

Okinawa Base Issue in the U.S.-Japan Relations After the Cold War and the Domestic Determinants of Foreign Policy

The United States, Japan, and their allies are facing growing economic, military, and political pressures from states, such as China, North Korea, or Russia, which are challenging the U.S.-led liberal international order. Under these circumstances, the U.S.-Japan alliance – the linchpin of the American Asian security framework and the main pillar of Japan’s national security framework – has been gaining in importance not only for the security of North-East Asia or the Indo-Pacific but also for the rest of the world. The alliance has undergone fundamental changes since the end of the Cold War, with Japan increasingly playing a more active role. In spite of the general revision of American military presence in the world and a shift from fixed bases to “more flexible and effective force posture.” Japan has remained one of the main strongholds for American “critical forward forces and warfighting capability”. Under this scheme, Okinawa (e.g., Kadena Air Base) was designated as a main operating base (MOB), the highest rank of permanence given to an overseas facility. At the same time, the U.S.-Japan alliance has been strained by the long-standing tensions arising from the presence of the American military bases in Okinawa prefecture, particularly the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma. The local protests have intensified since the end of the Cold War and have had a destabilizing impact on the U.S.-Japan relations, obstructing the process of base realignment, most notably the Futenma relocation, agreed upon in 1996. Given the situation, the lack of local support for the military facilities becomes a major obstacle not only for the efficient functioning of the alliance, but also for the democratic legitimacy, credibility, and trust towards both governments that often evoke democratic values on the international arena. In the above context, several important questions arise, which call for a careful investigation of the causes and factors affecting the decision-making process on the U.S. military bases in Okinawa, as well as the consequences of that so-called Okinawa problem for the alliance.

In the context of the above, this project seeks answers to the following questions: Why has the problem of Futenma and other American military facilities in Okinawa been stalemated for so long, and how it has affected the U.S.-Japan alliance? And more specifically: What factors, domestic and international, influenced the decision-making process on the military bases in Okinawa since the end of the Cold War? How influential were the main veto players (politicians, bureaucrats, etc.) on the one hand, and the social actors on the other? What strategic narratives have been employed by both sides of the conflict (US and Japanese governments vs. the base-critics)? And what are the implications of the problem for the US-Japan alliance management and other U.S.-centered alliances?

My research will try to tackle these questions from the perspective of the foreign policy analysis (FPA) with reference to the main theories of international relations (IR). Since the late 1990s, multiple analysis and explanations have been offered, although none has provided a comprehensive account of the decision-making process regarding the U.S. military facilities in Okinawa from the perspective of FPA, including the strategic narratives that shape the understating and therefore support for security policy among the general public. The research methods employed in this project are predominantly qualitative, which is dictated by the nature of the subject matter, but also supplemented by quantitative techniques to support the arguments whenever it is feasible and necessary.

The project will result in expanding knowledge and understating on the policy process on the U.S. military bases in Okinawa, and through this case study, will contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics and mechanisms of defense and foreign policy making both in the U.S. and Japan. Furthermore, by applying FPA models, the research will also contribute to the development of theoretical knowledge, by testing the explanatory power of the models, and allow for drawing general conclusions on the relationship between domestic and international determinants of foreign policy making. While the research results will not have a direct practical application, they could be useful for practitioners and the general public to better understand the issues of U.S. overseas facilities and based on it draw some implications for other U.S. allies, including NATO members, such as Poland that for years has been lobbying for a transfer of the U.S. forces onto its territory.