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Okinawa as a Borderland between Japan and China: A Study of Japanese Initiatives towards the Prefecture

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Abstract

The Okinawa island chain at the southwestern end of the Japanese archipelago has been a site of contestation regionally since at least the medieval period in history. Most recently, it is fast emerging as a site of contestation between Japan, which has administered the islands almost without interruption since 1872, and China, which Okinawans (then known as Ryukyans) nominally acknowledged as co-suzerains (with Japan) until their incorporation as Okinawa Prefecture. As the current Chinese administration under President Xi Jinping increasingly makes references to Okinawa's formerly 'independent' existence and takes steps to impress that difference upon Okinawan hearts and minds, this paper argues that it is high time that policymakers in Japan treat the island chain as a 'bordered' region where their maritime neighbor intends to play an increasingly competitive role in promoting and proselytizing alternative models of 'independent' and 'sovereign' identity. By utilizing Enze Han's 'neighborhood effect on border development', this paper studies a variety of policies Japan already has in place to secure its administrative control over the islands, particularly in the political/governance, economic and security domains, in order to identify sectors where Japanese policies succeed in

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preserving the loyalty of Okinawans and areas where there is scope for improvement. It also provides recommendations for policymakers based on these conclusions.

Introduction

Borders have been a site of contestation ever since the first modern states emerged in Europe. As the forces of globalization took wing from the ashes of the Second World War, they seemed to promise a new dawn whereby borders would eventually take their place in the ash heap of history. It was only when the twenty-first century approached that the world realized the fragility of this idea, with the 9/11 attacks convincing even the die-hard among its boosters that borders may not necessarily be a bad thing (Paasi in Wastl-Walter 2011, 11). The tottering ideology would nevertheless have endured if a death blow had not been delivered to it by a rising power determined to challenge the United States' established superpower status.

China's challenge to the international order is primarily a systemic one, noted most explicitly in its challenge to the Westphalian conception of fixed state boundaries. Its expansive claims to the entirety of the South China Sea, its encroaching demands on the Senkakus and other islets in the East China Sea, and its aggressive attempts to demolish India's Himalayan frontiers are all points along that continuum. Since 2012, its territorial claims have taken on a sharper edge, as evidenced by the Galwan clash of 2020 in the Himalayan heights, or the struggle currently underway at various points in the East and South China Seas.

An obvious implication of China's challenge to conventional borders has been to securitize them in the eyes of its neighbors. This has been accomplished in several countries by the gradual militarization of border regions, but also via the building up of local infrastructure in a sustained effort to win the hearts-and-minds of the local populace. Many have provided a range of financial benefits to local populations in order to secure their continued loyalty to the state. This paper proposes to study the efforts made by Japan, a disputant in the Senkaku islands dispute and a neighbor to China with a long and thorny history, to ensure that recent attempts by the latter to challenge the legitimacy of its administration of Okinawa prefecture are foiled.

This paper starts with a brief explication of the theoretical frame used throughout the substantive sections, which is Enze Han's concept of a 'neighborhood effect of border development'. This will be followed by the substantive sections themselves, which will start with an outline of the basic governance structure instituted by Tokyo to govern Naha and support the latter in its integration into the mainstream. Following this, successive sub-sections will study policies relating to political/governance, economic and security measures. A brief critique of these policies will be mounted by augmenting Han's original concept with Hirschman's seminal

loyalty-voice-exit paradigm, in order to illuminate areas where Tokyo's performance of border development and nation-building needs to be accelerated. The paper will conclude with an overview of the limitations and areas for further research, followed by a list of recommendations to policymakers in Tokyo.

Background: a brief introduction to the 'neighborhood effect of border development'

The theoretical grounding of the study will be based on Border Studies methodologies, particularly Enze Han's conceptualization of a 'neighborhood effect of border development' (Han 2019).

Han's central research puzzle is as follows: does nation-building occur in a vacuum? Is there any discernible effect of neighboring states on border territories, especially in cases where co-ethnics reside on both sides of the border? Through his pathbreaking study of the China-Thailand-Myanmar borderlands, he concludes that '[earlier, single-state] approaches have generally missed out an important dimension of how states undertake their state-building projects, which is the effect from neighboring states' (Han 2019, 30). Instead, he proposes that '[w]e should treat state building as an interactive process between domestic politics in one state and the international dimension that relates to its neighbors' (*ibid.*, 32).

