Volume 9 | Issue 9 | Number 2 | Article ID 3494 | Feb 28, 2011

Economic Crisis Shakes US Forces Overseas: The Price of Base Expansion in Okinawa and Guam□□経済危機が揺るがす在外米軍体制ー経済問題化する軍事費

Yonamine Michiyo

Economic Crisis Shakes US Forces Overseas: The Price of Base Expansion in Okinawa and Guam

Yonamine Michiyo

Translated by Rumi Sakamoto and Matthew Allen

'Debt is the Largest Threat'

On August 31, President Obama delivered a speech from the White House. Because he was expected to declare the end of the Iraqi war, the entire nation focused its attention on the content to the speech. 'Operation Iraqi Freedom is over. ... We have spent over a trillion dollars on this war, often financed by borrowing from overseas. This, in turn, has short-changed investments in our own people, and contributed to record deficits.... Our most urgent task is to restore our economy, and put the millions of Americans who have lost their jobs back to work'. It marked the beginning of a new era, and under other circumstances this speech would have impressed people. The president, however looked troubled, and the atmosphere was gloomy – hardly the context for a forward-looking policy announcement; this was largely due to the severity of the economic crisis the US currently faces.

Barack Obama, announcing his decision to withdraw combat forces from Iraq at Camp Lejeune, N.C., on February 27, 2009 (Photo from NYT)

The US financial deficit has exceeded one trillion dollars for two consecutive years and continues to run at the highest level in history. The unemployment rate is around 9%, with the most recent figure (November) being 9.8%, up 0.2 percentage points over the previous month. There were 143 bankrupted financial institutions in November, a significant increase over the previous year. There is no sign of improvement. Rebuilding the nation's financial system is the top US priority.

In these difficult times, criticism of the massive military budget, which currently accounts for about two thirds of the discretionary federal budget has been publicly aired for the first time.

It is understandable that people are criticising military spending, which has increased year after year since the end of World War II, yet

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466011010953 Published online by Cambridge University Press

had been considered 'inviolable' in budget discussions. This year, though, Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, warned against increasing the financial deficit, stating that 'the biggest threat we have to our national security is our debt.' In short, a senior US military leader has publicly declared that the biggest threat faced by the US is neither Iraq nor North Korea but the 'debt of the state'. This illustrates the urgency of US state finances.

In Washington, more voices are demanding cuts in military spending. In May, a non-partisan group of congressional representatives, convened by Democrat Barney Frank, and Republican Ron Paul, formed the 'Sustainable Defense Task Force' (SDTF). Together with some military specialists, they closely scrutinised military spending and concluded that it was possible to cut 1 trillion dollars in spending over the next 10 years by reducing US Forces stationed in Europe and Asia, and by not pursuing contracts for military airplanes such as the MV-22 Osprey.

Democrat Congressman Barney Frank, frequently cites Okinawa as "prime exhibit" of what he considers "wasteful WWII legacy spending." (Photo from WSJ)

In October 57 congressional representatives from ruling and opposition parties who advocate cuts in military spending sent a letter to the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform (NCFRR). It asked: 'Why does the US continue to station troops overseas in Asia and Europe despite the collapse of the Cold War?' and argued that national defense needs to reflect the new era. The NCFRR is an advisory body created by president Obama to identify strategies for rebuilding the economy. The non-partisan group asked this committee to reconsider the scale of military spending and the status of US Forces.

Barney Frank, who appealed to Congress for support, had previously appeared in US media on several occasions declaring that:

> The view that the US is the policemen of the world is outdated; it is a leftover from the Cold War. 15,000 Marines aren't going to land on the Chinese mainland and confront millions of Chinese soldiers. We don't need Marines in Okinawa. They're a hangover from a war that ended 65 years ago.

As Chairman of the House Financial Services Committee he was the driving force behind the Financial Regulatory Reform Act that passed Congress in 2010. This act is referred to as the Dodd-Frank Act. Ron Paul, a fellow member of the SDTF, is known as an isolationist who advocates withdrawal of US Forces overseas. He is a nationally known congressman who became well known during the 2008 presidential election.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466011010953 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Republican Congressman Ron Paul, in an interview with Kyodo News Agency in mid-February, 2011, dismissed the view of U.S. forces in Japan serving as a deterrent, calling it an excuse to maintain U.S. military forces in the region. (Photo from Tokyo Shimbun)

In July, Frank and Paul wrote an article 'Why We Must Reduce Military Spending' for the *Huffington Post*, the influential political website. In it they explained that 2010 military spending was about $693 billion, over 42% of total government spending, and this is damaging the US economy and reducing people's quality of life. They also pointed out that US intervention in other countries as a superpower often generates anger directed at the US, and concluded that 'rebuilding our economy and creating jobs remains the nation's top priority. It is essential that we begin to address the issue of excessive military spending.' In confronting this national crisis, two people from different sides of the political spectrum are thus cooperating in urging reform.

