

The G8 Summit and Okinawa

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Okinawa's Selection as the G8 Summit Site

At the end of April 1999, Japanese Prime Minister K. Obuchi announced in Tokyo that Okinawa would host the major part of the Year 2000 Summit for the Group of Eight (G8) and that the G8 heads of government would meet in Okinawa.

The Okinawan people, as well as most Japanese mainlanders, were very surprised at the big news. Okinawa was thought to be far less suitable for a G8 Summit Conference than seven other sites proposed, especially in terms of quality of facilities and ease of security arrangements, in spite of the enthusiastic efforts of the Okinawan Prefectural Government. The Tokyo Government explained why it had named the poorest prefecture, Okinawa, to host the G8 Summit, saying, "It has had a long, painful history. We have seen the strong passion and enthusiasm of the prefectural citizens for the summit."

At first, almost all of the Okinawan people welcomed this major world event because they thought that the G8 political leaders and journalists would see the facts as they are, including the severe fact that a large number of US military bases are located in Okinawa, and that it might boost local economies. At the same time, however, a great feeling of uneasiness began to spread over the island prefecture that there could be some hidden political motives behind the decision to select Okinawa as the Summit location, despite all its disadvantages as a site. The underlying motive is the issue of the relocation of US military bases within the prefecture. This relocation policy now faces difficulties because of the strong protests of the Okinawan people. Japanese government officials are trying to reduce the anxieties of Okinawans by repeatedly emphasizing, "There is no link between the Summit and the US military bases."¹

Background

For much of their history, the people of Okinawa have developed apart from the framework of the Japanese State. By the twelfth century, many small local rulers had emerged, but their domains were gradually consolidated by conquest. In 1429, the Ryukyus became a united kingdom (the Ryukyu Kingdom), whose ruler paid tribute to the Chinese emperor. From then onward, until the sixteenth century, Ryukyu's advantageous location enabled it to carry on a lucrative entrepot trade and the kingdom prospered. However, the Portuguese then cut into its Southeast Asian trade and in 1609 the kingdom was conquered by a feudal ruler of southern Kyushu (Japan), but the kingdom itself continued to exist.

After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the Japanese government claimed formal sovereignty over the islands and incorporated them into the Okinawa Prefecture in 1879, bringing the Ryukyu Kingdom to an end, although this was not recognized by the Chinese until the Sino-Japanese War in 1895. Toward the end of the Second World War, US forces landed on April 1, 1945. This was the only part of Japan to experience ground warfare, the Battle of Okinawa. Approximately 120,000 noncombatant lives (one third of the inhabitants) were lost and more than 100,000 US and Japanese soldiers were killed. Subsequently, the US Army occupied the islands. During the battle, the US Forces built many bases for the planned invasion of mainland Japan. After the war, the US military forces expropriated Okinawan land using bayonets and bulldozers. The US military bases were enlarged and strengthened, transforming Okinawa into a military island as the Keystone of the Pacific. However, after the Okinawan people's long struggle for the reversion of the islands to Japan, Okinawa was reverted to Japanese rule in 1972. But, on the anniversary, May 15 1972, the Okinawan people expressed mixed feelings because as a result of the Okinawa Reversion Agreement between the US and Japanese governments, huge US military bases still existed on the islands, reducing their pleasure in returning to Japan. Commemoration festivals and protest meetings were held simultaneously on this day.²

160 Ryukyu Islands form a subtropical archipelago stretching to the southwest from Kyushu to Taiwan, and are generally subdivided into the Okinawa, Miyako, Yaeyama and Sengaku groups. The main island, Okinawa, is by far the largest both in size and population, and is the prefecture's economic, administrative and cultural centre. The language is a major dialect of Japanese but it is not intelligible to speakers of standard Japanese or any of the dialects of the main islands of Japan. Now that standard Japanese has spread throughout the Ryukyus many young people no longer speak their native dialect. The prefecture, with a population of 1.34 million, is also Japan's poorest in per capita income.

US Military Bases in Okinawa

Although 55 years have passed since the end of the war, there is still a heavy concentration of US bases in Okinawa under the Japan-US Security Treaty. 75% of the installations used exclusively by US Forces in Japan are located in this prefecture, which comprises only 0.6% of all Japanese territory. These military facilities occupy about 11% of the prefectural land and on the main Okinawa island, where most of the population and industries are located, the bases in fact take up 20% of the entire island. The high density of military bases on the island hampers the expansion of transportation networks, the systematic development of cities, and the procurement of lands for industrial use. Furthermore, there are 29 sea zones and 15 areas of airspace around Okinawa, which are controlled by US military forces. As a result, Okinawan people live under unusual conditions where they lack the freedom to use their own lands, airspace and sea zones.³ The most widely recognized problem caused by the bases is noise pollution, which affects a wide area around airfields. In 1982, about 1,000 residents around the Kadena Air Base filed a lawsuit against the Japanese government asking for compensation for the effects of noise pollution and demanding the suspension of military night flight. Last March over 5,500 residents took action to sue the Japanese and US Governments for noise pollution again. Incidents involving murders, rapes, injuries and thefts are frequent. There were as many as 4,790 criminal charges brought against US military

personnel during the 23 years since Okinawa Reversion in 1972. Among the worst cases were 12 murders, 355 thefts and 111 rapes.

