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Millennial+ Voices on Okinawa: An Inquiry into the Attitudes of Post-Reversion Born Okinawans toward the Presence of U.S. Bases

By Charles E. Morrison and Daniel Chinen

A Report of an East-West Center Project Supported by a Grant from the U.S.-Japan Foundation

Executive Summary

This report provides a summary of findings of a study done by the East-West Center with funding from the U.S.-Japan Foundation on the attitudes of younger Okinawans toward the U.S. bases on Okinawa. Focused on 20- to 45-year-olds, it uses the term “Millennial+” [M+] to refer to these Okinawans, who were born and grew up after the reversion of Okinawa to Japan in 1972. These post-reversion adults have been Japanese citizens all their lives, and educated in accordance with the national educational curriculum. Throughout their lives, the U.S. bases were an established, stable element in Okinawa life, and were not involved in active East Asian combat operations. M+ Okinawans are approximately a third of the Okinawan population and 40 percent of the eligible voting population.

The study was conducted in the first half of 2018, a period when no major crimes or accidents involving U.S. service personnel or operations occurred. In an effort to gauge dominant views among more educated M+ Okinawans, the authors conducted in-depth interviews with some 60 Okinawans in this age group, conducted an on-line survey with 199 responses, and held several group sessions. The study was enhanced by comments on an interim report and later dissemination sessions in Okinawa and the United States. The survey as well as most interviews were conducted in Japanese. The findings do not represent a scientific polling of Okinawan attitudes and is a single snapshot, but we believe are broadly reflective of contemporary thinking of post-reversion adults in the island of Okinawa.

Findings

Mixed views and some fluidity in the attitudes of M+ Okinawans toward the presence of the bases. Fully half the survey respondents and many of the interviewees could not say whether they were “for” or “against” the base presence as such. Some gave arguments for both positions and many others professed not having thought seriously about the issue. More of those who did have positions opposed or strongly opposed the U.S. presence, and these opponents constituted about a third of all our sample respondents. They and those older Okinawans with opposed views continue to drive public opinion and dominate prefecture-wide politics as it relates to the bases.

Strong perception of an unfair burden. A majority of our interlocutors favored the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty with varying degrees of intensity, but there was a strong belief regardless of gender, age, or educational level that Okinawa hosts far more than its fair share of U.S. forces. This belief is combined with resentment against the central government for allowing this situation and not giving Okinawa an effective seat at the table on base issues. The construction of a replacement base at Cape Henoko, though the purpose is to close the Futenma base in a densely populated part of Okinawa, is widely regarded as a betrayal of Okinawa to broader Japanese interests and prejudices. Some supporters of the U.S. base presence in Okinawa, therefore, oppose the new construction at Cape Henoko.

Few actively protest. The vast majority of those we interviewed and surveyed have never been involved in protests against the U.S. presence, and only a handful were regularly involved in protests. They typically said they were too busy or disagree with the position or behavior of the protesters. The rise of a protest culture in the older generation in Okinawa came as a result of expropriations of lands in the 1950s. The younger generation have mixed feelings about protests as many feel they are ineffective, inconvenient, or even “un-Okinawan.” Specific incidents, however, can trigger large and visible demonstrations.

Positive views of U.S. service personnel. The most common descriptor of U.S. service personnel as individuals, cited by two-thirds of survey respondents, was that they are “friendly,” followed by “helpful.” Few of those interviewed or surveyed cited negative characteristics of service personnel. However, crime, accidents, noise, environmental issues, and traffic were regarded as base problems that should be “fixed.” There is little concern about too many base-associated foreigners in Okinawa; many saw this foreign presence as an asset that could even be made better use of.

Widespread desire for more cooperation and exchange with base community. There was very broad support among M+ respondents for enhanced contacts between the base and Okinawan communities for mutual benefit. This desire was especially strong among the younger, 20-30 age group. It decreased with age, but was still positive for the 31-45 year group, and among the small number of 46 and older people surveyed. The Okinawa Prefectural Government officials we spoke with also affirmed a desire for more cooperation with the base community.

