The Militarization of Okinawa and the Nansei Islands

Yasushi Ikeo

Part-time Lecturer, Ritsumeikan University

The Concept of Filling a "Void"

The militarization of Okinawa and the Nansei Islands in southwestern Japan did not happen overnight. One starting point in policy is the "National Defense Program Guidelines" (NDPG), which were adopted in 2010 under the Democratic Party of Japan administration. These guidelines shifted the focus from the traditional "Basic Defense Force" concept to a "Dynamic Defense Force" approach that emphasizes continuous surveillance and the mobile deployment of units. The policy specifically called for deploying coastal surveillance units and initial response forces to the Nansei Islands, which had previously been considered a "void" in Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) deployment. This term effectively erased the reality of local life and self-governance, framing the islands as spaces to be filled for military purposes instead.

Following the NDPG revisions of 2013 and 2018, these deployment plans took concrete shape. In 2016, a coastal surveillance unit was stationed on Yonaguni Island in Okinawa Prefecture. In 2019, security units, as well as surface-to-ship and surface-to-air missile units, were deployed to Amami Oshima and Miyako Island. Similar units were stationed on Ishigaki Island in 2023. The 7th Surface-to-Ship Missile Regiment, which commands surface-to-ship missile units in the Kyushu and Nansei regions, was established in 2024 at Vice-Camp Katsuren on Okinawa Main Island. The plan on Yonaguni Island has also expanded beyond the initially proposed coastal surveillance unit of approximately 150 personnel to include electronic warfare and missile units.

A common pattern runs through this process. Rather than presenting the full scope of deployment at the outset and seeking residents' judgment, the plans are broken down into smaller components, such as "surveillance," "security," and "disaster response." Once acceptance is secured for one phase, that consent is used to justify subsequent expansions. On Ishigaki Island, despite collecting signatures from more than one-third of the electorate, a referendum on the camp's deployment never occurred. After the camp opened on Miyako Island, it was revealed that it stored ammunition. The mayor protested, claiming that he had "not been informed." Local residents did not explicitly consent to these bases; instead, an administrative process fragmented decisions and created a series of 'fait accomplis.'

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US Strategy Toward China and Japan-US Military Integration

The deployment of troops to the Nansei Islands cannot be understood solely in the context of Japan's own circumstances. The US has shifted its Marine Corps operational concept, recognizing that China's growing Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities have made large, fixed bases and naval vessels increasingly vulnerable to attack. Central to this shift is the concept of Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO). Under this strategy, the Marine Corps disperses into small units that establish temporary outposts on islands or in coastal areas within contested or potentially contested waters and operate anti-ship missiles, sensors, and unmanned aerial vehicles. These units repeatedly maneuver within the enemy's detection and strike ranges to impede access to the maritime area and support US Navy and Air Force operations.

In this context, the "First Island Chain," the arc of islands stretching from Kyushu and Okinawa through Taiwan to the Philippines, is positioned as the front line of the U.S.-China confrontation. Although it is often described as a line to be "held at all costs," it is more accurately defined as an operational line intended to contain the expansion of Chinese naval and air forces into the Western Pacific and maintain U.S. maritime superiority. In this view, the islands are seen less as places where people live and more as "terrain" for deploying missiles and sensors.

The JSDF's strategic shift toward the southwest aligns with a U.S. military concept. During joint Japan-U.S. exercises, JSDF surface-to-ship missile units and U.S. Marine Corps units have repeatedly practiced dispersed deployment, joint command, sharing targeting data, and providing logistics support. The three key security documents adopted in late 2022 [1] established the possession of "counterstrike capabilities," or the ability to attack missile bases and other targets within an adversary's territory using long-range missiles. Consequently, the division of roles between Japan and the U.S. is shifting from a relationship in which the JSDF provides rear-area support to U.S. forces to a relationship in which both sides undertake offensive operations within the same theater of conflict.

Of course, China's military buildup and its military pressure on Taiwan cannot be downplayed. However, the existence of a threat does not mean that current policies are the only rational response. A cycle of military countermeasures invites further military expansion by the adversary. If deployments made in the name of deterrence turn these islands into targets for attack and force residents to evacuate, we must ask: "What exactly is this defense protecting?"

