

Protecting the environment from the US Military: Okinawan civil society actors and the barriers to change

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[Scott Musgrave-Takeda](#)

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Civil society on the Ryukyu Island chain off the coast of Japan is vibrant. Advocacy and protest are a part of the everyday. This has largely been due to the contested United States military presence on the islands since the end of World War II. Environmental concerns are a key issue among activists and a consciousness over ecological damage and chemical pollution has increased. Civil society actors have been key in voicing and sharing concerns through the media and other channels, but like many others before them, have faced many barriers to solving the issues.

I attempt to give some background and analysis on what environmental civil society actors key challenges are and how they are addressing them, while also touching on the issue's intersectionality with anti-base, pro-peace, and several other causes in Okinawan society. I will examine several of the barriers that activists face particularly vis-à-vis the US Military and Japanese central government. There will also be some suggestions of what more could be done to improve possible outcomes for environmental civil society actors in Okinawa.

The Ryukyu archipelago, including the main island of Okinawa, is located between Taiwan and mainland Japan. It hosts over 70 percent of all of Japan's US military bases and 15 percent of the area of Okinawa prefecture is taken up by these installations. The damage caused by the bases and their personnel to the general

population has been well reported including [noise pollution](#), [sexual assault](#), [adverse health effects](#) and now increased attention has been brought to the environmental degradation caused by the bases. Two specific examples I have chosen to examine are the per-polyflourylalkyl substance (PFAS) pollution linked specifically to Marine Corps Air-Station (MCAS) Futenma and the natural environment protection battles raging in Henoko, where a new military facility is being built. These two examples were chosen because they are both increasingly prescient in the current struggles over the US presence. Henoko, increasingly a symbol of Okinawan resistance, represents concerns over the natural environment while the PFAS issue is one that directly influences the human environment. Contrasting both can give a greater appreciation for the diversity and similarity of these related issues.

Concerns over PFAS contamination grow

The US military has continued to use fire-fighting foams in Okinawa that contain PFAS, which can pollute water sources. In 2016, [an Okinawan prefectural survey](#) discovered PFAS traces close to military bases in Chatan, Kadena and Ginowan. Attempts have been made to identify the source of the PFAS pollution directly to these facilities, only to be refused due to the protections the US military holds under the US-Japan Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). As of this year, however, declassified internal [documents show that the military acknowledged the possibility that the source of the PFAS contamination may have come from Futenma](#) air-station in Ginowan. In Okinawa's case, specifically in Ginowan, an unsympathetic local assembly and the US-Japan SOFA has created several barriers for civil society actors.



A sign reading 'Protect the children! No PFAS!' at a weekly protest in front of Ginowan City Hall, October 1, 2022. Credit: Author

PFAS activism is not confined to Okinawa nor is it new for the US military. PFAS contamination, specifically of the PFOA (perfluorooctanoic acid) and PFOS (perfluorooctanesulfonic acid) variety, has been strongly linked to the practices of American corporations [DuPont and 3M](#). The global awareness over the carcinogenic and ill health effects of PFAS has led to government agencies in the [US](#) and [European Union](#) pursuing bans on their use. PFAS is known as the 'forever chemical' because it does not break down and can have damaging effects for human life as well as animal and plant life. Introducing bans and limiting the use of PFAS, however, has been a problem for many environmental advocates across the world.

Local civic PFAS group, [The Association to Protect Citizens' Lives from PFAS Contamination](#) (有機フッ素化合物質 (PFAS)汚染から市民の生命を守る連絡会) has been active in spreading information about the dangers of PFAS in Okinawa. This group, established in 2019, has its roots as a network for PFAS activists across Okinawa located in Ginowan city, Okinawa city, Kadena town, Kin town and Chatan town.. Many of the participants have been active in relation to concerns beyond the environment, including noise pollution and anti-war concerns over the military bases in Okinawa, and their activism shows the intersectionality of the issue. Several of the group's members have been a part of or have recently been elected to local councils particularly in Ginowan and Chatan, showing there is significant traction for the PFAS issue locally. The effects of PFAS on pregnant women have brought mothers' groups into the anti-PFAS fold. Concerns over the effects of PFAS on the marine environment and agriculture have also widened the association's base.

