

counterpunch

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only.

SEPTEMBER 2, 2011

Yoshihiko Noda and the Futenma Air Base

Another Washington Pawn in Tokyo

by ALLEN MENDENHALL

Japan has a new prime minister: Yoshihiko Noda. The sixth Japanese PM in five years, Noda will also serve as the third consecutive PM from the Democratic Party of Japan, or DPJ, the so-called “liberal” party. Noda gains his title after a party runoff following the resignation of former prime minister Naoto Kan.

Western media outlets, in their profiles of Noda, have focused almost exclusively on Noda’s fiscal policies or personal upbringing while avoiding what is a more pressing issue: Japan’s oppressive treatment of Okinawans at the behest of the imperial Obama administration.

Okinawa “hosts” U.S. military bases. One base in particular has drawn the ire of local residents and even generated sustained media attention: the Futenma Air Station. Futenma is the product of the Futenma Accord, an agreement reached in the wake of a 1995 incident in which three U.S. soldiers on Okinawa gang-raped a twelve-year-old girl. Since then, Futenma has managed to upset local mayors and the Okinawan populace, whom Tokyo-based politicians treat as second-class citizens.

A majority of Okinawans want Futenma off their island, despite irrational and self-interested claims by U.S. military personnel that American troops generate commerce and provide much-needed security in the area. If U.S. troops generate commerce and provide security, they also commit crimes, pollute, disturb the peace, and monopolize valuable properties where real estate is hard to come by. The cruel paradox, then, is that commerce and security—the supposed justifications for the U.S. military presence—are undermined by the U.S. military.

U.S. administrations, from Clinton to Bush to Obama, have been complicit in—indeed facilitative of—Tokyo’s harsh and dismissive treatment of Okinawans. That’s why Doug Bandow, among other commentators, has referred to the Washington-Tokyo alliance as collusive and colonial. Okinawa has been colonized and occupied territory since the early nineteenth-century. During WWII, Okinawans, who are culturally and ethnically

distinct from the Japanese, suffered at the hands of both the Allied and Japanese militaries, which viewed Okinawans as a security threat.

The American military has occupied Okinawa ever since WWII ended. For a time America officially possessed Okinawa, but America “returned” the island to the Japanese in 1972—which is to say, America let the Japanese claim rights over Okinawa after Tokyo paid America over \$600 million. Japan continues to subsidize the U.S. military presence on Okinawa.

Before Noda and his predecessor Naoto Kan, Yukio Hatoyama was the PM—the first PM from the DPJ to serve in many years. Hatoyama stood up to the United States and challenged Obama on the Futenma issue. He campaigned on the promise of base relocation. Not long into his tenure, however, the Obama minions—most notably Hilary Clinton, Robert Gates and company—went great lengths to silence Hatoyama and to turn public opinion against him.

That seemed to work in Japan proper, but in Okinawa protests against the base began to mount, and local mayors began to gather petitions to mail directly to Obama. In the end, Obama’s heavy-handed foreign policy prevailed. Hatoyama buckled under media pressure and international scrutiny. He stepped down. Okinawans were furious. After all, wasn’t this U.S. president the recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize? Wasn’t this U.S. president the representative of hope and change?

In light of Obama’s triumph over Hatoyama, Kan avoided the Futenma issue, prevaricating whenever it came up. Despite repeated media insistences that the Futenma issue has been settled and that relocation will take place within (not outside) Okinawa, the future of the Futenma air station remains uncertain. Furthermore, the U.S. military continues carrying out noisy and dangerous fighter jet training exercises, which seem only more sinister in light of the over 40 U.S. helicopter crashes on Okinawa since 1972.

One wonders whether the U.S. military presence on Okinawa serves to circumvent Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which prohibits Japan from maintaining troops or using military force as a means of settling international disputes. One wonders, in other words, whether Tokyo and Washington have devised a scheme whereby Japan appears to have no military, even though she plays a determinative role in U.S. military decisions and operations in the region. In effect, Tokyo-based politicians have allowed the U.S. military to function as a *de facto* Japanese military—and U.S. military leaders and politicians seem to have enjoyed this role, which gives them wide latitude to influence Japanese public policy, both domestic and international.

Now it's time to see whether Noda will do what Hatoyama could not: stand up to Obama and defy the Tokyo-Washington elites. Unfortunately, Noda is himself one of the Tokyo-Washington elites. But that doesn't mean he can't change.

It's time to see whether Noda will demand that Futenma be moved to Guam, a U.S. territory that has expressed interest in hosting the base. It's time to see whether Noda will demand total withdrawal of U.S. troops from Okinawa and his entire country. I, for one, won't get my hopes up. Noda will be the next impeccable suit in a long line of leaders who pander to U.S. interests at the expense of impoverished and angry Okinawans. Let's hope I'm wrong. Futenma needs to go. And Okinawans need a chance to live free from occupation.

***Allen Mendenhall** is a writer and attorney living in Atlanta. Visit his website at AllenMendenhall.com.*