

Brief about the US base in Iwakuni

AWC-Japan

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Since around 2005, the US had planned to consolidate its military bases and facilities in Japan as a part of the US Global Posture Review (GPR). Okinawa, Kanagawa and Iwakuni are main targets on this plan.

In addition to the expansion of the base that finished on 2011, people in Iwakuni are facing the following consolidation plan of the Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni now;

- a)** transferring of the 59 carrier-based aircrafts from the Atsugi Base in Kanagawa
- b)** building of massive housing complex at Atagoyama-hill (outside the base) for the US servicemen and their families who would come from the Atsugi base
- c)** Using as operational hub for nation-wide flight training of the newly deployed US MV-22 Osprey aircraft.
- d)** transferring of the US KC-130 squadron from the Futenma base in Okinawa in 2014
- e)** planned deployment of the US F-35 stealth fighters in 2017

The Iwakuni base would become one of the biggest US base in Northeast Asia that has around 120 fighters if the plan would be completed. Ongoing the US 'rebalancing' strategy or 'US pivot to Asia-Pacific' may bring about further suffering to people in Iwakuni.

People in Iwakuni showed their opposition clearly in the referendum on March 2006. Since then, they have continued to struggle against consolidation of the base. Compared to Okinawa, Iwakuni are not so popular internationally. But people's struggle in Iwakuni is very important. It is also a key of development of anti-US base movement in 'mainland' of Japan.

The following is a brief background on the US base in Iwakuni and people's struggle there.

1) History

Iwakuni city has around 140,000 people, and is located in the east of Yamaguchi prefecture, and 40 km from Atomic-bomb attacked Hiroshima city.

It was in 1938 that the former Japanese navy started to construct the military airport. They forcibly drove the residents away and constructed an Air Station of the Navy there. After the defeat of Japan in the Second World War, the U.S. Marines took over it. During the Korean war in early 1950s, the US took advantage of the base as a sortie base for bombing on Korea, as well as a support/logistic base.

The Iwakuni base was formally defined as the US base in 1951 when the U.S-Japan Security Treaty was concluded. In the process, the U.S. Marines were transferred from South Korea, and it was completed as the U.S. Marines Corps Air Station Iwakuni in 1962.

During the Vietnam War, it was in full operation as a sortie base again. The U.S. soldiers stationed there were also dispatched from there in the Gulf War, and big transport helicopters joined in the Iraq war.

The Maritime Self Defense Force (MSDF) of Japan -the 111th Air Patrol Squadron of the 31st Fleet Air Wing- has shared the base since 1957.

2) Function and role of the Iwakuni Base

The main force of the Iwakuni base is the US 12th Marines Air Squadron under the command of the 1st Marines Corp. The Squadron in Iwakuni is assigned to take off immediately and support the Marines' landing operation from the air in case of emergency.

As of now, 57 fighters , including FA-18 Hornet fighters , AV-8B Harrier fighters and EA-6B Prowler electric warfare aircrafts, had been equipped in the Iwakuni base. According to a report in 2009, around 2,800 of the US servicemen and 1,500 of their families are staying inside the base. In addition, around 1,100 base workers do their job and 1,600 MSDF soldiers are on duty there.

The Iwakuni base plays a key role in the US-South Korea joint military exercises that prepare for potential war on Korean peninsula and attack on DPRK. In fact, Iwakuni base is the nearest US base except for one in South Korea.

But, of course, the function and role of the Iwakuni base is not limited for preparation of possible war on Korea. As we described already, the troops in the base participated in the US war in the Middle East.

3) Expansion of the Iwakuni base

The Iwakuni base had the area of 574 hectares before. But The US, under allowance of Japanese government, started to construct a new runway by reclaiming offshore base in 1997, and finished its construction in 2011. This additional construction added 213 hectares to the base. It means 140 % expansion of the base area. The Iwakuni base has the land of 787 hectares now. Along with the new runway, a new big 13 meter-deep port was completed, which is enough to accommodate even aircraft carriers.

At first, most of people in Iwakuni agreed to the construction of the new runway offshore. Because they have suffered from noises, airplane crashes, and accidents by dropped things from the planes for a long time. They hoped to reduce noises and the risk of plane accidents through moving of runway to the offshore. They also demanded to recover the land of old runway. But both governments of the US and Japan distorted the hope of the people and deceived them. They just expanded and consolidated the Iwakuni base to accommodate more US forces.