Both the Japanese Ministry of Environment (MOE) and American Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have put in place legal protections and measures relating to the use of PFAS. [The American EPA has recently announced](#) it will be adopting a new standard which signifies a significant decrease in what is considered a 'safe' amount of PFAS, almost 3,000 times less than the previous standard. This change to the safety standard may help Okinawans fight against PFAS contamination, but without appropriate cooperation of the US military to allow testing to be done on base, it remains to be seen just how much pressure can be applied. Japan's current laws regarding PFAS contamination in water are based on the US EPA's former safety levels, but at a slightly reduced level. They do not however extend to PFAS-contaminated soil. Unlike the US where safety standards for soil and water have been established with investigation protocols in place, the same cannot be said for Japan and as such concerns are [able to be waved away](#). If the MOE changes what it considers to be a safe level of PFAS in line with the expected revised United States EPA's standards, this would allow for a significant uptick in the urgency of the PFAS issue for the communities surrounding these bases. As it stands, the Japanese MOE and US EPA [have an information sharing memorandum over PFAS](#), so it would not

be unusual to think that such a change could occur.

For the moment, the burden of truth has been thrust upon civil society. Ginowan mayor, Matsukawa Masanori, has been reluctant to push the PFAS issue to the prefectural level to then advocate for expansive testing. However, the Association to Protect Citizens' Lives from PFAS Contamination, and in particular participating organisation, Ginowan Clean Water Association (宜野湾美ら水会), has been active in gathering data on contaminated soil through cooperation with researchers at Kyoto University. The PFAS Association also recently underwent [a blood testing drive](#) across a number of municipalities to discover the concentration levels of PFAS present in Okinawan residents' blood. It is hoped that this testing will provide further evidence, and eventually force local governments to push the prefecture to do more expansive testing.

In Kin town, near Camp Hansen however, the [city council is pushing for official overview](#) of the townspeople's health to the prefectural level showing that political will is present in other areas where PFAS is a concern. In order to overcome the lack of a detailed legislative framework for testing, it is now clear that enough evidence of the problem can lead to political pressure and therefore action in spite of appropriate laws not being in place.

The problem, however, remains as to what will happen if future prefectural surveys do come back with significant results. The United States can maintain plausible deniability until testing can be done on levels of PFAS on its bases. In 2020, testing occurred after a very public discharge of fire-fighting foam, but due to rain and other difficulties, it is difficult to assess whether or not the levels detected were entirely accurate. Under the SOFA, the US military has to report any occurrence of contamination for testing by the Okinawa prefecture and the Japanese government to go ahead. The issue, however, is that as leaks have not been admitted to or have not been as public, the US military have not reported any breaches.

The SOFA has continued to be the basis of considerable angst for Okinawan

residents. Even under significant pressure from the prefectural government, those at Marine Corps Air Station Futenma will not be legally obliged to open their gates given the extra-territoriality guaranteed by the SOFA. Unlike other nations across the world where the US and the host country has renegotiated its SOFA to allow for more rights of the hosting country, the US-Japan agreement has remained unchanged since 1960. Analysis from SOFA scholars [Akiko Yamamoto](#) and [Hiromori Maedomori](#) has suggested a revision of the SOFA would require a revision of the US-Japan Alliance. Policy makers are reluctant to do so in fear of derailing Japan's current arrangements with the US. With tensions over the Taiwan Strait continuing, political will at the national level will be extremely hard to shake. To solve the PFAS issue in Okinawa and eliminate the source of the problem, the only hope would be for an exception or a work-around to the SOFA be made. This, however, would seem unlikely given the history of incidents that could have, but have not, triggered such a response.

International responses to chemical contamination by the US military, such as jet fuel contamination in the fresh water aquifer [at Red Hill in Hawaii](#), may allow for transnational action over these issues. PFAS has also been found in [high concentrations at returned land in South Korea](#). Communities within the United States could be severely affected for the same reasons, with drinking water at [28 bases with PFAS concentrations over the safe level](#). Similar [concerns have been raised over the US navy base in Yokosuka](#) and other military establishments at Atsugi and Yokota close to Japan's capital. There is room for an international coalition on this issue to apply pressure to the US Government to change policy that applies to all US personnel and facilities at home and abroad to clean up existing PFAS contamination and remove all fire-fighting foams that contain PFAS.

For now, anti-PFAS civic groups in Okinawa could look to Yokosuka, Atsugi, and Yokota for future support in helping combat the PFAS problem. Yokosuka is geographically and demographically a more urgent concern for the central government. Combining voices with civil society actors in the greater Tokyo Metropolitan area in addition to local government, could lead to further action being

taken not only around the capital but in Okinawa as well. Efforts have already been made through the United Nations Human Rights Council and the Special Rapporteur on toxics and human rights to make the [PFAS fight in Okinawa more international](#), but at this stage not enough pressure has been applied from the UNHRC or otherwise to help resolve the problem.

