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Opinion – Okinawa’s Struggle with Ongoing US Military Presence

<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/12/19/opinion-okinawas-struggle-with-ongoing-us-military-presence/>

PETER CHAI, DEC 19 2025

When the U.S. occupied Japan from 1945 to 1952, it established military bases in Okinawa. When the occupation ended in 1952, Japan allowed the U.S. to retain control of the prefecture. The U.S. continued to expand its military bases in the prefecture until its handover to Japan in 1972. Japan now hosts the largest number of U.S. military personnel abroad. Okinawa accounts for just 0.6% of Japan’s land area and 1.1% of its population, yet it hosts more than 70% of all U.S. military facilities in the country. Given this concentration, Okinawa was assumed to have more personal interaction with the U.S. military and to benefit economically from base-related activities. However, history has showed that neither social contact nor economic gains have translated into positive attitudes to the U.S. military. A complex mix of factors—including criminal incidents involving military personnel, environmental concerns such as water, air, and noise pollutions, training-related incidents, a sense of unfairness, and concerns about security risks—has fueled local resentment.

A public opinion poll in 2023 revealed that 70% of respondents agreed that “it’s unfair that U.S. military bases are concentrated in Okinawa,” and 83% agreed that “military bases in Okinawa Prefecture would be targets of an attack in an emergency.” A study based on two surveys comparing an Okinawan sample with a national sample also shows that people in Okinawa express significantly more negative views toward the U.S. military.

In November 2025, a video showing U.S. military police in Okinawa slamming an American civilian to the ground and trying to handcuff him as he shouts that they have “no right to touch me” went viral online. It raised concerns over the infringement of Japanese police authority outside U.S. installations and the risks of misidentifying civilians and tourists. Under the Japan–U.S. security agreement, American military police may exercise authority only over service members and their families under specific conditions. Its authority does not extend to civilians, including U.S. citizens.

Since September 2025, U.S. military police has organized unilateral off-base patrols to enforce a ban on drinking in local nightlife districts between 1 a.m. and 5 a.m. The move followed several sexual assault allegations involving servicemen in 2024. The unilateral patrols were suspended after the viral video surfaced. In total, 101 people were arrested during 33 instances of unilateral off-base patrols and joint patrols with Japanese authorities. Sexual violence is not a new issue in Okinawa and has long fueled the island’s anti-base movements. According to the Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence (OWAAMV), 350 crimes, including sexual violence, were committed by U.S. personnel against Okinawan women from 1945–2011. A recent analysis of roughly 1,900 incidents recorded in Okinawa between 2005 and 2024 by the NHK found that nearly 60% were investigated as suspected sexual offenses, and that at least 14 of those cases were not clearly disclosed. From the start of 2025 through the end of September, U.S. military personnel in Okinawa were involved in 77 criminal cases resulting in arrests under Japan’s Penal Code—already surpassing the 2024 total.

In 1995, the gang rape of an Okinawan elementary schoolgirl by three servicemen triggered protests and prompted the U.S. to pledge the closure of the Futenma air base, located in a densely populated area. The U.S. and Japan agreed to build a replacement facility near the remote town of Henoko. However, sex crimes involving U.S. military personnel did not end with the 1995 scandal, and incidents have continued to be reported by the media every few years, with some involving female minors. In some cases, local district prosecutors chose not to indict the

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servicemen, and due to “the strong need to protect the honor and privacy of those involved in the case,” the reasons for their decisions were not disclosed. Sometimes, incidents were handled within the military and did not appear in Japan’s official statistics. In 2024, more than 25,00 people joined a protest against sexual assaults by U.S. servicemen.

Anti-base activists have opposed the Henoko base, arguing that construction—partly atop coral reefs—would pollute coastal waters and destroy habitat for local wildlife. Years of anti-base protests and technical challenges have stalled the plan. As a result, the Henoko base remains only partially built, and Futenma base continues to operate. In 2024, close to 1,000 people joined a protest against the restart of construction for a military runway being built into Oura Bay. On the other hand, PFAS contamination near U.S. military bases has been a major environmental concern in Okinawa. Since 2016, the Okinawa prefectural government has requested 6 on-site inspections, but the U.S. military has approved only two—both tied to incidents it acknowledged including a 2020 leak of 140,000 liters of firefighting foam at Futenma. In 2022, reports released by an Okinawa civic group based on test samples from 387 residents in 6 municipalities found that PFOS levels as much as three times the national average.

The contamination is also tied to financial burden. Between 2016 and 2024, the Okinawa prefectural government spent 3.2 billion yen on water testing and treatment. Prefectural officials estimate that managing PFAS over the next decade will require at least another 8 billion yen. Water bills are likely to increase not only due to inflation and aging water equipment but also due to the cost of managing PFAS. This added financial pressure has deepened public frustration, compounding the health concerns. Meanwhile, media has recently reported that U.S. military vehicles have driven on public roads without license plates, and parachutes used in training exercises have fallen into public areas, raising public safety concerns.

Japan’s first female prime minister, Sanae Takaichi, elected in October, is seeking to revise Japan’s key security documents, including the National Security Strategy and raise Japan’s defense spending above 2% of GDP. She is also considering to revise the “not permitting introduction” clause of the Three Non-Nuclear Principles, potentially involving more U.S. military presence in Japan. Her recent remark in the Diet suggesting that a potential Taiwan crisis could constitute a “survival-threatening situation” triggered strong protests and punitive measures from China, including travel and study warnings, free flight cancellations and changes by airlines, a suspension of Japanese seafood imports, and the cancellation of performances by Japanese artists.

In December, China deployed a large number of naval and coast guard vessels across East Asian waters—at one point exceeding 100 ships. On 6 December, a fighter jet launched from the Chinese aircraft carrier *Liaoning* sailing over international waters southeast of Okinawa Prefecture directed its radar twice at Japan Self-Defense Force aircraft. Some observers have suspected that Takaichi’s remark on Taiwan may have been intended to draw retaliation from China, heighten public awareness of security risks, and prepare the public to accept an expansion of Japan’s defense capabilities.

A Yomiuri survey in December found that more than 60% of respondents agreed with expanding defense capabilities. A Sankei survey in November found that around 60% of respondents said Takaichi’s remark on Taiwan was appropriate. However, NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) resistance from local residents and governments could slow or even block new military installations. Although national support for strengthening Japan’s defense posture and the U.S.-Japan alliance remains high, many citizens are unlikely to welcome military bases or advanced weapons systems being installed near their own communities. Also, their support may wane following the government’s recent announcement that the increased defense spending will be funded through an income tax hike in 2027.

National sentiment and local opinion can diverge sharply over military installations, and local resistance remains a key source of uncertainty for Takaichi’s plans to expand Japan’s defense capabilities, which will likely lead to more U.S. military involvement. It would be misguided for her to assume that strong national-level support for defense expansion and U.S.-Japan alliance will translate into minimal local resistance when new installations are proposed. Public opinion and historical experience in Okinawa—where long-standing opposition is rooted in issues such as sexual crimes involving military personnel and environmental damage—illustrate this dynamic clearly. Similar

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sensitivities exist in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where survivors and their families, shaped by the legacy of the atomic bombings, tend to hold more anti-militaristic views and show lower support for military expansion or the possession of nuclear weapons.

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