The Asia Pacific Journal | Japan Focus Volume 21 | Issue 11 | Number 6 | Article ID 5809 | Nov. 20, 2023

A Conversation with Claudia Junghyun Kim, author of Base Towns: Local Contestation of the U.S. Military in Korea and Japan

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Abstract: *Rabson discusses the new book,* Base Towns: Local Contestation of the U.S. Military in Korea and Japan *with the author, Claudia Junghyun Kim, who traces contentious politics surrounding twenty U.S. military bases across Japan and Korea—two of the largest U.S. base hosts in the world. Kim's book focuses on the municipalities hosting these bases and differing levels of community acceptance and resistance over time. The following excerpt from the book introduces key actors who shape base-community relations and their many twists and turns.*

Keywords*: U.S. military bases; base towns; anti-base protests; anti-base movements, anti-base activists; civil-military relations; base-community relations; US-Japan alliance; US-Korea alliance*

Introduction

Authors who write about U.S. military bases in Asia often depict either the negative impacts they impose on local communities that stir protests, or the "security" authors claim they provide. Claudia Junghyun Kim's far more nuanced analysis explains how activists' motivations and strategies range widely from appeals to national pride, opposition to war, or objections to vehicle accidents and aircraft noise; and she tells us why some local residents welcome the economic benefits bases bring either in business activity or government subsidies. She also notes that protest movements are not always static, evolving at times in their purposes and participants. Her on-the-scene observations (and photos) in the base towns of Korea and Japan, including interviews of residents, activists and local politicians, make for particularly compelling reading.

Q: Claudia, you say you went to graduate school to study alliance politics but wound up with a book about the local and human consequences of alliance politics. How? What happened along the way that brought you here? Do you have an anecdote or a lightbulb moment or something about your process that you can share?

A: While doing coursework in graduate school, I realized that I did not want to run regressions on the alliance dataset that contains every single alliance treaty that has ever existed in the world, which seemed to be one way to study alliance politics. I also did not feel well-equipped to write about international security in a grand, big-picture way, which seemed to be another way to study alliance politics. Almost all policy-oriented work on the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK alliances seemed to come down to one metanarrative about how the alliances should always be strengthened at all times. All these approaches are useful, but I felt like something was missing. In what ways, I wondered, does alliance politics influence normal people like me? As an answer to that question, I came to write about Japanese and Korean base towns and the people living in them.

Q: As you traveled around these base towns, what did you experience? What surprised you?

A: It was interesting to observe both subtle and overt ways in which bases presented themselves in the localities I visited: a local chicken and beer place named "Camp Casey" in Dongducheon, SPAM onigiri at Okinawan convenience stores, a faint smell of oil at Noksapyeong Station in central Seoul, and

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military aircraft flying over my AirBnB place in Ginowan.

There were many moments that reminded me that not everyone cared. I went to a party in Okinawa, and of the two-dozen people in their 20s and 30s there, nobody immediately recognized the name Ōta Masahide (governor of Okinawa prefecture, 1990-1998). The party host was a young man who said he never reads *Ryukyu Shimpo* or *Okinawa Times*. His choice was *Nikkei*, which he said was more "neutral." At the same time, there were moments that made me think that not every activist cared about gaining more support from these apathetic people, either. I discuss resonance a lot in my book, and at least some of the activist rhetoric I encountered sounded surprisingly anachronistic and/or utopian. Many of the protest events I observed were highly ritualized ones that did not seem very inviting to those who were not already part of the protest group.

At least on one occasion, I experienced cynicism towards academics. The Korean activist who refused to meet me did so because, in her words, "What's the point?" She did not want to speak to academics anymore. And who can blame her? While doing fieldwork, I began to question academic fieldwork itself. Am I just doing something that would, after all is said and done, contribute only to my own academic career? Is what I'm doing at least of some use to some of these people? What do we owe, if anything, to the people we interview and observe? Are academics "parasites"?

Q: What is new about your findings that complicates or challenges our current understanding of US military bases or the localities in which they exist?

