How Do The People Of Japan Feel About Having So Many American Military Bases Located On Their Soil?

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There are varied opinions on the continuing presence of U.S. military forces in Japan. While the majority of Japanese people, when polled, support their presence (which has decreased quite a bit since the post-WWII occupation period) a vocal minority have continued to question their presence. These objections range from NIMBY type objections, such as the issues surrounding the Futenma base in Okinawa, to general concerns about the continuing presence of another nation’s military forces on Japanese land. It’s telling that while more than 70% of the Japanese population in general say they support the presence of the U.S. miltary, more than 70% of Okinawans say the opposite.

The major point of contention at this time is the Futenma base. The people of Okinawa have never been too happy with the presence of such a large military base on their island, and they have a particularly complicated history with the U.S. Armed Forces since WWII. But things came to a head in 1995, when 2 Marines and a Navy sailor abducted and raped a 12 year old girl. (see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/199… ). There was another attempted rape case in 2002 (see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mic… ), but these incidents were perceived locally as just being indicative of a general problem with the conduct of U.S. military personnel in Okinawa. (Note: I’m not saying this is true or not, but just that there is that general perception.) There are other concerns about the effect Futenma has too, such as noise and water pollution, safety, and even a suspicion that nuclear weaponry is housed there.

The current governor of Okinawa made getting rid of or at least reducing the size of Futenma one of the major points in his election campaign, and he’s continued to hammer on this. His cause was muted somewhat by the very visible assistance the U.S. armed forces gave in the aftermath of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, called Operation Tomodachi (which means ‘friend’). If I may be cynical here, I believe that the immediate and highly publicized aid efforts were at least partly motivated by using it as an opportunity to appease Japanese sentiment vis-a-vis the Futenma problem. The current prime minister of Japan, Noda, has made noises about making it a priority to ‘do something’ about Futenma, but so have all his predessors without much effect, so it remains to be seen if things will change to the satisfaction of local residents. From the U.S point of view they would much rather keep everything as-is or even increase their operations at Futenma, because of its strategic location and because it is located in the territory of a strong ally with a democratic government.

U.S. military personnel generally do not mix much with the locals. They live on their own compounds, socialize mainly with each other, and so on. This is nothing unique to Japan; military personnel stationed anywhere in the world tend to stick to themselves and rarely attempt any meaningful contact with the ‘locals.’ People living near military bases, not just Futenma, complain of excessive noise and fears of pollution – again that’s not that unique to Japan I believe.

However, on a practical level the Japanese central government realises that it needs the U.S. military there. Japan is constitutionally forbidden from having a full blown military, and altough it does have a Defense Force, it would take a huge effort and a lot of money to build it up to a ‘real’ military. Plus, given that neighboring nations actively continue to keep the memories of past Japanese aggression alive in the minds of their people, the political repercussions in the region if Japan were to formally rearm itself may be quite strong. The furor alone may lead to serious instability.

In many senses the United States and Japan are the closest allies on the Pacific Rim. Given that there are some instable and/or unknown elements in the region (North Korea, China, even Russia, etc) continued U.S military presence in Japan is regarded as a necessary evil of sorts. Unless they’re right in your own backyard.

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