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Plan to Evacuate 120,000 People in Six Days

In parallel with base deployments, there is a plan to evacuate residents from the Sakishima Islands in Okinawa Prefecture to locations outside the region. The government's initial plan, released in March 2025, outlines the evacuation of approximately 120,000 people, including about 110,000 residents and 10,000 tourists from Miyakojima City, Ishigaki City, Taketomi Town, Yonaguni Town, and Tarama Village in Okinawa Prefecture. They will be transported to eight prefectures in the Kyushu and Yamaguchi regions over a period of roughly six days following the official designation of a "situation anticipating an armed attack." This would entail transporting approximately 20,000 people daily via commercial aircraft and ships. The national government, Okinawa Prefecture, the five municipalities, transport operators, and the prefectures of Kyushu and Yamaguchi have repeatedly conducted tabletop exercises. Additionally, "practical verification" drills were held at New Ishigaki Airport in September 2024 and at Miyako Airport in November 2025. These drills involved guiding residents to the airport, through check-in and security screening, and to the boarding gates. Officials conducted a field verification exercise at Miyako Airport at night after scheduled commercial flights had ceased operations. Approximately 100 city officials and others acted as evacuees to check movement routes and timing. The plan was beginning to move from paper to the actual site. However, conditions differ vastly between a verification exercise at an empty airport—devoid of regular users after the last flight—and an actual emergency evacuation, in which large numbers of residents and tourists would move simultaneously amid ongoing commercial operations.

Yet behind the figure of 120,000 people over six days are individual lives. Among them are cattle farmers, sugarcane growers, people requiring dialysis or nursing care, children attending local schools, and those tending to sacred *utaki* sites [2] and ancestral graves. Can more than twice the usual number of civilian aircraft and vessels be secured? Can airports and ports remain operational while under threat of attack? If the evacuation drags on for weeks or months, who will provide housing, schooling, medical care, nursing services, and employment? And when—and under what conditions—can people return? These questions remain unanswered.

Legally, the government distinguishes between a "predicted contingency" and an "armed attack." However, from an adversary's perspective, Japan's initiation of a mass evacuation of 120,000 people, deployment of long-range missiles, and strengthening of joint operations with the U.S. military could appear to be the final phase of war preparations. Conversely, the government may hesitate to launch a massive evacuation that would halt society and the economy when the crisis

still seems distant. By the time the crisis becomes severe enough to justify evacuation, will there still be time to safely use airports and ports? In modern missile warfare, prediction, evacuation, and attack occur within an extremely short timeframe.

Evacuating people from the island is essential for saving lives, provided it is done before an attack occurs. Systems that ensure health and dignity during evacuation are also essential. However, the plan has another side. If residents leave, the JSDF can more easily use the island for operations. Although evacuation plans are designed to protect residents, they can also establish the military conditions necessary to relocate civilians from an island that is destined to become a theater of war. Therefore, the question is not merely one of evacuation procedures. We must also scrutinize the underlying premises—specifically, military deployments and diplomatic stances—that force residents to abandon their homes.

The "Front Line" Expands Nationwide

The changes that began in the Nansei Islands have already spread nationwide. On March 31, 2026, the Japan Ground Self-Defense Forces (JGSDF) deployed Type 25 surface-to-ship guided missiles and Type 25 high-speed gliding missiles — Japan's first domestically produced stand-off missiles — to Camp Kengun in Kumamoto Prefecture and Camp Fuji in Shizuoka Prefecture, respectively. While the government describes these missiles as equipment for engaging threats outside the adversary's strike range, the three key national security documents also position them as part of Japan's "counterstrike capabilities." The infrastructure supporting these long-range missiles, including command centers, launch units, communication networks, and supply depots, extends beyond the Nansei Islands, spanning Kyushu in southwestern Japan to Honshu, Japan's largest island.

Ammunition depots are essential to sustaining these operations. Prioritizing "sustained combat capability," the government decided in December 2024 to construct 57 new explosive storage facilities across 12 sites nationwide. Construction and expansion projects are underway in various locations, including the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) Ominato Area in Aomori Prefecture, the JGSDF Vice-Camp Oita in Oita Prefecture, and the JGSDF Camp Uji Vice-Camp Hosono in Kyoto Prefecture. At Hosono, construction has begun on eight large-scale explosive storage facilities, raising concerns about the safety of a site near residential areas and whether it aligns with a written agreement between local authorities and defense officials concluded in 1960.

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This situation clearly illustrates the characteristics of current militarization. Bases, long-range missiles, ammunition depots, military use of airports and seaports, and evacuation plans for residents may appear to be separate policies. In reality, however, they are part of a unified strategy to sustain combat operations, which encompasses detection, the sharing of targeting data, offensive strikes, logistical resupply, and the relocation of civilian populations. Okinawa's fortification is not an issue confined to Okinawa; the entire Japanese archipelago is being reconfigured as a logistics, offensive operations, and evacuation network to support joint Japan-U.S. military actions.

