Americans, Japanese, and Okinawans have only rarely glimpsed into the inner workings of the huge American military bases in Okinawa for the past fifty-three years. These bases have been there for a considerably longer time than, for example, Japan’s Kwantung Army occupied Southern Manchuria. The Kwantung Army, based first in Port Arthur and then in Hsinking (Changchun), occupied part and ultimately annexed all of Manchuria during the period from Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1905) until the Soviet invasion of Manchuria in 1945. The Kwantung Army was the vanguard for Japan’s warmongering and belligerency during the 1930s and 1940s.

Similarly, the American military governed Okinawa from the Battle of Okinawa of 1945 until 1972 and has continued to maintain all its facilities and dominate the island under the Japanese-American Security Treaty since 1972. Throughout this period, the Americans have used Okinawa as their privileged sanctuary for wars in Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, and elsewhere. They are as much at home in Okinawa as the Japanese militarists were in their puppet state of Manchukuo and have more or less the same attitudes toward it as the Japanese did earlier toward their Chinese bastion.

Normally, an outside observer—whether Okinawan, Japanese, or American—hears nothing from the American high command on Okinawa other than the usual propaganda about how indispensable the American troops are to peace and security in East Asia. All the changes in East Asia since the Vietnam War—the death of Mao, the collapse of the USSR, starvation in North Korea, and the economic crisis that began in 1997—have not altered this situation in any way. The American commanders claim that their forces are there as guests of the Japanese, and they accept several billion dollars a year from the Japanese government to ensure they are housed and taken care of in a comfortable manner (on March 26, 1998, the Japanese Defense Facilities Administration Agency introduced in the Upper House of the Diet a list of 1,472 services for the U.S. troops that the Japanese government pays for, including golf-resort management, ice-cream making, manicurists, and many other benefits not paid for by American taxpayers). The American military engages in continuous propaganda about its being a “good neighbor” to the 1.3 million Okinawans whom it displaces, but it allows the Okinawans no say at all in how their territory is used (and misused).
In September 1995, the kidnapping and rape of a 12-year-old Okinawan girl by two American marines and a sailor seriously damaged this facade. There were the usual American delays in turning over the perpetrators to Japanese authorities (raising the threat that the Americans might simply spirit them back to the United States on military aircraft, as they had done so many times in the past). There was the pretense by high-ranking American officials in Tokyo and Washington that this “tragedy” was exceptional, although this was rather undercut by the Commander in Chief of American Forces in the Pacific, who publicly commented that if the rapists had not wasted their money renting a car, they could have purchased a “girl.” This led to a protest by 85,000 Okinawans and a prefecture-wide plebiscite, Japan’s first such vote, in which a majority of the voters called for the reduction and ultimate removal of foreign troops from Japanese soil.

In order to try to contain and deflect this movement while pretending to be responsive to it, the American and Japanese governments undertook several initiatives. These included postponing the scheduled visit of the American president to East Asia from the autumn of 1995 to the spring of 1996, so that he would not have to take immediate responsibility for what American troops and their officers had done. When President Clinton finally did meet Governor Masahide Ota of Okinawa at the April 1996 summit meeting in Tokyo, he contrived not to respond or to say anything to him at all.

Meanwhile, amid profuse apologies from lesser American officials, the U.S. and Japanese governments set up a Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) to recommend ways “to reduce the impact of U.S. military operations and training on the people of Okinawa.” In its final report of December 2, 1996, SACO recommended, among other things, that Futenma Marine Corps Air Station, located in central Okinawa and entirely surrounded by the city of Ginowan, be closed and that it be replaced by either a floating or an anchored, sea-borne airfield located slightly off-shore in northern Okinawa island.

This proposal became known as “the floating heliport,” and the chosen site was the small impoverished town of Nago in northern Okinawa—or, more exactly, its seacoast suburb of Henoko. Henoko, during the Vietnam War, was the site of the Camp Schwab marine base (still there but now little used), and so its citizens were presumed to be amenable to the return of the American troops, with their demand for bars, brothels, and brawls. It did not work out that way. The people of Nago organized another local plebiscite, held December 21, 1997, on whether they wanted a new military base built in their area and whether they were willing to accept the catastrophic environmental damage the experimental heliport would inflict on their fragile coral seas and marine life.

