

Developing the Islands or Demonstrating Effective Control? The Japanese Government and the Construction of a Heliport in the Senkaku Islands in the Late 1970s

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Abstract

In late May 1979, a year after hundreds of Chinese fishing vessels, many of them armed, had illegally entered the territorial waters of the Senkaku Islands, the Japanese government constructed a temporary heliport on Uotsuri Island, the largest of the five islands (and three islets) making up the group. The heliport, constructed primarily to support a survey on the possibility of the utilization and development of the islands led by the Okinawa Development Agency. The construction of the heliport had been a strong desire of Okinawa Prefecture, under which the Senkakus have been administered for most of the past 130 years. It also generally enjoyed wide support from officials in the government and members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, including Prime Minister Ohira Masayoshi himself. In the end, the Ohira administration decided that more study was necessary and did not build a permanent heliport nor did later administrations pursue it. This article examines the construction of the heliport, the reasons for it, and the debate surrounding its construction. It argues that the heliport should have been maintained for several practical reasons discussed within. The article is divided into eight sections, including an Introduction and a Conclusion. It utilizes declassified official documents, government publications, testimonies from the Japanese parliament, interviews, memoirs, biographies, and other secondary sources, almost exclusively in Japanese.

Introduction

In late May 1979, a year after hundreds of Chinese fishing vessels, many of them armed, had illegally entered the territorial waters of the Senkaku Islands, the Japanese government constructed a temporary heliport on Uotsuri Island, the largest of the five islands (and three islets) making up the group. The heliport, built by the Ministry of Transportation and the Maritime Safety Agency (known since 2000 as the Japan Coast Guard), under which it falls, was constructed primarily to support a survey on the possibility of the utilization and development of the islands led by the Okinawa Development Agency (*Okinawa Kaihatsuchō*) to be conducted later that month.¹

The construction of the heliport had been a strong desire of Okinawa Prefecture, under which the Senkakus have been administered for most of the past 130 years. It also generally enjoyed wide support from officials in the government and members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, including Prime Minister Ohira Masayoshi himself. However, there was strong criticism from the People's Republic of China, which, along with the Republic of China (Taiwan), had suddenly begun making claims to the Senkaku Islands earlier that decade. Voices of concern and caution were also heard from the media and politicians from both the opposition as well as within the ruling party. One of the latter ones was Foreign Minister Sonoda Sunao, who was concerned

¹ The author uses the modern name, "Japan Coast Guard" or "Coast Guard," throughout this article.

about damaging relations with China so soon after the signing of the Peace and Friendship Treaty in August 1978 in which he had a big hand, especially if the heliport was permanent and meant to strengthen Japan's effective control.

In the end, the Ohira administration (1978-1980) decided that more study was necessary and did not build a permanent heliport at that time. This decision was likely made in response to criticism by the People's Republic of China and Ohira's concerns about his own hold on power and the ability to manage intra-party factional dynamics, which has always troubled the LDP, made up as it is of so many different "smaller parties."²

This situation was also critically impacted by Ohira's sudden death in June 1980 during the first ever double elections held for both the Upper and Lower Houses. As explained in this article, the family who owned four of the five islands making up the Senkakus considered Ohira to be the senior politician most committed to the Senkakus and most in favor of strengthening Japan's effective control over the islands. Therefore, the decision to avoid riling China and not build a permanent heliport was likely a tactical and momentary one made while he simultaneously sought to strengthen public support for the LDP and within the party for his position as party president. His untimely death meant the effort to build a permanent heliport and/or other facilities such as a typhoon refuge, which would have the twin effect of contributing to the Senkaku Islands' development as well as strengthen Japan's effective control over the Senkakus, lost its key advocate.

Ironically, the plan to construct a temporary heliport originated in the first place with the need to respond to China's illegal incursion into the waters off the Senkakus in the spring of 1978. It was this same China that, one year later, was able to essentially block the construction of a more permanent facility or even continue use of the temporary one. Bullying and then bluffing is a tried-and-true practice for China to get its way.

Many people involved with the Senkakus then and today lament—correctly, in this writer's opinion—the fact that the Japanese government did not continue to maintain the heliport or build a more permanent facility at the time. Not only did the heliport provide a service in ferrying supplies and equipment for those conducting surveys or staying on the islands for research or administrative purposes, but had the heliport been preserved, it would facilitate the development of the islands for economic, fishing, or tourism purposes were the Government of Japan decide to actively promote such policies and proactively protect the livelihoods of those involved to in those industries.

Furthermore, a heliport on Uotsuri Island (or one of the other islands in the Senkakus, such as Minami Kojima, which was also being studied at the time for another heliport site) could allow a rapid response to any maritime incident, emergency, or infringement on Japanese administration or sovereignty of the islands. Not having a heliport there, in other words, greatly complicates the ability to respond and limits the options of possible actions and rescue operations.

High waves, for example, would prevent a boat from approaching the coast of an island while a heliport would allow a helicopter to land during a rescue or replenishment operation, assuming the terrain is flat, the area is wide enough to permit aircraft to land (especially Japan's new V-22 Ospreys, adopted by its Self-Defense Forces in 2020 after the U.S. Marine Corps introduced its MV-22s into Japan between 2012-2013 and the U.S. Air Force did so in 2018), and there is no debris that could get into the rotors or otherwise damage the aircraft's engines.

China understands this strategic principle well. It is one of the reasons China opposed Japan's construction of a heliport then, and why China continues to protest anything Japan does or say

² For an example of the impact of factional strife on foreign policy, see Robert D. Eldridge, "The Revision of the Security Treaty and Okinawa: Factional and Domestic Political Constraints on Japanese Diplomacy in the 1950s," in Makoto Iokibe, Caroline Rose, Junko Tomaru, and John Weste, eds., *Japanese Diplomacy in the 1950s: From Isolation to Integration* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 164-180.

with regard to the Senkaku Islands.

The fact that China built its own heliport in 2014 in the Nanji Islands in its Zhejiang Province suggests that it understands the need for a heliport in a good location.³ While it is not in the Senkaku Islands, the construction of a heliport in the Nanji Islands brought China's maritime policing and military reach closer to the Senkakus than airfields on the main island of Okinawa (300 km vs 400 km) for Japan. China uses the issue of "competing claims" to the Senkakus as a sledgehammer to break up any Japanese attempts to demonstrate or strengthen administrative control over the islands while using the same sledgehammer to forge its own claims.

Surprisingly, there are no books that introduce the heliport in any detail and only a very few that reference it.⁴ Similarly, there is only article that discusses (albeit briefly) Japan's construction of the heliport and its importance for developing, administering, and possibly defending the islands.

The main source of information about the role of the heliport in supporting the survey of the islands comes from that article, authored by the late Fujita Munehisa, who served in the planning department of the Okinawa Development Agency and was in charge of the survey.⁵ In addition, there are references to the heliport in newspapers from that period and the accounts in memoirs and biographies of those connected in some capacity at the time. However, these mentions are only brief ones and, individually, provide no wholistic understanding of the heliport, development survey project, and the domestic and international debate it caused.

Sadly, officials in later governments in Japan are also unaware of the history. A mere 30 years later, one minister stated in response to a question that the heliport was built during the "Nakasone [Yasuhiro] administration [1982-1987]."⁶ While Nakasone was supportive of asserting Japan's sovereignty over the Senkakus, the heliport was not built during his administration.

This paper seeks to fill the gap in the literature by focusing on the discussions, planning, and construction of the heliport, seeking to create a coherent history of what happened and why, as well as who was involved. It explores in detail the GOJ's efforts in constructing the heliport, the internal discussions, PRC protests, and Japan's sometimes contentious handling of those reactions.

It should be pointed out that the heliport issue is closely related to Sino-Japanese negotiations over its peace treaty and the efforts of the pro-treaty group and pro-China factions/individuals to prevent the Senkakus dispute over sovereignty from derailing bilateral relations. It is also closely connected to the efforts to develop the islands, as requested by Okinawa Prefecture and others who recognized the need, and to a lesser extent the activists involved in raising attention to the matter. All three topics (the Senkakus in the context of the Sino-Japanese normalization

³ "China Building Military Facilities Near Senkakus," *The Japan Times*, December 23, 2014.

