American Bases in Japan Are Sitting Ducks

If Japan wants to stay under the U.S. umbrella, it needs to open up its military facilities.


By Tanner Greer
| September 4, 2019, 1:59 PM

This aerial view shows land reclamation work on the Henoko coastal district of Nago, Okinawa prefecture, on December 14, 2018, to build a new site for relocating a US military airbase. Jiji Press/AFP/Getty Images

When it comes to Japan, U.S. President Donald Trump’s opinion is well known: The Japanese are freeloaders. This has been clear since his early days on the campaign trail in 2016, when he declared that if the Japanese “don’t take care of us properly, if they don’t respect us enough to take care of us properly, then you know what’s going to have to happen? … They’re going to have to defend themselves.” The meaning of “take care of properly” has become clearer in recent months: The White House has drawn up demands for “cost plus 50”—or the full cost of hosting American servicemen, plus a 50 percent premium.

There is nothing wrong with pressuring the Japanese to commit more to the forces that protect them. But a financial focus distracts from more urgent problems in the U.S.-
Japanese alliance—most importantly, Japan’s determination to cordon off the troops they host onto a small number of easily attacked bases. If changes to American basing are not made, the United States does not just risk being cheated, but defeated.

The bases that the United States uses in Japan were first constructed for imperial Japanese forces. The United States compelled Japan to turn many of these bases over to American troops directly after World War II. The relationship between these troops and the land they protected was codified in the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security signed in 1960. The Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) attached to this treaty specified that “Japan will furnish for the duration of this Agreement without cost to the United States … all facilities and areas and rights of way, including facilities and areas jointly used such as those at airfields and ports.” By treaty the Japanese are not required to pay anything past that; the text of the agreement specifically states that all expenses beyond facility costs are the responsibility of the United States (“the United States will bear … without cost to Japan all expenditures incident to the maintenance of the United States armed forces in Japan”).

In the context of the original treaty, signed when Japan was still poor and recovering from the war, this made sense. But as Japan’s wealth grew in the ‘70s and ‘80s, the Americans began to pressure the Japanese to take more responsibility for their own defense. The Japanese decided to do this through extratreaty payments to American forces. For the last two decades that has meant paying approximately 70 percent of the costs of the American presence.

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From the days of Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida forward, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)’s primary concern has been economic growth. For most of the postwar period its politicians have sought to isolate Japanese security policy from Japanese social life (and by extension, Japanese domestic politics). The best of Japan’s human and financial capital would be directed toward the most promising sectors of its economy; countering geopolitical threats would be left to the Americans, who would be restricted to a small number of bases in Japan, thereby limiting their impact on and visibility in Japanese society as a whole. In the minds of Japanese politicians, the anti-base movement that has dominated Okinawan politics since the rape of an Okinawan girl by three U.S. servicemen in 1995 has vindicated this approach.

It is an approach made for a different era. The rise of China has made it impossible for the LDP to keep security policy out of the public eye. The threat posed by China to forces stationed in Japan is real: Over the last ten years the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has drastically increased its ability to strike at the Japanese home islands, especially by missile or rocket. Ten years ago the PLA had fewer than 100 cruise or ballistic missiles capable of targeting U.S. air bases in Japan; according to the U.S. Department of Defense’s most recent report on the PLA, they now have around 1,000 ballistic or land-attack cruise missiles with this capability.
Missiles like these fly at extreme speeds. In a potential conflict, the first wave would arrive in Japan 6 to 9 minutes after being launched from mobile missile launchers scattered across China. This wave’s target list would include anti-missile and air defense systems, command centers, and communication systems. A review of PLA documents by Ian Easton and Oriana Skylar Mastro reveal a special focus on targeting runways of American bases in Japan. With runways cratered, American aircraft would be stranded, sitting ducks for the next wave of inbound missiles.

Simulations of these attacks are nauseating. In a 2017 report for the Center for a New American Security, Tom Shugart and Javier Gonzales conclude that the missile defense systems of every single American air and naval base in Japan would be overwhelmed by the PLA Rocket Force’s very first volley. They estimate that more than 200 aircraft, almost all fixed American command centers, every U.S. runway, and most of the American fleet at berth would be destroyed—tens of billions of dollars in military equipment gone in less than 30 minutes of fighting. Recent Rand Corp. war games found similar results. In response to the games, former Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work offered a caustic assessment: “In every case I know of, the F-35 rules the sky when it’s in the sky, but it gets killed on the ground in large numbers.”

There is a very real chance that America’s front-line forces would be crippled in the first moments of a conflict with China. This outcome is not an inevitable result of increasing Chinese power. The crisis derives from the poor planning, lack of any sense of urgency, and timidity on the part of American statesmen when dealing with their Japanese counterparts.

