

Lifting the Curtain on the US-Japan Relationship

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By Philip Brasor

[Richard Armitage, Deputy Secretary of State under the Bush administration until 2005, recently pronounced the US-Japan relationship to be in excellent condition – on a par with the US relationship with Britain. He should know, since he has been a central figure in shaping it. Yet the process of Global Reorganization of US forces has been completed with Europe and South Korea, but not Japan. True, an “Interim Agreement” was reached at the end of October 2005, but the end of March 2006, the deadline set for the final document, has now passed and, instead of agreement, wrangling continues.]

There have been two problems in particular. One is that local governments throughout Japan were not consulted and are up in arms about the way the Japanese government has divided up US military facilities among them. In Okinawa, in particular, when the plan to build a new base for the US Marines in northern Okinawa, already frustrated for a decade by local hostility, was revised and confirmed in October, the angry opposition was led by supposedly conservative local Okinawan government bodies. The Governor himself pronounced that there was no way he was going to allow the base to be built. Okinawan public opinion too has shown high levels of outrage at the deal that was cut in October. The crisis evolving around this issue, mirrored in the 90 percent voter rejection of an expanded Iwakuni Marine Base in southern Honshu, is likely to prove deeper and more dangerous for the Japanese state and the US-

Japan relationship than any in the past, including the era of the “progressive” Governor Ota Masahide in the 1990s.

Second is that the bill for the reorganization – especially for the withdrawal of 7,000 Marines from Okinawa to Guam, is to be met substantially by Japan, and the U.S. has estimated “costs” (including housing for the marines and their families) at ten billion dollars. However, Japan’s state finances are in crisis, cost-cutting is the order of the day, and it will not be easy for the Japanese government to persuade the electorate to approve such magnanimity.

The success of the relationship over which Armitage enthuses is partly due to the fact that its core areas are conducted in secret. Few secrets are ever blown as effectively as that discussed below, and in this case it has taken thirty years. What the story below now suggests is that, if precedent is any guide, a deal will again be cut, Japan will pay what it is billed, the truth will be concealed, the government will lie about it, and persuasion, bribery, and if necessary force will be deployed to deal with the official and citizen opponents to the deal.

At age 87, Yoshino Bunroku, former head of the Foreign Ministry’s North America Bureau, told the Yomiuri Shimbun what he knows of the negotiations (in which he was centrally involved) in the late 1960s over Okinawa’s “return” to Japan. (Yomiuri February 12, 2006) He makes clear that Okinawa was not “returned,” it was bought. Japan made an up-front payment of 320 million dollars, including an especially secret, if relatively paltry, sum of

four million dollars for compensation to Okinawan landowners for the clean-up of land being vacated by US forces. That four million payment was the subject of the Diet interpellations and court actions detailed below. Japan also paid for items including the removal of nuclear weapons, the purchase of various facilities built by the US forces (water and electricity etc), and "labour costs." The full details of the Japanese payment package have been painstakingly compiled by Okinawan scholar, Gabe Masaaki among others. He puts the figure of 685 million dollars on the total Japanese payment for Okinawa. One prominent heading was that of 200 million dollars for "maintenance of the bases and other expenditure." That heading has seen huge payments to the US by Japan over three decades. It is known in Japanese as "sympathy budget" (omoiyari yosan) and in English as "host nation support." A recent article by Hokkaido Shimbun journalist Tokosumi Yoshifumi (in Sekai, April 2006) quotes the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as source for the sum of 12.96 trillion yen (over one hundred billion dollars) paid as "sympathy" budget between 1972 and 2005.

In short, Japan paid the US vast sums both for the "return" of the Okinawan facilities and for their continuing maintenance, and continues to pay them, the bill rising steadily. Yoshino notes bitterly that the Japanese government had no way of knowing how any of the money was spent in the 1970s and that is surely still the case.

Asked to comment on the Yoshino revelations, Abe Shinzo, Chief Cabinet Secretary, and by most expected to succeed as Prime Minister when Koizumi retires in September, maintained the position on which the Japanese government has been insisting since 1972: there was no secret deal. By implication, Yoshino was lying.

What Armitage may have meant by his comments on the US-Japan relationship is that

the US has no more compliant and generous ally than Japan. Late in 2003, a "senior White House official" told Japanese reporters that "the president's view, I know, is that for us, Japan is not just some ATM machine." (Yomiuri Daily, 10 October 2003). The denial of a claim that nobody had made left the impression that perhaps Washington insiders might indeed joke among themselves about Japan being precisely such an ATM machine (that needed no secret number to operate), and why Richard Armitage could say that the relationship was so healthy. GMCC]

The bombshell that former Foreign Ministry official Yoshino Bunroku dropped last month hasn't had the explosive effect one might expect. Yoshino was in charge of the ministry's American Bureau at the time the United States handed Okinawa back to Japan in 1972, and in an exclusive interview in the Feb. 8 Hokkaido Shimbun he said that Japan paid the U.S. money under the table for the handover.

