

**Okinawan History and the Prospects for Nuclear Disarmament:  
Lessons from the Hatoyama Revolt and Counter Revolt, 2009-2012**  
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Before the 19th century, Okinawa had established itself as a relatively small independent state known as the Ryukyu Kingdom, maintaining its autonomy by paying tribute to both China and Japan while becoming a major center of trade in the region. After annexation by Japan in 1879, the Okinawan people were converted into Japanese citizens, and much of their culture and language was erased. In the final months of WWII, Okinawans were forced to sacrifice themselves in the Battle of Okinawa, at a point in the war at which the only objective was to delay the US invasion of the main islands of Japan, inflict maximum costs on the invaders, and seek more favorable terms of surrender. After the war, Okinawa became a US territory governed by a military administration. The inhabitants had no democratic rights during this period. In 1972, the US government negotiated a transfer of Okinawa back to Japan, and this was popularly supported by Okinawans because they believed the heavy burden of the US military presence would be lessened once democracy was restored and Okinawans would have a say in their future. Bitter disillusionment followed, as Okinawa continued to have an extremely disproportionate number of US military bases relative to other prefectures in Japan. The problem continued even after the expected peace dividend, supposed to arrive after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, failed to materialize. Both the Japanese and US government continued to tell Okinawans that the military burden was necessary because of Okinawa's strategic location and importance in countering the post-Cold War "war on terror" and, more recently, the threat of "great power rivalry."

This history illustrates that Okinawa has been at the nexus of various historical forces—the rise of global capitalism during the late industrial revolution, the age of competing capitalist empires, the post-colonial struggle for independence, the anti-communist war in Southeast Asia, and finally the present period of US economic hegemony in a system that US officials call euphemistically "the rules-based international order." As such, Okinawa is an exemplar of the struggle against the militarization of people and the natural environment. For people throughout the world who wish to reduce pollution and CO2 emissions, or achieve nuclear disarmament, reducing the military "footprint" is the most obvious way to pursue the goal of living more peacefully with the natural environment and with each other, at both a local and global level. This paper focuses on a recent chapter of Okinawan history that reveals a sobering lesson in exactly what happens when political forces arise to challenge the status quo of the militarized "rules-based international order," even to a small degree.

In July 2017, ICAN (International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons) worked with the United Nations and passed the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. 135 countries initially supported the treaty, but so far only 60 have signed it and 14 have ratified it. In order for the nuclear ban to become international law, 50 countries need to ratify the treaty. None of the nuclear powers have supported the treaty, and NATO and East Asian client states like Japan and South Korea, and other nations enmeshed in American relations (including even the nuclear-bombed Marshall Islands) have gone along with the nuclear powers, saying that the treaty is not practical because no nuclear-armed nations are supporting it. The ICAN representative for Japan, Akira Kawasaki, says "Japan should take the lead in advancing this humanitarian discourse." He adds that by not signing the treaty, the government is "undermining the credibility of Japan as a nation."<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Kawasaki may be right in this assessment, he and others who expect Japan to change its policy are being extremely naïve about the level of support Japanese citizens and institutions (media, academia, political parties, bureaucracies) would demonstrate in any resistance to American hegemony, which in this case involves protection under the American nuclear umbrella. In fact, Japan has already been through such a test in its recent history, but disarmament activists seem unaware of it. I am referring to the struggle that has been fought by the Okinawan people who have resisted both Japanese and American destruction of their homeland.

In particular, important lessons for activists involved in disarmament, peace movements and environmental protection can be drawn from the brief reign of *Minshuto* (Democratic Party of Japan) between 2009 and 2012. Although it achieved some modest domestic reforms in education, labor law, and family support payments, its boldest proposal was a dismal failure precisely because it aimed to get Japan out of its client state relationship with the United States. *Minshuto* was elected on a policy platform of reducing support for American military operations overseas, closing US bases in Japan (especially in Okinawa), and forming closer ties with East Asia. The leader of the party, Yukio Hatoyama, won a stunning majority in 2009 that, for a while, seemed to put a definitive end to the

long rule of *Jiminto* (Liberal Democratic Party). However, it turned out that this was only a brief attempt at revolutionary change in US-Japan relations. The counter-revolution came swiftly, as Hatoyama was thwarted by Japanese mass media, Japanese bureaucracy, and American officials all the way up to the new hope-and-change president who had come to power in the same year as Hatoyama.

