

POLICY BRIEF

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History and Information Warfare: The Importance of Okinawa in Chinese Strategy

Valérie Niquet

Introduction

In 2012, in order to avoid new tensions over the Senkaku Islands, the Japanese government purchased the islands of this archipelago, which were still held by a private owner. The Chinese authorities decided to turn this decision into a casus belli, multiplying denunciations and anti-Japanese demonstrations. It was also after 2012 that we witnessed in the People's Republic of China (PRC) a proliferation of articles and statements questioning the status of Okinawa (Ryukyu Islands).¹ Far beyond historical questions, this offensive, marked by periods of more or less intense activity, has several objectives that are essentially geostrategic in a complex game. They touch on the power rivalry with Japan and the desire to put pressure on the archipelago in connection with the Senkakus, but also on the role of the United States in the region.

The Geostrategic Importance of Okinawa

The Ryukyu archipelago, one of whose islands, Yonaguni, is only 111 kilometers from Taiwan, occupies an important strategic position for Japan and its American ally, of course, but also for the PRC. While Xi Jinping, upon coming to power in 2012, called for the PLA to be combat-ready and then envisioned “reunification” with Taiwan in the context of the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” the strategic environment around Taiwan is of considerable importance in all conflict scenarios. Okinawa closes access, through the island chain that extends from Hokkaido to the Philippines, into the western Pacific. This limits the Chinese navy's freedom of maneuver in the

1 An op-ed was published in the *Global Times* in 2010, following an incident involving the captain of a Chinese boat, Chen Degong, Jin Dexiong, 日本对琉球无合法主权 (Japan has no legal rights over the Senkakus), *环球时报* (*Global Times*), 2010-10-09.

event of a conflict, despite the progress made.² By firing nine missiles into Japan’s exclusive economic zone off Okinawa during maneuvers organized by the PLA in August 2022, Beijing also wanted to demonstrate to Tokyo that the archipelago would not be safe in the event of a conflict in the Strait.³

In the East China Sea, as Beijing increases pressure around the Senkaku Islands, the use of the “Okinawa issue” is openly claimed by some in Beijing to be a useful tool to pressure Japanese authorities. This is the position of Zhong Haipeng and Li Guoqiang, two scholars from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who in a 2013 op-ed published in the official *People’s Daily* called for a re-examination of the Ryukyu issue in the context of the Senkakus. The *Global Times*, for its part, took up the same theme in an editorial that states, “If Japan ultimately chooses to antagonize China, Beijing should reconsider its current stance on the Okinawa issue.”⁴ Beyond that, China questions the strategic importance of Okinawa to Japan and the United States, while the latter is the main obstacle to Chinese ambitions for hegemony in Asia.

Japan’s National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy (NDS), released in December 2022, emphasize the need for Japan to upgrade its own defense capabilities in a world of increasing threats by, for example, acquiring longer-range missile capacity, but also to further strengthen ties with the United States based on an alliance that remains the core of

regional stability and security.⁵

In December 2022, prior to the release of the National Security Strategy, an article published on the official English-language website of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), citing a Kyodo Agency dispatch, mentioned the ambition of Japan’s ruling coalition to build a “Okinawa Defense Unit,” increasing the strength of the 15th Brigade of the Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) from 2,000 to 3,000 men by 2027.⁶ This strengthening of Japan’s defense capabilities is clearly a matter of concern for the PRC that must be addressed and denounced, including with info-war operations targeted at Okinawa.

Even more than these significant changes in Japan’s defense posture, however, it is the US presence and the strength of the alliance that are at stake. Okinawa is home to the largest US military presence in Asia, and about 40 percent of US forces in Japan are based on the main island. They are spread across 32 bases in the archipelago housing 47,300 personnel, including 26,000 service members. In January 2023, it was announced that the US would establish a 1,800- to 2,000-man Marine Littoral Regiment in Okinawa that should be operational by 2025 to help defend the archipelago’s outlying islands.⁷ For China, addressing the status of Okinawa is thus an important element of its indirect interdiction strategy toolbox within an asymmetric context.

2 Zhong Haipeng, Li Guoqiang, 论马关条约与钓鱼岛问题 (Discussing the Treaty of Shimonoseki and the Diaoyu Islands issue, *人民日报 (People’s Daily)*, 2013-05-08.

3 <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2022/08/a901e23a7695-urgent-chinese-fired-ballistic-missiles-fall-into-japans-eez-govt.html>

4 “Ryukyu Issues Offers Leverage to China”, *Global Times*, 10-05-2013

5 https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/strategy/pdf/strategy_en.pdf

6 Liu Gang, “Let the People of Okinawa Decide the Future of Okinawa,” eng.chinamil.com.cn, 2022-12-05. The project is not mentioned in the new NDS. However, the United States will dispatch a Marine Corps regiment to Okinawa by 2025.