Han primarily delineates two aspects that he argues are key variables for measurement of the neighborhood effect, the first being power asymmetry between neighbors and the other being ethnic group distribution and kin relations. In Han's conceptualization, states may best be considered as dyadic pairs, where their relative power is either asymmetrical (that is, state A is more powerful than state B) or at parity (both states A and B are equal in power structure). To this endogenous variable Han adds an exogenous one, namely, the type of relations enjoyed by the two states. As he explains:

If these two states were on adversarial terms with each other, either due to historical feuds, territorial disputes, or ideological differences, then the more powerful state would intend influencing the other according to its own interests. Here, therefore, we are more likely to observe a case of intensive meddling by the more powerful state in its neighbor's state-building process along the borderland region. [...] If, on the other hand, these two states were amicable to each other, then the powerful state would have less incentive to change the other one according its own liking. Yet, due to power asymmetry between the two, the more powerful state's influence on its neighbor's state- building process would still

be felt, although to a lesser extent and often in a more benign way than in the first scenario. Barring political meddling, the most likely dynamic in this scenario is the extensive economic influence of the more powerful state on the lesser states... (ibid., 32-33; emphasis added).

What role does ethnic kin distribution play in this dynamic? Consider the dyad of state A and state B above. If we assume that state A hosts an ethnic minority in its border regions who are co-ethnics of the majority population of state B, then power dynamics between the two states may determine to a great extent the attitude of state A's ethnic minority to that state's nation-building efforts. If states A and B are at parity with each other in terms of state power, then state B will have less opportunity to provide external support to its co-ethnics, while if both states are asymmetrically powerful, then there is far more incentive for state B to support its co-ethnics in state A in resisting that state's bordering exercise.

What if state A's border minorities do not have an ethnic kin state in state B (that is, both states contain ethnic minorities that may be kin to each other)? In that case, Han argues,

[f]or these ethnic groups, a comparison between the different nationalist ideologies and practices they are subject to under the nation-building projects of the neighboring states will influence their evaluation of their respective living conditions and determine their preference for one situation or the other. Thus, if they perceive that their external kin groups are treated better in the neighboring state, then they are more likely to develop grievances toward the state they inhabit. [...] Additionally, their external kin, even though they do not have the backing of a state, might still have more resources to help their less fortunate brethren by mobilizing to support them. (ibid., 35).

Theoretical application to the Okinawa case

At the outset of his discussion Han explicitly states that 'not many countries in the world are isolated island states, and most share borders with other states' (*ibid.*, 30; emphasis added). This implies on the face of it that Okinawa, a set of islands located between Japan (itself a state comprised of islands) and China (a continental state with outlying island territories), is at risk of failing to qualify as a suitable case for the application of Han's theory. As argued below, three factors make it possible to expand that theory to the maritime domain, retaining its power as an explanatory matrix for what may be termed 'maritime borderlands'.

Firstly, and most pertinently, there is the argument from international law. As operationalized in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which forms the bedrock of the international maritime order, states can claim exclusive rights to areas of maritime real estate contingent on the presence there of land formations such as atolls, reefs and islands. Further, under the law, these claims are then treated as an extension of territory, with certain rights such as innocent passage of vessels and scientific research reserved for all states (Schofield in Wastl-Walter 2011, 668). Thus, the Okinawa Islands can be considered as the extension of Japan's maritime borderland into the broader East China Sea under international law (*ibid.*, 675-677).

To this argument may be added the behavior of China. In recent years, China has consistently attempted to claim the entire South China Sea for itself, constructed artificial atolls and reefs as *faits accomplis* to coerce weaker states into acquiescing to its illegal occupation of maritime territory and aggressively deployed (para)military forces to conduct grey zone operations designed to deny access to rival claimants as well as their allies. In the East China Sea, it has continually attempted to intimidate Japanese vessels operating in the vicinity of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands as well.