The process actually started before 2009 when Ichiro Ozawa, general secretary of *Minshuto*, had already displeased Japanese bureaucrats and American officials with his talk of closer ties with China and downsizing of the American military presence. He was pushed out through the common trick of exposing improprieties involving staff misuse of funds—the sort of minor infringement that almost every politician commits. After Ozawa resigned, Hatoyama led the party and became prime minister. The sorry tale of his rise and quick fall from power is described in detail by Gavan McCormack and Satoko Oka Norimatsu in chapter six of their book *Okinawa Resistant Islands*, which I use for the basis of the following summary.<sup>2</sup>

In the chapter entitled *The Hatoyama Revolt* (chapter six), the authors note how Hatoyama's discourse struck Americans as alarming and bizarre and set off a furious counter-revolt. In conservative Japan, Hatoyama used the word "revolution" in a positive sense, calling for Japan to turn away from a unipolar world order and to have an equal relationship with the United States. The Japanese government was locked into a deal made by the previous government called the Guam International Agreement which called for the closure of one troublesome and dangerous base on Okinawa (Futenma) to be replaced with a new base located elsewhere in Okinawa, in Henoko. Hatoyama wanted to scrap the plan to build Henoko and instead have an overall reduction of forces in Okinawa. This policy was immensely popular in Okinawa and it did much to strengthen the anti-base movement there, especially when Hatoyama was later unable to deliver on his promise.

The stonewalling of Hatoyama began immediately. President Obama refused to meet with him. McCormack and Norimatsu cite numerous American and Japanese officials' insults and dismissals of Hatoyama and his policies. One American official said he could not "continue slapping around the United States" or to "play with firecrackers." Another said Hatoyama was "speaking another language" with his "shocking platform." Foreign minister Katsuya Okada had started off saying, "If Japan just follows what the US says, then I think as a sovereign nation that is very pathetic," and "I don't think we will act simply by accepting what the U.S. tells us," but soon he was saying there was no alternative to relocating Futenma within Okinawa. In this fashion, Hatoyama's own cabinet, politicians in all parties, the mass media, Japanese bureaucrats and US officials all worked against the major policy for which *Minshuto* had been elected. Hatoyama was portrayed as a buffoon, a dreamer and a political amateur. Talk became condescending, with Americans adopting the attitude of a parent dealing with a wayward child. American ambassador Roos suggested to the vice foreign minister that "it would be beneficial for the US to go through the basic fundamentals of security issues with the Prime Minister," that is, as McCormack and Norimatsu described it, "explain to him the (political) facts of life."

While the Japanese media helped destroy the government's credibility, only the news media in Okinawa noted the lack of democracy, the betrayal, and the subservience of the Japanese political and bureaucratic establishment. Okinawan resistance solidified, but it would soon turn against Hatoyama himself as he caved to the pressure. With no support from the bureaucracy, the media or public opinion, there was nothing he could do. Within nine months his public support went from 73% to 19%. He agreed to pursue the construction of Henoko, but for several months he kept up a façade that claimed other solutions were being considered. Meanwhile, the insults against Hatoyama continued. Richard Lawless, deputy undersecretary of defense for Asian and Pacific security affairs under George W. Bush (2002–2007), said to the *Asahi Shimbun* that the Japanese government was mired in "mindless revenge" toward the previous administration. Again as if condescending to a child, he added, "... it almost seems we have a group of boys and girls playing with a box of matches as they sit in a room of dynamite." There was no public outrage over these comments. Later, the *Washington Post* described Hatoyama as "the biggest loser [among world leaders] . . . , hapless, . . . increasingly loopy."

