

US Military Liberty Restrictions in Okinawa —Falling on Deaf Ears?

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On 21 November 2017, in response to a criminal drunk driving incident by a US Marine that resulted in the death of an Okinawan civilian, US military leadership in Japan issued the latest in a series of disciplinary measures for US personnel, designed to show the Japanese that the United States is taking the behavior of its troops seriously. These restrictions were draconian by previous standards: US service members were strictly prohibited from traveling anywhere beyond their work locations and their residences and barred from purchasing or consuming alcohol on or off base, including their own residences. The restrictions were subsequently relaxed on 1 December, then removed on 14 December.

Enacting these measures is understandable: faced with the formidable political and diplomatic obstacles challenging the US–Japan alliance, the highest US military authorities must consistently respond to a bevy of incidents, unfortunately with fewer arrows in their quiver to deal with local personnel crimes and breaches of decorum than those at their disposal for dealing with potential enemies. However, even considering their severity, these disciplinary actions will never achieve their objective—preventing further deterioration of the US–Japan relationship—without the help of the Japanese central government. A significant gulf exists between how the central government strategically views Okinawa and how the Okinawans view themselves, which aggravates reactions following incidents and harms bilateral defense strategy. The central government must do more to help Okinawans understand the need for US military presence on the island.

A brief examination of Japanese reactions after US military liberty restrictions is instructive. Since 2000, the US military has attempted to discipline its own by

instituting massive restrictions to liberty and movement on Okinawa (and the rest of Japan) on four major occasions—to various degrees of severity. There are some who say the objective of these restrictions are to punish US military service members as a whole; while an argument can be made that such an approach is effective, especially in preventing a second incident immediately following the first, such an argument does not present the whole picture. The restrictions’ primary objective is to prevent the US–Japan relationship from souring by accidentally inflaming the seemingly never-healing sore of Okinawa-central government relations. Incidents by US forces in Okinawa place pressure on the central government for action; this pressure returns to US leadership in the form of an urge to placate Okinawans, preferably on a large scale, usually resulting in a curfew. However, as the following chart shows, such curfew decisions seem to have negligible impact on either the Okinawan government’s official stances or on its relationships with the US military and Japanese central government. Over a period of 16 years, the Okinawan govern-

Type/Date of Incident	US Reaction	Central Gov’t Reaction	Okinawan Gov’t Reaction
Rape in Okinawa: 2000	Statement of regret; curfew instituted ¹	Consultations with US counterparts ²	Outrage; demands for harsher restrictions ³
Rape in Okinawa: 2008	Top US military commander enacts severe curfew ⁴ ; declares “period of reflection” for troops to review behavior; US ambassador travels to Okinawa for talks; suspect turned over to Japanese prosecutors ⁵	Strong statements of anger from prime minister and defense minister ⁶ ; Foreign Ministry welcomes US decision to enact stricter measures ⁷ ; chief cabinet secretary comments on rarity and severity of curfew	Large protests outside US base; regional government passes resolution of protest against US and Japanese central governments ⁸
Rape in Okinawa: Oct 2012	US Forces Japan commander issues apology; ⁹ enacts nationwide alcohol restrictions and harsher restrictions for Okinawan bases	Prime minister enacts high-level discussions among ministries, US departments, and US ambassador to Japan; accepts curfew measures as sufficient ¹⁰	Okinawan governor Hirokazu Nakaima rejects apology (“hard to forgive” ¹¹); outcries label US forces as “occupiers” ¹²

Rape and Murder in Okinawa: May 2016	Formal apology by US secretary of defense ¹³ , US ambassador, and highest-ranking military leader in Okinawa; ¹⁴ mourning period enacted, heavy military curfew, status of forces agreement supplement with Government of Japan	Japanese minister of defense acknowledges apology, ¹⁵ reaffirms strong alliance posture with United States, ¹⁶ and negotiates status of forces agreement supplement with US side	No apparent acceptance of apology; Okinawan governor Takeshi Onaga demands total status of forces agreement revision ¹⁷
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ment has appeared disinterested in acknowledging US apologies, which presents a major obstacle to finding common ground and resolving differences among the US military, the Okinawan government, and the Japanese central government.

