

POLICY BRIEF

Decentring the First Island Chain Okinawa requires a recapitulation of security

The shadow of an insecure history

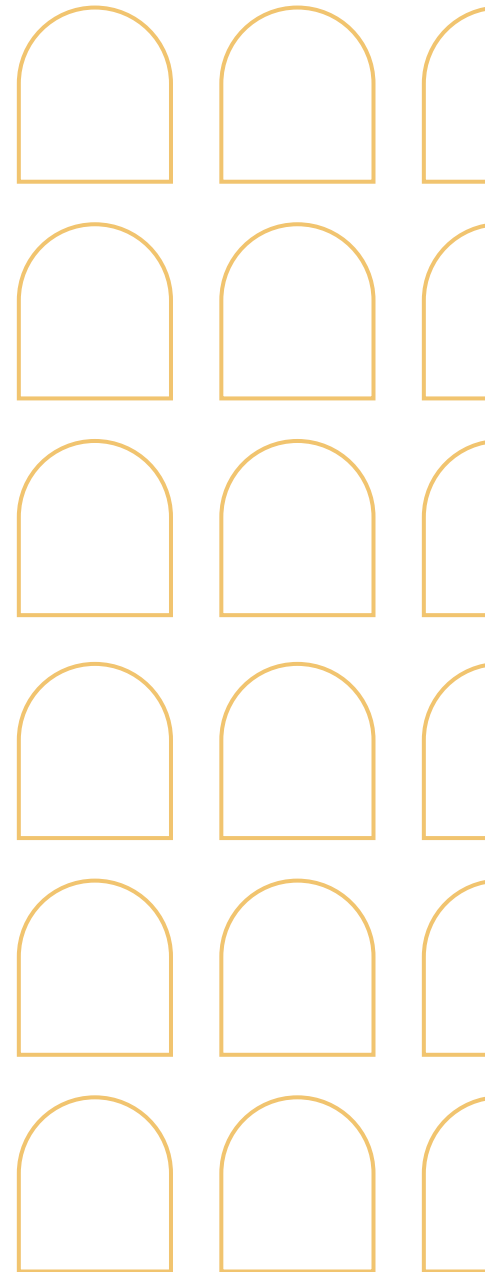
Historically Okinawa has been the ‘keystone’ of the Western Pacific. In other words, whoever controls the so-called First Island Chain, which runs from the Japanese mainland through to Itbayat and Basco, with the Ryukyu Islands at its centre, exercises power over much of the East China Sea (ECS) region, if not the Indo-Pacific more broadly.¹ Conversely, conceptualised as a maritime fault-line dividing great power rivals, the Okinawan islands remain a likely site of mid- to long-term instability and conflict through what is expected to be a period of transition in the international arena.²

As of today, with approximately 70% of US military bases in Japan still stationed on and around Okinawa’s Main Island, and a rapidly growing Japan Self Defense Force (JSDF) presence throughout the archipelago, Japan’s 47th and most south-westerly prefecture forms a key part of its radical transformation of defence and security policy.³ More specifically, it is being extensively fortified in preparation for prospec-

- 1 Mamoru Akamine, *The Ryukyu Kingdom: Cornerstone of East Asia* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2017).
- 2 “Kadena Airfield: From Auxiliary Airstrip to ‘Keystone of the Pacific’” in Yunshin Hong (ed.) *Comfort stations as remembered by Okinawans in World War II* (Amsterdam: Brill, 2020), pp. 196-232.
- 3 Christopher Hughes, Europe Japan Advanced Research Network (EJARN) conference presentation, University of Lund, 15 September 2023.

Author

Ra Mason, Sasakawa Associate Professor of International Relations and Japanese Foreign Policy (University of East Anglia); Visiting Researcher (Ritsumeikan University); Okinawa Diaspora Research Center member (Meio University)



Issue 2023/15
November 2023

tive confrontation with China. This has already led to a dangerous arms race that includes mapping multiple scenarios for strikes and counter-strikes relating to mainland Asian targets. In addition, the training and inter-operationalisation of US and Japanese forces in readiness to defend or retake the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu/Tiaoyutai (hereafter Senkaku) islets have been accelerated.⁴