At one point Hatoyama declared that he had come to understand the importance of the American military in Okinawa for deterrence purposes, but later he admitted that this was not something he believed personally. It was just something his advisors had suggested in order to explain his reversal. Referring to Wikileaks revelations about the US-Japan relationship at this time, the *Ryukyu Shimpo* in Okinawa summed up the sorry tale:

Although Japan was supposedly a democratic country, its officials, bowing and scraping before a foreign country and making no effort to carry out the will of the people, lacked any qualification for diplomatic negotiation... [Japan would] go down in history as in practice America's client state.

For most of the public, the Hatoyama period was just the usual politics that breeds so much apathy and cynicism among voters, but for Tokyo University political scientist Hajime Shinohara this was a pivotal event in modern Japanese history. It was a surrender of sovereignty that he described as "Japan's second defeat" after 1945.

Hatoyama resigned in June 2010, citing as the main reason his inability to deliver on the campaign promise to reduce the US military presence in Okinawa. Naoto Kan became the new party leader and prime minister. It was his fate to be in charge of the country during the earthquake-tsunami-nuclear meltdown catastrophe that struck northeast Japan in March 2011. It was perhaps his understanding of both nuclear physics and Japanese bureaucracy that saved Japan from a complete meltdown of the spent fuel storage pool in Unit 4 of Fukushima Daiichi, but an ungrateful media and the bureaucracy chose to treat him as they had treated Hatoyama. The anger he directed at TEPCO, government ministries and nuclear regulators was decried as meddling and irrational. Few asked what would have happened without the angry outburst that prodded TEPCO officials to take action in those critical days in mid-March.

Kan shut down all nuclear power in the country, pending safety inspections, and floated the idea of a complete exit from nuclear energy, but US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other American officials jumped in to make sure that this would not happen. The future viability of the US nuclear arsenal depended on the nuclear power industry, and the US nuclear power industry depended on exports, a viable nuclear industry in Japan and the ongoing maintenance of its plutonium stockpiles.<sup>3</sup>

By the summer of 2011, Kan faced a leadership challenge and was replaced by Yoshihiko Noda. In Noda's brief time as prime minister he made vague policy proposals about a reduction in reliance on nuclear energy, but these were not concrete promises. In December of 2012, Shinzo Abe, of the traditional ruling party, *Jiminto*, was elected prime minister with a majority in the legislature. Full support of the bureaucracy and the American government returned immediately. During his official visit to Washington he spoke at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies declaring that "Japan was back" and that he had saved it from becoming a "second-tier nation."<sup>4</sup> Abe's simple three-word slogan revealed an implicit belief similar to "*l'etat, c'est moi*," which in this case meant "*l'etat, c'est le parti Jiminto*." Japan had been absent for three years during a strange interlude, ruled by a strange mob of children, but now it was back from somewhere, apparently.

None of the above is meant to suggest that foreign policy and the nuclear crisis were the only factors that caused the collapse of the *Minshuto* government. There was a wide range of economic and financial problems, policy disputes over sales tax and social spending programs, and factional fights and realignments with small parties. However, it is remarkable how much these issues were focused on while the public remained largely unaware of the extent to which the US was interfering in Japan's domestic politics. The US-Japan relationship may have been invisible to most people simply because it is so important. It is the water everyone swims in, so one hardly needs to be conscious of the fact that Japan lacks true sovereignty and is still effectively under foreign occupation.

It should be clear that there is a lesson for nuclear disarmament activists in the story of Okinawa's struggle to rid itself of military installations and foreign domination. The nuclear energy crisis also highlights the critical links between Japan's plutonium stockpiles and the global nuclear weapons industry. If the closing of one military base and a few nuclear power plants was met with such opposition in Japan and the United States, it is almost inconceivable that Japan would ever try to leave the American nuclear umbrella, but there are two scenarios in which it could, hypothetically.

In one scenario, the political establishment and much public opinion would be in favor of building a Japanese nuclear arsenal, which Japan could do in a short time.<sup>5</sup> In the second scenario, there could be massive public support for ending the client state relationship with the United States and pursuing Hatoyama's vision of a non-aligned, neutral and peaceful country in a multi-polar world, which would include ratifying the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. But the experience of the *Minshuto* years (2009-2012) illustrated that although a portion of the public once elected a party that had a "peace" platform, the public wasn't willing to fight or sacrifice for it. Everyone—voters, bureaucrats, politicians, intellectuals, journalists—caved in under foreign pressure and abandoned the policy they had once supported.

