea. After North and South Korea establish a process to avoid and defuse future confrontations, the U.S. forces on the border with North Korea could be deployed further south and eventually sent home.

Thus far, this idea has only drawn support from conservatives. Speaking of the recent peace talks in Korea, Sen. Jesse Helms, R-NC and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, recently said: "If it's a temporary lull, we'll have to leave those people (U.S. troops) there for a while. But if it's for real, then we ought to make plans to bring those folks home."

The U.S. should also be scaling down its presence in Okinawa, first by shutting down the Air Force bases in Kadena and Futenma and relocating those forces to U.S. bases in Guam or California. It should set a schedule for withdrawing Special Forces and Marines as well. Rather than moving the Marine base at Futenma to another site in Okinawa, it should close the base and relocate it to the mainland United States.

At the same time, U.S. policymakers and activists committed to improving terms of trade and creating fairness for workers should focus not only on the multilateral institutions backed by multinational corporations, such as the World Bank and the IMF, but also on the U.S. institutions behind them, such as the U.S. Treasury and the Pentagon. Attention should also be focused on how the U.S. military is used to protect the global system of corporate trade; America must instead seek new forms of security that don't require a vast system of military bases and trillions of dollars in expensive weapons systems.

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