

Japan Chair Seminar on U.S. Military Global Posture Review and Okinawa
June 21, 2005

Summary

The Office of the Japan Chair hosted a seminar on the U.S. military global posture review and the future of Okinawa on June 21, 2005. Those in attendance heard from Yuji Uesugi, vice executive director of the Okinawa Peace Assistance Center; Tsuneo Watanabe, senior fellow in the Economics and Industry Analysis Department at Mitsui Global Strategic Studies Institute; and James Przystup, professor at the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University.

Yuji Uesugi

Yuji Uesugi began the seminar by discussing issues within Okinawa. His organization, whose goal is to facilitate dialogue among the various stakeholders in Okinawa, seeks to reduce the excessive burden shouldered by the local population. Approximately 20 percent of the island is occupied by U.S. facilities, and this presence affects the daily lives of the people of Okinawa. Burdens include land issues (bases are located in the center of urban areas), noise issues (from planes and helicopters), and accidents and incidents (such as the 1995 rape and the helicopter crash at Okinawa International University in 2004). Uesugi briefly went over other key events, such as the 1996 report of the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) and the 2004 agreement by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and President George W. Bush to reduce the burden in Okinawa. Uesugi expressed the growing frustration of Okinawans who, more than eight years after the creation of SACO, have experienced almost no change in their daily lives.

Regarding future prospects, Uesugi declared that the solution must accommodate three main goals: rapid deployment, integration of four services, and U.S.-Japan joint operations. Removal of troops, specifically the U.S. Marine Corps (which makes up 70 percent of the troop presence in Okinawa) would be the easiest way to reduce the burden; moving and rebuilding seaports would be more difficult. With that in mind, he presented various unofficial options, listing what units would remain, number of troops reduced, and relocation sites. He stated that the options of leaving the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) and reducing troops by 1,800 to 5,000 or 4,600 to 20,000, with Fuji, Yausubetsu, Guam, Hijudai, and Higashichitose as relocation sites, are the most probable ones.

Furthermore, Uesugi noted that many Okinawans still think the relocation of Futenma is crucial to relieving the burden. However, it is extremely difficult to find a relocation site due to overwhelming opposition by local populations. It is also costly and time consuming to build new bases. Thus he suggested the use of existing bases, such as Kadena Air Base and Ie Island, where there are unused airfields. The United States seems to welcome relocation to Kadena, and some Okinawans support Kadena because the danger of Futenma will be quickly eliminated, and if the noise level does not change, the people of Kadena are willing to negotiate. Uesugi also suggested that the Japanese

participate in U.S.-Japan joint operations and the use of sea bases to decrease the U.S. Navy's dependence on land facilities.

In conclusion, Uesugi stated that in order to implement any change, a strong link between Okinawa and the rest of Japan must be established. He stressed the need for strong political leadership.

Tsuneo Watanabe

Tsuneo Watanabe focused on Japanese domestic politics in relation to Okinawa. He began by saying that not many people in Japan know a great deal about domestic politics. Even though Okinawa is crucial to the future of U.S.-Japan relations, its implications and importance are not widely known.

Watanabe described the basic structure of the Japanese political system, emphasizing that the "1955 system" is in a phase of enormous transition; he stated that the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is marked by "serious corruption." Under the old system, the Communists and Socialists were always in opposition to the LDP, preventing any fruitful discussion on improving security policy; now, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) must create realistic options to move the debate forward.

In the past, Okinawa had been a hot issue at the top of politicians' agendas. The Hashimoto faction was the power center when the SACO report was issued in 1996; Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto and Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi both used huge amounts of political capital to solve the issue. Now, public attention is low, and there is no political center on Okinawa. Koizumi's cabinet is more active than he is, and Taku Yamasaki is in charge of the Okinawa issue. However, he is also in charge of the prime minister's greatest priority—the privatization of postal services. Watanabe also noted that Fukushima Nukaga, former defense minister, is another center of power regarding Okinawa.

While the Hashimoto faction operated on networking and vested interests, Koizumi destroyed this kind of system. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is making progress on Okinawa difficult. The new SACO process may have a grim future, for Koizumi does not have enough political capital to implement changes. The United States is expecting to resolve the issue, so by next year Watanabe predicts that Koizumi will be a "lame duck."