A: I wanted to challenge two different narratives about base politics and anti-base movements. The first narrative is the elite narrative that dismisses local discontent as something insignificant, powerless, and easily dismissible. The second narrative does the opposite by selectively presenting cases of powerful anti-base movements, which creates an image of universally beleaguered U.S. bases. In challenging the first narrative, I wanted to show that local movements can be powerful and efficacious at times. In challenging the second narrative, I wanted to show that a subnational approach reveals much more varied local responses to the U.S. presence.

Q: What is the most important takeaway that you would like a reader of your book to leave with?

A: Military bases are often discussed in the abstract terms of global power projection. It would be great if a reader of this book can conjure up more concrete images of base towns and their residents next time there is a new high-level decision to move around troops and machinery.

Editor's note: *Questions for the above interview were contributed by managing editor Mary M. McCarthy.*

Excerpt: U.S. Military Base Towns in Korea and Japan

Contentious politics surrounding American military bases abroad involves international, national, and subnational actors, including basing and host nations, central and local governments, host community residents, and activists. The following actors—with base opponents and local elites as central actors, and the rest in the background—shape the subnational base politics in Korea and Japan today.

(1) Base Opponents: I use this term to describe people who oppose U.S. military bases, either individually or as part of a group, and either as a full-time occupation or on a voluntary basis. The term incorporates both activists (i.e., those fully committed to acting upon the cause) and latent adherents (i.e., those who may occasionally join in opposition). Large-scale mobilization becomes possible when activists and latent adherents come together. The relative rarity of broad-based mobilization in turn attests to the difficulty of turning latent adherents into active opponents.

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Activists and police officers in Takae (Okinawa Prefecture, Japan)

(1-1) Activists: Activists hold deep convictions about anti-base causes and publicly express their views in various forms, including protests, marches, sit-ins, lawsuits, and petitions. Some build their entire professional careers around opposing bases; for example, Korea's Base Peace Network (Giji pyeonghwa neteuwokeu), a loose network of five civic groups in Seoul, Gunsan, Pyeongtaek, and Uijeongbu, consists of full-time career activists. Japanese anti-base activism involves more grassroots organizations and non-career activists, but centralized professional organizations with explicit partisan allegiances do exist: the Japan Peace Committee, affiliated with the Japan Communist Party (JCP), and the Peace Movement Center, affiliated with the Social Democratic Party (SDP), both of which boast local branches throughout the country. Still, the very physical presence of bases in local communities means that these activists are mostly locally based themselves. Some are born-and-raised natives or have lived in base towns for decades, while others are transplants. What constitutes "local," though, can be ambiguous at times. A Seoul-based activist on a mission to stop the expansion of a firing range in the Korean city of Paju, for example, once spent two years farming alongside locals in a rural village (Interview with Park Seok-jin, June 22, 2016). In Pyeongtaek, where a militant movement emerged in the mid-2000s against base expansion, dozens of activists officially moved their legal residence to the city to resist eviction. Although critics of anti-base activists like to cast these voluntary transplants as outside agitators, their very presence further attests to the primacy of the local in anti-base activism.

Variously motivated by nationalism, pacifist ideology, and practical concerns (Calder 2007, 84), activists assign different meanings to the imposing U.S. presence. Some explained to me that military bases are a militarist tool intended ultimately to "kill people," and others told me that they are proof that "Japan is a slave of the United States." These ideational differences, to be sure, do not necessarily preclude a coalitional movement; a national umbrella coalition against the expansion of Camp Humphreys in Pyeongtaek, for example, brought together activists of all stripes—indignant nationalists, visionary pacifists, and clear-eyed pragmatists. In propagating their anti-base beliefs, though, activists are mindful of the local resonance of such beliefs. In the words of one Korean activist, anti-base movements driven exclusively by professional activists, and not by "those who suffer the most, cannot sustain themselves; activists, in this sense, see their role as something limited to 'helping' latent adherents 'take ownership' of the movement" (Interview with Kim Pan-tei, June 15, 2016). In order to play this facilitating (if slightly paternalistic) role, activists serve as strategic frame entrepreneurs and filter out the kind of language that may alienate fellow local residents. Activists' framing choices can therefore deviate from their true motivation: those spurred into action by radical anti-militarist beliefs, for example, may still find it easier to talk about tangible everyday grievances to mobilize the local communities.

