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THE ISSUE OF OKINAWA'S REVERSION TO JAPAN

Abstract

At the end of World War II, following a brutal battle, the Okinawa Prefecture was occupied by American forces and placed under the administration of the United States. In 1951, the U.S. consolidated its position through the “San Francisco Peace Treaty,” according to which Japan officially ceded temporary administrative control of Okinawa Prefecture to the United States.

In November 1969, an agreement was reached between the United States and Japan, and the two countries commenced official negotiations regarding the reversion of the Okinawa Islands. On June 17, 1971, the “Agreement between Japan and the United States of America Concerning the Ryukyu Islands and the Daito Islands” was signed, taking effect on May 15, 1972. As a result, Okinawa Prefecture was reintegrated into Japan after a 27-year separation.

This study will review various circumstances and facts that had a significant impact on the reintegration of Okinawa Prefecture into Japan.

Keywords: *USA-Japan relations, Okinawa reversion.*

The Historical Background of Okinawa

In 1429, King Shō Hashi founded the Ryukyu Kingdom. Due to its strategic location, the islands developed into a kind of trade hub, connecting Japan, Korea, China, and various parts of Southeast Asia. In the 17th century, the Japanese feudal lord of Satsuma, Iehiro Shimazu, became interested in the resources of the Ryukyu Kingdom and the profits derived from its trade, and thus decided to subjugate it. In 1609, he conquered the Ryukyu Kingdom, making it a vassal of the Shimazu clan.

In 1868, within the framework of the “Meiji Reforms” initiated in Japan, the country began implementing a plan for its modern reorganization. The main goal of this plan was to ensure that the central government exercised maximum control over the territories. In July 1869, a major part of the reform was implemented: the han (domains) were replaced with ken (prefectures), each headed by a kenrei appointed by the central government, thus completing the process of centralization in the country.

In the initial phase, the reforms did not affect the Ryukyu Kingdom, which was located in the southwestern part of Japan. However, in 1872, the Ryukyu Kingdom, with its 450-year history, was stripped of its royal status and replaced by the Ryukyu han. In 1879, the Ryukyu han was abolished and Okinawa Prefecture was established instead, with a kenrei appointed by the central government to govern it.

Due to the Ryukyu Islands' unique status, the Japanese authorities initially pursued a cautious policy toward Okinawa. However, following Japan's victory in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), the central government began implementing an assimilation policy toward Okinawa.

During World War II, the Ryukyu Islands served as the last and principal bastion in Japan's defense system, protecting its main islands (Honshu, Kyushu, Shikoku, and Hokkaido), and were therefore heavily fortified. Toward the end of the war, Okinawa became one of the primary targets for American forces.

In March 1945, as part of Operation "Iceberg," American forces began landing on Okinawa. The Japanese mounted a fierce three-month defense, which ended on June 22 with their defeat. Approximately 200,000 people perished in this desperate battle. Alongside 12,520 American soldiers, 122,228 Okinawans lost their lives, of whom 94,000 were civilian local residents. According to data from the Okinawa Prefectural Archives, one in every four Okinawans died as a result of the military operations.

Okinawa under the American Occupation

Upon landing on Okinawa, the Americans immediately informed the local population that the Japanese administrative authorities had been suspended (the so-called "Nimitz Proclamation"). On August 15, 1945, Japan officially surrendered. On the same day, the Americans sought out former members of the Okinawa Prefectural Assembly, as well as school principals, from prisoner-of-war camps on Okinawa, and formed the Okinawa Advisory Council from among them to assist the U.S. military in administering the islands. The first city council elections were held on September 20.

In April 1946, as a result of the reforms implemented, the Okinawa Advisory Council was transformed into a civil government, establishing a full-fledged local self-governing body. Its creation stimulated the formation of political parties, and the population actively began discussions and planning regarding the postwar reconstruction of Okinawa.

On January 29, 1946, General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers in Japan, decided to separate the Nansei Islands from Japan. Consequently, Okinawa was administratively separated from Japan and began to develop independently from Tokyo.

The intensification of the Cold War altered U.S. plans regarding Japan. Instead of pursuing initial demilitarization, the focus shifted toward developing Japan as a regional ally, which involved rearming Japan, maintaining U.S. forces on Japanese territory, and establishing Okinawa as a separately controlled area. On this basis, the active establishment of military bases in Okinawa commenced.

In 1952, when Japan signed the San Francisco Peace Treaty, it regained the status of an independent state; however, Okinawa remained officially separated from Japan and under U.S. administrative control.