In response to the letter from Frank et al., the NCFRR produced a chairman's draft proposal in November. They recommended one trillion dollar cuts in defense spending by FY2015. The recommendation included reduction of military personnel stationed at bases in Europe and Asia by one-third, and ending procurement of the MV-22 Osprey – a combat assault transport for the Marines – which is projected to be based at the replacement facility for Futenma Air Station. Although the detailed list of military expenditure items was removed from the committee's final report released on December 1, the report strongly advocated cuts in defense spending: 'No exceptions. We must end redundant, wasteful, and ineffective federal spending – including defense'. This proposal, which incorporated reduction of the budget including tax overhaul, lacked the votes for approval in the voting two days later. However, it was put forward as a blueprint for public discussion, and brought to light the inevitability of drastic measures to reform national defense spending.

Similarly, a significant non-aligned, non-profit think tank, the Bipartisan Policy Centre, founded by Senators Dole, Mitchell, Baker, and Daschle, in November also called for a freeze on defense spending. Another think tank specialising in national security, 'The Stimson Center', has also published an article entitled 'Choosing Defense Mission Priorities,' which proposed cuts in the defense budget and called for the reduction of US military bases overseas. These and other organisations propose cuts in military spending and stress the necessity for a ruthless examination of the purpose and use of military spending–a view shared by ordinary citizens.

Reform Trends in a Military Environment

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466011010953 Published online by Cambridge University Press

With all this pressure, not even the DoD can ignore the criticism. Defense Secretary Gates has announced $100 billion budget cuts over the next five years by reducing DoD personnel, slimming the organisation and reducing contract figures. On top of this, they are also re-examining the role of the military, in particular the Marine Corps, which in recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, has become a 'second land army'. The Marines are known as an 'expeditionary force in readiness' and are characterised by their high mobility and ability to invade shorelines rapidly. However, recently they have been entering foreign lands on military airplanes, fighting on the ground, heavily armed, and deviating from their original purpose. The Marine Corps has become too large and the cost continues to increase.

Concerned with this situation, Gates in his speech to the Army in May asked, 'What makes the role of the Marines different from that of the Army?' The last amphibious landing was at Inchon during the Korean War. He explained that since then, for 60 years, there has been no Marine amphibious expedition.

Subsequently, in a lecture delivered in August, Gates revealed that he had ordered the leaders of the Navy and Marine Corps to review the mission of the Marines, including expeditionary forces, in the context of changing global threats and new technologies.

If defense spending is curtailed, the arms industry will suffer. Sensing the coming change, the industry has mobilised quickly. Lockheed Martin, the world's largest defense manufacturer, with its main office in Washington state, recently offered its employees voluntary redundancy packages, and more than 600 employees, or 25% of the targeted employees, rushed to take the option. With Lockheed Martin leading the way, the arms industry is now engaged in restructuring; cutting the work-force; rationalising the workplace through incorporating units, abolishing redundant sectors; and canceling large projects.

At the same time, because the reduction in the scope of the military industrial sector and cost-cutting measures applied across the board mean reduced employment, some regions with no other large companies have objected. Congressional representatives from such regions have opposed the cuts, and both supporters and opponents are jockeying to influence decisions about the military's future. Since summer, the move towards reduction of military spending has been widely reported in the US media. The Financial Times has also taken up the US defense environment on its front and analysis pages. Military spending has become an economic issue.

For the first time, serious discussion is about to take place concerning military spending, which rapidly increased since 9/11 with no questions asked; this discussion will also address the role of the military, with special emphasis placed on the significance of overseas Forces. A reform hurricane is brewing!

