

Examining the Special Relations Between the U.S. and Japan via the Post-WWII Development of the Ryukyu Issue

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Abstract: The U.S. control of the Ryukyu Islands following the conclusion of World War II and the subsequent return of the Ryukyu Islands provide a unique perspective for studying the special relationship between the contemporary United States and Japan. In this paper, the historical context of the Ryukyu Islands is explored to trace its strategic importance and the geopolitical perspective it has experienced. It then proceeds to analyze the post-World War II U.S. administration of the Ryukyu Islands, with particular emphasis on the issues of national self-determination and executive power. Exploring the development of the Ryukyu issue and its impact on modern Japan-U.S. relations, the paper aims to shed light on the formation and evolution of the Japan-U.S. special relationship. The results demonstrate that the Ryukyu Islands have not only influenced bilateral relations, but also had an impact on broader regional and international political dynamics. An examination of this issue will contribute to an understanding of U.S. strategic positioning in the Asia-Pacific region and its impact on regional security. This also provides support and reference for the resolution of similar international conflicts and help Japan to develop a more balanced foreign policy in dealing with territorial issues.

Keywords: Ryukyu Issue, Japan-U.S. Relations, National Self-Determination, Geopolitical Movements.

1. Introduction

The Ryukyu Islands are geographically situated in the heart of East Asia, historically serving as a buffer state between Japan and China. Following the conclusion of World War II, the region became a complex and contentious issue in the relationship between the United States and Japan. In the early postwar period, the United States imposed a military occupation of the region and, through a series of policies and actions, shaped its strategic significance and political destiny in the decades that followed. Influenced by the book *The Ryukyus Kingdom: Cornerstone of East Asia*, the paper aims to explore the special role and impact of the Ryukyu issue in postwar U.S.-Japanese relations, without taking a position on the legitimate sovereignty of the region. More specifically, the paper analyzes the U.S. occupation of the Ryukyu Islands and its subsequent administration, explores the origins and development of the Ryukyu Islands' self-determination movement, and assesses the long-term impact of the Ryukyu issue on Japan-U.S. relations. Therefore, the paper endeavors to provide a comprehensive perspective by delving into these areas to facilitate an understanding of how this issue

has become a pivotal factor in Japan-U.S. relations with far-reaching implications for the current as well as future geopolitical situation [1].

2. Post-WWII Administration of the Ryukyu Islands

2.1. U.S. Military Governance of the Ryukyu Islands after WWII

On March 26, 1945, the U.S. military occupied the Kerama Islands, situated to southwest of the main Ryukyu Island. Admiral Chester W. Nimitz of the U.S. Navy decided to terminate all Japanese political and military authority in the Ryukyu Islands and established a military government. After Japan surrendered in 1945, the United States assumed control over the Ryukyu Islands. The U.S. military established a provisional government to administer these strategically important islands. In 1950, this provisional government was reorganized into the United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands (USCAR). The establishment of USCAR aimed to restore and maintain social order in the Ryukyu Islands. Under USCAR's administration, the islands received assistance for reconstruction and economic development. The U.S. government invested in infrastructure projects such as roads, hospitals, and schools, laying the foundation for the modernization of the region. In addition, USCAR has implemented agricultural reforms that increased crop yields and improved living conditions for some residents [2]. To a certain extent, these measures contributed to the economic recovery and social stability of the region. As the Cold War progressed, the strategic importance of the region was further enhanced and then became a base for U.S. military power projection and a bulwark against the spread of red soviet power. During the U.S. administration, extensive military construction took place, with bases such as Kadena Air Base and Camp Foster becoming integral components of the U.S. military strategy in East Asia.

2.2. National Self-Determination and the Ryukyuan

The principle of national self-determination, initially proposed by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson after World War I, asserts the right of all nations and peoples to choose their own development paths. Despite its wide recognition by the international community, particularly by colonized peoples, the national self-determination remains a theoretical and legal concept with no direct enforceability in international law. As a result, the practice of national self-determination falls short of its intended outcomes. The trusteeship system was a crucial mechanism established by the United Nations after World War II, aiming to guide former colonies and territories of defeated countries towards autonomy or independence. The 1945 Potsdam Declaration stipulated that Japan had no sovereignty over the Ryukyu Islands. Under the Treaty of Peace with Japan, Japan agreed to place the Ryukyu Islands under United Nations trusteeship, with executive, legislative, and judicial rights vested in the United States until the trusteeship proposal was approved. However, instead of implementing the United Nations trusteeship, the United States ultimately exercised its executive power directly.