Ever since suspicions about this secret payment arose at the time, the government has vehemently denied any payment was made, and continues to do so now despite Yoshino's very detailed admission. While the major media reported Yoshino's story, the followup has been virtually nonexistent. One reason for this neglect, though by no means an excuse, is the fact that the news arrived during the Nagata e-mail fiasco in the Diet. One of the ironies of the timing is that the secret payment was the subject of a similar scandal involving a piece of correspondence. In March 1972 an opposition lawmaker presented telegrams in the Diet saying that they were proof of the payment. The government fought back, and Nishiyama Takichi, The Mainichi Shimbun reporter who passed the telegrams to the politician, ended up arrested, fired, and disgraced. Last week, he testified in a suit he has brought against the government for destroying his reputation more than 30 years ago. No news organization covered this testimony.

Given the current controversy over realignment of American forces and Okinawa's status as the host of those forces, the secret payment would seem to be more relevant than ever. The media's lack of interest is difficult to understand.

It's important to remember that the handover of Okinawa and Ogasawara was the watershed event in Japan's rise from the ashes of the Pacific War, and had something to do with the late Prime Minister Sato Eisaku being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1974. Yoshino's confession turns the accepted history of those two matters inside out.

The secret money was actually quite small, even for the time: \$4 million. Yoshino said this was made part of the \$ 320 million that Japan agreed to pay for the removal of nuclear weapons from Okinawa, an amount that Yoshino says the Japanese side accepted without really understanding how the U.S. arrived at it. Why was the Japanese government so intent on keeping such a paltry sum secret?

Yoshino says that his main task at the time was to make sure the Okinawa agreement was passed by the Diet. Sato had been boasting publicly that Japan would not have to pay for the islands, but then the U.S. State Department said that it would not pay to dismantle some facilities, even though international law compelled it to. Secret negotiations went nowhere, and the government believed that if it were known that Japan agreed to pay the \$4 million to dismantle the facilities, lawmakers would be furious at this unexpected cost and the agreement would not pass smoothly.

So Sato decided to pay, but keep it secret. Cables related to these negotiations fell into the hands of Nishiyama through a Foreign Ministry secretary with whom he was having an affair. The government used the scandal surrounding the affair to discredit Nishiyama

and the Mainichi in the public's eyes.

It now sounds like nothing more than diplomatic bumbling. But the coverup was deeper. At the time, the United States was hemorrhaging money to pay for the Vietnam War while becoming increasingly concerned about rising Japanese exports, since America was their preferred destination. They weren't going to let Sato have Okinawa just like that.

The Japanese people were told that Sato was working to keep Japan nuclear-free, but in the mid-1960s, he told U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk that, while the Japanese people didn't want nuclear weapons, if China developed a bomb then Japan should, too.

The United States didn't want China or Japan to have a bomb. By maintaining bases on Okinawa and including Japan under their nuclear umbrella, the Americans correctly believed Japan would abandon its quest for an atomic arsenal. Letting the Japanese have the islands back was no big deal, but they would have to pay for it in the long run. In return, Sato got to play the hero. He pledged to never make, possess, or allow on Japanese territory nuclear weapons, and he shared the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in getting Japan to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. We now know that America brought nuclear arms to Okinawa even after the handover, and Sato knew it. In a 2002 book commemorating 100 years of the prize, the Nobel committee admitted that awarding Sato the Peace Prize was, in hindsight, the biggest mistake it ever made.

The chickens are coming home to roost. Nishiyama, whose reputation has been partly redeemed by Yoshino's admission, told Tokyo Shimbun that the secret payment set a precedent for Japan's subsequent omoiyari (sympathetic) policy toward U.S. bases and "sowed the seeds for the poisonous grass that has grown so rampantly." That's a rather florid way of putting it, but the attitude he describes seems to fit the present situation. Japanese

negotiators are reportedly shocked that the United States is asking them to shoulder 75 percent of the cost of moving soldiers from Okinawa to Guam.

The Japanese government has paid the United States a lot for the privilege of standing under its nuclear umbrella. Saving face can turn into

an expensive habit once you start. Right now, there's probably a bureaucrat in Moscow looking at a map of those Northern Territories that Russia occupies and Japan wants back, tapping away at his calculator.

Philip Brasor is a Japan-based journalist. This story appeared in The Japan Times, April 2, 2006. Posted at Japan Focus on April 3, 2006.