Diverse Opinions in the US

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466011010953 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While questions are raised in Washington on the roles of Marines, US and Japanese governments are proceeding with plans to build new USMC facilities in Northern Okinawa. Top photo: tanks landing on Henoko on January 27. (Photo from Henokohama Tsushin.) **Bottom photo: protestors link arms to surround a truck to stop construction of new Osprey-capable helipads in Takae, on February 25.** (Photo from Yanbaru Higashi Village Takae no genjo)

I have explained the situation in the US at some length because this reform trend can affect other parts of the world that host US Forces overseas. It is therefore highly relevant to Japan, where many US troops are stationed. The most pressing base problem in Japan is Futenma Air Base. Both Japanese and US governments are still hewing to the principle of relocation to Henoko in Nago City. Many Japanese may think that the US must be irritated by the slow progress on the relocation. Besides, there is no way that the US bases will leave Okinawa. However, as the US itself re-examines many problems associated with military costs, adhering to the old framework means that we might miss the significance of this new trend. In fact, the overwhelming majority of American scholars and experts I interviewed believed that it was impossible to relocate to Henoko, and that the Marine Corps in Okinawa no longer plays any role in US military strategies. Such voices have become more strident since the beginning of this year. Let me introduce some of these voices below.

Mike Mochizuki (Professor, George Washington University):

> I do not think that the Henoko relocation is practicable because gaining support of the democratically elected governor is crucial. The US government's perspective is unrealistic. None of my American friends who specialise in Japan-US relations believe the agreement to relocate the bases will be carried out. [..] What does it (the Marines in Okinawa) deter? If it's North Korea, there is the Korean Army. US Forces are stationed there, too. If the Futenma problem is going to weaken Japan-US relations, then even if the military presence is maintained, deterrence will be weak, because deterrence involves political elements as well. Nor do I believe that the Marines are in Okinawa to anticipate and resist an attack by China. I do recognize the importance of the Marines for humanitarian support, disaster relief and other emergency rescue operations. To perform those roles, however, it is possible to transport Marines from Camp Pendleton (in California) – there is no need to station them in Okinawa. Japan itself can provide rescue support logistics, too.

Morton Halperin, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, who was involved in the 1972 negotiations over the return of Okinawa

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466011010953 Published online by Cambridge University Press

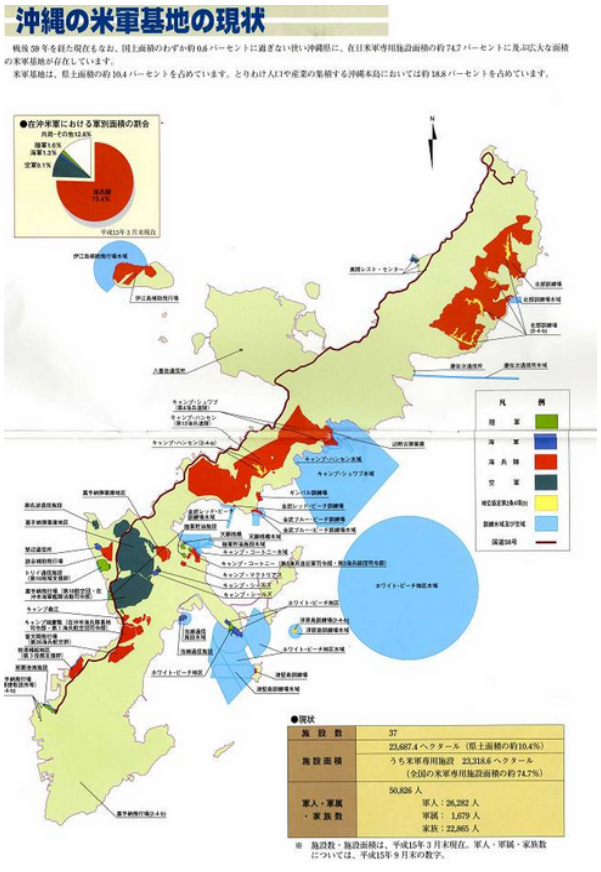
said:

> I am quite surprised that after many decades since Okinawa's reversion, the structure of the bases has not changed at all. This is because of government inaction. We need to pay attention to the burden on Okinawa. I visited Okinawa in 1968, and observed almost all the islands from a helicopter. My impression of Okinawa was that it was 'empty' because residents were concentrated in small areas. The rest was all bases. I asked a high ranking Navy officer, "Why do we have bases in Okinawa?" He answered, looking very serious, "You misunderstand. The military doesn't have bases in Okinawa. The island itself is the base." It was no exaggeration; the military really did think of the whole island as a base. The military intended to maintain Okinawa until there were no more disputes in Asia – that is, they planned to keep the bases forever. The structure of the bases in Okinawa is based on the assumption that Okinawa is a base and will continue to be a base forever. The US put bases on the mainland, too; but they were aware that it was Japanese territory. If they had an awareness that Okinawa was not a base but Japanese territory, they would have been able to ask themselves what sort of structure the base should have. But they are still not thinking about this seriously.