⁴ The three books are: Kentaro Serita, *The Territory of Japan: Its History and Legal Basis, Second Edition* (Singapore: Springer, 2023), pp. 89-90, Kameda Akihisa, *Senkaku Shotō no Sekiyū Shigen to Nicchū Kankei* (Oil Resources of the Senkaku Islands and Japan-Chinese Relations), (Tokyo: Sanwa Shoten, 2021), pp. 224-229, and Unryu Suganuma, *Sovereign Rights and Territorial Space in Sino-Japanese Relations: Irredentism and the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), p.138. Suganuma, who was raised in China, seems in his description to blame Japan for Chinese criticism of the construction of the temporary heliport in May 1979 rather than examining the events that predated it—namely, the incursion by reportedly hundreds of Chinese armed fishing boats in April 1978. Much of his other analysis is also unreasonably biased against Japan.

⁵ Fujita Munehisa, "Kyū Okinawa Kaihatsuchō no Senkaku Shotō Riyō Kaihatsu Kanōsei Chōsa no Keii (The Sequence of Events to the Former Okinawa Development Agency's Survey on the Possibility to Use and Develop the Senkaku Islands)," *Tōsho Kenkyū Jaanaru*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (March 2018), pp. 146-162.

⁶ Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Sugiura Seiken, 162th Diet, Meeting of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives, 14th Session (July 22, 2005).

of relations and peace treaty, the plans to utilize and develop the islands, and the activities concerning the Senkakus by so-called “Rightist” groups) will be handled in separate articles in the future and together in a forthcoming book.⁷ As such, this article focusses specifically on the heliport construction, with only brief references to the other three matters.

This article is divided into eight sections, including this Introduction and a Conclusion. It utilizes declassified official documents, government publications, testimonies from the Japanese parliament, interviews, memoirs, biographies, and other secondary sources, almost exclusively in Japanese (translations mine unless otherwise noted).

Domestic Calls for a Heliport and the Development of the Senkaku Islands

On the morning of April 12, 1978, the Japan Coast Guard patrol vessel *Yaeyama* detected a large number of foreign vessels northwest of Uotsuri Island and approached them with megaphones and banners to leave the area but was ignored. In the meantime, the 11th Regional Coast Guard Headquarters dispatched two other patrol vessels, *Okinawa* and *Nobaru*, as well as the patrol plane MA172 to the scene. Unfortunately, the number of Chinese fishing vessels, many of which were armed, increased as did the standoff, necessitating the Coast Guard to establish a special incident response headquarters. Among other actions, it helped coordinate the dispatch of aircraft and patrol vessels from other regional coast guard commands from throughout the country. In just the first week alone, there were 357 incidents of Chinese fishing boats trespassing into Japan’s territorial waters. The Fukuda Takeo administration (1976-1978), about to restart talks with China on the bilateral Peace and Friendship Treaty, was at a loss what to do. Eventually the Chinese vessels left the area. It was not until June 24 before the Coast Guard was able to disband the special incident response headquarters.

Voices of outrage and opposition were heard in the Japanese Diet, especially by those originally opposed to the ongoing talks over the Sino-Japanese peace treaty, and throughout the country immediately after the intrusion of the armed Chinese fishing vessels near the Senkakus. In Tokyo, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party established a special research committee on Japanese territory and territorial waters within the party’s Policy Research Council (headed then by Ezaki Masumi, a twice-former Director General of the Japan Defense Agency). In addition, within affected Okinawa Prefecture, under which the Senkaku Islands are administered, the livelihoods of the fishermen and their families of the Sakishima Islands (comprising the Yaeyama and Miyako Island groups) were particularly impacted. Moreover, fishermen from other areas of Japan, especially Kyushu, saw their livelihoods impacted as well as many of them traditionally operated in the waters off the Senkaku Islands for decades.

In the mass organized intrusion of the Chinese fishing vessels, boats from Taiwan regularly fished in the area. According to a former Diet member from Okinawa, the Coast Guard would send patrols by sea and air to enforce Japan’s jurisdiction, but there was little tension between the fishermen themselves.⁸ However, this time, the number of foreign ships was unprecedented and the fact that they were from the PRC and armed understandably scared local fishermen. Moreover, in response to warnings broadcast from the Coast Guard’s patrol vessels, Chinese ships responded by displaying signs that “the area was China’s and they would continue fishing there.”⁹ It was clear that they were there for political purposes, and they had not simply drifted by

⁷ The forthcoming book, tentatively titled *The Senkaku Islands Dispute in the 1970s*, will be a successor volume to the author’s *The Origins of U.S. Policy in the East China Sea Islands Dispute* (London: Routledge, 2014).

⁸ Inamine Ichirō, *Sekai o Butai ni: Inamine Ichirō Kaikoroku* (The World is a Stage: The Memoirs of Inamine Ichirō), (Naha: Okinawa Taimusu, 1988), p. 561.

⁹ Ibid.

mistake into the fishing area (as some Chinese leaders had told Japanese government officials and which was relayed to American diplomats monitoring the situation).

The actions of the Chinese fishing fleet at that time greatly unsettled the local fishermen and the Japanese Coast Guard, charged with their protection. The fleet would float on the edge of Japan's territorial waters and then send in 30 to 40 fishing vessels at a time. The vessels would swarm around the Coast Guard patrol vessel and harass it in Chinese. They refused to recognize Japan's authority there. Their presence became a life-or-death matter for the local fishermen who relied on those waters for their livelihoods.

Beginning in mid-April, a few days after the incident started, members of the Diet elected from Okinawa Prefecture called on the Japanese government to build facilities in the Senkakus. Various groups in Okinawa began to take action at this time, perhaps in an effort to increase pressure on the Fukuda government, still stunned by China's brazen and unexpected actions.

The 46-member Okinawa Prefectural Assembly, for example, held a special session on April 18. It unanimously passed a resolution stating that "the Senkaku Islands are historically and legally Japanese territory" and called on "the Japanese government to take all proper measures to ensure this type of situation would never happen again."¹⁰

That same day, Okinawan Vice Governor Nojima Takemori traveled to Tokyo to request a typhoon refuge be built in the Senkakus for Okinawan fishermen.¹¹ Moreover, the following day, the prefectural government announced it would begin studying the construction of a "fishing facility" in the Senkaku Islands.¹²

These actions were followed by a large rally of fishermen on April 20 held at Naha's Onoyama Park. The rally, organized by Inamine Ichirō, a member of the House of Councilors who concurrently served as chairman of the Prefectural Fisheries Promotion Council (*Okinawaken Suisan Shinkōkai*), was named the "Senkaku Shotō Gyoba o Mamoru Gyomin Taikai (Fishermen's Rally to Protect the Senkaku Islands Fishing Grounds)."¹³ Approximately 1000 people from the 33 fishery cooperatives in the prefecture attended and passed a resolution calling on the government to do the following: (1) Prevent the intrusion of foreign vessels into [Japan's] territorial waters and the [illegal] fishing within those waters; (2) Strengthen the surveillance system; and (3) Construct immediately an emergency evacuation facility [i.e., typhoon refuge, port, etc., in the Senkakus].¹⁴

It is unclear if a heliport was one of the items envisioned in the resolution adopted at the rally, but Inamine noted in his speech to the crowd that day the need for both a port and heliport in the Senkakus. "The intrusion by Chinese ships is a problem and should not be tolerated," he declared, adding, "A port and heliport should be built in the Senkakus."¹⁵

¹⁰ Senkaku Shotō Bunken Shiryō Hensankai, ed., *Senkaku Kenkyū: Senkaku Shotō no Shizen/Kaihatsu Riyō no Rekishi to Jōhō ni Kansuru Chōsa Hōkoku Okinawaken ni Okeru Chiiki Shinkō/Shima Okoshi no Ichijo to Shite* (Senkaku Research: Research Report on the History and Information Relating to the Nature and Development of the Senkaku Islands in Order to Assist in Regional Promotion and Island Development in Okinawa Prefecture), (Naha: Senkaku Shotō Bunken Shiryō Hensankai, 2010), p. 156.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 160. Nojima was the prefectural official in charge of the 1975 Expo in Okinawa and likely had close contacts in the central government. It may have been because of these connections that he went instead of Governor Taira Kōichi, an anti-base politician, going himself. Illness may have been another factor. Taira would resign later that year due to illness, the first of two post-reversion governors to do so. Nojima began his work as a civil servant immediately after the war, working for the U.S. military government in Okinawa.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Inamine, *Sekai o Butai ni*, p. 562.