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A protest slogan seen in Takae (Okinawa Prefecture, Japan)

A protest slogan seen in Yokosuka (Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan)

(1-2) Latent Adherents: U.S. military bases elicit a complex set of images and emotions in the minds of base town residents. Sometimes bases violently assert themselves into host communities, such as when a U.S. F-8 Crusader jet, en route to NAF Atsugi from Kadena Air Base, crashed and killed four civilians in 1964. Other times they insinuate themselves into the daily lives of local residents, as the Spam luncheon meat spotted in the local cuisine in Okinawa and Uijeongbu attest. Even the latest global pandemic linked U.S. forces to their host populations: American personnel, who continued to travel for their assignments in Pyeongtaek and Okinawa since pandemic-induced border shutdowns meant little to them, became part of the local Covid-19 statistics.

Base town residents may hold grievances about the U.S. presence, but they seldom get involved. Despite the belief that we live in a "movement society" where protests have become a routine part of conventional politics (Meyer and Tarrow 1997), many non-activists, suspicious of activists and their agenda, remain reluctant to get involved (Luke et al. 2018). In localities where many small businesses cater to the U.S. military, such as Korea's Dongducheon or northern Pyeongtaek, anti-base proselytizing gets particularly tricky. "You may be able to demand a wholesale troop withdrawal in places without bases," says Lee Cheol-hyeong, a longtime Pyeongtaek activist. "But you can't do that in base towns. Locals get immediately skeptical" (Interview, June 18, 2016). In rural areas with elderly, conservative residents—downtown Gunsan might be a bustling shopping district, for example, but Okseo, a county abutting Kunsan Air Base, is a sleepy town heavily populated by the elderly—activists also tread carefully to fend off suspicions.

On rare occasions when social movement skeptics do mobilize, they portray their participation as a "reluctant" and "accidental" one (Gullion 2015; Arrington 2016; Luke et al. 2018). It is hardly surprising, then, that when latent adherents join anti-base movements, their opposition is often about a wide range of negative externalities military bases entail, rather than about American global hegemony: noise pollution, environmental contamination, accidents involving U.S. personnel, and insufficient government compensation. The practical nature of these everyday grievances often forces activists to subordinate their aspirations for radical changes—"a world without the military," for example (Interview with Kang Sang-won, June 11, 2016)—to the more immediate, parochial goals that local residents pursue. In this sense, latent adherents are the ones who shape activist strategies, not the other way around—a finding that directly contradicts the frequent vilification of activists as agitators manipulating locals. But even then, some latent adherents still refuse to work

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with professional activists and instead form their own groups, often for fear that leftist politics will adulterate the supposed "purity" of local grassroots initiatives.

A view from a residential building in Daegu (Korea)

(2) Local Political Elites: Locals up in arms about U.S. military bases in their backyard often turn to their local—not national—representatives as a first resort, hoping for an intervention. Local governments are a channel of communication—what the Japanese would call *madoguchi* (literally, "window")—for residents who wish to file complaints against the U.S. military. In the Okinawan city of Nago, for example, residents can still register base-related grievances with the city office after hours by dialing a direct- dial emergency number; city officials, whose mobile phones are connected to the emergency number, respond swiftly to these requests, sometimes in the middle of the night (Interview with Nago officials, September 15, 2016).

Local elite support, however, is not easy to come by. Often, activists with maximalist goals and local elites prone to compromises fail to meet in the middle. Activists in Nago and the Korean city of Uijeongbu attempted to "recall" their pro-base mayors in 1998 and 2002, respectively, for the mayors' apparent willingness to countenance U.S. military consolidation. The name of one Nago-based grassroots group at the time, the Association of Citizens Angry at Mayor Kishimoto (Kishimoto shichō ni okkotteiru shimin no kai), bespeaks the frustration with the city government that chose to dismiss the 1997 anti-base referendum. Mutual hostility is not uncommon. Uijeongbu mayor Kim Mun-won, facing pressure to keep his election promise to hold an anti-base referendum, called the police on activists multiple times (Interview, anonymous, July 12, 2016).