The local plebiscite, almost never used in Japan until the late 1990s, has become by far the most important institution in the country through which ordinary citizens can democratically express their will. Even though the Liberal Democratic Party tried to sabotage the vote by offering the voters four choices instead of the usual two and sent in officials of the Defense Agency and other ministries to try to buy votes with promises of subsidies, only 2,562 unambiguously favored the heliport and 16,254 voted unambiguously against it.
Tokyo can think of no alternative to the Nago heliport, least of all moving Marine Corps Air Station Futenma to a location on the Japanese mainland. It knows that opposition in mainland Japan would be as fierce as that in Okinawa but more effective, since it would involve mainstream Japanese rather than the exploited ethnic minority the people of Okinawa have become. Since the Nago plebiscite, the LDP has intervened in all mayoral elections in Okinawa to produce victories for people who are not opposed to the heliport, no doubt setting the stage for its attempt to topple Okinawa’s governor, Masahide Ota. Ota, who faces reelection in the fall of 1998, has been a thorn in Tokyo’s side ever since he refused to override the property rights of dissident Okinawan landlords who did not want to continue leasing their land for the use of American bases. Despite Ota’s very considerable reputation as a scholar, which elevates his national and international standing over any of his LDP critics, the Japanese central government and its press appendages, particularly the *Yomiuri*, attack and ridicule him in every possible way. Pentagon officials, usually half Ota’s age, have learned to copy the behavior of their counterparts in the Japanese Defense Agency.

Throughout this complex, contentious process, officials of the Pentagon have maintained a complete silence on the policy issues involved. Congress and the White House have been equally derelict in exercising any form of oversight over the Department of Defense on these matters—with one exception. Congressman Duncan Hunter, a Republican for California’s 52nd Congressional District located east of San Diego in El Cajon, California, and chairman of the House Military Procurement Committee asked the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) to look into the matter. Hunter was not concerned about the Okinawans, but he did want to know what impact the implementation of the SACO recommendations would have “on the readiness and training of U.S. forces stationed on Okinawa.”

The GAO report, entitled *Overseas Presence: Issues Involved in Reducing the Impact of the U.S. Military Presence on Okinawa: Report to the Honorable Duncan Hunter, House of Representatives* and dated March, 1998, constitutes the only publicly available document from the American government on its recent activities in Okinawa. Since this report received no known coverage in the American press or other news media and even its existence has only been reported in Okinawa and Japan, JPRI is hereby offering some excerpts.

The GAO report is important because it reveals that the proposed heliport relies on technology that has never been tested and that, for one configuration, does not even exist. It reveals that the heliport cannot perform the functions currently assigned to the base at Futenma. It reveals that the heliport will be vastly more expensive than Futenma and that the Japanese and American governments cannot agree on who will pay for it. It also reveals that the heliport will inflict serious environmental damage on northern Okinawa island and that officers of the Department of Defense know all these things and have chosen to remain silent.

The GAO conducted its research, including an on-site visit, from June 1997 to March 1998. It interviewed many Department of Defense and Department of State officials in
Why Are American Forces in Okinawa

Discontent among the people of Okinawa regarding the U.S. military presence and its impacts has been rising for years. The chief complaint is that the Okinawa prefecture hosts over half of the U.S. forces in Japan and that about 75 percent of the land U.S. forces occupy in Japan is on Okinawa. They also believe the U.S. presence has hampered economic development. (p. 2)

To demonstrate a commitment to peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region, the United States has about 47,000 servicemembers, about half of all U.S. forces deployed in the Pacific region, stationed in Japan. Of the 47,000 U.S. servicemembers in Japan, over half are based on Okinawa, a subtropical island about 67 miles long and from 2 to 18 miles wide, with coral reefs in many offshore locations. In fiscal year 1997, U.S. forces on Okinawa occupied 58,072 acres of the land in the Okinawa prefecture. (p. 14)

The Status of Forces Agreement, signed on the same day as the treaty [the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, signed in January 1960 by the United States and Japan], permits the United States to bring servicemembers and their dependents into Japan. . . . The agreement also (1) required the United States to return land to Japan when the land is no longer needed, (2) specifies that the United States will perform maintenance on bases it occupies in Japan, and (3) relieves the United States of the obligation to restore bases in Japan to the condition they were in when they became available to the United States. U.S. Forces-Japan (USFJ) has interpreted this latter provision to mean that the United States is not required to conduct environmental cleanup on bases it closes in Japan. (p. 15)

