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Construction work continues in Okinawa Prefecture's Henoko coastal area despite the opposition of a majority of Okinawans to the base-relocation project. | KYODO

## Younger Okinawans' view of U.S. bases isn't black and white

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HONOLULU - Unfortunately, when international attention focuses on Okinawa, it usually is in the wake of a tragedy associated with the U.S. military presence, be it a crime or an accident. Last month's suspected murder of an Okinawan woman by an American serviceman and his suicide led to some stories in Washington and Sydney stereotypically headlined "Okinawans Eager to Expel U.S. Troops." However, recent research that an Okinawa-based colleague, Daniel Chinen, and I conducted for the East-West Center into the attitudes of 20 to 45-year-old Okinawans paints a far more complex picture.

Our study was supported by the private U.S.-Japan Foundation and involved dozens of interviews and an anonymous online survey of about 200 “millennial plus” Okinawans. It showed a broad consensus around the beliefs that Okinawa hosts more than its fair share of foreign military bases and that Tokyo does not give due regard to Okinawan views. There was wide support also for increased access to the U.S. bases, enhanced relations between U.S. service personnel and local communities, and more dialogue on Okinawa base-related issues. There were also far more positive than negative perceptions of U.S. military service personnel, who were most commonly described as “friendly” and “helpful.”

Notably our study subjects were born after the end of U.S. administration of Okinawa in 1972. The majority, including some who support some U.S. base presence, opposed the construction of the Marine facility at Cape Henoko to replace Air Station Futenma in urban city of Ginowan. They expressed disagreement with statements that the construction at Henoko should be accepted as a means to close Futenma (this logic is not compelling in Okinawa), to provide leverage for budgets from Tokyo or simply because it cannot be helped. And a majority agreed with a statement that Henoko should be opposed no matter what the cost.

While environmental factors are prominent in opposition to the construction, the driving forces remain the perception of unfairness and the frustration of not feeling heard. One millennial Okinawan put this view succinctly: “The current situation, sacrificing Okinawa for the rest of Japan, has to be changed.”

In view of this sentiment, the elections of Henoko opponents as Okinawa governor last year and as his replacement in the Lower House by-election last month are not surprising. Nor is the 72 percent opposition to Henoko of those who voted in February’s referendum on this issue.

Opposition to Henoko, however, should not be equated with a desire to eject the U.S. military presence in Okinawa as a whole. Our survey found about one-in-six millennial-plus Okinawans supporting a U.S. base presence, two in six opposing or strongly opposing it, and three in six, or half, responding that they couldn’t decide whether the U.S. bases were a good or bad thing for Okinawa.

The uncertain political and security environment is a major factor underlying their ambivalence. Younger Okinawans have the same overriding concerns as other Japanese: jobs and the economy, care of aging parents, education, the environment and potential disasters. However, geopolitical factors such as China’s feared ambitions and the problematic Korean Peninsula situation were cited by some respondents as reasons the bases are needed to provide a strategic balance. A majority also felt the Japan-U.S. security treaty is important, although perhaps a little less strongly than polls suggest for Japanese as a whole.

With tourism booming, the bases may no longer be as economically critical to Okinawa as they once were, but they still remain very important — and in some surprising ways. For example, Okinawa has capitalized on its U.S. connections by developing an “American Village,” a dining and entertainment area attracting foreign tourists as well as a local clientele.

The root of the base problem lies in too many foreign bases in too small an area. “Although there are crimes, accidents and inconveniences,” said one Okinawa prefectural government official, “we don’t deny there are some good aspects to the bases. It’s just that we have too many of them.” This is reason enough for tensions, but the feelings of resentment and discrimination that many Okinawans nurture against the Tokyo government introduce an added layer of complexity.

Is there a solution? The Japanese and American governments appear determined to build the Henoko facility, while Okinawan perceptions of unfairness remain deeply embedded. And, partly because of Henoko, such resentments are being consolidated in the younger generations. Since Okinawan political leadership will be responsive to local sentiment, the tensions will not go away. But there are potentially better ways of managing them.

First, the current mode of defensively reacting to problems rather than proactively seeking to lessen impacts can be changed. The Okinawa prefectural government has been examining U.S. status of forces agreements with NATO countries and will be looking next at those with South Korea, the Philippines and Australia. The issue is less the language of the agreements, which is similar, but their actual operation, which varies significantly.

This is something that Japanese, American and Okinawan leaders can explore together with two goals in mind: The bases should be no less disruptive to the civilian population in Okinawa than for U.S. bases at home, and appropriate channels for Okinawan voices to be heard on issues affecting them should be no less available than in any other U.S.-allied country.

Second, Okinawans’ desire for more contact with the base communities is an opportunity for enhanced cooperation. The American military has many community outreach programs, but these appear to be highly compartmentalized, repetitive and directed toward towns immediately adjacent to the bases rather than comprehensively designed with the prefecture as a whole in mind. Few of our respondents had ever participated in one. These programs should be reviewed in partnership with younger Okinawans to give them greater impact for the island as a whole and direct them more toward emerging opinion leaders.

Finally, in positive news for Tokyo, our research suggests that Okinawa is more integrated with the rest of Japan than ever before in its history. We found very little support for independence or even special autonomy. But there is a strong sense of a distinct “*uchinanchu*” (people of Okinawa) identity and local pride coupled with a resentment narrative that Okinawa is under-appreciated elsewhere in Japan, resulting in an unfair base burden and leading to tension between local and central authorities. There is no easy solution, but the study highlights the need for Tokyo to be especially sensitive to Okinawan feelings and make special efforts to honor the rich Okinawan culture that contributes so much to Japanese diversity.

*Charles E. Morrison is an adjunct senior fellow and former president of the East-West Center, headquartered in Hawaii. The study on the attitudes of millennial-plus Okinawans can be found at: [www.EastWestCenter.org/Zcp](http://www.EastWestCenter.org/Zcp).*