¹⁴ Senkaku Shotō Bunken Shiryō Hensankai, ed., *Senkaku Kenkyū*, p. 156.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Following the rally, representatives of the fishery cooperatives and other related organizations traveled to Tokyo where they submitted petitions to the respective Okinawa special committees of the Upper and Lower Houses and related government agencies.¹⁶ Upper House member Inamine, who had represented Okinawa since 1970, felt the government was unresponsive. Its attitude, he wrote a decade later, was at the time: “we are on the eve of restarting negotiations on the peace treaty with the PRC and it would be bad to anger the Chinese side.”¹⁷ It is safe to say that pro-China sentiment in the government and ruling party would only increase in the 1980s as Japan invested more and more in China’s modernization, and bilateral trade friction grew vis-à-vis the United States.

Following the rally on the 21st, a PRC government spokesman stated that the incident was purely accidental and did not reflect the intentions of the government with respect to the Treaty of Peace And Friendship with Japan.¹⁸ And on the 24th, the Chinese vessels left the area.

Their departure was only temporary, however, and was likely partly related to Typhoon No. 2 (Olive) that zigzagged through the region but in the end did not hit the Yaeyama Island Group. Newspapers in Okinawa reported on April 27 that some 60 Chinese vessels were still assembled in the area, outside of Japan’s territorial waters.¹⁹

Although Inamine and the fishermen, as well as others in Okinawa Prefecture, had long called for a typhoon refuge in the Senkakus so that fishermen could escape rough seas and inclement weather, it is unclear where and when the idea for a heliport had originally emerged. Also, despite a number of agencies and people eventually involved, and despite the existence of several accounts of those involved in the early stages of discussion, planning, or construction of the heliport, just who first suggested it and how remains unknown.

Once the idea for constructing a heliport was openly being discussed, however, it gained rapid traction within parts of the Japanese government. Conservative members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party were particularly vocal in their calls to take concrete actions to protect the Senkaku Islands. It is clear that momentum for construction of a heliport picked up speed in 1978 following the mass incursion of the PRC fishing boats in the area.

It appears that Abe Shintarō, Chief Cabinet Secretary in the Fukuda Takeo administration, was the first senior government official to publicly broach the idea of a heliport. He did so on April 20 stating that the “recent movement by Chinese fishing boats around [the] Senkakus [is] inexcusable...If China persisted in such behavior, [the] GOJ would find it difficult to resume PFT (Peace & Friendship Treaty) negotiations. [Moreover] Japan should consider constructing [a] heliport on [the] Senkakus.”²⁰

In contrast, Foreign Minister Sonoda Sunao did not want, as a pro-treaty politician and the official tasked with bringing it about, anything to hinder the restart of talks on the peace treaty and vetoed within one of the Cabinet meetings Abe’s plan to build a typhoon refuge or any other

¹⁶ Inamine, *Sekai o Butai ni*, p. 562. The main members of the group of representatives that traveled to Tokyo included: Tamaki Tokukō, president of the Prefectural Association of Fisheries; Itoman Saburō, Vice Chairman of the Prefectural Fisheries Promotion Council; Ganaha Seisei, President of the Naha Fisheries Association; Uehara Seiichi, President of the Kume Island Fisheries Association; and Nakazato Zenkichi, President of the Yonabaru Fisheries Association.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 562.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 563.

¹⁹ Senkaku Shotō Bunken Shiryō Hensankai, ed., *Senkaku Kenkyū*, p. 157.

²⁰ “Telegram no. 1978TOKYO06996 from Mansfield to State Department April 20, 1978 on Senkaku Incident and PFT: Prime Minister Takes Umbrage at PRC Ambassador’s Remarks,” U.S. Department of State.

projects in the Senkakus.²¹ He may also have had ideological and personal reasons to be critical of it as well.²²

Toward a Budget for the Heliport and Survey

Throughout his time in office, Foreign Minister Sonoda would maintain his opposition to strengthening Japan's effective control over the Senkakus through the building of any facilities on the island for fear of damaging relations with PRC. Nevertheless, the Fukuda administration subsequently approved plans for the Okinawa Development Agency, then headed by Director General Inamura Sakonshirō, to do a survey of the islands. To do so, the administration also established the Coordination Council of the 7 Related Government Ministries and Agencies (*Kankei 7 Shōchō Renraku Kaigi*) to prepare the Okinawa Development Agency's draft 1979 Fiscal Year budget. The survey and preparation would require the cooperation of the other agencies, hence, the coordination council. With their help, the Okinawa Development Agency completed its budget draft on August 29, requesting 35,650,000 yen for a survey that would look at the building of a typhoon refuge and heliport.²³

After the draft budget was approved internally, officials from the Okinawa Development Agency submitted it to the Budget Office of the powerful Ministry of Finance, briefing officials at the working level there.²⁴ Eventually, the Ministry of Finance approved the draft in full, suggesting it had strong political and government backing. The Ministry of Finance officially informed the Okinawa Development Agency of its approval on January 5 in the new year.

However, in the meantime, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Lower House discussed the draft on October 13, 1978, due to the perceived political sensitivity of the survey and the pending visit by Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping to Japan during the last week of October to exchange ratification documents for the Treaty of Peace and Friendship (signed in August). Representatives from two opposition parties, the Japan Socialist Party, the Communist Party of Japan, and the New Liberal Club, a break-off party from the LDP, all asked questions of officials from the government including Sonoda.²⁵ Respondents from the government side included the Director of the General Affairs Bureau of the Okinawa Development Agency, the Chief of the Agency's Planning Division, and the Director General of the Asia Bureau of the Foreign Ministry. The heliport did not come up at this time, however. Subsequently, Ezaki Masumi, who headed the LDP's Policy Research Council, called on October 30 for the government to include in the 1979 FY budget plans for the construction of a heliport in the Senkaku Islands to demonstrate Japan's effective control over the

²¹ Daniel Tretiak, "The Sino-Japanese Treaty of 1978: The Senkaku Incident Prelude," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 18, No. 12 (December 1978), p. 1245.

²² One dynamic that may have led to Sonoda's criticism of Abe's plan may be related to the fact that Sonoda had wanted to continue in the position of Chief Cabinet Secretary that he had been serving in prior to being appointed as Japan's top diplomat, and was embittered that Abe had been appointed by Fukuda in November 1977 in the reshuffled cabinet, to the position of Chief Cabinet Secretary.

²³ "Senkaku Riyō e Chōsa 'Jikkō Shihai' Kakuritsu Hakaru Okinawa Kaihatsuchō ga Yoson Yōkyū (Survey to Utilize the Senkakus, Clarifying Japan's Administrative Control, Okinawa Development Agency Submits Budget)," *Asahi Shimbun*, August 30, 1978.

²⁴ Fujita Munehisa, "Uotsuri Jima, Minami Kojima, Kita Kojima de no Nihon Seifu no Riyō Kaihatsu Kanōsei Chosa no Aramashi: Uotsurijima, Minami Kita Kojima ha Donna Shima na no ka, 1 (An Overview of the Japanese Government's Survey of the Possibility of Utilizing and Developing Uotsuri Island, Minami Kojima, and Kita Kojima, Part 1)," *Tōsho Kenkyū Jaanaru*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (October 2022), p. 100.

²⁵ Sonoda Sunao was foreign minister throughout this time from November 28, 1977 until November 8, 1979.

island.²⁶

Later in December, LDP parliamentarians involved with the Senkakus issue visited the Okinawa Development Agency to call on the new director general, Mihara Asao, and ask him to expedite the survey.²⁷ Mihara, as well be introduced in a future article, had earlier provided financial support in the form of a donation in his individual capacity as a politician, along with a number of other LDP politicians, for activists to land on the Senkaku Islands earlier that year.