This simple chart is not intended to be an all-inclusive list of incidents that affect the US–Japan relationship but as the data seem to indicate, there are two clearly different tacks taken by the Japanese central government and the Okinawan prefectural government, respectively, following liberty restrictions. The former, while correctly expressing outrage, largely supports US decisions to resolve issues and seems willing to work with the US side as long as it’s able to save face with the Okinawan people. The latter is clearly unsatisfied with the liberty restrictions—no matter their scale and scope—and often express outrage with the central government as much as with the United States. Meanwhile, the vast majority of law-abiding US personnel in Okinawa perceive the restrictions as punishment for crimes they did not commit.

Perhaps most striking about Okinawa’s various reactions is Governor Takeshi Onaga’s attitude that seems to indicate the United States’s efforts are worthless to him. Since his election to prefectural governor in 2014, Onaga has repeatedly stated his single-minded insistence to prevent the move of Futenma Marine Corps Air Station to a location mutually-agreed upon between the Japanese and US governments, including personally attending a protest rally in March 2017. He has attempted on at least seven separate occasions to derail this move via methods ranging from prefectural orders to lawsuits. The governor was also conspicuously absent (he claimed a scheduling conflict) from a ceremony in December 2017 that commemorated the reversion of nearly 10,000 acres of land from the US military to Okinawa in 2016.

Of particular note, as the above data show, he and the Okinawan government seemed impervious to US apologies. Even in this, Governor Onaga did not speak for all Okinawans, and never can, even though his government claimed he did. We have known for a long time, for example, that Okinawans who do not live near bases refer to opinions emanating from areas near Naha, the capital city of Okinawa Prefecture, as the thoughts of those living “over the mountains”—in other words, people who do not represent their views.

But, more importantly, this quick comparison reveals the Japanese central government to be the key to resolving the different viewpoints affecting the “Okinawa situation,” without which curfews of any size or shape by the US side will be completely ineffective with an Okinawan prefectural government that has clearly made up its mind, in spite of faithful efforts by high-ranking Japanese officials to work with the Okinawan government. For example, former Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida met with Governor Onaga in February 2017; Minister of Defense Itsunori Onodera met with Onaga in August 2017; and most recently, Foreign Minister Taro Kono met with the governor on 4 December 2017. Their attempts to find compromise and understanding regarding Okinawan issues, while admirable, again revealed that very rarely do the views of the Japanese central government and those of the Okinawan prefectural government match, and their relationship has degenerated to one more resembling hostile nations. The well-established pattern of these meetings—with each side explaining its position, Okinawan prefectural complaints, central government official insistence on obedience, and then departure with no solution—must be reimagined if there is to be progress.

Other leaders, such as former Minister of Defense Gen Nakatani, claim to have attempted to get the Okinawan people to understand the central government’s position and the importance of Okinawa’s strategic location; however, such overtures appear to have failed to make an impression on Okinawan leaders.¹⁸ Rather, such attempts are drowned out by a media that seems obsessed about how closely US statements conform to what they think an apology should look like¹⁹ and that continues to use language personifying the Okinawan basing burden as “suffering.”²⁰ The relationship will never improve without the Japanese central government’s intervention to change this narrative by rethinking how they address the Okinawan people.

The inability of the central and prefectural governments to see eye to eye has clear implications for the US military which, while attempting to defend Japan, becomes caught in the middle of the domestic bickering and is placed in a situa-

tion where pleasing both parties is clearly hopeless. This creates a sense of urgency to find something that works; and to a military mind, this means developing a meaningful, fast, and punitive response to a transgression—clearly indicating that the United States means business. These messages, while powerful from the US perspective, are largely mute to career protestors who regularly tumble onto Okinawan shores, to locals paid off by subsidies, and to a broader Okinawan audience with no frame of reference. The messages also mean nothing to those with a rabid—and prefectural government-sponsored—desire to remove US forces from the island completely.

Further, US leadership in Japan seems to be repeating the same prescription for a disease with no meaningful result. That's because there is no cure possible from what they are prescribing. The Okinawan “problem” is no more than a localized set of grave misunderstandings compounded by individual crimes and mistakes and fueled by central government subsidies. It must be solved locally. It requires a deep understanding of local concerns, a historical perspective on how past problems were dealt with, and steady punishment for the guilty parties—and only the guilty parties.