Misconceptions of modern-day Okinawan security

Against this backdrop, there are at least three important question marks concerning the motivation and efficacy of advancing a policy trajectory focused primarily on fortification. First, it is already leading to escalation. In other words, a security dilemma has been created in which the US-Japan alliance is militarising in order to keep pace with China's development of conventional and non-conventional war machinery and *viceversa*. From Tokyo's perspective, this is in the hope of maintaining sufficient deterrence to prevent a future invasion or capture of Japanese sovereign territory and further deter aggression against Okinawa's neighbour, Taiwan. Second, led by the Americans as the senior partner, the US-Japan alliance has focused recent efforts on interoperability as a means by which to maximise combined conventional military capabilities in readiness for a regional security contingency. Of course, the Japanese political leaders might still refuse to respond or instruct their American partners to go it alone, but it nevertheless threatens to entrap Japan in US foreign policymaking – or 'burden share' to use Washington's terminology. For example, if their forces are deeply integrated, then any localised aggression against US assets – albeit highly unlikely in and around Okinawa given China's wariness to avoid provoking a kinetic response – can more credibly be deemed an attack on the alliance and therefore subject to invoking self-defence, which allows Japan to circumvent its own constitutional constraints on operationalising lethal combat. Third, by using the pretext of national se-

curity, the Government of Japan (GoJ) is able to make apologetic noises about the disproportionate burden that Okinawa shoulders in terms of bases, but ultimately justifies it as "essential" for the defence of all Japan.⁵

Each of the above aspects of security policymaking on Okinawa are fundamentally flawed. As such, the approach to realising real security on Okinawa needs to be recapitulated in a series of interlocking layers that incorporate structure, agency and identity sequentially. Putting the US-led drivers towards interoperability and fortification already noted to one side for a moment, the process of this recapitulation can be initiated by decentring the GoJ's false narrative dichotomy of national security versus self-determination, which is pedalled by leading political, bureaucratic and conservative media figures in Tokyo. Instead, policy should be driven constructively from Naha. Even a cursory attempt to simulate this makes it abundantly clear that there is no good reason why Okinawa cannot have both greater autonomy and improved security. Moreover, arguments for increased self-determination at the prefectural level are underpinned by a common-sense interpretation of the (unrevised) Constitution of Japan. This rests on promotion and application of Article 95, which upholds the right to localised self-governance with popular backing.⁶

Structure, agency and identity as a framework for recapitulation

The layered approach, therefore, begins with incorporation of a defensive realist understanding of the current structural balance of power. Opinions vary widely on the relative strengths and intentions of the ECS's multiple adversaries. However, despite Beijing's increasing ability to strike targets on and around Okinawa, the US and Japan continue to possess capabilities that sustain a viable deterrence against potential aggression led by China in the Western Pacific for the immediately foreseeable future. As such, the question of how much power

4 "Chūgoku niranda jieitai no bōei kyotenka, kyūsokuni susumu okinawa [A 'southwestern shift' to stare down China: Strengthening of the JSDF defense hub across Okinawa is advancing at breakneck speed], Asahi Shimbun, May 13, 2023, <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASR5F5R2HR5DTPOB004.html>.

5 Japan Ministry of Defense (MOD), 2020, https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2020/pdf/R02030204.pdf.

6 Kantei, 2023, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html.

is enough power can be answered convincingly if framed in terms of preventative security.⁷ This framing dramatically reduces concerns over the concept of power transition, even more so when considering that China remains behind the Alliance when it comes to conventional military hardware. In this regard, when combining US military, JSDF and Japan Coastguard (JCG) readiness and pragmatism – as is currently witnessed in the standoff over the Senkaku Islands – there is little if any incentive for Beijing’s leaders to escalate from a situation that approximates the existing status quo.

This does not mean that China will not continue to use assertive tactics and greyzone tricks to wrestle a degree of control over the surrounding waters. Critically, though, the situation has become relatively stabilised precisely because the JCG exercises maximum restraint and its Chinese counterparts are aware of the likely grave consequences of further escalating towards armed conflict that could draw in the Japanese and, potentially, US militaries. Both are positioned on alert in close proximity. In the case of other possible contingencies in the ECS, too, a similar pragmatism would be likely to take hold. For instance, even in the unlikely scenario that China decided to impose a blockade on Taiwan and its surrounding waters, the PRC might realistically allow a carve-out that exempts Okinawa’s closest inhabited islands, such as nearby Yonaguni Island, to avert a default confrontation with Japan.⁸

With this defensive framework established as a partial stabilisation mechanism, the next step is for Okinawa to exert greater agency. It is essential here for Naha to work *with* instead of *against* Tokyo, as has too often been the case in recent years. Indeed, the prefectural authorities, particularly under Governors Onaga and incumbent Tamaki, have been the victims of punitive litigation by the central government for resisting the fortification process. How-

ever, they have also worked tirelessly to promote a range of socio-cultural and economic regional initiatives that offer a pathway for the comprehensive development of Okinawa as a regional hub.⁹ These are geared towards promoting economic investment and socio-cultural exchanges with a range of Asian mainland partners, and renewing ties with Taiwan. By emphasising the potential of the prefecture to revitalise historical trading relations with port cities around the ECS, and hosting high-profile international sporting events and scientific projects, Okinawa is positioning itself as a satellite centre for peaceful coexistence and regional integration. In so doing, it sends a powerful message to Tokyo, Washington, Beijing and Taiwan that de-escalation is both possible and profitable.¹⁰