In September 1995, the rape of a schoolgirl by US military servicemen triggered an Okinawan citizen's anger and the "October 21st Okinawan People's Rally" was held. The rally, in which over 85,000 people participated, united all parties and called attention to Okinawa's US military base issues at home and abroad. On September 8, 1996, the first prefectural referendum in Japan was held at the initiative of prefectural residents. The referendum clearly indicated the people's desire for the revision of the Status of Forces Agreement and the reduction and realignment of the US military bases in Okinawa. Okinawan residents have been shouldering a great burden for a half-century, brought on by the Japan-US Security Treaty. The prefectural referendum was held not only to express the Okinawan people's will, but also to spur both US and Japanese Governments and the citizens of these two countries to give serious thought to the present situation in Okinawa.⁴

Tokyo and Washington set up the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO), in order to smooth down the anger following the rape incident. SACO agreed on the return of 11 facilities. According to the SACO report, the total area of US military bases in Okinawa will be reduced by 20%. However, most of the facilities on the final report must meet the precondition of relocating to other facilities or areas within Okinawa. Above all, the relocation of the Futenma Air Station within Okinawa has become the focal issue. Although the prefectural governor and Nago mayor have accepted the alternative base, voices of disapproval have led to a swirl of controversy. The well known phrases, "Okinawa within US bases" and "the Keystone of the Pacific", are still realistic.⁵

The Significance of Okinawa G8 Summit

First, it was decided to hold the 2000 Summit in provincial cities. In Japan, so far, the Summit meetings have been held in Tokyo three times. Therefore, only Tokyo has become well known all over the world. The name Okinawa is not known around the world. Only a few people remember it as US military islands. Therefore, Okinawan people were very glad to see that their own unique culture, history and beautiful nature would be introduced all over the world through the G8 summit. Keiichi Inamine, Governor of Okinawa Prefecture, said "many people think of Japan as a homogenous nation, but we believe our traditions and arts will show world leaders how diverse Japan really is."⁶ It is also expected that Okinawa's tourism and resort industries will further develop following this.

Second, Japan is the only Asian nation in attendance at the G8 Summit, therefore it has the important duty of sending Asian messages to G8 meetings. Okinawa is a suitable place in which to do so because of its deep historical ties to Asian nations. As I mentioned earlier, taking advantage of its key position in linking the Japanese mainland and continental China with the various nations of Southeast Asia, Okinawa has carried out a lively trade with these nations for a very long time. During this long history of interaction with the nations of the region, Okinawa developed its own unique and original culture. Okinawa is now again striving to be a base for international exchange in the south of Japan.⁷ Also, I must add that Okinawan people have wanted China to participate in G8 Summit meetings somehow.

Nevertheless, almost all Asian nations are developing countries. The Japanese government announced three paramount themes on April 28, 2000 - on economic, political, and social issues - for G8 leaders to discuss when they gather for their July 21-23, 2000 Summit in Okinawa. The three themes are: international cooperation aimed at enabling “all people in the world to enjoy prosperity, achieve deeper peace of mind and live in a more stable world”, according to government officials. Then, one of the underlying goals of the G8 Okinawa Summit is to attain a “globalization for all people” by bridging the widening gap between developed and developing nations, dealing with detrimental aspects of economic globalization and promoting cooperation for development in developing nations.⁸ I feel that Okinawa is a suitable place for G8 leaders to discuss this theme.

Third, Okinawa is closely related to another two themes: “deeper peace of mind” and “a more stable world.” The chance to hold the G8 Summit has led to various plans throughout these islands to project the “Okinawan Spirit” and inspire peace worldwide. Those who experienced the Battle of Okinawa and the postwar hardships have the strongest desire for global harmony.⁹ According to the Prefectural Opinion Poll Survey in October 1999, asking “What is the most important issue Okinawa should appeal to the world about on the occasion of the Summit?”, the largest number of respondents chose “US base problems” (44.6%), followed by “the peace-loving heart of the Okinawan people” (33.2%).¹⁰ Frankly, the Okinawan people are expecting that G8 leaders will discuss the severe problem of US military bases in Okinawa and discover a solution. However, it goes without saying that until now, Japanese and US governments have been clearly negative about this, saying that those problems lie between US and Japanese governments, and they are not global problems.