Among the callers are believed to have been members of the *Seirankai* (Blue Storm Society), a cross-faction group comprised of about 30 members established five years before.²⁸ Formed in 1973 and heavily represented by those of the Fukuda and Nakasone Yasuhiro factions, as well as some from the Mizuta Mikio and Shiina Etsusaburō factions, they greatly distrusted China and a handful of them had even voted against the peace treaty. They wanted to impress upon the newly established Ohira Masayoshi administration, whose cabinet was formed on December 7, 1978, the importance of the Senkakus issue. Two days after this meeting, on December 27, the Okinawa Development Agency officially requested the assistance of the Coast Guard with the survey.²⁹

The following month on January 16 (1979), ten days after the Ministry of Finance had government's approval to the requested budget, and one week after the Cabinet had approved the budget on January 10, the new Minister of Transportation, Moriyama Kinji, announced at a press conference that the Coast Guard would be making a temporary heliport (of 20m x 20m) in the Senkakus that spring to facilitate a survey by the Okinawa Development Agency to study whether to construct a lighthouse, safe harbor, and/or a permanent heliport on the island.³⁰

However, before the Ministry of Transportation, Coast Guard, or Okinawa Development Agency could implement the plan, it was necessary to meet with the owner of the islands on which the survey was to be conducted and the heliport built to get his approval.

Initial GOJ Discussions with the Private Owner of the Senkaku Islands

As part of the preparations for the survey and the construction of the heliport, it was necessary to get the permission of the new owner, Kurihara Kunioki, of the four privately held islands, who had

²⁶ Tonooka Teruo, *Senkaku Shotō Tōdai Monogatari* (Story of the Lighthouse on the Senkaku Islands), (Tokyo: Takagi Shobō, 2010), p. 283. The position of chair of the Policy Research Council, or *Seimu Chōsakai*, is to prepare and coordinate policies of the LDP. It is unclear if Ezaki's call was his personal opinion, or simply the consensus of the committee. Ezaki was a member of the Tanaka Kakuei Faction, which was seen as pro-China. Thus, it is somewhat surprising to see him come out strongly in favor of a budget for construction of a heliport in the Senkakus. However, by this point, Tanaka's influence was starting to weaken after his arrest in the Lockheed Scandal. In any case, Ezaki had previously served twice as Director General of the Defense Agency, once immediately after the passage of the revised U.S.-Japan Security Treaty in the summer of 1960 and the second time when Okinawa was reverted to Japan. These experiences may have influenced him toward taking a stronger stance on the Senkakus. Or he may simply have taken a neutral position as head of the committee, a position he held until December that year.

²⁷ Mihara came into office on December 7 with the establishment of the Ohira administration.

²⁸ Fujita, "Uotsuri Jima, Minami Kojima, Kita Kojima," p. 103. Fujita did not attend this meeting but knew the group was "passionate about the survey." Not all *Seirankai* members were. For more on the *Seirankai*, see James Babb, "The *Seirankai* and the Fate of its Members: The Rise and Fall of the New Right Politicians in Japan," *Japan Forum*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2012), pp. 75-96.

²⁹ Fujita, "Uotsuri Jima, Minami Kojima, Kita Kojima," p. 103.

³⁰ Tonooka, *Senkaku Shotō Tōdai Monogatari*, p. 283. For more on Moriyama, see Yayama Tarō and Itō Atsuo, *Moriyama Kinji: Hankotsu no Hyumanisuto* (Moriyama Kinji: A Rebellious Humanist), (Tokyo: Moriyama Mayumi Jimusho, 1988).

come into possession of them the year before.³¹ Representatives from the Okinawa Development Agency went to see Kurihara Hiroyuki, Kunioki's younger brother, who represented his older brother in matters concerning the islands. (Hereafter, the use of the family name "Kurihara" refers to the youngest brother, Hiroyuki.)

The initial meeting held at Kurihara's home in then Omiya City, Saitama Prefecture, on February 5 (1979) and initiated by Kaneko Kiyoshi, the director of the planning division, did not go well. The younger Kurihara found Kaneko's manner and attitude overbearing. The latter, according to Kurihara's account, had haughtily stated at the outset that the Kurihara family was incapable of managing the Senkaku Islands on their own.³² The meeting continued to be contentious and ended when Kurihara apparently told the official he would not work with him.³³

A few days later, his boss, the deputy director of the General Administrative Bureau of the agency came to apologize, and Kurihara eventually agreed to various potential uses of Uotsuri, Minami Kojima, and Kita Kojima Islands (as Kuba and Taishō Islands were then being utilized by the U.S. military as part of the U.S.-Japan Status of Forces Agreement as air-to-ground target ranges).³⁴

What moved Kurihara, it seems, was a direct appeal from Prime Minister Ohira himself. According to a book about his involvement in the sale of the Senkaku Islands to the government in September 2012 published before his passing in May 2014, Kurihara was asked to meet with Ohira at a restaurant in Tokyo. They were joined by Ohira's secretary and an official from the Okinawa Development Agency.³⁵

Kurihara did not ask the reason for the meeting but easily assumed it had to do with the islands. Before they discussed the sale or other uses of the islands, Ohira, who was about to turn 70 years old, looked at Kurihara, who had only recently turned 40, and told him that he would do anything to meet Kurihara's needs and to go ahead and ask. Kurihara responded that most of all

³¹ Kurihara Kunioki, who was like a son to Koga Zenji and his wife Hanako, purchased the Minami Kojima and Kita Kojima in 1972 from Koga Zenji. After Zenji died in March 1978 and the incursion by fishing boats into the Senkakus in April 1978, Hanako transferred the deed for Uotsuri Island to Kunioki. Hanako would pass away in January 1988. In the meantime, in 1985, Kurihara Kazuko, the younger sister of Kunioki, acquired Kuba Island. (In December 2009, Kunioki adopted his younger sister as his daughter.) In June 1991, Kunioki turned over Minami and Kita Islands to Hiroyuki. In 1992, the Kuriharas entered into a 20-year lease for Kuba Island with the Japan Defense Agency. In April 2002, the Kuriharas entered a lease agreement for Uotsuri, Minami, and Kita Islands. Finally, in 2012, the Kuriharas sold the three islands to the Government of Japan. See Kurihara Hiroyuki, *Senkaku Shotō Urimasu* (Senkaku Islands for Sale), (Tokyo: Kōsaidō Shuppan, 2012). Hiroyuki passed away in May 2014.

³² Kurihara, *Senkaku Shotō Urimasu*, pp. 70-71. Kaneko eventually became Governor of Niigata Prefecture from 1989 but was involved in a scandal and resigned in 1992. His memoirs, *Oashisu o Motomete: Chihō Jichi 35 Nen* (Searching for an Oasis: 35 Years Involved in Local Administration) do not touch on his involvement with the Senkakus.

³³ One of the officials described the meeting differently, saying that they in fact discussed the temporary heliport and that they would like to meet again at the end of March after the seven-agency Coordination Council had discussed in detail the survey. Fujita, "Uotsuri Jima, Minami Kojima, Kita Kojima," p. 103.

³⁴ For more, see Robert D. Eldridge, "(Un)targeting the Senkaku Islands: Bombing Ranges in the Senkakus, the Decision by the United States to Suspend Their Use, and the Current Implications of That Moratorium, 1948-1978," *Japan Review*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2024), pp. 37-53. Kuba Island was (and is) still privately owned by Kurihara Kazuko. Taishō Island had always been owned by the Japanese government. In 2012, the Government of Japan purchased Uotsuri, Minami and Kita Kojima. For details, see the author's article on the 10th anniversary of the government's purchase of the islands, Robert D. Eldridge, "Behind the Japanese Government's Purchase of the Senkaku Islands," *The Japan Times*, September 15, 2022.

³⁵ Kurihara, *Senkaku Shotō Urimasu*, p. 78.

he wanted to see a memorial built on Uotsuri Island, which his family had promised the former owner of the islands, Koga Zenji, before his passing the year before.³⁶ Ohira agreed immediately and subsequently lived up to his promise.

The Kurihara family paid for the building materials and supplies, the Japanese government paid for the transportation of these items, as well as the craftsmen to make the memorial. The costs, according to Kurihara, were quite large.³⁷ Materials were transported by ship from Kagoshima Prefecture (fuel prices were particularly high at the time in the wake of the second Oil Crisis) and in the necessary cases, 180 trips were made by helicopter to Uotsuri Island from various locations.