In more recent times, China has turned its historical-revisionist gaze on the purported 'legitimacy' of Japanese administration over Okinawa. In the wake of the nationalization of the Senkakus by Tokyo in 2012, there has been a wave of revisionist publications by influential government mouthpieces in China, which according to some scholars amounts to information warfare (Niquet 2023; Hosoda 2023, 126). The theme of such publications seems to be to posit the Okinawa islands as an entity separate from Japan.

Though it has long been Chinese (and Taiwanese) government policy to refer to the islands as Ryukyu (琉球; Shimabuku 2019, 3) rhetoric surrounding Okinawa has accelerated under Xi Jinping. In some recent cases, Xi referred to the independent Ryukyu Kingdom's tributary relations with the Chinese imperium, claimed special relations with the Ryukyus as the former governor of Fujian (the province that historically formed the contact point between the Ryukyu Kingdom and the Chinese empire), and conveyed to Okinawa Governor Denny Tamaki that he was personally concerned to improve relations with Okinawa. Chinese state media also actively highlighted places where Ryukyuans throughout history lived, worked and died during Governor Tamaki's much-discussed visit in 2023 (Kyodo News 3 July 2023; Kyodo News 4 July

2023). The establishment of a new “Ryukyu Research Centre” in an university in China’s northeast in 2024 is the culmination of this long rhetorical sequence, as it effectively institutionalizes rumblings within it about seeking a ‘historical basis’ for challenging Japan’s administrative authority over the prefecture (Yasuda 2025).

These actions imply that the People’s Republic of China *already behaves as if its maritime claims are identical with its territorial claims*. In other words, it does not differentiate between its maritime borders and its continental borders and responds to rival claimants in the former domain with the same toolbox that it uses to deter and challenge rivals in the latter. Given this premise, it behooves China’s strategic challengers and rivals to reconstrue their maritime conflict with China as in a continuum with its continental border disputes.

A third factor that makes the extension of Han’s theory possible to the Okinawan case is the behavior of Okinawans themselves. Though this paper does not discuss Okinawa’s history or its long-lasting anti-base movement in any great detail (except where relevant), it can be argued that the behavior of these actors, from the government of Okinawa down to the anti-base movement (including the fringe ‘Okinawa independence’ (沖縄独立) and ‘Okinawan indigenous people’s’ (沖縄先住民) movements; Takahashi 2024, 117-122) behave as if their territory is a *borderland*, which, as defined by Newman, describes ‘areas in proximity to the border which constitute a transition zone between two distinct categories, rather than a clear cut-off line...an area within which people residing in the same territorial or cultural space may feel a sense of belonging to either one of the two sides, to each of the two sides, or even to a form of hybrid space in which they adopt parts of each culture and/or speak both languages’ (Newman in Wastl-Walter 2011, 37).

Thus, it can be said that a section of Okinawan political actors is behaving as Han’s theory predicts ethnic kin groups behave when they are dissatisfied with the state they are currently administered by, by seeking the (at least rhetorical) intervention of the rival borderland state. The fact that the topmost authority in the neighboring state is responding to these overtures indicates that a majority of Okinawan political actors along with the PRC are attempting to *reify an ethnic kinship status on the basis of the Ryukyu Kingdom’s long intercourse with imperial China*. One must conclude that some Okinawan political actors exist who are willing to consider themselves ethnic kin of the Chinese, especially the Fujianese people, in order to balance against

what they perceive as the ‘domination’ of the ‘Yamato people’ (やまとうんちゅ) over the long-suffering ‘Ryukyuan people’ (うちなんちゅ).

The Government of Japan’s Initiatives toward Okinawa

Tokyo’s policies toward Okinawa are rooted in the events of 1972, when the islands were finally reverted back to Japanese control by the US military. With an eye towards ensuring a smooth handover, the central government rapidly established the necessary institutional governance frameworks.