To determine DOD’s views on the benefit or necessity of having U.S. forces stationed on Okinawa, we interviewed officials and obtained relevant documents, including the Quadrennial Defense Review report. . . . Because it was outside the scope of our work, we did not evaluate any alternatives to forward deployment. However, in a June 1997 report, we concluded that DOD had not adequately considered alternatives to forward presence to accomplish its stated security objectives. (p. 19)
The III Marine Expeditionary Force, the primary Marine Corps component on Okinawa, consists of the (1) 3rd Marine Division, the ground combat component; (2) 1st Marine Air Wing, the air combat component; (3) 3rd Force Service Support Group, the logistics support component; and (4) command element. (p. 24)

Warehouses hold war reserve supplies on Okinawa that would support U.S. operations, including 14,400 tons of ammunition, 5,000 pieces of unit and individual equipment, and 50 million gallons of fuel. (p. 25)

MCAS Futenma’s primary mission is to maintain and operate facilities and provide services and materials to support Marine aircraft operations. MCAS Futenma covers 1,188 acres of land and is completely surrounded by the urbanized growth of Ginowan City. (p. 27)

The land at MCAS Futenma is leased from about 2,000 private landowners by the government of Japan. . . . MCAS Futenma has a runway and parallel taxiway that are about 9,000 feet long as well as an aircraft wash rack, maintenance facilities, vehicle maintenance facilities, fuel storage facilities, a hazardous waste storage and transfer facility, a control tower, an armory, and other facilities needed to operate a Marine Corps air station. (p. 29)

The Heliport

The U.S. and Japanese government established a working group to examine three options for replacing MCAS Futenma. The options were relocation of the air station onto (1) Kadena Air Base, (2) Camp Schwab, or (3) a sea-based facility to be located in the ocean offshore from Okinawa Island. . . . The government of Japan has decided to locate the sea-based facility offshore from Camp Schwab. However, at the time of our review some residents living near the propose site had opposed having the sea-based facility near their community, but U. S. officials are proceeding on the basis that the facility will be built. (p. 29)

The United States has established a runway length requirement of about 4,200 feet for the sea-based facility. Arresting gear would be located about 1,200 feet from either end of the runway to permit carrier aircraft to land. (p. 31)

During regular operations, about 66 helicopters and MV-22 aircraft (when fielded) would be stationed aboard the sea-based facility. The MV-22 can operate in either vertical takeoff and landing mode, like a helicopter, or short takeoff and landing mode, like an airplane. . . . The Pacific Command has established a 4,200-foot runway for all MV-22 operations based on aircraft performance and meteorological data. The Marine Corps study indicates that a 4,200-foot runway is sufficient for most training and mission requirements. However, the study also stated that for missions requiring an MV-22 gross weight near the maximum of 59,305 pounds, the aircraft would have to operate in its short takeoff mode and would require a runway of 5,112 feet under certain weather conditions. (p. 30)
The United States planned to locate the headquarters, logistics, and most operational facilities aboard the sea-based facility and most quality-of-life activities, including housing, food service, and medical and dental services, ashore at Camp Schwab. . . . Due to a lack of DOD dependent schools in the Camp Schwab area, only unmarried servicemembers will be housed at Camp Schwab. (p. 31)

A pontoon-type sea-based facility would essentially be a large platform that would float in the water on pontoons. The structure would be located about 3,000 feet from shore in about 100 feet of water. Part of the platform would be below the water line. To keep the sea relatively calm around the platform, a breakwater would be installed to absorb the wave action. *The breakwater would be constructed in about 60 feet of water atop a coral ridge.* . . . According to documents that we obtained, no floating structure of the size required has *ever been built.* In addition, Naval Facilities Engineering Command officials told us that construction of a breakwater in about 60 feet of water would be “at the edge of technical feasibility.” (pp. 32-34)

A pile-supported sea-based facility essentially would be a large platform supported by columns, or piles, driven into the sea floor. The structure would be located in about 16 feet to 82 feet of water and relatively closer to shore than the proposed pontoon-type sea-based facility. *According to Naval Engineers, about 7,000 piles would be needed to support a structure of the size proposed.* (p. 34)