“Ohira was a man of his word,” Kurihara later wrote.³⁸ “Not only did the Ohira Cabinet help with the construction of the memorial, but it also sponsored an unveiling ceremony [attended by Kurihara and members of the Japan Coast Guard] when the memorial was completed.”³⁹ In their summer white uniforms, “they promised to not only protect the memorial but the surrounding seas as well with their lives,” Kurihara recalled decades later.⁴⁰

The Okinawa Development Agency’s Plans for a Survey

In the meantime, Kurihara visited the Okinawa Development Agency to discuss the status of the plans for the survey on March 27, and followed up on March 29, with his lawyer in attendance, to listen to the explanation of the Agency regarding the setting up of three atmometers (automated weather stations) on Uotsuri, Kita Kojima, and Minami Kojima. They agreed that the atmometers could be permanent, and the Kuriharas would not be paid for the use of the land on which they were installed.⁴¹

The next day, on March 30, Transport Minister Moriyama announced at a press conference that the Coast Guard had installed three survey markers, presumably with the Kurihara’s permission, on Uotsuri Island’s eastern coast and two on the small islet of Okinominamiwa. The markers were 8 centimeters in diameter and used to designate the waterway.⁴² Moriyama, who prided himself on “pursuing common sense politics,” also announced at that time that the Coast Guard was planning to move forward with the heliport construction, as the Diet, dominated by the ruling LDP, had approved the budget in full.⁴³

However, reaching agreement with the Kurihara family was taking longer than expected.

³⁶ Ibid. The Kurihara family came into possession of the islands in April 1978, after Koga Zenji, the son of the original developer of the islands, Koga Tatsushirō, died on March 5 that year. Originally, Zenji’s wife was going to maintain possession of the islands, but in light of the attention the islands received in the wake of the Chinese fishing boats’ incursion into the waters surrounding the Senkakus, Hatako informed the Kurihara family she wanted to sell them earlier. (Ibid., pp. 44-46) See footnote 31 for related details.

³⁷ Kurihara does not provide details or an exact timeline as to what happened, but according to photographer Yamamoto Kōichi, who has visited Uotsuri 11 times and knew the Kurihara family as well as the directors of the foundation established by Kurihara Kunioki on September 8, 1988, in Koga’s name, the text for the memorial stone was drafted on April 28, 1978 as this date is engraved on the stone. (Phone interview with Yamamoto Kōichi, August 4, 2025.) It is unclear where and when the stone was actually engraved, however, and from where it was transported when it was installed on Uotsuri Island. The memorial remains on Uotsuri Island more than 45 years later.

³⁸ Kurihara, *Senkaku Shotō Urimasu*, p. 79.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Fujita, “Uotsuri Jima, Minami Kojima, Kita Kojima,” pp. 103-104.

⁴² Tonooka, *Senkaku Shotō Tōdai Monogatari*, p. 283.

⁴³ Yayama and Itō, *Moriyama Kinji*, pp. 289, 292.

Discussions continued throughout April.⁴⁴ As alluded to earlier, the younger brother, Hiroyuki, was in charge of the negotiations on behalf of the family and did not like the attitude of some of the officials of the Okinawa Development Agency. While they believed in the importance of the survey, as it would contribute to the strengthening of Japan's actual administration of the Senkaku Islands, the family (according to an official of the Development Agency) seemed to be worried about antagonizing both China and the so-called "Rightist" activists who had previously landed on Uotsuri Island's west coast (and would end up doing so again shortly before the survey began).⁴⁵

The more time elapsed, the more nervous the Okinawa Development Agency became as it would have to decide by April 17 about whether to postpone the survey. Eventually, Kurihara and the Agency came to an agreement on April 27, nearly three months after discussions began, signing the necessary contract.⁴⁶ The following day, Kurihara visited the Okinawa Development Agency to add a request that representatives of the family be allowed to join the advance party as well as the actual survey team. This was agreed to by the Agency.⁴⁷

Parallel to the discussions with the owner's representative, Fujita Munehisa, who had been seconded by the Ministry of Construction to the Okinawa Development Agency and was in charge of planning how to conduct the survey and its contents, began meeting with relevant organizations and his counterparts to discuss details on the survey's implementation.

On February 23, he met with Coast Guard officials to discuss the heliport and its role in conducting the survey. Later that same day, Fujita also met with a mapping expert from Geospatial Information Authority of Japan (*Kokudo Chiriin*), which was under the jurisdiction the Ministry of Construction. The expert would be tasked with preparing 1/5,000 scale maps of the three islands to be surveyed.⁴⁸

The following week, on February 26, Fujita and other officials from the seven-agency Coordination Council held their first meeting where he explained the background to the survey and shared the draft used for preparing the budget. Fujita listened to the opinions of the other agencies, incorporating their views into the plan. Of particular importance were the views of the Coast Guard as it would be responsible for providing a variety of logistical support and offshore security for the onsite survey.⁴⁹

Planning continued over the next couple of months, with the level of detail increasing as they got closer to the departure of the smaller advance team and then the larger survey group. On May 8, Fujita visited the Coast Guard vessel *Souya*, docked in Tokyo at Hinode Pier, to meet its captain and the pilot of the attached helicopter.⁵⁰ The 3200-ton *Souya* was normally based in Nemuro, Hokkaido, but was assigned for this mission, likely due to its logistic capabilities and helicopter capable of carrying larger loads.⁵¹ As explained in the next section, it was a complex operation, with many moving parts not only within the government, but also vis-à-vis the private

⁴⁴ Fujita, "Uotsuri Jima, Minami Kojima, Kita Kojima," p. 104.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid. An added complication was that the Kurihara family in general did not trust the central government due to past deeding. See Kurihara, *Senkaku Shotō Urimasu*, p.9.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 105.

⁴⁸ The agency now falls under the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism as a result of the realignment of the Japanese government in January 2001. The Ministry of Construction was absorbed into MLIT at that time.

⁴⁹ Fujita, "Kyū Okinawa Kaihatsuchō," p. 146.

⁵⁰ Fujita, "Uotsuri Jima, Minami Kojima, Kita Kojima," p. 105.

⁵¹ The *Souya* was originally designated a Patrol Vessel Large, but was later changed to PLH for Patrol Vessel Large with Helicopter. Construction on it was completed on November 22, 1978, seven months prior to its mission to the Senkakus.

sector which assisted with technical expertise, equipment, and personnel.

Construction of the Temporary Heliport

On May 14th, the leader of the advance team for constructing the temporary heliport, who was the section chief of the Planning Division of the General Affairs Bureau of the Okinawa Development Agency, departed Haneda Airport for Ishigaki via Naha. He was accompanied by two technical advisors, one for the construction of the temporary heliport from the headquarters of the Coast Guard and the other from the Japan Weather Association (*Nihon Kishō Kyōkai*), founded in 1950, to assist with the installation of the automated weather station. After arriving in Ishigaki, they conducted the necessary local greetings and coordination as they awaited their fellow team members to travel to Okinawa.

Three days later, on the morning of the 17th, they flew by helicopter from the Coast Guard's Ishigaki Air Station, landing at 11:00 a.m. on the west coast of Uotsuri Island. In the meantime, on the evening of the 16th, five workers and materials and equipment procured locally for constructing the temporary heliport and installing the automated weather station departed Naha's Aja New Port aboard the patrol vessel *Motobu*, arriving off the coast of Uotsuri Island early the next morning. They unloaded these materials onto a lifeboat belonging to the same vessel, landed at a campsite on the west coast of Uotsuri Island, and proceeded to unload the equipment and materials shortly after 8:00 a.m. They began setting up their camp and work area and were subsequently joined by the other three men who flew in from Ishigaki. Later that day, they sent a detailed update to the Coast Guard's headquarters, which shared the information with Fujita and others at the Okinawa Development Agency monitoring the operation from Tokyo.⁵²

The report noted that the setting up of the tents and kitchen were completed in the afternoon, that they were located on the site of a former bonito-dried fish factory employee residence, and that they were located 70 meters from the ocean and approximately 50 meters northeast from the inland dock/waterway that had been made is when Koga Tatsushirō had set up his bonito-dried fish factory in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The report also noted that the advance team had determined that there was enough sand for the construction of a temporary heliport and the installation of an automatic weather station and that the candidate site for the temporary heliport was decided as planned. They needed mosquito repellent (coil-shaped incense that burns slowly) and noted they were lacked drinking water but that they could acquire it from the nearby Coast Guard patrol vessel.