Civic Resistance Linking Islands and Regions

At the same time, resistance movements have begun connecting across different regions. In the Ryukyu Arc islands of Yonaguni, Miyako, Ishigaki, Okinawa Main Island, Amami, and Mageshima, local movements have consistently opposed base construction, the deployment of missile units, and the establishment of ammunition depots. Although these movements' specific circumstances and histories vary by island, they have built solidarity through site visits, rally participation, and the sharing of information and experiences.

In recent years, this movement has grown to encompass not only Okinawa and the Nansei Islands but also the Kyushu, Chugoku, and Kinki regions. Residents nationwide are speaking out against various developments, including the deployment of long-range missiles to Kengun in Kumamoto Prefecture and Osprey aircraft to Saga Airport in Saga Prefecture, the construction of ammunition depots in Oita Prefecture and Hosono in Kyoto Prefecture, the militarization of Kure in Hiroshima Prefecture, the expansion of bases in Iwakuni in Yamaguchi Prefecture and Kyotango in Kyoto Prefecture, and the military use of facilities such as the Port of Kobe in Hyogo Prefecture. Additionally, movements have emerged in various localities that oppose the government's designation of 'airports and ports for specific use.' These groups argue that civilian facilities should not be integrated into a military-use network. They are urging local governments to exercise caution and explain these designations to residents.

One entity that connects these local stakeholders is the "Stop the War! Okinawa-West Japan Network" (Oki-Nishi Net). Recognizing that various plans are being carried out independently across regions as part of a single, unified military strategy, the network has issued field reports and joint statements, organized rallies, and engaged in joint negotiations with the Ministry of

Defense and other government bodies. Missile deployments, ammunition depots, base construction and expansion, airport and port 'specific use' designations, and Japan-U.S. joint exercises are proceeding across various regions.

These projects may appear separate. However, pooling experiences from different locations shows they constitute a unified military reorganization that supports joint Japan-U.S. operations. The Oki-Nishi Network's activities reveal that fortifying the Nansei Islands concerns not only those islands, but the entire Japanese archipelago.

This solidarity is very significant. The government advances its plans by fragmenting them into facilities, budgets, and municipalities. Consequently, any local opposition is easily dismissed as "local anxiety" or NIMBYism. In contrast, the citizens' network shows that the ammunition depot in Hosono, the missile base in Miyako Island, the long-range missiles in Kengun, the evacuation plans for the Sakishima Islands, and the designated airports and ports throughout the country are all parts of the same strategy. Pooling records from various locations, verifying inconsistencies in government explanations, and identifying discrepancies between initial briefings and actual operations help reintegrate these fragmented policies into a single political issue.

Civic resistance entails more than protesting at base gates. It includes demanding information disclosure, asking questions in local assemblies, calling for referendums, urging local governments to make decisions, and carefully documenting agreements with the state and the explanations given to residents. Many of the airports and ports designated for 'specific use' are managed by local governments, and their designation requires the municipality's 'understanding.' This leaves room for residents and local governments to debate the plan's merits and withhold consent as a local political issue. This assertion challenges the idea that "defense is the exclusive jurisdiction of the state" by claiming that matters such as residents' lives, land use, transportation, healthcare, education, and the environment are issues of local autonomy. This effort brings issues excluded from public deliberation in the name of national security back into ordinary politics by framing them in terms of daily life and local self-governance.

Simply speaking of the threat posed by China or voicing abstract opposition to war is not enough. We must identify the specific policies that create such dangers and determine who bears the resulting burdens. Then we must link diplomacy aimed at de-escalating military tensions with local autonomy so residents can decide their communities' future. Islanders' dignity entails more than the ability to evacuate safely. It also includes the right to object to policies that designate their home as a frontline, reject the premises underlying those policies, and choose their future.

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Editor's Notes

[1] The three key security documents refer to Japan's National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Defense Buildup Program.

[2] *Utaki* sites are sacred sites in the Ryukyu Islands, traditionally used for religious rituals and worship.

About the Author



Yasushi Ikeo is a part-time lecturer at Ritsumeikan University, specializing in peace studies and international relations. Edited works include *The Militarization of the Nansei Islands* (in Japanese, Chiheisha), *Constructing Peace Studies* (in Japanese, Koyo Shobo), and *The Peace-Building Capacity of Local Governments* (in Japanese, Iwanami Shoten); co-authored works include *Building Peace from the Local Level* (in Japanese, Koyo Shobo), *Peace Studies from Japan, and Gender and Peace as Liberal Arts II* (in Japanese, Horitsu Bunka Sha), among others.

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