The administration of the U.S. in the Ryukyu Islands has been controversial. The Ryukyuan, with their distinctive cultural and historical identity, have sought greater autonomy and recognition. Despite its espousal democratic values, the U.S. tended to prioritize strategic military interests over local self-governance, a tension that serves to illustrate the complexity of applying the principle of self-determination in the context of international strategic priorities. In the final stages of World War II, U.S. anthropological surveys of the Ryukyu Islands revealed a unique cultural identity, leading to the plan to separate the islands from Japan. In order to secure its strategic interests in the Western Pacific, the U.S. aimed to prevent the resurgence of Japanese militarism by transforming the Ryukyu Islands into a base of operations, and by adopting policies such as “de-Japanization,” administrative separation, financial independence, and cultural education, which aimed to reshape the pre-war

Japanese-colonized “Okinawans” into “Ryukyans” under U.S. occupation, thereby establishing a permanent military presence in the Asia-Pacific region [3].

In short, the prolonged occupation and administration of the Ryukyu Islands by the U.S. runs counter to the principles and rules of the trusteeship system. Under this system, the administering authority should promote the self-determination and development of the trust territories, instead of exploiting them for military bases or strategic interests. However, this military presence has also caused many social problems, such as the 1969 toxic gas leak, which have sparked ongoing protests from local residents [4]. The prolonged control of the region by the United States not only disregarded the right to self-determination of the local inhabitants, but also violated the basic spirit of the trusteeship system [5].

2.3. Complexity of Administrative Authority

The concept of administrative right emerged in the negotiations between the U.S. and Japan regarding the governance of the Ryukyu Islands. It has been argued that a state's sovereignty over its territory includes legislative, executive and judicial powers, collectively referred to as administrative right. In addition to these powers, very little sovereignty remains. The concept of administrative right is thus largely a product of compromise and pragmatism, which is considered distinct from sovereignty in this paper. The U.S. has administrative right over the Ryukyu Islands, which implies control rather than full sovereignty, allowing the U.S. to administer the region while Japan retains nominal residual sovereignty. The dual arrangement engenders ambiguity and tension due to the limited influence of the people of the Ryukyus and the Government of Japan over the administration of the region.

The U.S. administration of the Ryukyu Islands is based on its administrative rights, granting the U.S. full control over the administrative, military and economic affairs of the region. However, the Treaty of Peace with Japan stipulated that Japan retained nominal “residual sovereignty” over the Ryukyu Islands, which led to a complex legal and political conflict between the U.S. and Japan over the Ryukyus. During the exercise of its executive power, the U.S. implemented a series of administrative and legal measures in the Ryukyu Islands, such as land expropriation, infrastructure development, and the expansion of military installations, which were carried out without adequate consultation with the Japanese government, resulting in Japanese dissatisfaction with the unilateral decisions made by the U.S. Japan insisted on its “residual sovereignty” over the region, arguing that the prolonged control by the United States violated Japan's national sovereignty and right to self-determination, and advocated the restoration of full sovereignty as soon as possible. Moreover, the legal basis for the concept of residual sovereignty was not clearly defined, which provided an opportunity for both parties to pursue their respective interests.

3. Impact of the Ryukyu Issue on U.S.-Japan Relations

3.1. U.S. Control over Post-War Japan

Following the conclusion of World War II, U.S. assumed control over Japan that extended beyond the scope of a mere trusteeship. During the Allied occupation period (1945-1952), the U.S., through the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), implemented extensive political, economic, and social reforms in Japan. Led by General Douglas MacArthur, the occupation forces reorganized the Japanese government, which included dismantling the Japanese military, trying war criminals, instituting land reforms, and drafting a new constitution that was most notable for its pacifist Article IX, which relinquished Japan's right to wage war [6]. Through these reforms, the U.S. not only reshaped Japan's political and social structures, but also secured its long-term strategic interests in East Asia. Despite Japan's restoration of sovereignty in 1952, the signing of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between the United States and Japan (simplified as the Security Treaty)