On the 19th, they reported that the island's uneven coral base would present a problem when laying the concrete roadbed for the temporary heliport, and thus would have to break up where necessary any coral that was obstructing the work. They were able to secure enough water to make the concrete mortar, which was poured.

The next morning, the *Souya* arrived from Tokyo, via Naha, with the reinforced concrete slabs that would be laid on top of the mortar. There were 25 slabs (or plates) in total. Each plate was 1m square, 10cm thick, surrounded by steel frames and filled with rebar, and weighed approximately 190kg. They were manufactured in Tokyo. Weighing a total of approximately 4.75 tons, they were tied in pairs with wire in a cross shape and loaded by crane on to the ship.

The *Souya*, carrying the reinforced concrete plates and other materials, had departed Tokyo Port on the evening of the 16th and arrived at Aja New Port in Naha on the 17th. After a couple of days there, it then departed Naha on the evening of May 19th and arrived off the west coast of Uotsuri Island in the early hours of the 20th.

The vessel's onboard large helicopter began unloading equipment and the 25 concrete slabs early that morning, in addition to the complete set of automated weather instruments and other

⁵² Fujita, "Uotsuri Jima, Minami Kojima, Kita Kojima," p. 105.

materials. Fortunately, none of the slabs were damaged during transport.

That morning as well, Kurihara Hiroyuki, as a representative of the family owning Uotsuri Island, arrived by helicopter from the Japan Coast Guard's air station in Ishigaki to conduct an inspection which had been agreed to the month before. Fortunately, someone from the Coast Guard remembered to bring the mosquito-repelling incense coils and delivered them at this time, too. The workers still had to deal with snakes and rats, among other creatures living there, however.

Kurihara explains in his memoirs that prior to traveling to the Senkakus, after landing in Naha by commercial flight, he was escorted off the plane on the tarmac before it reached the terminal and flown from Naha to Ishigaki on a JCG aircraft to avoid the press and "Rightist" groups.⁵³ The week before, a group of seven activists had landed on Uotsuri Island, setting up a camp there. Eventually, they were persuaded to leave only when a member, who had some influence over them, from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, traveled to the Senkakus on a 300-ton Coast Guard patrol vessel *Okinawa* and spoke with them.⁵⁴ The activists, having made their point, left on the evening of the 16th, passing somewhere *en route* to Naha the 3200-ton *Motobu* as it was bringing the advance party to Uotsuri Island.

The work of the advance party in the end was not interrupted by the activists, but it was a close call. The departure of the advance party from Naha may have been timed with the activists' departure from Uotsuri Island. In light of the efforts made to convince the activists to depart, it is reasonable to assume that had the activists' departure been delayed, that of the advance team's would have been as well.

Work on the construction of the temporary heliport and automated weather station continued through the morning of the 22nd. The helicopter, a Bell Model 212, on board the *Souya* conducted practice landings to test the heliport. The weather station functioned as well, too, operating through the end of March the following year.

On the 23rd, the eight-member advance party made their way back to the *Souya*, and that evening they departed the waters off the western side of Uotsuri Island for Naha, arriving at Aja New Port early the next morning.

In the meantime, the 31 members of the team for the Okinawa Development Agency-sponsored survey assembled in Ishigaki. There were 12 scientists under the academic leadership of Professor Ikehara Sadao of Ryukyu University plus ODA officials in charge of the overall survey (for a total of 31 members). They departed Aja New Port on May 27 at 5:30 p.m. aboard the 1000-ton Coast Guard vessel *Satsuma*, heading for the Senkakus.⁵⁵

They arrived the next morning and landed on Uotsuri Island using rubber boats belonging to the *Satsuma*. The helicopter assigned to the *Souya*, which had returned to the area, also helped transport personnel and supplies to the island thanks to the heliport.

While not the subject of this article, it is necessary to briefly mention the outcome of the survey before discussing China's criticism of the heliport. A fuller analysis of the survey and its results will be done in a future article.

Originally, the writing of the report was expected to take until the end of the fiscal year. However, it was completed three months earlier and announced before the end of the calendar year.

Several reports were prepared. First, the survey team produced a 354-page report on the ability to utilize and develop the Senkaku Islands was prepared entitled *Senkaku Shotō Chōsa Hōkokusho Riyō Kaihatsu Kanōsei Chōsahen* (Report of the Survey on the Potential to Utilize

⁵³ Kurihara, *Senkaku Shotō Urimasu*, pp. 80-82.

⁵⁴ Fujita, "Uotsuri Jima, Minami Kojima, Kita Kojima," p. 106.

⁵⁵ Tonooka, *Senkaku Shotō Tōdai Monogatari*, p. 284.

and Develop the Senkaku Islands, Survey Volume). A second volume of scientific findings, titled *Gakujutsu Chōsahen* (Scientific Volume) and numbering 244 pages, was simultaneously prepared and shared with universities, the Okinawa Prefecture Government, and different government ministries and agencies, including the Defense Agency. Finally, a 69-page summary entitled *Riyō Kaihatsu Kanōsei Chōsahen no Yōyakuban* (Summary Version of Survey on the Potential to Utilize and Develop [the Senkaku Islands]) was distributed to reporters and others at a press conference held on December 18 after that day's Cabinet meeting for use in explaining the survey.⁵⁶

Unfortunately, the results of survey indicated that it would be difficult to utilize or develop the islands due to the lack of water, rough seas, and prohibitive costs. Specifically, it noted that technological limitations and high seas prevented the construction of a typhoon refuge for boats and that further study was necessary for a more permanent heliport. However, it was clear that political will was increasingly lacking within the government and ruling party to pursue the heliport, perhaps due to factional dynamics, personal motivations/ideology, and/or concerns about relations with China.

Domestic and Foreign Reactions to the Construction of the Temporary Heliport

At the time the temporary heliport was being constructed in May, officials in Tokyo held a meeting with the relevant agencies in the Cabinet Council Room on the morning of May 21 to discuss how to deal with the press. While no one from the Foreign Ministry came to the gathering, representatives from the Cabinet Secretariat, Okinawa Development Agency, and Japan Coast Guard were there. They decided that Director General Mihara Asao of the Okinawa Development Agency should announce the full details of the completion of the temporary heliport at a press conference after a Cabinet meeting later that week, perhaps on the 24th or 25th.

Despite this coordination, Transport Minister Moriyama unexpectedly announced the following morning at a press conference the details of the construction of the heliport.⁵⁷ His press conference, after the May 22 Cabinet meeting, ended up generating a lot of media attention. The Okinawa Development Agency was particularly bothered as the minister's comments went against the understanding reached the day before nor had it been informed that Moriyama was going to speak that day about the heliport's construction.⁵⁸

Interest in the construction, as well as in China's likely reactions, ran high in Japan. The *Mainichi Shimbun*, for example, dispatched its own aircraft, *Myōjō*, on the morning of May 23 to photograph the heliport, providing a detailed description of the island and heliport.⁵⁹ The left-leaning *Asahi Shimbun* also dispatched its own aircraft, *Hayakaze*, that morning to photograph the heliport and the first practice landing by a Japan Coast Guard helicopter. A short article appearing in the evening edition described the practice landing and the island, mentioning the small hut constructed by, what the reporter described, as "rightists who landed on the island after the illegal incursion into the territorial waters by Chinese fishing vessels."⁶⁰

The sudden arrival of media aircraft caught the advance team working on the island off guard.

⁵⁶ Fujita, "Uotsuri Jima, Minami Kojima, Kita Kojima," p. 98. The author is grateful to Kuniyoshi Makomo for assistance with viewing the reports.

⁵⁷ "Senkaku (Uotsurijima) ni Kari Heripooto: Kaijō Hoanchō 'Kiso Chōsa no Tame' (Temporary Heliport on Senkakus (Uotsuri Island): 'For Basic Survey' [according to] Japan Coast Guard)," *Yomiuri Shimbun*, May 22, 1978 (evening edition).