Luckily, there is a potential cure for the troubles: instruction from the Japanese central government on the Okinawans' critical role in national defense. A strong case can be made that the central government has shirked its responsibility to instruct Okinawans on the island's strategic role and location. Despite Ministry of Defense announcements and private meetings with the Okinawan prefectural government, the limited audience and disinterest in central government opinion exhibited by the Okinawan prefectural government in these instances mean that the average Okinawan still may not understand his or her island's geographic significance to bilateral defense, may not care why US military forces are stationed there, and likely does not understand why the United States and Japan share a major security interest in the island and its location. Indeed, many Okinawans do not encounter American military forces on a day-to-day basis. Within this vacuum, Okinawans are free to cook up historical or paranoid reasons why either (or both) party “hates” them, free to view the “military burden” cash subsidies provided to them by the central government as a well-earned and justified birthright, and free to hang the US military in effigy within the local newspapers without consequences. The real failure in this trilateral relationship among the US, the Japanese central government, and the Okinawan prefectural government, is that many Okinawans appear to have ignored or have not grasped how important and neces-

sary they are, and by extension why US forces are there in the first place. The central government can clearly help close this gap by better education and explanation beyond closed-door meetings, as Okinawans may not listen to US military sources who try to do the same. As a matter of domestic national security, the central government has a responsibility and duty to find the courage to counter historical narratives for the sake of national defense; if Okinawan leadership attempts to obstruct this view, they must—by necessity—be countered as well.



Takeshi Onaga, elected Okinawan governor in 2014, left, exchanged greetings and discussed bolstering relationships among the Okinawan government, citizens, and US forces in Okinawa with Lt Gen John Wissler, USMC, Okinawa area coordinator, US Forces Japan, during their first meeting 18 December 2014 at the Marine Corps Installation Pacific headquarters. US Marine photo by Cpl. Henry Antenor

The United States will continue working to minimize and forestall US personnel transgressions and crimes, as it always has. Recent apologies by US leaders have been notably effective in guiding the alliance through rough times by providing the central government with their critical face-saving requirements. Further, deputy chief of staff for Marine Corps Installations Pacific Col Darin Clarke’s comment on 5 December 2017 firmly informed Okinawans the recent criminal drunk driving incident was the fault of an individual while simultaneously apologizing, which is exactly the proper message. However, the press’s careless commentary that Col Clarke’s statement and the subsequent central government decision to not obstruct US military operations showed “contempt for the people of Okinawa”—without further elaboration—were not constructive measures and recklessly exacerbated the

problem.²¹ If the Japanese central government wants a better-behaved Okinawa, its path is clear: the central government must “kill them with kindness” and begin doing so by making clear to Okinawans their critical role in Japanese national strategy at a local level.

This is not a lie: few geographic areas in Japan are more strategic than Okinawa. If necessary, to get this critical message across, the Japanese central government must bypass the Okinawan prefectural government and address the people directly—they certainly possess the charisma within the cabinet to make a large impact on the local population. There are logical, prudent reasons why Okinawan officials’ cooperation is in doubt: these officials may have too much political capital invested in a “throw out the Americans” stance to realistically assist central government efforts. Further, the central government does not have to shame itself or keep giving Okinawans free money; it simply has to explain where the perceived military burden originated, why it’s necessary to continue the course, and what it means to the nation if the US forces were to withdraw. An occasional statement from the defense minister and a twice-a-year meeting will not be sufficient; an island-wide, long overdue, education campaign directed at the populace ought to be the best solution. Given the problematic relationship and lack of overall progress, it’s certainly worth a try.

To be cold, if curfews do not lead to a correspondingly positive diplomatic result from Japan, the curfews are effectively hollow and only result in US self-effacement. Okinawa really is important, and the people there really are critical to the US–Japan relationship. They have simply been disenfranchised by the central government and disappointed by US military mistakes to the point that they believe the closer they can get to “independence,” the better off they will be. Nothing is further from the truth. The more fragmented Okinawa is, the more danger Japan—and the US military forces stationed there—are in, which is bad for all three parties. **JIPA**

Notes

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