and the retention of U.S. military bases in Japan marked the continuation of U.S. influence, transitioning from direct control to a lasting strategic alliance [7]. Moreover, the prolonged U.S. control over the Ryukyu Islands and Japan underscored its dominant position in the post-war international order, influenced the Ryukyuan people's right to self-determination, and shaped the geopolitical landscape of the entire East Asian region. The U.S. maintained a continuous military presence and strategic control in order to ensure its influence over Japan and its territories, laying the groundwork for subsequent security treaties and solidified the special U.S.-Japan relations during the Cold War.

3.2. The Ryukyu Islands and the *Security Treaty*

Understanding the postwar U.S. control over Ryukyu and Japan helps elucidate the background and significance of the Security Treaty. Initially, the U.S. adopted a policy of ethnic separation towards the Ryukyu Islands, but as the regional situation evolved, it gradually integrated the Ryukyu Islands into its broader control framework as part of Japan, and opposition to the U.S. policy arose in Japan during this period. The Security Treaty was not only a defense agreement between the two countries, but also a continuation of U.S. influence in East Asia, which allowed the U.S. to maintain military bases in Japan and ensure its strategic deployment in the region [8]. As one of the permanent members of the United Nations and a key player in the bipolar world order, the U.S. prioritized its strategic interests over the principles of trusteeship and national self-determination. Therefore, this conflict highlighted the complexity of the Ryukyu issue and revealed the asymmetrical power structure within U.S.-Japan relations. And the security alliance between the two was formalized in Security Treaty, signed in 1951 and revised in 1960, which permitted the U.S. to maintain military bases in Japan, including those in the Ryukyu Islands. The strategic importance of the Ryukyu Islands was a crucial factor in the treaty negotiations, with both countries recognizing the necessity of a strong military presence to counter the Soviet threat. The treaty marked a major shift in the relationship between the U.S. and Japan, as Japan was transformed from a wartime adversary to a key ally in the Asia-Pacific region.

3.3. Reversion of the Ryukyu Islands

The reversion of the Ryukyu Islands to Japan in 1972 was a complex diplomatic process. Following the restoration of sovereignty in 1952, Japan actively pursued the reversion of the Ryukyu Islands in the international arena and gradually gained more support. Throughout the 1960s, as U.S.-Japan relations deepened and economic cooperation intensified, conditions for consensus on the reversion issue became more favorable. Under constant international pressure and domestic protests, the U.S. eventually agreed to return administrative rights over the Ryukyu Islands to Japan [9]. In 1969, Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato and U.S. President Richard Nixon entered into an agreement whereby administrative control of the Ryukyu Islands was to be transferred to Japan in 1972, while the U.S. retained military bases in Okinawa to safeguard its security interests [10]. The reversion process involved a balance between strategic interests and political and social considerations, where the interplay between international reputation, national interests and pragmatic decision-making is evident. After the reversion, the Ryukyu Islands still suffered from some social problems. However, as Japan increasingly benefited from the special U.S.-Japan relations, opposition was largely confined to the economically underdeveloped Ryukyu region, rendering its protests less effective.

4. Development of the Special Relations between Japan and the U.S.

4.1. U.S.-Japan Military Alliance

The U.S.-Japan alliance was formed during the Cold War as a means of countering Soviet influence in Asia. In this context, the strategic position of the Ryukyu Islands was of paramount importance, and the U.S. maintained a substantial number of military installations there as forward bases for regional operations, a military presence that was of central importance to the United States in terms of its power projection and regional stabilization strategies. The Cold War context reinforced the special relationship between the U.S. and Japan, which worked closely to address common security threats. A significant aspect of the U.S.-Japan alliance was the revision of the New Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation, which delineated the framework for bilateral cooperation in addressing regional security challenges. The United States has provided substantial support to the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) and has enabled Japan to play an active role in international peacekeeping operations, which collectively demonstrate the high level of trust and cooperation between the two countries on matters of security.

