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1 Evolving U.S. Pacific Security Framework.....03

Benjamin Blandin

Dr. Benjamin Blandin is a Maritime Security Expert and a Research Fellow at the Yokosuka Council on Asia Pacific Studies (YCAPS) and at the Korea Institute of Maritime Strategy (KIMS). He was previously a Senior Consultant in strategy at Airbus Defence and Space and at various international consulting firms. He graduated with a Ph.D. in geopolitics from the Paris Catholic University (ICP) and with a master's degrees in strategy from Lyon Business School (EM Lyon), in geostrategy from Paris II University (ISAD) and in geopolitics from Paris VIII University (IFG). Benjamin Blandin is a former (graduated) auditor of the Paris Military Academy (IHEDN), the French Naval Academy (CESM) and the International Foundation for the Law of the Sea (IFLOS).

2 Japan's 1941–1942 Covert Intelligence Operations in Southeast Asia: Evaluating the Role of Iwaichi Fujiwara and *F Kikan* in Retrospect11

Monika Chansoria

Dr. Monika Chansoria is a Tokyo-based Senior Fellow at The Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA) since 2017. Previously, Dr. Chansoria has held many senior research appointments, including, at the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (FMSH, Paris); at the Cooperative Monitoring Centre, Sandia National Laboratories (Albuquerque, U.S.); and, at the Hokkaido University (Sapporo, Japan). She has solely authored five books on Asia's security affairs, including *China, Japan, and Senkaku Islands: Conflict in the East China Sea Amid an American Shadow* (Routledge ©2018) and *Nuclear China: A Veiled Secret* (©2014) among others. Dr. Chansoria is also a Senior Contributing Author & Analyst at the JAPAN Forward Inc., Tokyo, where she writes a regular column on Asia's geopolitics and history.

3 Developing the Islands or Demonstrating Effective Control? The Japanese Government and the Construction of a Heliport in the Senkaku Islands in the Late 1970s20

Robert D. Eldridge

Robert D. Eldridge, Ph.D., is a Senior Fellow, Japan Institute of International Affairs. He was

formerly a tenured associate professor at the Osaka School of International Public Policy, Osaka University, and the Political and Public Diplomacy Advisor to the United States Marine Corps in Okinawa, Japan. He is the author, editor, and translator of dozens of books on Japanese political and diplomatic history, U.S.-Japan relations, and international security including: *The Origins of the Bilateral Okinawa Problem*, *Japanese Public Opinion and the War on Terrorism*, *The Origins of U.S. Policy in the East China Sea Islands Dispute*, *The Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force*, *Operation Tomodachi*, *The Japan Self-Defense Forces Law*, and *Japan in the 1960s*.

4 Eighty Years after WWII: A Comparative Analysis of Historical Reckoning in Europe and Asia39 **Valérie Niquet**

Valérie Niquet is senior fellow at the Japan Institute of International Affairs and head of the Asia department at Foundation for Strategic Research. She writes extensively on Asia-Pacific strategic affairs and security. Her latest book include *L'Indo-Pacifique nouveau centre du monde* publication date: 2024. You can follow her on twitter @V.Niquet

Evolving U.S. Pacific Security Framework

Benjamin Blandin

Abstract

This article traces the evolution of U.S. grand strategy in the Pacific from the early days of the 18th century to the present time, highlighting four major phases: initial expansion (1820–1941), wartime ascendancy and Cold War predominance (1941–1973), post-Vietnam retrenchment (1973–2009), and the renewed pivot to Asia (since 2009). It argues that while the United States entered the Pacific belatedly compared to European powers, it progressively secured a lasting presence through territorial acquisitions, military expeditions, and the establishment of forward bases. The Second World War and subsequent conflicts in Korea and Vietnam consolidated America's role as a Pacific power, underpinned by alliances and global liberal internationalism. The post-Vietnam era saw a relative decline in military engagement, but continued intelligence, technological, and economic influence. Since 2009, U.S. policy has shifted again, emphasizing flexible force posture, enhanced partnerships, and multilateral initiatives in response to China's growing assertiveness. The analysis concludes that America's enduring legitimacy as a Pacific nation now faces unprecedented challenges from industrial, technological, and strategic constraints, requiring deeper reliance on allies to sustain its regional leadership

From its creation up to the current era, the United States has adopted different approaches to the concept of Grand Strategy, including isolationism (with elements of expansionism), liberal internationalism, containment, strategic retrenchment and the War on Terror.

This article aims at describing this succession of strategic evolutions and how it influenced U.S. policies and shaped the country's involvement in the Pacific through five successive time periods, covering the early days of the American presence (1820–1941), from the Pacific campaign to the Vietnam War (1941–1973), the post-Vietnam War era (1973–2009), and the pivot (from 2009).