Ms. Norimatsu once described the encounters she has had in speaking throughout Japan about Okinawa. She has met somewhat sympathetic people who hesitate to support the cause because they say, “If some of those bases in Okinawa were moved to other parts of Japan, then those soldiers would be raping women here.” Such comments illustrate the lack of understanding and solidarity that public opinion is based on. Okinawa, previously known as the Ryukyu Kingdom, was annexed and colonized in the 1879-1940 period, then it was militarized and sacrificed in the Battle on Okinawa in 1945. Subsequently, it became a US military-governed territory, lacking any form of democratic government until its reversion to Japan in 1972. The people of mainland Japan have still not conceived of Okinawa as a true part of Japan, and not conceived of Okinawan people as truly Japanese, and this distinction is clear when people express such wishes to keep the problems of militarization out of the main islands. People on the main Japanese islands do not want to share equally in the burden of the US military presence, nor do they want the obvious alternative of eliminating this foreign interference in their sovereignty. This is a failure which implies that Okinawa is still expected to make sacrifices for the foreign nation that annexed the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1879.

In a similar way, it seems many progressives and activists for nuclear disarmament and environmental protection pay little attention to places like Okinawa, and this leads to a naïve or oblivious attitude toward the obstacles that really stand in the way of their goals. As for nuclear disarmament, it might be more sensible to work first on general disarmament and a reduction in the global network of US military bases. After all, it is the enormous superiority of US conventional military force that makes smaller powers want the “inexpensive” option of developing their own nuclear deterrent.<sup>6</sup>

The place to start is with the demilitarization of Okinawa, and hundreds of places like it around the globe. These should be the first priority in creating the conditions of global security that will allow for de-nuclearization and significant reductions in CO2 emissions. That struggle will not win a Nobel Peace Prize for anyone, but it is the immediate, necessary step. Reducing our own personal carbon footprint, or supporting the ban treaty, are examples of palatable goals that everyone can applaud. No one is bothered by ICAN being awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. Such is not the case for the people who have stood in the way of bulldozers at the Henoko construction site in recent years.<sup>7</sup>

## Notes

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1 Patrick Parr, “[ICAN champions grass-roots efforts to persuade Japan and others to support a nuclear-free world](#),” *The Japan Times*, August 6, 2018.

2 Gavan McCormack and Satoko Oka Norimatsu, *Okinawa Resistant Islands: Okinawa Confronts Japan and the United States, Second Edition* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2018)113-136. Sources are not given for the quotations that follow in the summary of this chapter. The sources can be found in chapter six of this book, pages 113-136. For an online summary of this subject, see also: Gavan McCormack, “[Japan’s Problematic Prefecture—Okinawa and the US-Japan Relationship](#),” *Asia Pacific Journal*, September 1, 2016.

3 Tom Henry, “[Government, military officials in favor of Trump’s nuclear bailout plan](#),” *Toledo Blade*, July 1, 2018. “A broad coalition of 75 industry, government, and military dignitaries—a quarter of whom are retired admirals or vice admirals—has come out in support of President Trump’s plan to bail out the nation’s struggling nuclear plants, agreeing that more premature **closures pose a national security threat.**” (Emphasis added)

4 Shinzo Abe, “Japan is Back,” [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#), February, 2013.

5 Robert E. McCoy, “[Could Tokyo ever go critical and make nuclear weapons?](#)” *Asia Times*, August 6, 2018. “Japan has had an actual nuclear weapons policy since 1969—although that had been secret until 1994 when it was leaked. The leaked document states in part that ‘for the time being we will maintain the policy of not possessing nuclear weapons,’ but ‘keep the economic and technical potential for the production of nuclear weapons, while seeing to it that Japan will not be interfered with in this regard.’”

6 Sergei Latyshev, “[The US State Department Openly Outlined Its Plans to Guarantee America’s Global Primacy](#),” *Organizing Notes*, September 3, 2018.

7 “[Tokyo to make military base plan ‘inevitable’ in Okinawa](#),” *Asahi Shimbun*, June 8, 2018.