While the first instinct of local elites is to stay away from base politics, they sometimes become anti-base claimants themselves—either after much courting from activists or on their own initiatives. As municipal governments oversee the administrative units where bases are located, mayors and governors can influence bureaucratic and technical aspects of bases when it comes to their construction, relocation, and operation. When Okinawa's late governor Ōta Masahide exercised his administrative authority and refused to grant land leases for U.S. bases in 1995, for example, Okinawan base issues quickly became politicized. Local elites' obstructions of the allies' basing policy often results in a conflict between the local and central governments, which creates elite cleavages that activists can exploit (even if ultimately to their detriment, as we shall see later). Base opponents in Japanese localities ranging from Iwakuni to Nago, for example, found their cause suddenly gain national and even international political salience when their mayors turned against base relocation. In rare instances, as in the Korean city of Dongducheon, local elites may actually be the ones leading mobilization in a top-down manner, as opposed to following activists. In typical Korean local government behavior, city-led anti-base initiatives mobilize politically conservative and pro-government—meaning noncontroversial—civic groups and exclude their traditional leftist—meaning controversial—counterparts. Elite preferences for politically moderate civic groups give activists another incentive to engage in impression management-and another reason that the movement's supposedly radical ideas are tamed, at least in their public presentation.

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An entertainment district in Dongducheon (Gyeonggi Province, Korea)

military accident that killed two teenagers showed an absolute majority holding favorable views of the United States (Moon 2012, 20). In Japan, various polls indicate a general acceptance of the U.S. presence, although clear divisions exist between mainlanders and Okinawans (NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute 2017). Even when we set aside the issue of the U.S. military, the Japanese public's apparent aversion to social movements, which some allege borders on "phobia" (Higuchi 2021), bodes ill for activists. The public, in this sense, serves as an important background actor that further informs activist strategies.

(3) The Public: The presence of oppositional mobilization does not equal the presence of general discontent. After all, the U.S. Osprey tiltrotor aircraft, a subject of universal antipathy among anti-base activists, boasts a "fan club" in none other than Okinawa—the place most frequently associated with anti-base sentiments. In Seoul's Gwanghwamun, the political center of the country that is also home to the U.S. embassy, no one bats an eye at the sight of a gathering of anti-American activists just a stone's throw away from another gathering of pro-American Korean War vets with a banner reading, in English, "Thanks Runs Forever?" At Camp Humphreys, once a magnet for protesters, many of whom are sympathetic to North Korea, a large banner makes a plea: "Bomb North Korea!"

Unfortunately for base opponents, they are destined to belong to a movement where the "goal orientations of reference publics depart significantly, in direction or intensity, from the goals of protest groups" (Lipsky 1968, 1146). Nationwide public opinion polls in both countries have shown a majority supporting the continued U.S. military presence. An annual poll in Korea between 2012 and 2019 showed consistent support—ranging from 67 to 82 percent—for a continued U.S. presence (Asan Institute for Policy Studies 2019). Even in 2003, a survey that came on the heels of mass protests over a U.S.

A protest tent in Nago's Henoko district (Okinawa Prefecture, Japan)

(4) Host State Governments: Host state governments—Korea and Japan in this study—facilitate the continued U.S. presence, widely considered an effective deterrent against North Korea and, increasingly, China. The two longtime U.S. allies are something of poster children for American interventionalist expansionism: stories of the former's rags-to-riches success and the latter's militarist-to-pacifist transformation serve to highlight salubrious aspects of American foreign policy, of which the forward military presence is an integral part.

The anti-base cause will rarely find a vocal champion among national political elites. The United States and its military loom disproportionately large in the worldview of host state political elites, almost as if

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Washington constitutes the entirety of foreign relations. From Syngman Rhee's fixation with extracting U.S. security commitments in the form of a military alliance to the continued pleas to delay the transfer of wartime operational control that remains in the hands of Washington, Korean elites remain faithful to the American presence that they associate with security and prosperity. From the Yoshida doctrine of postwar security dependence to the increasing military ambition synchronized with the U.S. regional strategy, Japanese elites dutifully follow the rules set by their erstwhile enemy. It is unthinkable today, for example, that the term *dōmei* (alliance) was once such a loaded term in the context of Japan's imposed anti-militarism that Japanese leaders actively avoided using it to describe U.S.-Japan relations until the 1990s (McCormack and Norimatsu 2012, 63).