The foundational law for Okinawa, the Special Measures Law for the Promotion of Okinawa (沖縄振興特別措置法), in 1974. In the interim, Okinawan affairs were governed by the first edition of the Plan for the Promotion of Okinawa (沖縄振興計画), which was issued in 1972 immediately after the reversion. The coming into effect of the law did not supersede the Basic Plan, but rather provided for the Plan to be subsumed into the law as its effective implementation arm, with it being issued by the prefectural government at Naha and reviewed and renewed every ten years. Guiding principles for both the Plan and the law were provided by the Basic Policy on the Promotion of Okinawa (沖縄振興基本方針), which could be re-issued by the incumbent prime minister as necessary. These three central pillars remain the base on which the entire superstructure of Japanese policies toward Okinawa are built (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan n.d.).

Upon these three pillars is constructed a secondary set of governance structures. The first of these is a ministerial-level official dedicated to the Okinawa issue (along with the Northern Territories issue), entitled the Minister of State for Okinawa and the Northern Territories (沖縄及び北方領土に関する特命担当大臣). This minister, along with the rest of the Cabinet, is a permanent member of the Okinawa Policy Committee (沖縄政策協議会), which is dedicated to discussions on Okinawa-related issues. Further, there is the Okinawa Policy Promotion Bureau (沖縄振興局), which handles Okinawa-related policies as part of the general policy formulation process. There is also an Okinawan Affairs Office (沖縄総合事務局) which is the starting point for all national policies on Okinawa. The entire governmental structure is monitored and investigated by standing committees in both houses of the Diet, such as the Special Committee

on Matters Relating to Okinawa and the Northern Territories (沖縄及び北方対策に関する特別委員会) (*ibid.*).

The Role of the Okinawan Government

For its part, the Okinawan Prefectural Government in Naha takes the policy inputs and funding provided by the central government and utilizes it in service of what it calls the Okinawa 21st Century Vision (沖縄 21 世紀ビジョン). Started in March 2011, the Vision acts a fundamental policy document that sets up goals the prefecture aims to achieve by 2030. The policy has five objectives which it claims are derived from Okinawan people's genuine aspirations. To realize those objectives, it identifies four concrete tasks for the government to tackle. The five objectives are itemized below.

- 1) Aiming to become an island that respects its unique nature, culture, history and traditions (沖縄らしい自然と歴史、伝統、文化を大切にする島を目指して)
- 2) Aiming to become an island where people can live peacefully and happily (心豊かで、安全・安心に暮らせる島を目指して)
- 3) Aiming to become an island that is prosperous and overflowing with energy and liveliness (希望と活力にあふれる豊かな島を目指して)
- 4) Aiming to become an island that is open for interaction and coexistence with the world (世界に開かれた交流と共生の島を目指して)
- 5) Aiming to become an island that can achieve its future by unlocking diverse talents (多様な能力を発揮し、未来を拓く島を目指して).

Each of the five objectives is subdivided into a range of subobjectives which feed into the tasks. In 2022, the Okinawa 21st Century Vision was renamed the New Okinawa 21st Century Vision, though the basic objectives were left unaltered (Okinawa Prefecture 2022, 3-8).

Political/Governance incentives

The Basic Policy on Okinawan Promotion is divided into five objectives which mirror those laid out in the Okinawa Government's 21st Century Vision. These are further subdivided into 36 basic policies governing 121 policy variables. Though this paper will discuss the major

highlights of the Basic Policy, a detailed treatment of the entirety of the policy will have to await future research.

The first objective of the policy focuses on broadly cultural objectives, such as the promotion of cultural industries (文化産業), the encouragement of sustainability as a way of life and the transmission of Okinawa's traditional culture. The second objective of the Basic Policy covers policy interventions in demographic issues such as maintaining the quality of life for aged and super-aged citizens at the same time as the construction of a sturdy social safety net for childbirth and child-rearing, while the third aims to develop an 'autonomous economy' (自立型経済) which sees the island develop into a hub of exchange between Japan and Asia. The briefest set of policies, the fourth, concerns itself with Okinawa's international contributions by staking a claim to sub-national diplomacy as a valid tool for Naha. The fifth and final objective contains a set of progressive policies which target the development of human capital in the islands (Cabinet Office 2021).