Policy Implications

The study focused on describing post-revision-born adult attitudes and did not have explicit policy objectives. However, the findings suggest implications for U.S. and Japanese policies that deserve greater study and attention.

Major opportunity for U.S. public relations and public diplomacy. The desire of M+ Okinawans for greater contact with the base community and fluidity of attitudes on base presence appear to provide a potentially important opportunity for the American military and diplomats to strengthen base-Okinawan relations. While individual services work hard at community relations activities and have numerous activities, these are often couched in old-fashioned terms (“service” rather than partnering), appear compartmentalized, and seem to reach relative narrow groups. Few of our interlocutors had been involved. These programs could be reviewed and redesigned synergistically in cooperation with Okinawans to give special attention to engaging at younger ages on an island-wide basis. Increased opportunities to visit bases for educational and cultural activities can be an important draw.

Updating the Status of Forces Agreement. The operation of the U.S.-Japan SOFA is not well-understood in Okinawa where we found even very well-educated people often believe that it allows service personnel to commit crimes off-duty and off-base without punishment. There is also deep concern about environmental issues. The agreement could be reviewed by the two governments, with input from local sources and with reference to SOFAs with NATO allies, both to update it, if needed, and to better publicize its provision to help correct misperceptions within Okinawa. This exercise alone, with sufficient transparency, can be useful in updating perceptions.

Building a more multidimensional U.S.-Okinawa relationship. The U.S. relationship with the people and local governments (prefectural and below) in Okinawa is centered around the military dimension. Given the desire for educational and cultural linkages expressed by our interlocutors, increasing attention to these dimensions could place the relationship on a broader base. Special U.S. attention to this one Japanese prefecture is justified by the out-sized role that Okinawa plays in the alliance relationship and in preserving peace and security in the Pacific.

Future of the construction at Cape Henoko. Our study suggests the construction of the Henoko Marine facility inevitably will continue to be controversial within Okinawa and be opposed by the public and local government. Clearly, the notion that Henoko must be built to close Futenma has little resonance in Okinawa. The outcome of the September 2018 gubernatorial election in favor of Dennis Tamaki, who staunchly opposed to the Henoko project, reflected this wide sentiment. The Japanese government is committed to continue construction of the base, but will face continued legal and local opposition. Opposition to this facility, however, should not be equated with an unwillingness to host a U.S. presence.

Addressing the resentment problem. Our interviews and survey suggest mixed messages of importance for Tokyo. Okinawans appear to feel more Japanese than ever. Contrary to some belief abroad, especially in China, we found no significant support for the concept of Okinawan independence. But there is a strong sense of distinct identity and local pride that appears to be frequently coupled with a resentment narrative that Okinawa is underappreciated by the rest of Japan, accounting for the heavy concentration of foreign bases, unfairly “burdening” Okinawa. This leads to a prickliness in the relationship between local and central authorities that will not be resolved, and can even be accentuated, by special financial subsidies. There is no easy solution, but the findings suggest the need to be especially sensitive to Okinawan feelings and make special efforts to honor the distinctive and rich Okinawan culture and its contributions to Japanese diversity.

Author Bio's:

Charles E. Morrison has his Ph.D in international studies from the Johns Hopkins University. A former Senate aide, he served many positions at the East-West Center including president (1998-2016). He is now an adjunct fellow. He has also worked with the Japan Center for International Exchange as a non-resident fellow, and has visited Okinawa many times since 1980.

Daniel H. Chinen has an undergraduate degree from the University of Hawaii Manoa and a masters degree from Arizona State University in electrical engineering. Following an early career in the digital industries, he moved to Okinawa since 2007 where he has been a fellow with the University of the Ryukyus and teaches language and STEM sciences at several institutions. He also serves as the East-West Center representative in Okinawa.

www.soyo2018.com

soyo2018@gmail.com

080-1760-6620 (Japan)