Under the framework established by San Francisco Peace Treaty, the occupation regime in the Ryukyu Islands consisted of a dual administrative system, dividing functions between the United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands and the Government of Ryukyu Islands. The Civil Administration had de jure authority to intervene in public affairs managed by the three branches of the Ryukyu Islands Government.

Following the U.S. acquisition of administrative control over Okinawa in 1952 under the San Francisco Peace Treaty, the construction of military bases was actively pursued. Once this status was consolidated, the Americans implemented stricter policies than before. In 1955, forced land confiscations were carried out in several areas. Additionally, the lease terms and rent fees offered to locals were considered unacceptable. These measures fueled anti-American sentiment in Okinawa.

Moreover, numerous other problems arose. The head of government of the Ryukyu was not elected by the local population but appointed by the Deputy of the U.S. Civil Administrator (later the High Commissioner). The legislative body was permitted to pass only laws that did not contradict the directives of the U.S. Civil Administration. Crimes committed by American soldiers were tried in American military tribunals rather than Ryukyu courts. Furthermore, cases involving local residents that significantly affected U.S. military governance were transferred from local courts to the courts of the U.S. Civil Administration. In addition, publications critical of U.S. authorities and governance were subject to a form of censorship. All these measures were deeply resented by the local population and fostered critical attitudes toward U.S. rule.

The Movement for the Reversion of Okinawa to Japan

The final official status of Okinawa under the American military and civil administration was unclear, and therefore, debates regarding the future status of Okinawa began shortly after the end of the war. Although the United States recognized the Ryukyu Islands as part of Japan, and the local population held Japanese citizenship, Americans strictly controlled travel between the Ryukyus and Japan.

In 1951, when the San Francisco Peace Conference was planned, local newspapers in Okinawa, *Uruma Shimpō* and *Okinawa Times*, initiated public debates regarding Okinawa's future status. The newspapers allocated space both to proponents of reintegration with Japan and to advocates of U.S. or U.N. trusteeship. Supporters argued that Okinawa's reversion to Japan was akin to a child going back to its parent's place and further contended that Japan's economy would recover after World War II, enabling the reconstruction of the devastated islands.

In January 1953, the Association for the Promotion of the Reversion of the Okinawa Islands to the Homeland was established, but it was soon disbanded under pressure from the U.S. military administration. Subsequently, the movement entered a period of stagnation. However, the issue of military land leases reignited the desire for reversion to Japan.

In 1955, the Japanese newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* published an article based on a report by the organization Japan Civil Union, which addressed human rights issues in Okinawa. The Japanese researcher Fumi Inoue notes that this article provoked significant public outrage and influenced U.S.-Japan relations concerning Okinawa. In August 1955, Japan's Foreign Minister Mamoru Shigemitsu requested U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to reversion Okinawa to Japan and to treat the Okinawan population with greater respect, but Dulles refused.

From 1956 onward, anti-American movements in Okinawa resumed, accompanied by demands for reversion to Japan. The U.S. military regarded the bases in Okinawa as strategically vital, and any local movement advocating the reversion of the Ryukyu Islands

to Japanese jurisdiction was perceived as a serious challenge and was suppressed. Nevertheless, the stricter the U.S. measures, the more support grew among Okinawans for reintegration with Japan.

The situation eventually became so complex that some U.S. officials considered it preferable to revert Okinawa to Japan in exchange for retaining control over U.S. military bases. In response to active protests, the U.S. military administration attempted to ease tensions by improving social conditions. In April 1960, the “Okinawa Prefecture Reversion Council” was established, aiming to explain the benefits of reintegration with Japan to the Ryukyu population. Meanwhile, the partnership between Japan and the United States deepened further.

In 1960, the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan (U.S.-Japan Security Treaty) was signed, under which the United States pledged to assist Japan in the event of an attack by a third country. In reversion, Japan provided the United States with additional access to military bases and ports, on the condition that Washington would consult Tokyo beforehand regarding any necessary military actions. The treaty included a ten-year period, after which either party could unilaterally terminate it.

As Marshall Green, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs (1969–1973), recalled, the strategic location of the Ryukyu Islands was too important to be relinquished. At the same time, if the islands were not reversion to Japan, there was a high likelihood that Tokyo would no longer uphold the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, necessitating action. It was precisely for this reason that negotiations were initiated.

The Path to the Initiation of Negotiations

In 1962, U.S. President John F. Kennedy declared that the Ryukyu Islands are part of Japan and announced the launch of a “Kennedy New Policy for Okinawa.” This policy entailed recognizing Okinawa as part of Japan, improving the welfare of the Okinawan population, and maintaining U.S. military bases.