Economic incentives

The policy outlined above generates several outputs such as the special budget on Okinawa, which is a consolidated budget request presented to the Cabinet and the Diet by the Cabinet Office instead of the Ministry of Finance. Interlocutors from Okinawa have stated that the budget supports as much as 10 percent of the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the islands, which makes it the centerpiece of Tokyo's economic incentives towards Okinawa. Okinawa prefecture also receives a lump-sum grant system (一括交付金制度), which provides funds for various activities undertaken by Naha. This grant system is available in both hard and soft flavors, with clearly separated functions.

Alongside the grants is an 'unparalleled' system of subsidies (他に例を見ない高率補助), which protects domestic industries, provides benefits to Okinawan citizens residing close to US bases and underwrites basic infrastructure improvements for the prefecture. For example, sectors such as breweries producing local beers (the Orion brand) or high-alcohol-content traditional beverages (the most representative being the rice wine called *awamori*) are protected under the subsidy system from competition by both domestic and foreign players.

Okinawa prefecture also receives subsidies for local development in cities/regions designated as special zones, is granted several tax exemptions to enable a greater share of revenues from tourism to accrue to prefectural accounts and has access to the coffers of the Okinawa Development Finance Corporation (沖縄振興開発金融公庫), an entity which funds local development projects with funds provided by both the central and other prefectural governments (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan n.d).

Okinawa Prefecture has a persistently high child poverty rate, variously measured as between 19.9 and 37.5 percent of the population. Causes for this range from the high prevalence of single-mother households and the non-competitiveness of the economy among others. In 2016, in order to address this problem, the Okinawa government introduced its Prefectural Plan to Combat Child Poverty. This sets up 34 indicators that measure multidimensionally how household sizes and structures affect child poverty levels, and attempts to address them through specific policy interventions. Funding for this is part of the Okinawa Promotion Budget, and in 2023 reached 1.85 billion yen (Suzuki and Tanabe 2023, 144, 150-151; Cabinet Office, Government of Japan n.d.).

There are special incentives for municipalities close to the US military bases. Traditionally, residents living close to US bases are entitled to compensation for noise and other pollution-related damage. Landowners leasing their land to the Japanese government (which in turn leases them to the US military) also receive lease payments from Tokyo, which is entirely non-taxable; it has been estimated that 10,000 Okinawan residents receive approximately two million yen annually in rents from the government. Lands falling within the US base area but not normally used is also subject to rent payable by Tokyo, with the owners allowed to farm on the land in a limited area. If US forces damage the land or the crops in any ways, the landowners in this category are entitled to further compensation (Bosack 2019).

The Japanese Ministry of Defense runs a separate compensation scheme called the US Forces Realignment-Related Expenditures since 2007 (renamed the US Forces Realignment-Related Expenditures Special Community Support Project (再編関連特別地域支援事業補助金交付) in 2015), which is meant to compensate residents of communities where a US base is under construction or in the process of reconstruction (such as Henoko, where the controversial Marine Corps Air Station Futenma is to be relocated). In 2019, the Japanese government initiated

a sub-scheme under the Okinawa Promotion budget named the Okinawa Promotion Special Budget Fund (沖縄振興特定事業推進費), which was designed to be directly delivered to affected municipalities, leaving the Okinawan Prefectural Government out of the picture (Hiyane and Piao 2023, 296, 298-9).

Security incentives

Tokyo's security initiatives relating to the defense of Tokyo is inextricably linked to the presence of US military bases. At the same time, the growing presence of the JSDF speaks to a gradual reorientation of the defensive burden towards Tokyo. Though the Author was unable to glean many details regarding the finer points of this rebalancing due to security classifications, broadly speaking, one can extrapolate certain trends by studying public statements and media coverage. Tokyo can be said to have two strategies that it operationalizes to reassure Naha of its sincerity. The first is rhetorical clarity: all officials, from the prime minister down to the local base commander, unequivocally express their rejection of the attitude displayed towards the islands during the late stages of the Second World War. In the summer of 1945, Tokyo, perceiving that the US military would soon invade the Japanese mainland, sought to use Okinawa as a frontal battleground where it hoped it would be able to bog down US forces. The term it used to describe this strategy was the 'disposable stepping-stone' strategy (捨て石作戦; Takahashi 2024, 33). The result of this strategy was the Battle of Okinawa (1 April – 21 June 1945) which justly earned the infamous moniker 'the typhoon of steel' for its ferocity. At least 100,000 Okinawans (one-fourth of the island's population) lost their lives in this most sanguinary battle, as a result of both the actual fighting as well as forced suicides (*junshi*) by the Imperial Japanese Army (Endo 22 June 2021).