4) Transferring of carrier-based aircrafts from the Atsugi base

On 2005, the US and Japanese governments agreed on the 'realignment project of the US forces in Japan' as a part of the US Global Posture Review(GPR). On this plan, the both governments intended to transfer the US Navy fighters in the Atsugi base (fighters that are deployed the nuclear aircraft carrier George Washington based at the Yokosuka Naval Port) to the Iwakuni base.

The transfer of as many as 1,600 servicemen and 59 fighters of the Atsugi base will impose unbearable burden on people of Iwakuni. The noise of the daily exercises will be more than double of the ongoing flight training.

Aside from tremendous increase of sufferings caused by transfer of fighters from Atsugi base, the transfer has another implication to make the Iwakuni base more aggressive military base. The US plans to implement integrated operation by both of the Navy and the Marines at Iwakuni in order to improve the response capability in emergency.

5) Building of housing complex for U.S. servicemen in Atagoyama-hill

In addition, the US and Japanese governments have planned to build massive housing complex for 1,600 US servicemen and their families who may come from the Atsugi base.

Atagoyama-hill, the targeted area for the housing complex for the US servicemen, is the place where land development had promoted for supply of civilian housing complex by the prefectural and city authorities. At the same time, they had used the earth of the hill to reclaim offshore base. Just after finishing of reclaiming , however, Yamaguchi prefectural government and Iwakuni city governments decided to abandon the project to build civilian housing complex on the pretext of deficit financing and slow demand for houses. They have instead asked Japan's Defense Ministry to purchase the site.

Finally, governor of Yamaguchi prefecture formally expressed the acceptance of building of the housing complex for US servicemen on November 2011 and sold the site to Japan's Defense Ministry on March 2012

6) Using as operational hub for the US MV-22 Osprey transport aircraft

The US decided to deploy 24 of the MV-22 Osprey transport aircraft on the Futenma base in Okinawa. The Osprey is newest transport aircraft but famous for its many cases of crashes and accidents since under development.

The US landed 12 of the Osprey transport aircraft in Iwakuni base on July 23, 2012 once and deployed them in Futenma base, Okinawa on October 1, 2012. Additional landing of the Osprey in Iwakuni was done on July 30, 2013..

The Osprey transport aircraft will be used for US-led military drills in the Asia-Pacific region and, of course, war practice. The US forces in Japan also intend to carry out low altitude flight trainings of the Osprey all over Japan. They plan to use the Iwakuni base as operational hub for these trainings.

7) Other plans of reinforcement of the Iwakuni base

On December 2012, the US secretariat of Defense Leon Panetta expressed that the US deploy the newest F-35 stealth fighters in the Iwakuni base on 2017. This will be the first deployment of them outside the US. This is also one of maneuvers under the US 'rebalancing' strategy that is mainly focusing on containment and restraint against China and also on thread against DPRK.

In addition, the US and Japanese government 'confirmed that the bilateral consultations on the relocation of a KC-130 squadron from MCAS Futenma to MCAS Iwakuni would be accelerated and concluded as soon as possible' at the US-Japanese security council meeting (2+2) on October 3, 2013. They plan to deploy the squadron in summer 2014.

8) People's opposition against the consolidation of Iwakuni base

For long years, people in Iwakuni have suffered from noises, accidents and crimes committed by US soldiers due to the existence of the US base. But most of them had kept silence and only small number of activists have served anti-base issue.

But the situation changed in 2006. Regarding the transferring of the US Naval fighters from the Atsugi base in Kanagawa, a referendum was held in Iwakuni city on March 12, 2006 and people show their opposition clearly. On the referendum, 87 percent of direct voters or around 58 percent of the electors rejected the transferring of the fighters from the Atsugi base. The slogan 'No More Consolidation of the Iwakuni Base' became the majority voice in Iwakuni.

Then Iwakuni city mayor Mr. Katsusuke Ihara respected the will of citizens. Japanese government, however, put unjust pressure on the mayor by many ways such as pending of governmental subsidy for ongoing construction of new city hall, etc. Unfortunately, Mr. Ihara lost the position by a narrow margin on the election in 2008, and newly-elected mayor of Iwakuni city have accepted the consolidation of the base.

But people's struggle still continues and even expands. They have promoted campaign against consolidation of the base, including rallies, forums and court struggles, etc. Residents in Atagoyama-hill formed 'the association to defend Atagoyama-hill' and continue the regular sit-in protest in the planned construction site. They also held protests against the landing of the Osprey aircrafts in the Iwakuni base.

AWC-Japan has supported such people's protest in Iwakuni actively and continuously. We have held annual anti-base rally in Iwakuni since 2006 in solidarity with struggling people in Iwakuni.

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