To support the improvement of Okinawa’s welfare, the United States requested Japan to share part of the economic burden. Japan agreed to this request, and implementation began in 1963. It is noteworthy that during the 27-year period of U.S. military administration, the total assistance provided to the Ryukyu government amounted to 123,200,000 yen (43%) from the Japanese government and 164,900,000 yen (57%) from the U.S. government.

In April 1964, the Japan-U.S. Consultative Committee and the Japan-U.S. Ryukyu Technical Committee were established, laying the groundwork for negotiations between the two countries concerning Okinawa.

The U.S. government approached the matter seriously, and in 1966 concluded that the reversion of Okinawa to Japan was possible, provided that U.S. military bases were maintained. In 1967, at the Japan-U.S. Summit, both governments agreed that the issue of Okinawa’s reversion would be resolved within the next two years.

According to a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (17 February 1969), Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Satō would exert maximum effort to resolve the reversion of Okinawa. In 1970, the term of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) presidency was set to expire, and parliamentary elections were scheduled in Japan. It was anticipated that the Okinawa issue would become the most contentious matter, particularly after LDP-backed Chōbyō Yara

assumed the position of Director of the Ryukyu Government. Yara's main political commitment was to reversion Okinawa to Japan, gradually remove U.S. military bases from the islands, and eliminate nuclear weapons from Okinawa. His election exerted additional pressure on Satō to take decisive action for Okinawa's reversion.

The overall assessment concluded that the "Okinawa issue could negatively affect U.S.-Japan security relations and impede cooperation on various matters. It could also lead to increased demands in Japan for the reduction of American bases. Meanwhile, a growing and intense campaign against U.S. civil administration and military presence was underway in Okinawa. Under such conditions, there was a risk that Okinawa's role in supporting U.S. forces in Southeast Asia and Korea could be seriously undermined."

Negotiations Concerning the Reversion of Okinawa

In June 1969, official Japan-U.S. negotiations regarding the reversion of Okinawa to Japan began in Washington, D.C. Japan deployed its most skilled diplomats to achieve success in the negotiations. The most challenging issue concerned the U.S. right to freely use its bases in emergency situations, a sensitive matter for Japan as it implied the potential use of nuclear weapons.

To gain leverage in the negotiations, the U.S. government preemptively and urgently removed nuclear weapons from Okinawan bases. As a result, Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Satō agreed to the U.S. right of free use of the bases, while an additional secret protocol was created regarding the deployment of nuclear weapons.

Financial considerations were also a critical aspect of the reversion negotiations. Engaged in the Vietnam War, the U.S. was unwilling to incur additional financial costs and sought to transfer the entire financial burden to Japan. Conversely, the Japanese government did not want its population to perceive that it had effectively "purchased" territory rightfully belonging to Japan. The negotiations were difficult, but ultimately Japan had to concede and agreed to pay \$320 million.

As a result of the Japan-U.S. negotiations held from November 19–21, 1969, it was decided that the Ryukyu Islands (Okinawa) and the Daito Islands would be returned to Japan in 1972. The United States renounced all rights and interests regarding the Ryukyu and Daito Islands under Article 3 of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, signed on September 8, 1951.

Since Okinawa Prefecture had been administered by the United States since the end of World War II, its governance system differed from that of Japan. Therefore, various preparatory procedures were required. In March 1970, Japan established the "Reversion Preparatory Committee."

Within the framework of preparing for reintegration under Japanese administration, the following matters were addressed: 1. Preparations for the establishment of local branch offices and other departments in Okinawa Prefecture and the transfer of the status of Ryukyu Government employees, etc.; 2. Preparations for the application of mainland laws and regulations; 3. Treatment of public corporations, public finance corporations, and other public organizations; 4. Preparations for the transfer of public property and U.S. assets; 5. Preparations for currency conversion; and 6. Preparations for the application of the Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement.

The Reversion of Okinawa Prefecture to Japan

On June 17, 1971, Japan and the United States signed the “Agreement Between Japan and the United States Concerning the Ryukyu and Daito Islands.” The agreement was signed by Japan’s Foreign Minister Kiichi Aichi and U.S. Secretary of State William P. Rogers. It comprised nine major articles and officially came into force on May 15, 1972.

The local population had mixed feelings. On one hand, they welcomed the return to Japan, but on the other, they were dissatisfied that, despite their demands, U.S. military bases remained in the prefecture, prompting protests by the discontented population.

On May 15, a special law came into effect, transforming Okinawa into a Japanese prefecture until elections could be held. The Executive Director of the Ryukyu Government was appointed as the governor of Okinawa, and members of the local legislative assembly became members of the Okinawa Prefectural Assembly. On June 25 of the same year, elections for the governor and the assembly were officially held. Chōbyō Yara was elected governor, and the assembly was composed of 44 members.