China has a huge advantage, thanks to the absurd overconcentration of fixed U.S. targets in Japan. U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ) stations the majority of its personnel and weaponry in seven locations: Misawa Air Base in northern Japan, Yokota and Atsugi Air Bases near Tokyo, Iwakuni Air Base in southern Japan, naval bases in both Sasebo and Yokosuka, and a patchwork of military facilitates in Okinawa. The most concentrated military presence is found on that island. Over half of USFJ’s military personnel are located on Okinawa, though it comprises less than 1 percent of Japan’s total land area.

Concentration is the enemy. In a technology regime dominated by long-range precision munitions, concentrating American servicemen, weaponry, communications, and logistics in a few dense hubs that can be targeted by weapons launched from hundreds of miles away means defeat. This is why the U.S. Navy is reforming its doctrine and fleet structure away from the concentrated firepower of the Carrier Strike Group. They recognize that dispersal means survival. There is no parallel effort for USFJ’s land-based assets.

Japan is not lacking in airfields. Grant Newsham, a former diplomat and Marine Corps liaison officer stationed in Japan and current senior research fellow at the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies, offered a blunt assessment in an interview with Foreign Policy: “Japan is grotesquely overbuilt with civilian airfields, many that were built during the bubble era and nearly all of them underused.” Newsham suggests that there are more than 100 possible sites that could be used to host American aviation assets if the occasion demanded it.
This tallies with an assessment published by the U.S. Air Force in 2014. In order to counter Chinese missile threats, the Air Force has been developing the capacity to use cargo planes loaded with supplies and munitions as a mobile supply and command base for a small group of F-22 fighter jets. They have also developed the capacity to refuel and rearm these jets with skeleton base crews of as few as 30 people sent to operate remote runways in the event of base attack. This sort of modular system would be able to fly missions out of any runway that is at least 6,000 feet long. More than 140 runways in the “first island chain” off the coast of East Asia fit that criteria—and most of those are in Japan. To survive constant missile bombardments, planners imagine the American fighter fleet dispersing across the archipelago to runways like these, disrupting the PLA Rocket Force’s plans by expanding its list of targets. This capability, when combined with the skills of the Japanese runway repair teams, would make aviation assets in Japan far more resilient to attack.

The question is: Will those planes survive long enough to disperse in the first place?

American servicemen will have less than 10 minutes between the time they become aware of a PLA attack and the moment their runways begin to be cratered by PLA munitions. This is a frighteningly small amount of time to get dozens of planes up into the air. The U.S. military has only a handful of runways to do it from. To make matters worse, dispersing to airfields across Japan is not something USFJ airmen and naval aviators practice regularly today.

The necessary solution is to begin dispersing American military assets now, well before any future conflict. American diplomats and defense officials should make it a priority to expand basing access across Japan. “In my conversations with [Japanese Ministry of Defense] officials,” one researcher who has taken part in confidential Track II discussions in Japan told Foreign Policy, “it seems that the central government is happy to host rotational forces that do not require host nation notification, but is reticent to stand up new bases or wholly new units. It is unlikely that there will be any new bases stood up. What is possible is the granting of permission for U.S. forces to access more Japanese bases, and vice versa.”

Many Japanese air bases could—with necessary changes made for accommodating the extra troops—easily host American fighter, bomber, or airlift squadrons. Joint basing would require some difficult organizational changes, streamlining U.S. and Japanese forces based together into unified command structures. But it can and should be done.

But neither new joint basing nor U.S. use of existing civilian airfields will happen unless American statesmen push for it. “The US side has never said, ‘here’s what we want…’ and then offered up a detailed request that would really disperse US forces,” noted Newsham. “The White House, DoD, the US embassy—none of them have been willing to play rough with the Japanese.” Much of this reticence is based on the frustrating experience American officials have had dealing with Okinawan opposition to the American presence on the island. With American basing at the center of every Okinawan election campaign, foreign-service officers and American military liaisons responsible for American basing already have very busy bandwidths.

Even outside of Okinawa, individual communities often resist standing up new bases or receiving a larger number of American troops on NIMBY grounds. To win over these
communities, the economic benefits of hosting U.S. forces could be emphasized. Municipalities with dwindling populations can be shown that an influx of young people with cash to spend is an economic windfall. The Diet of Japan could sweeten the deal by offering tax incentives or economic subsidies to municipalities willing host American troops, as they did in 2007 in the face of local opposition to the transfer of carrier-borne fighters from Atsugi to Iwakuni.

This will cost the Japanese government money and political capital. But it is Japan’s unwillingness to shoulder larger costs that prompted Trump’s outrage in the first place. Subsidizing the decentralization of U.S. Forces Japan is the right way for the Japanese to meet Trump’s demands that they bear an increased share of the USFJ’s costs.

By underwriting the construction of new facilities, the Japanese government would be paying more to support American servicemen in Japan, as Trump wishes. But they would also be getting more for their payment. After all, why should the Japanese pony up more funds for a military deterrent that can be destroyed in one crippling surprise attack? On the other hand, why should the United States station its soldiers, sailors, and airmen in a country that is not willing to bear the financial and political costs of ensuring these men and women do not vainly die in the first few minutes of combat?

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