*The semisubmersible sea-based facility relies on technology that does not yet exist,* according to documents provided by DOD. . . . Semisubmersible sea-based facilities are limited by current technology to about 1,000 feet in length. (pp. 36-7)

Technological challenges may arise because no sea-based facility of the type and scale envisioned has ever been built to serve as an air base. . . . *The sea-based facility would have to survive natural events such as typhoons, which strike within 180 nautical miles of Okinawa Island an average of four times a year.* During a typhoon, personnel would evacuate the sea-base facility, but the aircraft would remain aboard the facility in hangers to ride out the storm, according to 1st Marine Air Wing officials. (p. 38)

If Kadena Air Base is not available for MV-22 operations, the Marines would have no alternative U.S. military runway of sufficient length on Okinawa to support MV-22 missions at its maximum weight and maintain safety margins in certain weather conditions. . . . *Naha International Airport would be available as an emergency landing strip for U.S. military aircraft.*” (p. 39)

**Costs**

Japan pays part of the costs of the U.S. forces stationed in its country with annual burden-sharing payments that totaled about $4.9 billion in fiscal year 1997. [¥544 billion at US$1=¥111, the rate used by USFJ.] The annual payments fall into four categories. First, Japan paid about $712 million for leased land on which U.S. bases sit. Second, Japan provided about $1.7 billion in accordance with the Special Measures Agreement, under
which Japan pays the costs of (1) local national labor employed by U.S. forces in Japan, (2) public utilities on U.S. bases, and (3) the transfer of U.S. forces’ training from U.S. bases to other facilities when Japan requests such transfers. Third, USFJ estimated that Japan provided about $876 million in indirect costs, such as rents foregone at fair market value and tax concessions. Last, although not covered by any agreements, Japan provided about $1.7 billion from its facilities budget for facilities and new construction. (p. 16) The Congressional Research Service believes that the Department of Defense (DOD) overstates the true value of burden-sharing payments from Japan because such costs as base lease payments and rents foregone are costs unique to operating in Japan. DOD would not pay these costs if troops based in Japan were relocated to bases in the continental United States. (p. 16, n. 3)

The sea-based facility is estimated to cost Japan between $2.4 billion and $4.9 billion to design and build. . . . Based on a $4-billion sea-based facility design and construction cost, U.S. engineers have initially estimated maintenance costs to be about $8 billion over the 40-year life span of the facility. Thus, annual maintenance would cost about $200 million, compared with about $2.8 million spent at MCAS Futenma. At the time of this report, the United States and Japan were discussing having Japan pay for maintenance on the sea-based facility. If Japan does not pay maintenance costs, then the U.S. costs related to the SACO recommendations could be much higher. (p. 37)

Environmental Damage

If environmental contamination is found on bases to be closed under the SACO process, cleanup could be expensive. . . . USFJ and Marine Corps Bases, Japan, officials believe that the United States is not obligated to do environmental cleanup at bases to be closed. Nevertheless, a 1995 DOD policy calls for the removal of known imminent and substantial dangers to health and safety due to environmental contamination caused by DOD operations on installations or facilities designated for return to the host nation overseas. . . . In fact, Marine Corps Bases, Japan, and other Okinawa-based U.S. forces were informed by a letter dated August 25, 1997, from the Government of Japan’s Naha Defense Facilities Administration Bureau that the toxic substances mercury and polychlorinated biphenyls were found on the Onna communications site. The United States had closed the base and returned the land to Japan in November 1995 (a land return unrelated to the SACO process). The letter indicated that the presence of these substances has prevented the land from being returned to its owners and thus being available for reuse. The letter concludes by requesting that the United States conduct a survey, identify any contamination that may exist, and clean up bases scheduled for closure in the future. (p. 47)

The United States and Japan, along with a substantial number of other countries, support an international coral reef initiative aimed at conservation and management of coral reefs and related ecosystems. Coral reefs are in the area in which the sea-based facility is tentatively to be located. . . . Two sea-based facility options currently under consideration have the potential to harm the coral reefs. The pontoon-type facility requires the installation of a large breakwater and several mooring stations onto the seafloor. The pile-supported facility requires several thousand support pilings that would need to be driven.
into the coral reef or seafloor and reinforced to withstand storm conditions. Both of these options require at least one, and possible two, causeways connecting them to shore facilities. Numerous scientific studies show that large construction projects can cause damage to coral reefs and the nearby coastal areas. (p. 48)

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