The final piece of the recapitulation puzzle here is the creation of a persuasive narrative to articulate the strength of such agency driven from within, instead of outside, Okinawa. The Okinawan islands have ample pedigree to achieve this given their historical lineage and contemporary positionality.¹¹ And although Onaga’s call for the cause of ‘All Okinawa’ had only limited success given its somewhat divisive rhetoric, Tamaki’s push for peace and prosperity has more practical emphasis. The key here is for Tamaki and others to maintain a pragmatic depoliticised approach that casts Okinawa as a uniquely significant subnational entity which can aid central government in winning the hearts and minds of Asian partners, while avoiding a tone that evokes images of independence or leaning too far towards reincorporation in an ancient Chinese sphere of influence.¹²

7 Christopher P. Twomey, “Japan, a circumscribed balancer: Building on defensive realism to make predictions about east Asian security.” *Security Studies* 9, no. 4 (2000), pp. 167-205.

8 Kyoto Hatakeyama, “The Japan US Alliance and the Senkaku Islands: A Source of Conflict or Strategically Important?” Machinaka Com Centre, YCAPS, January 31, 2023.

9 “Chiji teian setsumeï yōshi [Summary explanation of the Governor’s proposals],” February 14, 2023, first session of the 2023 Okinawa Prefectural Assembly.

10 Ra Mason, “Layered Security in Okinawa” in Keiji Nakatsuji, *Japan’s Security Policy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023).

11 Interview, Sherzod Muminov, online, March 19, 2023.

12 Interviews, Kazuyuki Zakimi and Daisuke Nagahama, Miyako City Office, 12 and 14 April 2023.

Lingering constraints on decentring

There has already been some pushback from both American strategists and Japanese conservatives in these regards. Tamaki's *refusal* or *failure* – depending on one's political disposition – to rebuff remarks made by General Secretary of the CCP and President of the PRC, Xi Jinping, to the effect that Okinawa's rightful place in history lies in a greater Chinese empire, certainly raised more than a few eyebrows.¹³ This is significant because it illustrates an area in which the Prefectural authorities in Naha might utilise Chinese dog-whistling designed to (not so) subtly indicate Beijing's long-term aspirations for Ryukyu assimilation. In other words, this is primarily about China projecting legitimacy for its domestic audience by promoting the restoration of a lost historical legacy that includes regional hegemony and incorporation of Okinawa as a tributary state. Tamaki is well-placed to encourage the increased economic integration with his giant mainland neighbour that this would entail while simultaneously leveraging fears of its realisation to push for increased autonomy in order to defend political sovereignty underwritten by the US-Japan alliance.

Meanwhile, the ruling LDP in Tokyo continues to promote a counternarrative of a severe security situation that identifies China as an outright threat to its strategic interests. Nevertheless, the leaders of Okinawa's key municipalities are not naïve in their understanding of this. Instead, despite most of them being conservative in their political standpoints and in favour of a strong US-Japan alliance, they are acutely aware of the need to view Okinawa's role from a position that puts Okinawan perspectives at the centre. This means the development of regional relations that improve the prefecture's economic, environmental and geomilitary security in tandem with, rather than against, China and other neighbouring states and statelets, including Taiwan.

In this respect, Okinawa faces an internal struggle to align its culturally diverse and geographically

dispersed islands to the point where they can act in unison to realise this aim.¹⁴ For example, recent efforts by Yonaguni Island and Ishigaki Island, among others, to reach out to Taiwanese partners might risk hampering progress made by authorities in Naha to develop initiatives with mainland China that can rejuvenate key trade and tourism sectors.¹⁵ Prefectural and municipal governments have also been at loggerheads over issues concerning base relocation and construction, such as at the controversial site of a new base at Henoko Bay to replace Ginowan City's notoriously dangerous Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma. These should not, however, be insurmountable problems. If a constructive dialogue that promotes a historically grounded Okinawan identity and mutual benefits that can be advanced in good faith by all parties, there is every reason to think that this beautiful island chain can become a world-renowned centre for eco-tourism, marine sports, scientific endeavour and more.

A call for all to realise Okinawa's glorious future

Boasting nine UNESCO World Heritage sites, seven international universities, a world-class transport network, cutting edge tech and tourism infrastructure, and a dual-runway international airport, not to mention its pristine marine environment, Okinawa has everything it needs to operate as a keystone of regional peace and prosperity. All that remains is for sufficient buy-in to be captured by state, market and societal actors. Therefore, by consolidating its positionality through a robust yet defensive interpretation of structural power, exercising pro-active agency in pursuit of multi- and mini-lateral private and public sector exchanges with regional partners, and projecting a modern antimilitarist Okinawan identity, this once proud island nation can surely regain both a thriving peace and enduring security.