7 “US Marines to Set Up Unit in Okinawa for Defense of Remote Japanese Islands,” *Japan Times*, 2023-01-10.

Mobilizing History to Serve Chinese Interests

In order to achieve these goals of weakening the legitimacy of the central authorities in Okinawa and the posture of American forces in the archipelago, the Chinese regime is using means that are, in various forms, those of information warfare.⁸

This three-step strategy was clearly outlined in an article published in the *Global Times* in 2013.⁹ The first step is to open public discussion of the Ryukyu issue and establish related organizations without the official involvement of the authorities. The second step is to bring the Ryukyu issue to the international stage in line with the op-ed: “If Japan tries to sabotage China’s efforts to raise the issue, China can promote forces in Okinawa that seek the restoration of independence.”¹⁰

This first step was implemented in 2012 by questioning the history of Japan’s legitimacy in Okinawa, publishing articles denying the legality of Japan’s jurisdiction over Okinawa, and organizing academic seminars.¹¹ In an article published in the *People’s Daily*, General Luo Yuan, an ideological expert at the Academy of Military Sciences, asked “Do the Ryukyu Islands belong to Japan?”¹² His article, intended to define

a political line, was echoed by two experts from the Academy of Social Sciences, Zhong Haipeng and Li Guoqiang, who equated the integration of Okinawa into the Japanese empire in 1879 with an “invasion”. Like Luo Yuan, they point out that the Ryukyu Kingdom, which was independent from 1429 to 1879, paid tribute to the Ming Empire as early as 1372, long before tribute was also paid to the daimyo of Satsuma from 1609.¹³ In fact, from 1429 to 1879, the Ryukyu Kingdom played a historically significant trading role as an intermediary among Edo Japan, which was officially closed to the outside world, Taiwan and the mainland.¹⁴ They also state that the US unilaterally transferred the Ryukyu Islands to Tokyo in 1971.

In 2019, a new article mentioned that the US had imposed colonial rule in Okinawa before “returning” the archipelago to Japan in 1971.¹⁵ Contrary to the PRC’s claims on the Senkaku Islands, though, the two experts from the Academy of Social Sciences contend that “China does not want to recover the Ryukyu Islands, the Ryukyu Islands were not historically part of China, and they were an independent kingdom paying tribute to China”.¹⁶

According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman this proliferation of articles on the Ryukyu Islands only reflected “China’s

8 Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy*, Military Science Publishing House, Beijing, 2005; Emiliano Lasiello, “China’s Three Warfare Strategy Mitigates Fallout from Cyber Espionage Activities”, *Journal of Strategic Securities*, Vol. 9, Number 2, Summer 2016 <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1489&context=jss>

9 “Ryukyu Issues Offers Leverage to China”, *Global Times*, 10-05-2013

10 Idem.

11 Jane Perlez, “Calls Grow in China to Press Claims for Okinawa,” *New York Times*, 2013-06-13.

12 Luo Yuan, “Do the Ryukyu Islands Belong to Japan?”, *People’s Daily Online*, 2012-07-22.

13 Zhong Haipeng, Li Guoqiang, op.cit.

14 Robert K. Sakai, “The Satsuma Ryukyu Trade and the Tokugawa Seclusion Policy,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 2011-03-23.

15 陈静静 Chen Jinjing, “美军统治琉球群岛的历史考察,” (“Study of the History of United States Rule over the Ryukyu Archipelago”), *Military History Research*, Issue 4, 2019.

16 Zhong Haipeng, Li Guoqiang, op.cit.

renewed interest in the islands in light of Japan's provocative actions over the Senkaku Islands".¹⁷

In fact, China's strategy is to play on the frustration of a part of Okinawa's population against the central government in Tokyo by reminding and supporting independentist opinions that may exist in the archipelago. This is the third step mentioned in the *Global Times* article published in 2013, which also suggests promoting exchanges with Japanese organizations that support Okinawan independence.¹⁸

In 2022, Okinawa University professor emeritus Liu Gang, who is presented on the university's website as a specialist in China-Japan relations and the Okinawa issue, published an article on the official website of the People's Liberation Army titled: "Let the People of Okinawa Decide the Future of Okinawa".¹⁹ A mobilization of activists based in Hong Kong or Taiwan is also apparent. In 2016, an article published by Zhao Dong, who founded a "Preparatory Committee of the Ryukyu Autonomous Region" in Hong Kong in 2010, questioned the legality of the Japanese "occupation" of the Ryukyu archipelago.²⁰

Cyber and Information Warfare

This questioning of the history and legitimacy of the Japanese presence in Okinawa is part of a strategy of information warfare, integrated into the united-front operations that are at the heart of China's strategic thinking. Information warfare and propaganda are not new elements;

they have always been tools employed by Leninist regimes and political parties associated with totalitarian states. Today, as in the past, it is a matter of manipulating public opinion, including by means of fake news, and of waging psychological warfare aimed at demoralizing the opponent and sowing divisions. What is new, however, and what expands the possibilities of influence is the use of the cyber domain, social media and artificial intelligence. The Japanese Public Security Intelligence Agency (公安調査庁) report published in 2017 mentions an increase in influence activities, including cyber-based efforts, from China to Okinawa.²¹