To emphasize the repudiation of the Imperial Army's mistakes, during the celebrations marking the 70th anniversary of the JSDF, General Yoshihide Yoshida, the senior-most uniformed military official in Japan, went out of his way to refer to the strategy as a mistake and categorically assured the people of Okinawa that their protection was foremost in his mind (Matsuura 2 July 2024). Other military officials have also echoed these sentiments across different platforms, and the JSDF continues to maintain public-facing interactions that attempt to familiarize locals with their presence.

The second strategy Tokyo has adopted is in line with its overhaul of its national security doctrine at large, starting with the 2022 revision of three key documents that underpin it. This involves demarcating the JSDF's role as a homeland defense force vis-à-vis the US military role as an offensive military force much more clearly. Examples of this involve the much more proactive patrols undertaken by the JASDF's Southwestern Area Defense sector as well as the dispersal of smaller groupings of JGSDF troops across the *Nansei Shoto* (Southwestern Islands) to augment and balance the US Marine Corps' 'distributed lethality' doctrine. Also mentionable in this regard are the JMSDF's boosting of its own capabilities in the southwestern islands, and the Japan Coast Guard's (JCG) aggressive patrolling around the Senkaku islands and the Okinawa island chain. Recently, the JCG has also been involved in studies regarding the coordination of evacuations of people from the islands should Chinese missile attacks target them (Yomiuri Shimbun 2023; but also see Sim and Arago 2023).

What do Okinawans think of these moves? Though there is sparse survey data on Japan's other incentives, there is a wealth of data available on security-related opinions. Even as Tokyo continues to stress the strategic significance of the Okinawa chain of islands in the Indo-Pacific security complex with the rise of China, the people of Okinawa express significantly chary attitudes towards the US military presence, though at an individual level, their experiences of interacting with US servicemen and their families is largely positive. In a survey by the NHK in 2022, almost 60 percent of respondents felt that the US presence there was 'inevitable' and 'necessary', but more than 80 percent were aggrieved by the sheer scale of the US military burden borne by Okinawa. More than 70 percent of respondents also answered that the US bases 'do not help' their lives or jobs, and more than 50 percent thought the prefecture would get along nicely without the bases (Nakagawa and Nakayama 2022).

Another, more recent survey by faculty from a group of universities including Meisei University and the University of the Ryukyus in 2023 found that "around 70% of Okinawan residents think the concentration of US military bases in the prefecture is "unfair"" and 83 percent think the US military bases would invite attack in the event of conflict. On the other hand, it also found that anti-base movements continued to attract significant, though marginally declining, support, with 41 percent believing in the continued relevance of these movements (Higa 7 June 2023).

Opinion fluctuates at times, to be sure. In 1996, after the heinous rape and murder of a 12-year-old schoolgirl by three US servicemen came to light, anti-base sentiment was quite pronounced, as it was after similar incidents occurred in 2012 and 2016. A particularly damaging recent setback in this context is the discovery of repeated incidents of sexual and physical assault committed by US servicemen in the islands since 2023 that the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs knew of, but did not inform the Naha government. This is an extremely regrettable act that undercuts the work of winning hearts and minds essential in critical border regions. US Ambassador Rahm Emanuel's admission that the US military's training and education protocols are 'just not working' should be cause for great concern in Tokyo, as these incidents serve to focus Okinawan minds on the immediate physical threat posed by the foreign troops in their midst, which in turn feeds the narrative that their presence is in itself a threat (Higa et al. 29 June 2024; Ono et al. 4 July 2024; Associated Press 7 July 2024; Dudden 2024).