Watanabe then discussed the nature of the U.S.-Japan alliance. The United States and Japan defined the cooperation area for the defense of Japan to be "Japan and its surrounding areas." However, as Japan's responsibility and the nature of the threats it faces change, this cooperation area is expanding. There is no consensus on how to interpret the new situation, and creating a new definition of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty would take a tremendous amount of political capital. The question underlying this debate is: what kind of role should Japan play in its alliance with the United States? It is up to the Japanese people to decide.

James Przystup

James Przystup stated that the Okinawa issue is still a process in motion, and there are still several loose ends. Looking at the bigger picture, the U.S. global posture review (GPR) is a part of a greater transformation of the U.S. military in the post-9/11 environment. The GPR seeks to transform the military from implementing static defense to playing more of an expeditionary role. The military seeks to expand allied roles and responsibilities, reduce frictions with host nations, and create greater operational agility. The overarching goal is to easily integrate dispersed forces using today's most advanced technology—the emphasis is on capabilities as opposed to numbers.

The future will revolve around the fact that Japan and the United States have common strategic objectives; this attitude was apparent in the “two-plus-two” statement presented in February of this year. Threats to Japan are very global in nature, and thus the alliance is becoming more global. The deployment of ships to the Indian Ocean and troops to Iraq are examples of this trend; compared to the first Gulf War, Japan's role has increased significantly.

Regarding Okinawa, Przystup summed up the current political reality by stating, “we'll always have Okinawa.” With the disconnect between Japanese politics and Okinawa politics, it is almost impossible to implement changes. Bush and Koizumi's pledge to reduce burdens is nice, but it has little substantive meaning. This is because the value of Okinawa is increasing with respect to the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, and the war on terror. It is crucial for the United States to have readily deployable, expeditionary forces in Okinawa. Przystup also noted that the possibility of relocation to Kadena is more and more talked about. In time, some reduction of the U.S. military presence will occur, but it will not be the amount that Okinawans want.

Q&A

Q: Has anyone quantified the advantages and disadvantages, cost and profits, of having a U.S. military presence in Okinawa over the past 60 years?

Uesugi: No. Another think tank has assessed the impact of the U.S. presence on Okinawa's economy, but the cost is difficult to quantify. Such an effort would involve “what if” situations, such as asking, “if there was no air base, what can we build instead?” and so on.

Q: Is the constitutional debate related to the Okinawa issue?

Watanabe: Current Self-Defense Forces (SDF) operations could be described as exercising the right to collective self-defense. An amendment is required, but realistically, doing so could make it more difficult to accept the current situation. The priorities of the Koizumi government are different from those of the LDP—the anti-Koizumi LDP; there is no consensus.

Q: Is the Futenma relocation ever going to happen? People will complain anywhere the relocation occurs.

Uesugi: Relocation to offshore bases will attract non-Okinawan demonstrators and create international opposition. It is too expensive to build new facilities, so it is better to move to existing bases.

Q: Is the U.S. military willing to risk potential dangers and opposition to keep Futenma?

Przystup: Futenma is seen as a very dangerous situation. It is an accident waiting to happen, and the effects on the alliance could be very severe. But we have to consider where to go after leaving Futenma. And in the post-9/11 world, Okinawa is very important, so some kind of negotiation is necessary.

Q: Has Shimoji Island been considered as a relocation site?

Uesugi: Shimoji is too far away for the marines, and it is too close to China.

Q: What about Ie Jima?

Uesugi: The water around Ie Island is very deep, and the marines want a bridge built for commuting, which will be very expensive. But Ie Island has two unused airfields, about 40 kilometers from the main island.

Q: What is the most probable option that the United States and Japan will take?

Uesugi: Options 4 and 5 (leaving the 31st MEU, reducing troops by 1,800 to 5,000 or 4,600 to 20,000 with relocation to Fuji, Guam, Yausubetsu, Hijudai, and Higashichitose) are most likely now that Bush and Koizumi have pledged that the burden will be reduced. Options 1 through 3 (leaving more forces in Okinawa, relocation to Henoko) will not be satisfactory for local residents.