The alliance has had significant impacts on both sides. For the U.S., cooperation with Japan has been crucial for maintaining its influence in the Asia-Pacific region, enabling global interventions and safeguarding its global position and interests. For Japan, the presence of U.S. forces alleviated the pressure on its own military development, effectively addressing its defense issues, and Japan has enjoyed a relatively stable international environment to support its own economic development. However, U.S. dominance has also brought some unfavorable factors, such as the infringement on Japan's sovereignty and the social issues arising from the operation of military bases. These include incidents that have provoked public dissatisfaction and resistance, with the Ryukyu issue having lasting political and social repercussions. Local opposition to the U.S. military presence remains a major issue, involving environmental impacts, crime, and burdens on local communities. It is thus imperative that the U.S., Japan, and the Ryukyus engage in sustained dialogue and collaboration to address these challenges while ensuring the continued viability of the alliance. The future trajectory of U.S.-Japan relations depends on the domestic political developments in both countries. Japan has repeatedly attempted to revise The Constitution of Japan to aggressively expand the capabilities of its Self-Defense Forces, seeking greater autonomy and operational flexibility. Meanwhile, adjustments in the U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy inevitably involve expansion and contraction, with far-reaching implications for bilateral relations. To maintain peace, stability, and prosperity in East Asia, regional countries should enhance communication, cease hostilities, and actively adjust their relations with the United States to face complex challenges [11].

4.2. U.S.-Japan Economic Ties

Under the control of the U.S., the military bases have become the mainstay of the Ryukyu economy, and these bases not only directly provided a large number of employment opportunities, but also indirectly stimulated the development of the neighboring service industry, including the restaurant, entertainment and retail sectors. The “base economy” model has resulted in a highly dependent economic structure for the Ryukyu Islands, contingent upon the continued existence and operation of U.S. military bases. Moreover, with large tracts of land being requisitioned for military facilities [12], agriculture and traditional industries were severely suppressed, further exacerbating the local economy's reliance on U.S. bases. This economic model is similar to an export-oriented economy, where prosperity relies on external market demand, leading to instability and vulnerability. The Ryukyu economy would suffer a severe setback when the size of the military presence is reduced or

when U.S. military procurement decreases. The presence of military bases limits the economic policies of local governments, making it difficult to promote diversified industrial policies.

Following the return of the Ryukyus to Japan in 1972, the Japanese government increased its economic investment and support for the Ryukyus, particularly in infrastructure and tourism, which led to the diversification of the Ryukyu economy. The Ryukyus gradually shifted from reliance on the U.S. military base economy to the development of various forms of economy, such as tourism, fisheries and manufacturing [13]. Nevertheless, the return of the Ryukyus led to the emergence of economic conflicts of interest due to the continued presence of U.S. military bases. Local residents have expressed discontent over the noise and pollution generated by U.S. military bases, which has hindered the growth of tourism in the region. Nevertheless, the U.S. bases also provide local employment opportunities and economic support. Therefore, the Japanese government needs to find a balance between maintaining the U.S.-Japan alliance relationship and satisfying the economic interests of Ryukyu residents, and harmonize the conflict of interests through various economic policies and compensatory measures [13].

5. Conclusion

This paper examines the far-reaching impact of the Ryukyu issue on media relations by examining the development of the Ryukyu issue in the post-war period. The paper argues that the development of the Ryukyu issue in the post-World War II period was one of the key factors that shaped the special relationship between the United States and Japan, and served as a critical node in the political, military, and economic interactions between the two countries. U.S. administration of the Ryukyu Islands, the complexities of national self-determination, and the strategic importance of the region have shaped the dynamics of the bilateral relationship. The return of the Ryukyu Islands to Japan and continued security cooperation between the two countries illustrate the lasting impact of the Ryukyu question on the bilateral relationship. The legacy of the Ryukyu question remains an important element in the partnership between the two countries in addressing contemporary security challenges. The evolution of the Ryukyu issue in the postwar period is not only an important aspect of the unique U.S.-Japan relationship, but also an important lens through which to understand and analyze the development of U.S.-Japan relations. Future research should further explore the impact of the Ryukyu issue on the current U.S.-Japan relationship and focus on the dynamic development of this issue in the new international context.

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