

On the Consequences of the Okinawa Elections, US Military Presence, US-Japan Relations

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So, the snap [governor elections](#) of the Okinawa Prefecture that were critical for the Japanese federal government were held on September 30 this year and ended in an unpleasant surprise for it. Despite Tokyo's anticipation (and to its sheer disappointment) the former Ginowan City Mayor Atsushi Sakima supported by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party of Japan failed at the elections.

The former radio host Denny Tamaki won by receiving 56% of the vote; he considers himself a follower of the former Governor Takeshi Onaga. Takeshi Onaga who deceased in early August was a strong opponent of the US military presence on Okinawa, that is, the largest island of the Ryukyu Arc and a prefecture of the same name.

10 days prior to his death, he made a kind of political will by claiming that he was going to revoke the permission for allocating a part of the island's coast in the low-populated settlement of Henoko for the construction of a new location for the US Marine Corps Air Station Futenma. The aforementioned base is currently located in the very heart of Ginowan City whose population is approaching 100,000 people.

On August 15 (due to the allegedly coming typhoons), all work in Henoko that had been carried out by the federal government for over a year using the state budget funds was suspended.

Although, legally speaking, in the conflict between Takeshi Onaga and Tokyo, the latter was right, but the federal government decided not to exacerbate the situation after the death of the popular governor. Hoping that it would be able to resume the work without further ado after the victory of their candidate Atsushi Sakima.

Well, not this time, as it were. The Japanese newspapers which used the Okinawa events as their top news story for a week were full of photographs featuring both the exulting winner and his supporters, some of whom proceeded to block the Henoko construction site in no time.

The Okinawa protesters received unexpected support on the other shore of the Pacific Ocean, i.e. in the US. The united US – Japanese group of omnipresent environmentalists submitted an appeal to the California State Court concerning procedural infraction during the approval of the US Ministry of Defense's request regarding the conformity of the work in Henoko to the needs of conserving the unique ecosystem of [Okinawa](#).

The plaintiffs are in particular concerned with the future of the rare marine mammal, the

dugong, which inhabits the coastal area of the island. The noise of the Futenma 2 base-to-be Osprey convertiplane engines is believed to affect the nervous system of dugongs. It was announced that the case would be considered in substance.

In his election campaign, Denny Tamaki promised that if he were elected he would follow the [steps](#) of the deceased governor Takeshi Onaga. That is, not only hamper the Relocation of the Marine Corps Air Station Futenma to Henoko arranged by Japan and the US, but also follow his predecessor's course of action for a complete withdrawal of all the US military units from Okinawa. Which include about 70% of the US military personnel deployed in Japan.

Let us specify that Takeshi Onaga meant sending the US troops deployed on Okinawa away from the country (without mentioning a specific location) rather than relocating them to the 4 main islands of Japan. This prospect (in the near future, that is) seems unrealistic considering the fact that Japan is interested in the military and political alliance with the US more than the US itself.

Though, this prospect is not entirely impossible. For instance, if the incumbent US President's neoisolationist foreign policy actions continue. He already gave certain peculiar signals of the kind (concerning South Korea and the Middle East).

Apropos, the commotion in the federal government caused by the Okinawa election results had to do with the question asked by Washington. It has been a silent question so far, but it can be voiced: "Fellows! Who is the primary stakeholder here? If it is you then provide the minimum conditions necessary for our soldiers performing their duty as allied forces. And forget the rubbish about the will of the people. This man did not get the overwhelming majority of the vote on Okinawa."

As if that is what the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe needs right now. 2 days prior to the Okinawa elections, he came back from New York where, apart from giving a speech at the United Nations General Assembly, he held another round of difficult negotiations (analysts cannot even say for which time by count) with Donald Trump. Their main topic of conversation had remained the same for 18 months already: trying to find a solution for the issues in their bilateral trade and economic relations.

Even without the Okinawa issue, Shinzō Abe finds himself at a disadvantage in these negotiations since his opponent has a cast-iron argument of the many years of Japan's positive balance of trade with the US (amounting to about \$70 billion annually). Which is, according to Donald Trump, caused by the unfair and unjust tariff policy of his partners. As we stated [earlier](#), the Japanese Prime Minister had to make serious concessions during the negotiations in New York.

That is why the last thing the Japanese government needs is another cause for reproach of the kind from its key ally, even more so concerning the military and political area.

During the first days after the elections, the disagreement between the Federal Government and the Okinawa Governor did not seem hopeless. Both parties hinted at the possibility of reaching a compromise by negotiating.

However, as usually is the case with populists, the new governor after riding the popular wave will now have to follow its course. On October 26, the Okinawa Prefecture Parliament

made a decree on holding a [referendum](#) on the single issue of the (dis)approval of the plans to build the Futenma 2 base in Henoko. According to the legislation, an expression of popular will of the kind must be held 6 months later, that is, in spring 2019.

Which makes the painful sore in the relations between the federal government and that of one of its prefectures, as well as (indirectly so far) between Japan as a whole and its key ally not only remain unhealed, but also get worse.

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