As an agent of the U.S. military, host states are tasked with ensuring the continued cooperation of subnational localities. Although they increasingly feel compelled to seek local consent, such consent is often little more than a formality. Many base-related decisions follow the "decide-announce-defend" model (O'Hare, Bacow, and Sanderson 1983), in which the allies announce their decisions and then seek local understanding after the fact. What base scholars call compensation politics (Cooley and Marten 2006; Calder 2007) comes into the picture here, as the central government dangles monetary rewards—and the threat to withdraw them—in front of the financially vulnerable localities. Some get carrots, and others get sticks. Residents of Okseo, a rural county bordering Kunsan Air Base in the Korean city of Gunsan, frequent a public bathhouse and a small library housed together in a community building named *soeum pihae bokjihoegwan*—literally, "a welfare facility built as consideration for noise pollution." Iwakuni residents saw a similar community hall built in the 1970s when U.S. bases in Japan served as a launchpad for the Vietnam War. More recently, though, they found themselves on the receiving end of the stick when the state subsidies earmarked for a half-built city office building evaporated as a punishment for the mayor's opposition to the fortification of MCAS Iwakuni. Conversely, local governments may actively protest bases in the hope of extracting financial concessions from the central government. Pocheon, home to the Rodriguez firing range, is demanding a new subway line connecting the city to Seoul, citing the heavy American presence as a cause of the stagnant local economy. The host states, facing these varying local interests, continue to cajole and threaten as they seek to protect the most conspicuous symbol of U.S. security commitments.

(5) Basing State (U.S.): U.S. basing rights in Korea and Japan are codified in the two separate mutual defense treaties originating from the Korean War and World War II, respectively. Despite a few moments of disturbance—such as Jimmy Carter's attempt in 1977 to withdraw all troops from Korea, and the mass movement that resisted the renewal of the U.S.-Japan security treaty in 1960—the alliances and the U.S. military presence they institutionally guarantee remain incredibly stable. State visits by American presidents are newsworthy anywhere, but such visits to Korea and Japan often involve their grand appearances at major American bases—a home away from home. On his 2019 visit to Korea's Osan Air Base, Donald Trump walked out of Marine One to greet the cheering crowd of troops, with Lee Greenwood's song "God Bless the USA" playing in the background: "I'm proud to be an American where at least I know I'm free."

Rodriguez Live Fire Complex in Pocheon (Gyeonggi Province, Korea)

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American base officials rarely, if ever, interact directly with base opponents (Yeo 2011, 25). As those familiar with base-community relations say of protesters at Yongsan Garrison: “What happens at Gate 3 is outside (the USFK’s) jurisdiction” (Interview, anonymous, June 23, 2016). At the same time, the U.S. military exclusively oversees what goes on behind fences, although host communities often bear the brunt of such extraterritoriality. In one such example, information obtained through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) shows that there were eighty-four cases of oil leaks at Yongsan Garrison between 1990 and 2015, most of which were never reported to Korea (Green Korea United 2017). Separate FOLA requests demonstrate that members of the U.S. Marine Corps in Okinawa are advised not to inform the Japanese authorities of “nonemergency and/or politically sensitive incidents,” such as environmental accidents (Mitchell 2016). Host communities, as a result, are left to quarrel over remediation and redevelopment of base sites, even after bases close and American troops leave (C. J. Kim 2018). Most recently, as national borders were shut down amid the global pandemic, American troops proved that such borders, for them at least, remain porous. As troops continued to relocate to Korea and Japan, they shaped local health dynamics. On August 5, 2020, for example, 121 of 161 infection cases counted in Pyeongtaek were traced back to the USFK (Pyeongtaek City 2020). The conduct of the U.S. military, formulated internationally and implemented locally, has ripple effects on host communities in myriad ways.

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