From 1820 to present, a history of American engagement in the Pacific Ocean

Created in 1776 and finally independent in 1783, the United States of America were all but destined to be a Pacific power if we consider the initial limits of the 13 colonies, but these borders were to experience a considerable change in a short period of time. Indeed, starting from their proclamation of independence, the U.S. have grown through a succession of land cessions, conflicts and annexations, including the French cession of Louisiana in 1803, the British cessions of 1818 and 1842 (northern border settlement), and 1846 (Oregon), the Spanish cessions of 1813 and 1819 (Florida), the annexation of Texas (1845), the Mexican cessions of 1848 (New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada & California) following the Mexican-American War of 1846–1848 and the Gadsden Purchase of 1853. All in all, the size of the continental United States has grown almost tenfold, from 1,1 million km² to 8 million km², not even counting for Alaska that was later acquired from Russia in 1863.

In the wake of the “Manifest Destiny”, the United States entered an active phase of expansionism and interventionism, transforming from an Atlantic Ocean, European-centric

country to one that covers three oceans (and the Gulf of Mexico) and the greatest part of an entire continent with economic, diplomatic and military interests in Asia and the South Pacific. This evolution that we could label using a renowned Chinese classic “Journey to the West” was not without consequences.

A late and progressive arrival in the Pacific (1820–1941)

Being present in the Pacific Ocean since at least 1784 for trade and whaling activities, the United States was the last Western power to gain access to and to explore the Pacific Ocean, about three hundred years after the expedition of the Spanish explorer Magellan, and a flurry of other expeditions initiated by Spain, Portugal, France and the United Kingdom, with a first state-sponsored presence made up by the Pacific Squadron (1820-1910). Even though this initiative was a humble beginning, with a limited number of boats all along its lifetime, it was not to last for too long and the United States indeed followed suit with a series of naval expeditions. Some of these were shaped by both commercial and scientific concerns, like the Wilkes Expedition (1838), the USS Albatross Expedition (1886) and the Tanager Expedition (1923). Others were driven by a desire to expand American influence and interests in the Pacific Ocean - later coined as “gunboat diplomacy” - such as the Perry Expeditions to Japan (1852), the intervention in the second Opium War in China (1857), the Formosa Expedition (1867), the “Korean Expedition” to Joseon (1871) and the China Relief Expedition (1898) during the Boxer rebellion. During that time, the United States also established the Yangtze River Patrol Force (1854–1949) and the U.S. Asiatic Fleet (1902–1942) to protect American interests in China and the Pacific.

Despite a national strategy of isolationism, these expeditions have indeed allowed the United States to make a place for itself – politically at least – among the great powers of that era, notably through the signing of unequal treaties with China¹, Japan² and Joseon³. These treaties expanded the reach of American business interests and were accompanied by a growing presence of American citizens, especially in China, following the establishment of the American Concession in Shanghai (1848–1863), including military personnel, diplomats and a significant number of missionaries who opened charitable institutions such as hospitals, places of worship and schools.

Encouraged by a state sponsored imperial policy, the American presence then transformed from occasional to permanent through a particular piece of legislation, the Guano Act of 1856, an act that authorized the United States to claim all uninhabited islands on which guano was found on the sole basis of a declaration by any citizen of the United States. In all, fifty-six islands were claimed, the vast majority in the Pacific Ocean, and partially occupied, notably Howland Island, Baker Atoll, Johnston Atoll, Jarvis Island, Kingman Reef, Midway, Northern Mariana, Guam, Wake Island, Palmyra Atoll, and the American Samoa between 1856 and 1900. An “*a posteriori*” legitimization that was to serve again with the illegal annexation of Hawaii following the Newlands Resolution of 1898, and the “*de facto*” occupation of the Philippines, Guam and the Northern Mariana after the Spanish-American War of 1898.

A little less than two decades later, in 1914, another event was to transform the United States’ approach to the Pacific Ocean, when the Panama Canal, connecting the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, was finally inaugurated after having been initiated in 1880 by the French engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps. This canal, measuring 80 km, not only allowed ships to cut time by half for a New York to San Francisco Journey, paving the way for an increased American commercial and military presence, but also reflected the increasing importance of the Pacific in U.S. foreign policy.

¹ Treaty of Wanghia of 1844, Treaty of Tientsin of 1858, Boxer protocol of 1901

² Treaty of Kanagawa of 1854, “Harris Treaty” of 1858

³ Joseon–United States Treaty of 1882

This growing American presence and influence coincided with an emerging power in Asia, Japan, and its aggressive and expansionist strategy. This strategy started with the formal annexation of the Bonin islands in 1876 and that of the Ryu Kyu in 1879 and was followed by a succession of military successes, even though costly, against the Qing empire in 1895 and the Russian empire in 1905, both at land and at sea. Both victories allowed Japan to annex or occupy Joseon, Taiwan, the Pescadores and the Liaodong Peninsula. During World War I again, Japan expanded its territory through occupation under a mandate of the League of Nations or “South Seas Mandate” (1920) of the German Pacific territories and the Shandong peninsula.