⁵⁸ Fujita, "Kyū Okinawa Kaihatsuchō," p. 148.

⁵⁹ "Heripooto wa Shima no Nishigawa Chūō (Heliport is Built in Center of Western Side [of Uotsuri Island])," *Mainichi Shimbun*, May 23, 1979 (evening edition).

⁶⁰ "Kore ga Kari Heripooto: Uotsurijima Kaiho Heri ga Hatsuchakuriku (Coast Guard Helicopter Undertakes First Landing on Uotsuri Island)," *Asahi Shimbun*, May 23, 1979 (evening edition).

They had been unaware of Moriyama's sudden press conference the day before.⁶¹

Because, perhaps, of this premature tip-off, the evening editions of newspapers in Japan reported that "Chinese government officials 'expressed their displeasure at the heliport's construction' on May 24."⁶² As explained in a later section, Chinese officials would continue to criticize the heliport until the Japanese side abandoned it.

The Chinese were helped by divisions within the ruling party and government over the repercussions of the survey. Reflective of the influence the PRC already had in Japan by this point, neither the Japanese government nor the Liberal Democratic Party spoke with one voice on the construction of the heliport or even the implementation of the survey.

On May 29, Shen Ping, Director of the Asia Bureau of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs called Acting Japanese Ambassador to China Ban Shōichi to the foreign office and expressed his regret, stating that the building of a temporary heliport on the Senkakus and the survey being conducted there "clearly go against the understanding between the two countries."⁶³ Shen requested that Japan look at the "larger picture (*taikyokuteki tachiba*)" and stop all activities there so as not to further damage Sino-Japanese relations.⁶⁴

In response, Ban, an Imperial Navy veteran of World War II and a lawyer by training before joining the Japanese Foreign Ministry in 1951, stated: (1) "the Senkakus are historically Japanese territory and the survey being conducted is to ensure the protection and safety of the fishermen and others," and (2) while the Japanese government will continue to work toward promoting bilateral relations, it did "not intend to change its plans for the ongoing survey."⁶⁵

The following day, however, Foreign Minister Sonoda, during questioning in the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives, announced his opposition to the survey being conducted by the Okinawa Development Agency. "I did not know about it ahead of time," he stated, "nor was I asked my opinion about it by any other member of the cabinet."⁶⁶ He added, "it would be better for our national interest if we did nothing for the next 20, 30 years."⁶⁷

This comment appears to be disingenuous, as the survey was public information (having been reported in the newspapers the previous year), or was misquoted by the media. MOFA had been invited to attend the interagency coordination meetings, but for whatever reason, chose not to be there. Indeed, Sonoda's long-standing opposition to the heliport was well known throughout the government by this point.

At the time of Sonoda's comments in the Diet, his political ally, Suzuki Zenkō, a former chief cabinet secretary and former head of the LDP Executive Council, was making his way to China. On May 31, Suzuki met with Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping in Beijing who said, "I am forced to speak out [on the issue of the Senkakus] because Japan is causing a lot of problems. The issue is best left for future generations."⁶⁸

It is unclear how Suzuki, who as a member of the Ohira faction would be appointed to head the LDP Executive Council again in November (for the third time), responded and on whose behalf he went—Sonoda's or his own faction's leader, Ohira, who was by then prime minister

⁶¹ Fujita, "Kyū Okinawa Kaihatsuchō," p. 148.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Tonooka, *Senkaku Shotō Tōdai Monogatari*, p. 285.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 286.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid. Suzuki would be reappointed to head the Executive Council in November that year. (The Executive Council is also known as the General Council.)

(having defeated Fukuda in December 1978 in a bitter contest, in which Sonoda withdrew his support from Fukuda in his bid for re-election as party president).⁶⁹

As we saw previously, Kurihara, as the representative of the family who owned four of the five islands comprising the Senkakus, felt that Ohira was by far the most committed to the Senkaku Islands. This may explain why the next day, in response to Vice Premier Deng's remarks, Prime Minister Ohira himself stated that "China has no say in this matter. [Japan is] exercising effective control [over the Senkaku Islands] and there is no need for China to raise the issue."⁷⁰

In the meantime, the leadership of the Okinawa Development Agency began to get nervous. On May 31, the day after Sonoda's comments in the Diet, the agency announced, in light of the survey of the Senkaku Islands becoming a diplomatic issue, "it would try to finish [the survey] as early as possible."⁷¹ The following day, Director General Mihara announced that "while the survey is simply for the purposes of regional development of the islands, [we] do not want to negatively affect Sino-Japanese relations" and added that he was prepared to discuss with other relevant agencies, including the Ministry of Transportation, the removal of the heliport as well.⁷²

Mihara's announcement is surprising on many levels. As a former Director General of the Defense Agency (1976-1977), he would have understood the importance of having a heliport on a remote location such as in the Senkakus. In addition, as mentioned earlier, he was personally committed to helping raise attention of the Senkakus issue having donated money to that effort.

Mihara should have known, too, that he had the support of LDP's Executive Council, which had not only decided at a meeting held in the fall of 1978 to endorse the conducting of the survey, but also reiterated its support the same day as Mihara's press conference on June 1. However, at this press conference, Mihara instead cited the concerns Foreign Ministry had with Sino-Japanese relations being impacted by the construction of the heliport, however temporary.⁷³

Adding to the tense situation, the next day, Transport Minister Moriyama announced that he had received a death threat from a Chinese organization based in New York. While it is not clear if such an organization truly existed, and whether it was comprised of supporters of the *Kuomintang* (Nationalist Party of the Republic of China) ensconced in Taiwan since 1949, or their rivals, the Chinese Communist Party, in mainland China, the letter stated, "we will assassinate you if you support the invasion of the Senkakus."⁷⁴

It is not certain if the minister reported the letter to authorities who would have asked their U.S. counterparts to look into the organization that made the death threat. It is likely that the warning did not bother Moriyama, who had served in the Imperial Japanese Army and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs before being elected to the Lower House in 1949. Later that summer, for example, during a visit to the Miyako Islands for the opening of Shimoji Shima Airport on July 5, Moriyama flew with the new governor, Nishime Junji, a former member of the House of Representatives who had served as the parliamentary vice minister of the Okinawa Development Agency in the Tanaka

⁶⁹ Sonoda apparently did so because he wanted to continue on as chief cabinet secretary as mentioned earlier, but Fukuda had reshuffled the cabinet putting Abe in the position and making Sonoda foreign minister again instead.

⁷⁰ Tonooka, *Senkaku Shotō Tōdai Monogatari*, p. 287.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 286.

⁷² Ibid., p. 287.

⁷³ There may have been a political and diplomatic need to not highlight the territorial dispute at the time, too, as Japan was getting ready to host the G-7 Summit at the end of June in Tokyo. However, one could argue that then was the perfect time to assert Japan's position and seek to gain the support of the other G-7 nations.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

administration and became governor in December 1978, over the Senkakus to view them.⁷⁵

Nishime, who was originally from nearby Yonaguni Island, was no doubt disappointed that the survey was cut short and that China had criticized the temporary heliport. At a regular session of the Okinawa Prefectural Assembly on June 8, the governor stated that he believed it was “good for the central government to strengthen effective administration over [the Senkaku Islands]” adding he would “continue to call for the central government to build a typhoon refuge at Uotsuri Island.”⁷⁶

Unfortunately, Okinawa never got its typhoon shelter in the Senkakus. Nearly 50 years have passed since then. Few fishermen from Okinawa (or other parts of Japan) head to the Senkakus anymore as it is too dangerous to do so. Chinese public ships harass them with little consequence.

Conclusion

In not maintaining the temporary heliport, or building a more permanent structure, as well as honoring the other local requests from Okinawa’s fishermen such as a port to evacuate to during rough seas and typhoons, Japan lost a major opportunity to provide international public goods to the region, to clearly demonstrate Japan’s sovereignty and effective control over the Senkaku Islands, to respond to the needs of its public and taxpayers to be able to utilize and develop the islands, and to be able to defend better its interests should the need arise.

