U.S. Military Bases in Post-Soviet Central Asia
Economic Lessons from Okinawa

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The new United States and coalition force military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, established in 2002, have not attracted much media attention in the West. Yet as we know from cases elsewhere in the world, the presence of U.S. troops can sometimes serve as a flashpoint for political protest and unrest. In places ranging from Korea to Puerto Rico, U.S. military bases have sometimes been seen in the local popular imagination to represent the heavy hand of foreign imperialism. In Saudi Arabia, the very fact of the U.S. military presence probably helped ignite militant Islamic terrorism.

Yet the stationing of troops abroad remains an important component of U.S. military strategy, especially in the ongoing struggle against terrorism and instability in the Middle East and Central Asia. It is therefore worth considering whether there are actions that U.S. authorities can take to minimize the negative impact of those bases, and strengthen the likelihood that their presence will be welcomed by locals. The experience of U.S. military bases in Okinawa provides some important lessons in this regard.

The Okinawa Example

The U.S. bases in the Japanese prefecture of Okinawa—a semi-tropical island located far from the Japanese mainland—have received a great deal of negative publicity over the years. There have been several horrific accidents and crimes associated with the bases, most notably a 1965 parachute drop that missed its target and killed a young girl in the yard of her home, and the brutal 1995 abduction and rape of a 12-year-old schoolgirl by three drunken U.S. servicemen. Indeed, the local inhabitants of Okinawa engage in frequent protest actions against the U.S. bases, involving street demonstrations, letter-writing campaigns to political authorities in Tokyo, and press exposés centered on environmental and safety concerns. As anyone who has been to Okinawa can attest, the base presence in the prefecture (including everything from fenced-off tracts of land to the rowdy weekend behavior of U.S. Marine recruits) is overwhelmingly large, and the noise of overhead flight exercises is an unpleasant distraction on some areas of the island.

What becomes clear, however, through an in-depth study of the situation is that much of the protest activity is staged. While occasional terrible events associated with the bases have occurred, provoking genuine and understandable rage in the population, both public opinion polls and the prefecture's recent electoral history demonstrate that a majority of

Okinawans want the U.S. military presence to be maintained. What explains this seeming puzzle, where protests against the bases are common but the locals want the bases to stay?

It turns out that when locals engage in such protests, Tokyo makes "burden payments" to the municipalities and prefectural government of Okinawa in return for their inhabitants' willingness to tolerate the base presence. The louder the protests, the more the pay-off increases. So while some of the protests reflect genuine anger, many base-related issues are reportedly blown out of proportion by local leaders for economic reasons. A lot of the protests are themselves "scripted," according to U.S. base and consular officials—the Americans are notified of where the protests will be held by protest organizers in advance, and the demonstrators move along regular circuits where at each stop, their demands are politely read aloud and the Americans are handed a written copy in both English and Japanese. These protests succeed in getting money out of the government of Japan, because Tokyo's greatest fear is that the United States might actually pick up and leave, and relocate its bases in the U.S. territory of Guam, for example. The pay-off to Okinawans ensures that the protests never become overwhelming, and also ensures that the locals have a stake in the U.S. presence. If the United States were to withdraw its military presence from Okinawa—strategically located off the coast of Taiwan, and within easy range of North Korea—the government of Japan would have to go through the politically hazardous process of modifying its constitution, whose Article 9 prevents Japan from having armed forces capable of going on the offense abroad.

What this means for the locals is that a large number of economic interest groups benefit from the base presence, and many people are employed who would otherwise be out of work in Japan's poorest prefecture. Although bases everywhere in the world attract a thriving local retail sector catering to troops, Okinawa is unique in the variety of economic sectors it draws in. The bases themselves are mostly located on private land commandeered at the end of World War II, and the landowners get above-market (and ever-increasing) rents from the Tokyo government for tolerating this situation. On several of the bases, the landowners are allowed to have so-called "tacit farmers" grow soybeans, sugarcane, sweet potatoes, and other crops in areas near the gate periphery, and hence the owners gain double rent for their property. Furthermore, the municipal and prefectural governments in Okinawa have unexpectedly well-appointed public facilities, including beautifully designed cultural and recreational centers, swimming pools, and practical things such as garbage processing plants, which are built mostly by local construction companies under budgetary contracts originating in Tokyo. And local companies provide on-base construction and other contractual services, too, including secretaries, interpreters, and civil affairs liaisons.

Lessons for U.S. Bases in Central Asia

What does this example have to do with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan? The unique triangular economic relationship between Washington (which gets its Okinawan bases essentially for free), Tokyo (which gets the U.S. security guarantee in return), and the local Okinawan authorities (who get the burden payments) is unlikely to be repeated

elsewhere. And of course, Japan, unlike Central Asia, is not threatened by Islamic militancy and terrorism.

Nonetheless, the Okinawan experience suggests an important political lesson. If the United States wants its bases to be accepted by a critical mass of the local population—people who will act to support the continuation of the base presence, even though they may object to the real problems that accompany the bases—it must appeal to the broadest variety of local economic interests possible. Sometimes it is assumed that U.S. military bases abroad support primarily burger joints, bars, and prostitutes. Okinawa shows that this does not have to be the only economic legacy of the U.S. troop presence.

Reaching out to a broad variety of local economic interests—through construction contracts, agricultural purchases for food supplies, and hiring of service personnel (not merely well educated translators and office staff, but also custodial and cafeteria workers who need no special skills or training)—is a way to gain continuing local support for the U.S. presence. In countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, which are going through massive social changes in the post-Soviet atmosphere under authoritarian governments, it is especially important that the United States target a wide-ranging set of ordinary local people for its economic interactions. The worst mistake the United States could make in Central Asia would be to associate itself economically with the ruling clans and families, who are widely known for their corrupt behavior, while ignoring the ordinary people who are struggling to get by.

Helping to Solve the Authoritarian Dilemma

Indeed, reaching out to locals may be one way for the United States to demonstrate that it is not in these countries primarily to prop up the unpopular antidemocratic regimes that are now in place. A great dilemma that the United States faces is the fact that for security reasons in the fight against terrorism, U.S. troops need to be based in areas of the world whose rulers regularly violate western human rights norms. Kyrgyzstan's leader in particular, President Askar Akaev, has portrayed the U.S. presence in his country as a reward for his so-called anti-terrorist actions, which have included arbitrary arrests and inhumane jailing practices, and have alienated pious Muslims. Although the United States has tried to criticize Akaev's human rights policies, Washington needs him more than he needs Washington; the military presence of both Russia and China have been increasing in the country, and Akaev evidently enjoys playing the big powers off of each other. The United States, then, risks provoking Islamic militancy by its very basing presence in Kyrgyzstan, and its hands are largely tied in responding to Akaev's brutal excesses.

Perhaps the best way to solve this dilemma is to demonstrate to the local population that the U.S. military can be a force for good in Central Asia. U.S. civil affairs officers are undoubtedly already engaged in humanitarian assistance programs in these countries, which help convey this message. Bringing a broad swath of local economic interests on board may be the best way to make the message louder.