Richard Samuels, a prominent Professor of Japanese Politics at MIT followed a similar line:

> The US needs to realise the political difficulty of Okinawa and consider training the helicopter units in other places like Guam. Futenma needs to be closed down as soon as possible. If there is any victim, the government's forbearance will become an issue. It is time for the US to step back and consider a Plan B such as training in Guam, San Diego or Hawaii. We need to change direction. For that we need political leadership. [..] We can apply pressure through US negotiations with Japan. The Democratic Party of Japan wants an "equal Japan-US alliance". If Japan can become more responsible towards the US and can say no, that would be an ideal alliance relationship. Germany sometimes says no, and France always does; this does not end the alliance. This is an honest and healthy relationship. The US always demands and Japan always says "yes". The US should realise that Japan has lost its sense of self-governance. If the two countries do not share an understanding of the importance of their roles, the cost and benefit of their alliance, that is not a healthy relationship. Okinawa is disproportionately bearing the burden of security. It is possible to ask to lighten such a burden. Japanese people need to understand what a real burden means.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466011010953 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Map of US military bases in Okinawa. Red: Marine Corps; Dark Blue: Air Force (Kadena); Green: Army; Bright Blue: Navy; Light Blue: Water Space and Airspace for Training

Professor Barry Posen, a specialist in Security Studies at MIT also supports this line of argument:

> Even if the Marine Corps left Okinawa, if the Air Force and the Navy were to stay in Kadena and mainland Japan, there would be no change in deterrence. I cannot see what role the Marine Corps might play in military actions that are likely to take place in the context of Japan-China or China-Taiwan relations. I have heard that the Marines have tasks to perform in case of emergency on the Korean Peninsula; however, considering the size of today's Korean military and their technological capabilities, it is not possible that the defense of Korea relies on a single US Marine force. [..] Of the three US Marine Corps divisions, the Okinawa division is the weakest in terms of combat strength. [..] In the plan to relocate parts of Futenma's capacity to Guam, the Marine Corps in Okinawa will be divided into two (command unit and combat unit): it will take some time to coordinate the two units to act together; rather than wasting time in logistics it would be much less time-consuming if the whole division is withdrawn from Okinawa. [..] The US is maintaining too many bases and military forces overseas. We need to reduce them.

Professor Andrew Bacevich, Boston University (and a former US Army Colonel) had similar views:

> Those in Washington believe that forward deployment of military forces will promote stability of the region. This may be true to some extent, but at the same time, overseas forces also contribute to regional instability. DoD consistently insists that the existing bases are strategically irreplaceable. Today's Marine Corps, too, would say that Okinawa is strategically vital. But in reality, US forces have already given up some overseas bases and have managed to find ways of adapting

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466011010953 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> to such losses. The US used to maintain two large bases in the Philippines – Subic Naval Base and Clark Air Base. Despite strong local opposition, the DoD used to insist that they were 'important, irreplaceable bases.' However, after the 1991 eruption of Mr. Pinatubo, when the bases were destroyed by the ashes, the US military decided that the cost of repairs would be too high and simply withdrew the forces. The argument that they were irreplaceable had suddenly vanished. [..] The mistake we Americans made after the end of the Cold War was our belief that military power is effective for solving problems. If the US were to adopt a low profile, including reduced military power, we could avoid a situation that leads to instability. Bureaucrats have too much faith in military power.

Listening to different people's opinions from diverse fields in the US, it is clear that the US government's explanations and policies do not necessarily have the support of the American people. In Japan, we still hear voices that extol the deterrence power of the Marine Corps in Okinawa; but we must change our thinking to fit changing times.

The US also has some domestic issues

Having said that, even the US government, which had been insensitive to Okinawan opposition, has finally begun to realise that it is difficult to implement the Japan-US agreement. When Governor Nakaima Hirokazu was re-elected in the November 28th Okinawa gubernatorial election, some US media reported that 'the possibility of relocation has survived', based on Nakaima's previous acceptance of the relocation of Futenma Air Base to Henoko. However, Washington is not really that optimistic. Since before the election, Washington was less concerned about which candidate would win than about what measures the Japanese government might take in response to the election result.