Before Okinawa’s reversion to Japan, U.S. military bases occupied approximately 353 km², representing 14.8% of the prefecture’s total area (27.2% of the main island). According to the June 1971 agreement between the Japanese and U.S. governments, the United States retained the right to use the military bases even after Okinawa’s reversion, although their number was to be reduced. Under the agreement, 34 bases were immediately returned to Japan, 12 bases were returned after a certain period, and 88 bases remained under U.S. control.

On June 29, 1971, the so-called “Kubo-Curtis Agreement” was concluded, under which the Japanese government deployed defense forces to Okinawa after its reversion. The number of personnel in Okinawa soon increased to approximately 6,400, but later, under Prime Minister Satō’s decision, both personnel and armaments were reduced.

The continued presence of U.S. bases caused dissatisfaction among the local population, who had expected their complete removal. Residents believed that incidents and accidents caused by U.S. military personnel and civilians, as well as noise pollution, adversely affected their daily lives. They were also concerned about environmental damage caused by various pollutants.

Okinawa’s reversion was not aligned with the interests of the Republic of Korea (South Korea). As Japanese researcher Chihiro Narita notes, the primary reason was the potential weakening of national security. South Korea had an interest in the retention of U.S. military bases on Okinawa, which had played a significant role in the country’s defense during the Korean War (1950–1953).

A Charles A. Schmitz - U.S. Embassy official in Tokyo involved in the reversion process described the June 17, 1971, agreement as the most successful U.S. transaction since the purchase of the Louisiana Territory. In his view, although a few minor adjustments were made at the request of the Japanese, the U.S. achieved its primary objective of retaining American military bases in Okinawa and preserving the right to use the bases for almost all intended purposes. Furthermore, the United States was relieved of the enormous financial burden of administering the islands and, most importantly, removed itself from the moral responsibility that might have portrayed the U.S. as an imperialist power in its relations with Asian countries.

Conclusion

The research revealed a range of facts and events that significantly influenced the reversion of Okinawa Prefecture to Japan. Among these, the most critical factor was the global geopolitical situation. The onset of the Cold War compelled the United States to reconsider its policy toward Japan, particularly as communist forces consolidated their positions in China and the northern part of the Korean Peninsula. In the East Asian region, the United States needed a strong allied state rather than an occupied zone, and only Japan could fulfill this role. The United States assisted Japan in economic recovery and strengthening its defense capabilities, which culminated in the signing of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty. This trilateral partnership facilitated Japan's ability to regain its territorial sovereignty.

Geopolitical considerations also played a decisive role in the reversion of Okinawa. For the United States, the maintenance of military bases in Japan — especially in Okinawa — was of paramount importance. These bases were strategically employed both during the Vietnam War and to ensure security in South Korea. Furthermore, U.S. military installations in Japan were critical to consolidating American influence and security in the East Asian region. Thus, when the renewal date of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty approached in 1970, Tokyo effectively leveraged the issue of Okinawa's reversion to exert pressure. Washington was essentially compelled to concede Okinawa to Japan in exchange for retaining its military bases.

In addition to the geopolitical context, other factors decisively influenced the process. The harsh policies implemented by the U.S. toward the local population intensified the Okinawans' desire to return to Japanese sovereignty. Had U.S. policy been less severe, anti-American sentiment might not have developed as strongly, and the local population could have continued under a different administrative status instead of seeking reversion to Japan. Evidence of this can be found in the public debates in Okinawa since the early 1950s, where alternatives to reversion were also considered.

The attitudes of Japanese political leaders were also significant. Prime Minister Eisaku Satō's principled position that Okinawa must be returned to Japan effectively constrained his policy options and created additional motivation to achieve the objective. The election of Chōbyō Yara in Okinawa provided further impetus for the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. Additionally, the exposure of human rights violations in Okinawa by the "Japan Civil Alliance" generated widespread public indignation in Japan and prompted protest movements demanding Okinawa's reversion. Public sentiment added pressure on the Japanese government to act decisively.

In conclusion, the reversion of Okinawa represented a mutually beneficial outcome. Japan successfully restored sovereignty over its territory, while the United States retained its military bases. Although the presence of U.S. bases provoked some local dissatisfaction, particularly among Okinawans, given the prevailing geopolitical context, their presence was more advantageous than detrimental for Japan. While the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty places Japan under a so-called "nuclear umbrella," the continued presence of U.S. military bases provides a greater guarantee of stability, indirectly supporting economic and financial security.