These are all actions that a peaceful, responsible sovereign nation is expected to do. Not doing anything to help one’s own fishermen and failing to strengthen administrative control in the process, is, in fact, the irresponsible course that can ironically lead to potential misunderstanding, miscalculation, and eventually conflict.

Japan, in other words, took and continues to take China’s “sensitivities” into much more consideration than it seems to do those of its own people. This in turn confuses the international community which wonders to whom, in the end, do the Senkaku Islands actually belong? China, by constantly asserting its claims and pressuring Japan not to do anything that would strengthen its effective control, would have us believe the islands are theirs.⁷⁷

Unfortunately, the report prepared by the Japanese government in December 1979 following the survey stated it would be technologically difficult and economically costly to move forward with the infrastructure projects to support the utilization and development of the Senkaku Islands. This was certainly a conclusion influenced by political and diplomatic considerations as Japan had both the technology and money to develop the islands. Remember, approximately 240 people lived on Uotsuri Island in the prewar period thanks to the efforts of the Koga family.

The report also hinted with regard to the heliport that further study was necessary. This phrase was likely a political compromise between the clear need for a heliport and the opposition expressed by China and its supporters within the ruling LDP. Japan would not be in a weakened position, diplomatically and militarily, vis-à-vis China had it gone ahead with building a permanent heliport.

Unfortunately, Prime Minister Ohira’s sudden death in June 1980 during a double election being held for both the Upper and Lower Houses may have brought an early end to efforts to further study the heliport, developing the Senkakus, or doing anything to strengthen Japan’s administration of the islands. Ohira was the prime minister most serious about the Senkakus until

⁷⁵ “Kaikōshikiten Sanka no Moriyama Daijin Totsuzen no ‘Senkaku Shisatsu’ (Minister Moriyama Attending Ceremonies of Airport Opening Undertakes Sudden ‘Senkakus Investigation’),” *Yomiuri Shimbun*, July 6, 1979.

⁷⁶ Tonooka, *Senkaku Shotō Tōdai Monogatari*, p. 288.

⁷⁷ For more on China’s pressure tactics, see Richard H. Solomon, *Chinese Negotiating Behavior: Pursuing Interests Through ‘Old Friends’* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 1999).

then, and thus his loss can be said to be huge.

The role of the individual in history, as readers know, is key, for better or worse. A good statesman can, with foresight, address issues proactively and with wisdom, while a bad or weak leader may be afraid to take the initiative or otherwise make an unwise decision. Japan, like every country, has its fair share of both. Through commission or omission, these individuals affect history. This is especially true in the case of the Senkaku Islands.

Ohira was succeeded by Suzuki Zenkō, a former member of the Socialist Party of Japan and someone most well-known for his gaffe as prime minister (1980-1982) about the U.S.-Japan alliance and his inability to articulate what the bilateral security relationship was about. There is no evidence to suggest that he was interested in or inclined to stand up to China on the Senkaku Islands issue.

On the contrary, on May 31, 1979, as the Okinawa Development Agency was pursuing its survey in the Senkaku Islands, Suzuki, a former chief cabinet secretary and head of the LDP Executive Council, was visiting China in his capacity as a member of the Lower House and met with Vice Premier Deng in Beijing as previously mentioned. The latter stated, “I am forced to speak out [on the issue of the Senkakus] because Japan is causing a lot of problems,” and repeated what he had said during his visit to Japan in late October 1978 for the exchange of ratification documents for the Peace and Friendship Treaty that “the issue is best left for future generations.”⁷⁸

As such, it appears that the momentum built up in the late 1970s for developing the Senkaku Islands and constructing there of a permanent heliport, among other facilities, was lost over at least four stages—the wavering over the actual construction and survey in late May and early June 1979, the apparent government decision to not move forward with a permanent heliport in December 1979, Ohira’s sudden passing in June 1980, and the election the following month (July 1980) of Suzuki to succeed him as LDP president (and subsequently) prime minister. Japan never really recovered the momentum afterwards, despite the geostrategic and diplomatic importance of the Senkakus rising in the interim.

Other factors, external in nature, were that the PRC was seen as a valuable partner by the United States and Japan in fight against the Soviet Union with détente having ended and the new Cold War having begun following the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan. The three countries’ informal alliance would continue until the end of the 1980s when the East-West Cold War initially ended.

In the meantime, China’s own expansionist tendencies grew alongside its increasing economic and military might after it adopted Deng’s “Four Modernizations” to reform the country. Before long, it gradually became clear that Japan and the West had created a monster in the PRC that increasingly backs its extensive territorial claims with lawfare, economic warfare, and kinetic actions.

That realization came much too late, however. Indeed, rather than taking a firm position on the Senkakus in support of Japan’s claim at the time it reverted Okinawa to Japan in 1972, the U.S. government adopted a policy of neutrality on the issue of sovereignty (despite administering the islands under the formula of recognizing Japan’s “residual sovereignty” for the previous two decades).⁷⁹ Worse, at great detriment to its own military readiness and relations with its ally Japan, the U.S. Department of State later that decade made a unilateral decision to suspend use of its air-to-ground target ranges on Kuba and Taishō Islands in the Senkakus (which it had been

⁷⁸ Tonooka, *Senkaku Shotō Tōdai Monogatari*, p. 286.

⁷⁹ Robert D. Eldridge, “U.S. Senkakus Policy and Its Contradictions,” *The Japan Institute of International Affairs/Resource Library*, September 2023 (https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/resourcelibrary/pdf/ResourceLibrary_Territory_Eldridge_230906_r.pdf)

leasing from the Japanese government since 1972 as part of the Status of Forces of Agreement under the U.S.-Japan security treaty) out of fear for being drawn into the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Senkaku Islands.⁸⁰

While the U.S. government does not seem to have taken a stance on the construction of the temporary heliport covered in detail in this article, it was, as declassified telegrams show, monitoring the situation.⁸¹ Unfortunately, the tensions over the temporary heliport's construction produced between China and Japan seems to have scared the U.S. State Department and caused it to endorse a recommendation from Leonard F. Woodcock, the first U.S. Ambassador in China since 1949, that the 1978 moratorium on using the training ranges in the Senkakus be extended:

In view of the above, we believe that U.S. Navy resumption of the use of the Sekibi-sho is inadvisable. It could evoke a protest from the PRC side and prompt the PRC and Japan to air publicly their claims to the islands at a time when they are quietly beginning to pursue efforts to resolve the issue out of the public eye with the legal jurisdiction of the area unresolved, the Embassy [in Beijing] believes that it is in the USG interest to avoid actions which would implicitly tend to support the claim of either China or Japan.⁸²

The great irony is that the willingness of the United States to work with China militarily, and for Japan to do so economically, during the latter years of the Cold War vis-à-vis a shared enemy (hegemon), the Soviet Union, had the unintended consequences of strengthening China, which, in turn, made it feel more emboldened in the region and to do more to back up its claims to the Senkakus.

Today, Japan and, to some extent its ally the United States, are desperately trying to prepare for the defense of the Senkaku Islands, an operation that will be difficult without any infrastructure on the islands today whatsoever. This situation could have all been avoided in the 1970s, when the necessary actions—continuing to use the already-made heliport, the building of a typhoon refuge, the continuance of use of the target ranges—involved the least amount of risk.

Diplomacy is not to be based on a vague hope that things will go right, but a concrete (pun, intended) knowledge that a country has the means to protect its national interests. China understands this principle. Unfortunately, it seems Japan and the United States did not, at least in the 1970s, when the heliport issue arose.

⁸⁰ Eldridge, "(Un)targeting the Senkaku Islands."

⁸¹ An example would be a January 1979 telegram from the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo to the State Department which noted, following Minister Moriyama's January 16 press conference, that an official from the China Division of Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs "emphasized to emb[assy] off[icer]s...[the] modest nature of landing site." See "Telegram 00792 from Embassy Tokyo to State Department on GOJ to Conduct Survey in and Around Senkakus. Build Helicopter Landing Site, January 17, 1979," Department of State records.

⁸² "Telegram 298078 from Secretary of State Vance referencing State 291869 from Woodcock on Use of Sekibi-sho Range, November 16, 1979," Department of State records. Woodcock was a former head of the United Auto Workers who negotiated the normalization of diplomatic relations with China and the subsequent trade agreements.