On the day Nakaima's projected victory became certain, the US State Department said that 'Okinawan concerns will be reflected in the adjustment (of the U.S. military on Okinawa)," indicating that they were not going to take drastic measures. Crowley, the US Department of State spokesperson, said that 'dialogue with Okinawa is the Japanese government's job', and Lapan, a DoD spokesperson, also avoided referring to Okinawa saying that it was a 'domestic issue'. A senior US military officer in Japan said rather dispassionately, 'we have already given them two options for runway layouts: V-shaped and I-shaped. We are waiting for the Japanese government's decision'. They are all watching the Japanese government carefully. Unanimously calling Okinawa 'Japan's domestic issue' may mean that the US government is already sensing an impasse around the Japan-US agreement and is preparing a contingency position.

The US domestic situation is also relevant. Given US plans to strengthen the bases on Guam, including transferring the Okinawa Marines there, it has no resources to spare to intervene in other countries. In September the DoD announced it would postpone completion of the transfer originally planned for 2014 due to lack of preparedness on Guam. The infrastructure cannot cope with the sudden influx of the Marines, their families and construction workers.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466011010953 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The coastal Pagat archaeological site, Guam's valuable cultural site (Photo from National Geographic)

Prior to this, relevant congressional committees approved cutting the cost of relocation by 70 percent. With operations not progressing according to US government plan, the plan itself is now being questioned. Committee reports have severely criticised the government, stating: 'Guam's water and waste water facilities, electrical system, roads and other infrastructure are already inadequate. There is no consideration of the environment' (US Senate Appropriations Committee); 'It is a serious concern when and how the DoD will respond to the poor evaluation it received regarding the environmental impact of the Guam construction plan. They have not addressed its impact on residents either' (House Committee on Appropriations).

Inadequate infrastructure and environmental concerns are not the only problems. Another issue is the construction of a Marine firing range for East Guam. The US military originally planned to construct the range inside the base, but in the 2008 plan it became clear that construction was to be outside the base. Part of the planned construction site was state-owned land. This land was originally meant to be allocated for landless Chamorros and descendents of those whose land was requisitioned by the US military after the war.

The Guam government in August sent a letter to the US Department of the Navy expressing concern over the new land acquisition that was to accompany the Marine relocation and the 'move to extend the US bases on the island'. This was despite the original promise that the Marine relocation would involve no additional land acquisition or extension of military facilities. The Guam government's position is to accept Marine relocation; but distrust is intensifying because of the discrepancy between the US government's explanation to the locals and the actual plan. I visited Guam in April 2009 and spent one week gathering information; even then the firing range was a huge issue. The military has yet to satisfactorily answer questions about the situation.

The US military's pattern of extending bases in accordance simply with their perceived military and strategic value, without any understanding of local circumstances, history and culture, is precisely what is happening in Okinawa. Regarding the construction of replacement facilities in Henoko, Japanese and US governments say that this is 'not construction of a new base but relocation to the pre-existing Camp Schwab'; but since they are constructing runways where there was nothing before, extending the base in this way is the same as what is occurring on Guam. The US government's argument that "the transfer to Guam is not progressing because the Futenma issue is stagnating" can no longer be accepted. This is a situation unique to the US. And if the delay is due to domestic circumstances in the US, packaging Guam with Futenma will not work. Four and a half years on since the 2006 announcement of the restructuring of US Forces, the agreement is coming apart at the seams.

Time to reconsider Futenma

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466011010953 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Pristine water off Henoko (Photo by Yoshio Shimoji)

As the US faces a financial crisis with no sign of recovery, and a number of difficult related issues, the trend of domestically-oriented policies and national consciousness will continue to accelerate. Even the Republican Party, which believes that a large defense budget is the barometer of state power, and which opposes defense budget cuts, has to accept that there is no such a thing as a 'sacrosanct' sector these days. If the inward-looking philosophy that 'money should be spent only on our own country' spreads further, overseas military forces will undoubtedly become a target to rationalise. Voices calling for 'abolishing overseas forces' have emerged even from within extremely conservative Tea Party groups that influenced recent midterm elections.

