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Japanese protesters gathered outside the parliament building in Tokyo on Sunday to demand the removal of a US base on the island of Okinawa. Numerous rallies have been held recently, both on the island and the Japanese mainland, to oppose the US military's presence in the country.

An estimated 15,000 people took part in Sunday's protest, denouncing plans to move the US Marine Corp Air Station Futenma base to a new location at Henoko, which is currently being constructed. Futenma is located in the city of Ginowan, while Henoko sits along a less populated coast in Okinawa. Many people held banners reading, "No to Henoko." They demanded the base be removed from the prefecture altogether.

One protester, Akemi Kitajima, told the press: "We must stop this construction. The government is trying to force the plan, no matter how strongly Okinawa says 'no' to it." The demonstrators also expressed opposition to US plans to deploy CV-22 Ospreys to the Yokota Air Base in Tokyo.

A larger protest took place on the previous Sunday, when 35,000 people gathered on Okinawa to oppose the base relocation plan. The protests began that Friday and continued throughout the weekend. On the Saturday, demonstrators marched around the Futenma base and were joined in other cities across the country by approximately 2,600 others. Besides their opposition to the base, people shouted slogans, such as "Oppose enhanced Japan-US defense ties," directed against Japan's turn to militarism.

Plans to move the Futenma base have been in the works since 1996, following the 1995 brutal kidnapping and rape of a 12-year-old Okinawan girl by three US servicemen, which resulted in widespread anti-US protests. Other, less publicized crimes by US personnel have also stoked anti-US sentiment.

Okinawa, however, is on the front lines of any conflict with China. A majority of the 47,000 American troops stationed in Japan are on the island, strategically located in the East China Sea adjacent to the Chinese mainland. Okinawa plays a key role in Washington's "pivot to Asia," designed to surround China militarily and economically subordinate it to US interests.

There is little chance the Obama administration would agree to relocate the Marine base off the island, especially at a time when it is engaged in provocations with China. The relocation of the base, which was outlined in a 2006 agreement between the US and Japanese governments, has provoked persistent protests. The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) came to office in 2009 promising to revise the agreement, but the Obama administration refused

point blank to discuss the issue with Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, and worked to undermine him. He was forced to accept the 2006 deal, then [resigned](#) in June 2010. His DPJ replacement, Naoto Kan, quickly reaffirmed his full support for the US alliance.

The current Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government has not only made clear that the base relocation will proceed. It has [stepped-up](#) the remilitarization of Japan, acting in concert with Washington as part of the US “pivot” against China.

The recent demonstrations have been organized by citizens groups with ties to the Okinawan prefectural government. Governor Takeshi Onaga was elected last November as an independent, largely on his opposition to the Futenma base and its relocation. He is formerly of the ruling LDP and draws support from the conservative Shinpukai faction that left the LDP due to its support for the Okinawan bases.

Onaga is not opposed to the military alliance with the United States, nor to Japanese militarism. His is simply making the limited, parochial demand that the Marine base be moved to another location in Japan. Onaga recently declared: “I fully understand (the importance) of the Japan-US alliance. You should never break it down.”

At the same time, the governor has fostered illusions in the possibility of a shift by Washington. Onaga said recently: “Only Okinawa is burdened with this heavy load, and I want to let the United States, a democratic nation, know about this unfair situation.”

Despite his explicit backing for US militarism, Onaga has been backed by the Japanese Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party, both of which posture as opponents of Japanese re-militarization. They function as a political safety valve. The protests allow people to blow off steam while the governor plays to Okinawans’ sense of mistreatment at the hands of the mainland.

For politicians like Onaga, the battle over the bases also provides a pretext for land grabs. Nearly one-fifth of Okinawa is covered in US military bases, taking up territory that the wealthy elite would rather use to turn a profit. The governor views the bases as the “biggest impediment” to increased business opportunities.

Onaga hopes to turn the island into a hub for tourism, which means more hotels, restaurants, and other businesses to cater for visitors, as well as construction deals. In 2013, a record 6.58 million tourists visited Okinawa while the number of overseas visitors jumped 64 percent to 630,000 over the previous year. In total, tourism accounted for 448 billion yen (\$US3.87 billion) in revenue during the 2013 fiscal year.

Onaga is seeking to attract foreign investment. He visited China in April as a delegate for the Association for the Promotion of International Trade Japan. Before the visit, an Okinawa prefectural government spokesperson stated:

“We would like to take this opportunity [of Onaga’s visit] to promote economic exchanges between Okinawa and China. We hope companies use special economic zones in China and Okinawa to trade with each other.”

Onaga is offering up the Okinawan people as a source of cheap labor. Okinawa is the poorest prefecture in Japan with an unemployment rate twice as high as on the mainland. “Companies were attracted by subsidies, low labor costs, and the abundant workforce,”

Takehide Kinjo told the *Wall Street Journal* last November. Kinjo is president of Dinos Cecile Communications Company, based in Uruma City, an hour north of Naha, Okinawa's capital.

Local investors are eager to get their hands on the land now occupied by the Futenma base. "Expectations are rising for redevelopment projects on the land after it is vacated," an Okinawan bank official told the *Asahi Shimbun*. "Futenma has good transport connections, and the average land price there can rise higher than that in Naha's new city center." Naha's city center, once the site of residences for US military personnel, now hosts shopping malls and duty-free shops offering luxury brands.

Okinawans have for decades had a strained relationship both with Japan and the United States. Known as the Ryukyu Kingdom until it was annexed by Imperial Japan in 1879, the island saw heavy combat at the end of World War II, during which more than 100,000 civilians were killed. Following the war, Okinawa remained under direct US control until 1972, two decades after the US occupation ended in the rest of Japan.

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