It is interesting here to note that while the JSDF also maintains bases in the islands, reactions to them are much more muted, and revolve primarily around distrust of Tokyo's willingness to defend the islands in the event of a contingency (Takahashi 2024, 92). There are no clear reasons that emerge from interviews and surveys conducted on the issue, but one can hazard a guess: most respondents are perhaps pointing to the US' tendency to get embroiled in military conflicts, some of which are unprovoked and misguided. Thus, the biggest concern for them can be said to be the fact that the US' military strategy, for example in Taiwan, may end up involving Okinawa either as a target of attack or blockade by the PRC, or as the site of a massive US military presence 'to defend Taiwan' in perpetuity (see Chotani 2019 and Dickson 2024 for some idea of the nuances involved).

A factor that may also be relevant to the discussion here is the location of the respective bases. Whereas US facilities are sited deep within major cities (such as MCAS Futenma in Ginowan city or Kadena AFB in Naha), the JSDF is located in much more dispersed areas. JGSDF Camp Ishigaki, for example, is a newly-established base set up in 2023. The author was struck by the deeply isolated nature of the base, sited far away from the nearest municipality on a former golf course. The JASDF's Camp Naha is also located in the suburban regions of the city (though adjacent to the international airport). A retired senior military official interviewed by the author clarified that the location indicates the orientation of the respective forces: whereas the US does not consider the defense of Japan as its sole reason for being located in Okinawa, the

JSDF has no other mission but to protect the homeland. Survey outcomes that show Okinawans prefer the JSDF's protection now begin to make more sense.

Nation-building in a 'bordered' Okinawa

The primary problem between Tokyo and Naha can best be understood by adopting Albert O. Hirschman's seminal paradigm of *loyalty*, *voice* and *exit*. The lion's share of the people of Okinawa support Japan fully, thus obviating the need to secure loyalty. Their support is evident in interactions and observations during the Author's trip to Okinawa, and more recently, in the soundness of the electoral reverse forces sympathetic to Governor Denny Tamaki's political stance have suffered.

The other two elements, *voice* and *exit*, are where Tokyo's efforts appear most uninspired. Okinawans, as the surveys cited above and in other publications have shown, feel most dissatisfied with the degree of participation Tokyo offers them (or does not offer them) in policymaking, particularly on security-related issues such as those concerning US military facilities which directly impinge on their physical safety not only against foreign attack but also against criminal activity by US servicemen. This has been exposed after Tokyo imposed the 'administrative override' in order to restart construction work in Henoko village in 2023. Though Governor Tamaki's political motivations in opposing the Futenma base relocation are clear, that in and of itself does not negate the fact that a sizeable section of Okinawans feel left out of the national conversation on security issues.

Okinawan people, especially those in the outlying islands, espouse varying shades of opinion regarding the bases. None likely support the bases wholeheartedly, but significant nuances exist which give grounds for believing that a practicable *modus vivendi* may be reached. As such, injecting a real sense of democratic accountability, where Okinawans are treated as worthy and equal participants in helping make decisions that impinge on their physical safety and well-being, is critical to ensure voice.

The amplification of voice attains deeper significance in light of the third available option in Hirschman's paradigm: exit. At root, China's discourse around 'Okinawa independence' can be read as a call to Okinawans to exercise the option of *exiting* the polity they are currently resident in, which it argues is insufficiently accountable to them. By contrast, its proffered vision is that of Okinawans as subjects in their own right, endowed with loyalty and voice of their own,

members of an independent polity that would stand apart from both Japanese and Chinese sovereignty. Though Okinawans are not currently seduced by this mirage, policies that are insufficiently sensitive to Okinawa's special concerns, if implemented by Tokyo in future, could well induce them to see its merits.

Conclusion and future research avenues

The British geographer and border specialist Colonel Thomas Holdich (1843-1929) stated that:

[b]oundaries are the inevitable product of advancing civilization; they are human inventions not necessarily supported by nature's dispositions, and as such they are only of solid value so long as they can be made strong enough and secure enough to prevent their violation and infringement [...] the first and greatest object of a national frontier is to ensure peace and goodwill between contiguous peoples by putting a definite edge to the national political horizon, so as to limit unauthorized expansion and trespass (Holdich 1916, x, 2).

The People's Republic of China at present is keenly aware of the veracity of this statement. It has striven to amass tools intended to challenge, and if possible, overturn the present territorial borders of neighbors. To beat back this 'bordering' challenge, Japan must think of Okinawa in the same terms, as a border region to be 'won'. The policies discussed above offer a very good head-start, but much work remains to be done.