PFAS civil society activists in Okinawa have a long way to go yet to fully solve their problem, but by using more objective scientific evidence it is hoped that a solution will present itself.

Environmental justice for Henoko

Further afield in the north of the main island of Okinawa lies the now infamous Henoko base construction in Nago city. Concerns over environmental damage in Henoko linked to the US military have been a focus of the [Okinawan Environmental Justice Project](#) (OEJP). The OEJP has helped bring together many civic groups concerned with conservation of the nearby Yanbaru forest as well as over the Henoko base construction. The OEJP sees the possibility of solving the issues in an international arena. Dr Yoshikawa Hideki, director of the OEJP, [in a recent interview at the 3,000th day of protest at Henoko](#) said 'it's difficult to solve this just in Okinawa. Whilst continuing our protest, [I] want to appeal internationally in a logical and scientific manner the uncertainties surrounding this base construction.'



Protestors being ushered away by police next to Camp Schwab, Henoko in Nago City on September 27, 2022. Credit: Author.

To give some background, the new base at Henoko has been 26 years in the making. First decided in 1996 under the auspices of the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) to relieve the base burden of Marine Forces Corps Air Station Futenma from around the heavily populated areas of Ginowan city, Henoko was selected as the new site of construction. This proposal has since been one of the most infamous in Okinawan society. Construction has been full speed ahead since the second Shinzo Abe Government took control in 2012. However, construction has not been without setbacks. A questionable environmental survey, [that has since been disputed by independent investigators](#), formed the basis of the Henoko site selection. Since then, previous governor Onaga Takeshi and current governor, Tamaki Denny have attempted to block construction by [rescinding or denying prefectural](#)

[permission](#) when new plans have been submitted. While this has not completely halted construction, further work being conducted by civil society actors has furthered the environmental cause.

The OEJP in [a recent public letter to the United States Congress](#), in conjunction with 87 civic organisations, has condemned the ‘Japanese government’s misleading information on the feasibility of the Henoko project and the impact of base construction on the environment.’

The Henoko base issue borrows popular feelings of the more latent peace and anti-war movement. By switching the frame from peace for peace’s sake to a more scientific and objective way of thinking about the base issue has given the overall anti-base movement help resisting the US military and the militarisation of Okinawa. Concerns about the Henoko base range from environmental concerns, such as the Okinawa dugong that feeds on the grasses in the bay where construction is occurring, to the unfair base burden and fears of being drawn into military conflict. The use of environmental protection legal frameworks positions the issue away from more subjective feelings about war or how international relations should be played out into a more objective arena of science.

The environmental survey of the Henoko site selection was undertaken through Japan’s Department of Defence which has a vested interest in seeing the project go ahead. This highlights an area that will require improvement under Japanese legal environmental protections: Independent surveys by impartial bodies need to be the norm going ahead. Compared to the PFAS issue further south, the base construction at Henoko has numerous complementary narratives that range from the environmental concerns mentioned above, to anti-base, pro-peace and even Okinawan [independence](#) concerns. It has become a battleground of ideas and thoughts over the impact of the US military on Okinawan society and nature. Stopping the construction has, however, been difficult. While considerable pressure has delayed construction by almost 20 years, step-by-step it continues to go forth. Once again, realpolitik has overridden the voice of Okinawans in their fight against

the destruction of their environment.

Combining both issues is a need for accountability and a need for a legal framework that can protect the environment from not just domestic actors but also extra-territorial ones. Under the [Japan Environmental Guideline Statement \(JEGS\)](#), there are in-built policies to help tackle the impact of the United States military on the Japanese environment. But reporting any problems or possible damage can only be initiated by the US military and under the current SOFA and these environmental policies there is no system in place to allow the Japanese side to initiate an investigation. A revision is required to improve environmental outcomes in the future. However, political will to change the SOFA is another question entirely.

The challenge to overturn and reduce the military imprint on Okinawa is a challenging one. Not only is it difficult due to legal protections for the US military through SOFA, but it is also the latent national security issues that make convincing the Japanese government and others that something needs to change. Japan and the United States are concerned about the intentions of China and North Korea. National security prerogatives have long drowned out the protests of the Okinawan people. Perhaps now however, with the very clear and present dangers associated with the US military, more effort will go into creating better protections for the people and natural environment of Okinawa. It is no longer an issue of emotion connected to an increasingly distant trauma of war. It is a present and modern danger that needs to be addressed.

Main image: A press conference of a civil society group called the Liaison Association to Protect the Lives of Citizens from PFAS Contamination at the Okinawa Prefectural Assembly building in Naha on October 15, 2022. Credit: Author.