However, it would be premature to think that this will lead directly to the return of Futenma Air Base or the withdrawal of the Marines from Okinawa. Japan provides the world's largest sympathy budget and is offering to construct a new US base in Henoko for free. In such favorable conditions, there is no need for the US to change things in Japan. In fact, in the public hearing of the House Armed Services Committee in July, Assistant Secretary of Defense Wallace Gregson flatly rejected committee members' questions such as 'Do the Marines need to be in Okinawa?', by noting Okinawa's geopolitical significance. He emphasised that 'Japanese defense spending is only 1% of GDP. We would like to ask them to increase the sympathy budget', thus turning the attention of Congress away from withdrawal towards the increase in the sympathy budget.

Regarding Okinawa's geopolitical importance and the importance of the Marines stationed in Okinawa, the aforementioned scholars think that the Marines can be replaced with current military technologies or other, less specialised forces. Some people even question the necessity of the existence of Marines in Okinawa.

Peter Kuznick, a historian at American University says:

> Japan is bearing substantial cost for US base relocation and maintenance. The US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty identified the purpose of US Forces in Japan as maintaining security in the Far East; but in reality they have turned into a military force that fights all over the world – Korea, Vietnam, the first Gulf War, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

He pointed out that the role of the US Forces in Japan has gone beyond the framework of a sympathy budget.

When the US government arrogantly tells us 'we are protecting Japan; Japan should pay for it', we may feel intimidated. But if we listen to various opinions outside the US government, we can clearly see that this is simply pressure that originates in self-righteousness. Naturally, diplomacy prioritizes national interest; there is no way that US diplomacy supports other

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466011010953 Published online by Cambridge University Press

countries, or Okinawa, for that matter.

But this also means that, in today's situation concerning Japan and the US, the possibility exists that the prevailing logic is reversed. Namely, the US is short of funds. Cuts in military spending are inevitable. So is the review of forces overseas. The US Marines' role needs to be reviewed. Marines in Okinawa are in a state of suspended animation. Okinawan people fiercely oppose relocation of Futenma Air Base to Henoko. The Prime Minister of an important allied nation was driven to resign over the US bases (Abe). US bases continue to be a huge political issue. As the US no longer has overwhelming power, and cannot do without the cooperation of its allies, it is not in US interest to continue pressing the base issue.

A USMC helicopter crashed into Okinawa International University campus on August 13, 2004. (Photo from Ginowan City's website)

We often hear the threat that 'if the Henoko relocation fails, Futenma will remain as is'; but it would take only one airplane crash to put the US government in a very difficult position. Closing down risky Futenma as soon as possible and restoring the unstable Japan-US relationship must surely suit US national interests. If Japan adheres to the existing logic – not to mention its Chief Cabinet Secretary asking Okinawa to accept the burden of the bases – Japan will not find a solution to the Futenma problem. It deserves to be criticised for its sycophantic diplomacy following the US. Fourteen years after the agreement to return Futenma base land to the people, with absolutlely no progress, the situation is ripe for change. If we link the new defense trends in the US with the 'all-Okinawa' opposition to relocation inside the prefecture, it is natural to conclude that it is time for reconsideration of the Futenma problem.

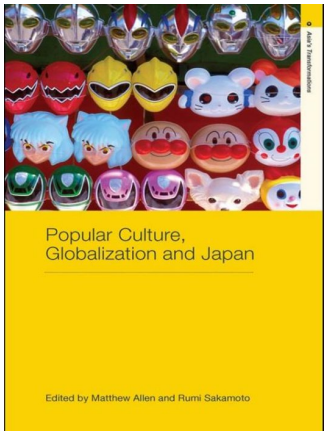
This is a slightly abbreviated version of an article that appeared in Sekai, February 2010.

Yonamine Michiyo (b.1966) was a journalist in Okinawa and Tokyo before being posted to Washington in 2010 as correspondent for the Ryukyu Shimpo*. She is presently reporting from Okinawa.*

Rumi Sakamoto is a senior lecturer in the School of Asian Studies, the University of Auckland, New Zealand, and a Japan Focus *associate. Matt Allen is professor and head of the School of History and Politics, University of Wollongong, Australia, and a* Japan Focus *associate. Rumi and Matt are coeditors of* Popular Culture, Globalization and Japan*.*

Recommended citation: Yonanime Michiyo, Economic Crisis Shakes US Forces Overseas: The Price of Base Expansion in Okinawa and Guam, The Asia-Pacific Journal Vol 9, Issue 9 No 2, February 28, 2011.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466011010953 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Click on the cover to order.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466011010953 Published online by Cambridge University Press