With this in mind, the following general recommendations are offered:

Security

- Tokyo and Washington must work together to include as meaningful an Okinawan representation as possible in all currently active security-related forums,
- Tokyo must figure out durable, mutually-acceptable solutions to the US base 'problem', by conveying to the people of the islands the US' strategic role in Japan and across the entire region,
- Simultaneously, Tokyo must work with Washington to limit certain demographics of US servicemen from too-frequent interactions with locals, especially in areas where there may be women and children present,

- Tokyo would do well to ensure that US service members are not seen to be receiving special treatment or undue extraterritorial privileges after committing even heinous crimes of sexual assault, with visible punishments being most desirable to counteract negative emotions,
- Tokyo must also consider increasing the number of joint-use bases throughout the islands, with JSDF personnel acting as a kind of moderator between USFJ and local people.

Economic

- Tokyo should undertake urgent efforts to enable Okinawa to diversify away from traditional sources of income such as tourism and the bases,
- Opportunities to exploit Okinawan resources in sectors such as the ‘blue economy’, renewable energy and critical and emerging technologies such as semiconductors, must be encouraged, provisional to the initiative being taken by Naha,
- As for existing subsidies and protections, these must be more actively tied to Okinawan government officials and businesses coming up with new, more innovative ideas for the development of the economy, instead of creating semi-permanent market distortions,
- Lastly, as Japan grapples with declining birth rates, Okinawa remains the most fertile region in the country. Okinawan youth, as well-educated and gainfully employed members of Japanese society, must therefore be provided avenues to ameliorate the nation’s population crash.

Informational

- Tokyo must urgently work towards preventing the formation and consolidation of an ‘Okinawan independence’ core of hardliners that is influenced by Chinese narratives and that can be used as a rearguard disruptor of security activities by both US and Japanese forces,
- Tokyo must create more public awareness of Chinese disinformation campaigns, offsetting them by more robust information security measures and pre-bunking policies that can anticipate common Chinese discourses in advance,

- Finally, Tokyo must work with Naha in obtaining a real-time ground picture by cooperating with prominent media outlets to debunk or counter potentially malicious information being provided to them.

This paper has attempted to identify, list and assess the various policies the Japanese state offers to the people of Okinawa to maintain their loyalties to it. It has occasionally hinted at the challenge mounted by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to Japan's entitlement to their loyalty, but has for reasons of space not delved deeper into it. It is expected that a future research project to understand the sources of that country's narrative would have to be undertaken to study the schemes it has put into place to attempt to reroute Okinawan people's loyalties to itself.

Another exploratory dimension offered by this paper is the role of the US in Okinawan affairs. Though Han's theory initially proposes a two-nation model as the primary unit of analysis, it is not difficult to imagine that the intervention of a third country, through security condominiums with either of the nation-states concerned, could have second-order effects that both complicate and enrich the theoretical paradigm he propounds. As such, a study, possibly jointly, on the role played by the US bases in determining Okinawan people's attitudes towards both Tokyo and Beijing would be highly rewarding. This would serve not only to expand on the necessarily brief hints scattered throughout this paper to the role of the US bases, but also potentially offer up a case study rich in great academic and strategic significance.

Before closing this paper, it would not be out of place to discuss briefly the broader impact of the extension of Han's theoretical framework discussed herein to maritime spaces. As discussed above, extending Han's work on territorial borders to the maritime domain serves to generate interesting complexities well worth the effort of scholars to investigate. What tools would Han's hypothetical State A use to influence littoral peoples on its maritime borders? Would these tools even be comprehensible to these peoples, as they would not necessarily be as visible to them as the construction of physical infrastructure on territorial borders? Would State B be advantaged or disadvantaged by this infirmity on State A's part? Would joint development by both states in a state of parity upset the balance and lead to power asymmetry causing ethnic kinship to be sought, or would it cause the reverse? These and further questions are thrown open if we take Han's conceptualization and its maritime extension to its logical conclusion. It would

be a matter of great happiness for the Author if scholars working in border and security studies would take up these important questions in their investigations.

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