In the context of a possible conflict in the Taiwan Strait, China is also using the weapon of fear to widen divisions between the Okinawan people and the central government, as well as between Japan and its American ally, hyping the risks of being drawn into a war. This is one of the meaning of the Chinese live-fire missile launches into Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone off Okinawa in August 2022: to better underscore the risks Tokyo is taking by getting involved in a conflict in the Taiwan Strait. This increased pressure aimed at attacking the enemy's morale and resolve is intended as a response to Japan's increased commitment to defense since the mid-2010s, which continued with the new National Security Strategy in December 2022.

In his article "Let the People of Okinawa Decide the Future of Okinawa," Liu Gang points out that "by adopting a more active defense strategy, certain places in Japan become focal points for improving and implementing these

17 Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying press briefing, 2013-04-26 in Justin McCurry, "China Lays Claim to Okinawa as Territory Dispute with Japan Escalates," *The Guardian*, 15-05-2013

18 "Ryukyu Issues Offers Leverage to China," *Global Times*, 10-05-2013

19 Liu Gang, op.cit.

20 促日归还琉球中国人你告上国际法庭, (Chinese Go to International Court to Urge Japan to Give Back the Ryukyus) 自由时报 (Liberty Times), <https://www.ltn.com.tw/>, 02-08-2016

21 内外情勢の回顧と展望、(Review and Prospects of Internal and External Situation), 公安調査庁、平成29年1月 and Dylan Buck, "China in the Asia Pacific Cyber Domain: Okinawa and the South China Sea Case Studies," *Marine Corps Gazette*, December 2021

military plans...This is the case in Okinawa and the Ryukyu Islands.” Supporting the peace movement by recalling the past, he writes: “The local people in Okinawa all feel that the atmosphere of preparation for war is getting closer. Public opinion in Okinawa is more anti-war than in mainland Japan”.²²

This mobilization of fear and pacifist sentiment, which is particularly strong in Japan, is not new. In the 1960s and 1970s, there were much more violent mobilizations against the renewal of the defense treaty between Japan and the United States. The aim of weakening the US-Japan alliance and interfering with the freedom of maneuver and decision of American forces stationed in the region remains a constant but the PRC has now replaced the Soviet Union as the main player.

Liu Gang asserts: “Japanese politicians have hyped Taiwan’s emergency as Japan’s emergency and regard Okinawa as a natural barrier to protect the Japanese mainland”.²³ It is a matter of mobilizing the tragic memory of World War II and the civilian casualties in the archipelago to declare, as Governor Denny Tamaki does, that “war must never happen again” and to refuse to see Okinawa become a “target” by being involved against its will in a possible conflict. This theme is taken up by associations such as the Association for the Study of the Question of the Independence of the Ryukyu Nation,²⁴ the Okinawa Environmental Justice Project, whose director, Hideki Yoshikawa, declares “China will hit bases in Okinawa if Japan is involved by plan or accident”,²⁵ and the “No More Okinawa-Sen” movement, created in March 2022.²⁶

Finally, China supports and encourages people-to-people contacts between Okinawa and the mainland, notably through the establishment of a sister province relationship between Fujian Province and Okinawa, recalling the six centuries of friendly contacts between the Ryukyu Kingdom and the mainland. Economic interests are also leveraged, highlighting the importance of Chinese tourists with direct links to the mainland, who accounted for more than 25% of tourists to the island before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

One of the objectives of China’s information operations in Okinawa after 2012 has been to support its territorial claims over the Senkaku Islands by putting pressure on Tokyo. Beyond this objective, China’s information operations in Okinawa are also part of its broader efforts to influence public opinion and shape perceptions in the region in order to improve its status and strategic advantages by weakening US influence and the Japan-US defense alliance and undermining the legitimacy of the US military presence in the region. In order to achieve these objectives, China uses historical disinformation, propaganda, and influence operations targeting local populations, economic and political interests as well as public opinion leaders. China’s information operations in Okinawa are thus a part of its broader efforts to shape perceptions and advance its strategic interests by targeting what is perceived in the PRC as a “weak link” in a region of major strategic importance.

22 Liu Gang, op.cit.

23 Xing Xiaojing, “Reelected Okinawa Governor Wishes to Inject Hope, Transition Prefecture from a Conflict-Ridden US Military Base Hub to a Cultural and Tourist Region,” *Global Times*, 06-11-2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202211/1278815.shtml>

24 Eiichiro Ishiyama, “Ryukyu Pro-Independence Group Quietly Gathering Momentum”, *Japan Times*, 2015-01-26.

25 <http://okinawaejp.blogspot.com/p/about-project.html>

26 nomore-okinawasen.org