13 "Shūkinpei shi, okinawa no rekishi ni genkyū 'jinmin nippō' de ryūkyūkan ya kumesanjūrokusei: tamaki denii chiji no hōchū wo ishiki ka ["People's Daily' discusses the Ryukyu family and Kumei Rokusei migrants, as it reports that Xi Jinping

14 Wendy Matsumura, *The Limits of Okinawa*, Duke University Press, 2015.

15 Okinawa Prefectural Government, "Kōryū – taiwa de tsukuru ajia taiheiyō chiiki heiwa to mirai [Future regional peace in the Asia-Pacific constructed through exchange and dialogue]," panel discussion event, Naha, 14 March 2023.

The Global Governance Programme

The Global Governance Programme (GGP) is research turned into action. It provides a European setting to conduct research at the highest level and promote synergies between the worlds of research and policy-making, to generate ideas and identify creative and innovative solutions to global challenges. The Programme is part of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies of the European University Institute, a world-renowned academic institution. It receives financial support from the European Commission through the European Union budget. Complete information on our activities can be found online at: globalgovernanceprogramme.eui.eu

EU-Asia Project

The EU-Asia project is a research and educational initiative within the Global Governance Programme. It is designed to contribute to mutual understanding and exchange between Asia and Europe at a time of unprecedented change in international politics and global governance. The project also aims at an ambitious academic programme on EU and Asia, with a particular focus on Japan.

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

The Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (RSCAS), created in 1992 and directed by Professor Erik Jones, aims to develop inter-disciplinary and comparative research on the major issues facing the process of European integration, European societies and Europe's place in 21st century global politics. The Centre is home to a large post-doctoral programme and hosts major research programmes, projects and data sets, in addition to a range of working groups and ad hoc initiatives. The research agenda is organised around a set of core themes and is continuously evolving, reflecting the changing agenda of European integration, the expanding membership of the European Union, developments in Europe's neighbourhood and the wider world.

www.eui/rsc



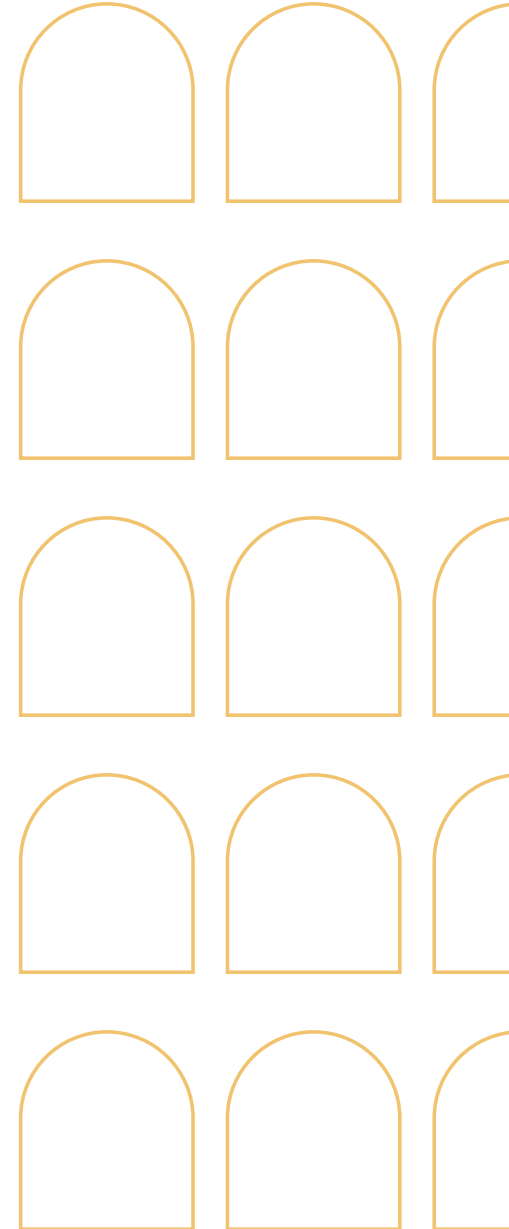
Co-funded by
the European Union

© European University Institute, 2023
Editorial matter and selection © Ra Mason, 2023

This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 \(CC-BY 4.0\) International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which governs the terms of access and reuse for this work. If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the series and number, the year and the publisher.

Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual authors and not those of the European University Institute.

Published by
European University Institute (EUI)
Via dei Roccettini 9, I-50014
San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy



doi:10.2870/020882
ISBN:978-92-9466-373-3
ISSN:2467-4540
QM-AX-23-015-EN-N