But, almost all of the Okinawan people do not agree, because both of the governments have continued to mention that for over half a century that US military bases in Okinawa are very valuable for Asia-Pacific security as the “Keystone of the Pacific.” For the US government, the US-Japan Security Treaty must be no less important than NATO in Europe. The Okinawan people are not asking for the abolition of the Treaty, but asking for the resolution of the base-related problems from the viewpoints of protecting the life and property of the residents. There is no provision in either the US-Japanese Security Treaty or the Status of Forces Agreement which states that the US military bases must be built in Okinawa. The Okinawan people feel that if both US and Japanese governments believe that the US-Japan Security Treaty is important for the two nations, the burden of US military bases must be shared equally by all Japanese citizens and the US government must realign the bases and reduce the number of troops in Okinawa.¹¹

I myself think that Okinawa is a very suitable place for the G8 Summit Conference because the difficulties that Okinawa is now confronting are related to “sustainable development”, “environment”, “information technology”, “unemployment”, etc., which are now on the main agenda of G8 Summit Conference. In any event, compared to any of the other places that have hosted G8 Summit Conferences, Okinawa might be considered the most unique. On the other hand, for Okinawan people the G8 Summit could be just like a typhoon from the West. Therefore, Okinawan people were looking forward to G8 leaders’ response to Okinawan-US military problems. If there was to be no response and the problem completely neglected, Okinawan people would be deeply disappointed and perhaps think that in conclusion, the G8 Summit would be an unwelcome guest for them, in spite of their traditional hospitality. It might well be said that Okinawan people had been waiting for the Summit with their feelings of ambivalence, owing to their historical trauma and severe realities.

After the G8 Three-Day Summit in Okinawa

The Okinawa Summit presented three big events to Okinawan people. The first was, of course, the three-day Summit Conference itself. The second was the US President's speech delivered to Okinawan residents at a memorial to the more than 200,000 people who died during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945. The last US President to visit Okinawa was Dwight Eisenhower in 1960. Bill Clinton has been the second since then and the first President to visit Okinawa since its reversion to Japan in 1972. In his address the President, as widely predicted, acknowledged that the people of Okinawa have been bearing most of the burden of the US military bases in Japan.

While stressing the strategic importance of the US-Japan alliance, Clinton also claimed to be making an effort to reduce the US military presence. Many Okinawan people appreciated his speech because he made reference to their historical difficulties, present heavy burden and above all, the US effort to lessen the burden.¹² However, some people criticized his speech severely. For example, Mr. Seigen Miyazato (representative, Okinawa External Affairs Study Group) commented that the Cornerstone of Peace Memorial was hijacked to prop up the US-Japanese military alliance, but we are not easily misled by speeches which preach the necessity of maintaining an indefinite military presence in Okinawa.¹³

The third memorable event was the "Human Chain" which encircled the military bases just before the G8 Summit Conference. A crowd of 27, 100 people linked hands around the perimeter of the island's largest military facilities on the afternoon of July 20th in a protest designed to appeal for a future free of military bases, and for the island to follow a different destiny as a bastion of peace. Some mainland NGO's also took part in the peaceful demonstration. The resulting "Human Chain" encircled the 17.4km circumference of the base, encompassing Okinawa City and the two towns of Kadena and Chatan.

The protest represented a groundswell of anti-base opinion and an intensification of activities designed to oppose the controversial plan to relocate the Futenma Marine Air Station in Ginowan City, to the north of the island. Demonstrators also sought to bring about the reduction and eventual removal of US Forces. A Peace Declaration was issued by the No-Base Human Chain Executive Committee. Kadena witnessed similar protests in 1987 and 1990, while the smaller Futenma air station had been encircled by Human Chains on two occasions in 1995 and 1998. Previous actions, however, have not occurred under the glare of publicity afforded to Okinawa by the G8 Summit.¹⁴

Incidentally, while President Clinton paid a courtesy call at the Cornerstone of Peace Memorial, other heads of state visited other municipalities where they were invited to exchange friendships. To the familiar music of the Beatles, British Prime Minister Tony Blair appeared in the gymnasium at Chatan Elementary School and chatted with pupils. EU President Romano Prodi and his wife were welcomed by the local children of Yomitan, where they were staying. The couple enjoyed the Okinawan traditional dances performed by the children. German Chancellor Gerhart Schroeder visited the German village in Miyako Island to enjoy friendship with locals. Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien visited Okinawa's only ice rink to watch the junior game between the "Wolfpack" from Ottawa and "The Dragonfires" from Haeburu. He unexpectedly played with the youngsters.¹⁵ Okinawan people enjoyed the friendly communication with heads of states through those events and ceremonies.

Okinawa Governor Keiichi Inamine expressed delight that the G8 Summit in Japan's southernmost prefecture proved successful. "There were different ways in which the G8 leaders individually took part in cultural exchanges with the local people," Inamine said at the conclusion of the three-day event. He stated, "we were able to introduce Okinawan culture and art" during a reception by the prefecture and included local gifts to the top leaders. Regarding the burden placed upon Okinawa by US military bases, Inamine expressed confidence that Japanese people's awareness of the issue has been increased as many people signed up for a press tour of US military bases and tourists spots. "People from all over Japan took part in the tours and saw the actual situation here. In that sense, the program was a big success," Inamine said.¹⁶

According to the opinion poll survey conducted by the Okinawa Times on July 29-30, 2000, asking "Do you think that the Okinawa summit was successful?" 66% of respondents answered "Yes", while 15% answered "No". Concerning the question "Which issue could Okinawa appeal to the world?", the largest number of respondents (39%) chose "the peace-loving heart of the Okinawan people", followed by "the heavy burden of US military bases" (24%), "Okinawan hospitality" (11%), "International sightseeing area (39%) and so on."¹⁷

Notes

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