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Obama Out of Okinawa

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In a momentous about-face, Japan has revamped her defense strategy to address Chinese threats to Japan's southern islands rather than Russian threats to Japan's northernmost islands. The change comes as tensions between North and South Korea have caused Prime Minister Naoto Kan to patch strained relations between Japan and South Korea and to align Japanese policy with American interests.

Just months ago, Obama guaranteed the political demise of Yukio Hatoyama, Japan's former prime minister, when the U.S. prevailed in the Futenma base dispute in Okinawa despite local and indeed national resistance in Japan. At the heart of the dispute were plans to relocate the U.S. military base – known as Futenma – from its current location to a site supposedly more ideal for Okinawans.

During the dispute, the Obama administration took to media outlets to discredit Hatoyama, who staked his reputation and career on removing American military bases and whose approval ratings in Japan plummeted as a result. The Japanese people have, since WWII, avoided confrontation with America and the West, and Hatoyama's unpopularity had much to do with this deference.

Although Okinawans continue to protest the American military presence on their island, Prime Minister Kan only passingly acknowledges their opposition. While visiting Okinawa last week, he failed to convince Okinawans of the necessity of relocating Futenma, and protesters mocked him as he flew over the proposed beachfront site of relocation. Along the sand, protesters arranged strands of fabric to read "No base on the beach."

Obama has enjoyed the freedom to manipulate policies in Japan (and in Okinawa particularly) without facing high levels of media scrutiny in America. This Nobel Peace Prize winner also has mobilized American forces and staged war games in Korea in a way that a post-2003 George W. Bush, whose foreign policy was held under a media microscope, never could have pulled off. Obama has informed poverty-stricken Okinawans that they will benefit from the continued American military presence, but that's a tough sell for a population faced with high crime rates coming from U.S. troops, destruction of coastlines to make way for further base construction, pollution spewing from military facilities, and culture clashes with U.S. troops and officials.

Not only did Obama virtually unseat the leader of a foreign nation that purports to be one of America's closest allies, he also caused Japan to call into question the legitimacy of Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, an American-designed provision that forbids the threat or use of Japanese military force. The mainstream American media, infatuated with Kim Jong-il and his marching minions in Pyongyang, seems to have overlooked Obama's military orchestrations in Okinawa and southern Japan.

Obama, moreover, has meddled in the affairs of a sovereign nation and has successfully engineered that nation's foreign policy with little to no resistance by American antiwar activists or American taxpayers. Perhaps American taxpayers have remained silent because Okinawans foot much of the bill for amenities on the local American base even though, of all the regions of Japan, Okinawa is the least capable of paying.

Prime Minister Kan has faced a number of difficulties since assuming office, not least of which was reorganizing Hatoyama's cabinet. The growing rift between Japan and China has tested his diplomatic dexterity while he has bowed to Obama's demands at the expense of Okinawans' best interests. Whenever the Obama administration wants to have its way with the Japanese, it simply recites lines about the dangers of China and North Korea, and Japanese leaders give in. But many Japanese are tired of Americans telling them what to do, and leaders such as Kan are finding themselves increasingly unable to please both their constituents and the U.S.

This is not to say that China and North Korea are not threats to Japan. They are. North Korean missile provocations are frequent and well-documented. No less serious are Chinese provocations that go unnoticed by many (if not most) Americans. In September, for instance, the arrest of a

Chinese fishing boat captain whose boat collided with the Japanese Coast Guard – an event known as the Senkaku Boat Collision Incident – drew the ire of Chinese leaders and reignited territorial disputes over the Senkaku Islands. Chinese patrol vessels and submarines have floated ominously in that region ever since, prompting U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to pledge unremitting American support for Japan. Obama can now cast his base maneuvers in Okinawa as sudden rescue missions rather than as strategies of longstanding U.S. military occupation.

On Nov. 13, speaking at the InterContinental Yokohama Grand Hotel, Obama announced that he and Prime Minister Kan had affirmed their commitment to a U.S.-Japanese defense alliance. Obama stated, "Five decades of experience make this clear: Japan and the United States are stronger when we stand together. I'm pleased that our teams have completed an agreement in principle outlining Japan's commitment to host-nation support. ... The commitment of the United States to the defense of Japan is unshakable. Our alliances, bases, and forward presence are essential not only to Japan's security, but ... they help us ensure stability and address regional challenges across Northeast Asia." These lines echo years of American rhetoric about the necessity of a U.S. troop presence in Okinawa, but they come at a time when resistance to such a presence has never been stronger.

It is remarkable that just months ago, Japan's ties with China, though strained, were not as tense as they are today, and the Japanese were insisting that American troops leave Okinawa. After Obama forced Hatoyama out of office, the nature of Japanese foreign policy changed to meet Obama's demands. Under Japan's new defense strategy, U.S. and Japanese forces will unite to ward off aggressive Chinese boat maneuvers and to deter North Korean nuclear ambitions – both valid objectives, but objectives that Japan could accomplish without U.S. assistance.

As U.S. and Japanese forces and polices become increasingly entangled, several questions come to mind. Do the Chinese boat maneuvers in southern Japan and the North Korean nuclear ambitions have something to do with an ominous U.S. military presence in nearby Okinawa? Is it possible that rather than deterring conflict in Asia, the U.S. military presence in Japan and South Korea is provoking conflict? If Japan is capable of defending herself, why does America insist on doing it for her? Is it Obama's job to ensure that American troops remain in Japan so that the Japanese do not appear to be violating their own constitution, or is Obama a convenient scapegoat for Japanese politicians as Japan enhances and extends its military operations? Is Obama forcing Japan to invalidate Article 9, or is Obama an excuse for Japan to invalidate Article 9?

À la Leon Hadar, I would submit that "while I don't know many things, I am quite sure that the prospect of Japan and South Korea going nuclear will make it more likely than not that China will finally start acting like the responsible regional power that it claims to be." Japan and South Korea are capable of fending for themselves, but Obama seems to want to relieve these countries of the burden of self-protection. In Japan specifically, people would rather shoulder that burden without American military backing.

If America's allies can defend themselves and want to do so, America should let them. America should neither cause other countries to violate or dismantle their constitution nor give other countries reasons to blame her for the violation or dismantling of their constitution. If Japanese politicians are pressing forward with military operations despite the resistance of the Japanese people, Obama should not allow the U.S. to bear the blame.

Most of all, America should not continue to wear away Okinawan scenery, culture, and community. The poor Okinawans have had enough, just as Americans have had enough of Obama.

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