After this last conflict, the Washington Naval Treaty (1922) limited naval arms race in the Pacific but also solidified the U.S.’s position as a leading Pacific power. Only a decade later Japan resumed its attacks against China with the Mukden incident and the ensuing occupation of Manchuria, which marked the beginning of the second Sino-Japanese War. From there, the tensions only kept growing between the United States and Japan as the later engaged in continued attacks, from the Marco Polo bridge incident and the invasion of China to the USS Panay incident and the Nanjing Massacre, all of which happened in 1937. These last tragic events led to the adoption by the United States of economic sanctions in 1940 and again in 1941, effectively halting trade and impacting the Japanese defense industry and military capabilities. Fortunately, faced with the Japanese threat, the United States had taken advantage of the 1920s and 1930s to build and develop a string of military installations such as naval and air bases, to protect their territories, including Naval Station Pearl Harbor in Hawaii or Clark Airbase in the Philippines. Some ventures were more exotic such as the establishment of the American Equatorial Islands Colonization Project (1935–1942) on Jarvis Island, Howland islands and Baker Atoll (later expanded to Canton Island and Enderbury island), with the purpose of building weather stations and landing fields that could serve military and commercial purposes on air routes between Western Australia and California.

In just about fifty years, from the Perry expedition to the Spanish-American War, and the pre-World War II, the United States had moved from a near absent power to a major “*de facto*” resident power in the Pacific Ocean, controlling a great number of territories. The conflict to come was to become its ultimate test of resolve and demonstrate its attachment to this newfound role in the Pacific.

From the Pacific campaign to the Vietnam War, a ubiquitous power? (1941–1973)

Shocked by Japan’s surprise attack at Pearl Harbor Naval Base on December 7th, 1941, the United States quickly activated their massive industrial capabilities and developed their military arsenal in record time. Already raised before the war from 334.000 men in 1939 to 1,8 million in 1941, the armed forces of the United States rose to 12 million men by 1945, including 4,2 million in the Navy and 660.000 in the Marine Corps. The number of tanks, planes, pieces of artillery and vessels experienced an equally formidable increase, the Navy in particular, growing from 790 vessels in 1941, including seven aircraft carriers, to nearly 6800 vessels, including thirty-four aircraft carriers, in 1945.

Despite a series of rapid offensives by the Japanese Imperial Army in 1942, which stretched from the Chinese hinterland to Papua New Guinea in the south, and from the Aleutian Islands in the northeast to Burma and India in the west, the United States stood firm. Taking leadership of the Allied forces, including Great Britain, Australia, and the Netherlands, the U.S. launched the Doolittle Raid, waged a devastating submarine campaign, and secured crucial victories in key naval, air, and ground battles at Midway, Guadalcanal, and the Coral Sea. Additionally, the U.S. provided vital Lend-Lease aid to its allies, including Australia, New Zealand, China, the Soviet Union, and the Netherlands, further strengthening the global resistance against Japan.

Between 1943 and 1945, the United States achieved capital successes with their “Island hopping campaign”, progressively taking control of the Pacific Islands (Tarawa, Saipan, Kwajalein, Guam, Peleliu, Tinian) and Papua New Guinea, retaking the Philippines, expelling the Japanese forces from Borneo and launching a massive landing in Okinawa. In 1945, the world saw the first use of a new weapon with the release of a uranium bomb (“Little Boy”) on Hiroshima, and a plutonium bomb (“Fat Man”) on Nagasaki, both leading Japan to recognize its defeat and to sign its capitulation onboard the USS Missouri. The end of World War II and the use of the atom as a weapon, quickly followed by the USSR, led the U.S. to establish the Pacific Nuclear Test Site or “Pacific Proving Grounds” in the Marshall Islands that detonated a total of 105 nuclear tests between 1946 and 1962 over a series of campaigns, including Operations Crossroads, Sandstone, Greenhouse, Ivy, Castle, Redwing, Hardtack I and Dominic I and II.

Despite major victories over the axis power in both Asia and Europe, the United States was not to rest for long and soon found itself supporting France in its colonial war in Indochina (1946–1954) while leading the United Nations forces in their first campaign to protect South Korea from an invasion by its northern neighbour, retreating at first under the chock of a massive attack, all the way to Busan. It then quickly brought reinforcements and established absolute air superiority, in addition to launching a surprise landing in Incheon, cutting North Korean supplies and making it possible to launch a major counterattack that took UN forces all the way to the border between North Korea and China. The ensuing massive Chinese offensive resulted in a controlled retreat that ultimately ended up with the fixation of the armistice line on the 38th parallel, a “demilitarized zone,” in fact the most heavily armed area in the world.

Less than a year after the end of the Korean War, the United States started deploying military advisors to the government of South Vietnam, but it only started involving itself in 1965. From there, the American military presence grew over the years, reaching a pic of 500.000 men in 1968, in addition to which other countries contributed such as South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines and Taiwan. In Vietnam, the United States again attempted to use the techniques that had proven so successful in the previous two conflicts: establishing near total air superiority, using the latest weapon systems of their arsenal, including the B-52 bombers, the F-4 and F-5 jet fighters, the ubiquitous Chinook and UH-1 Iroquois helicopters, and the M-109 self-propelled howitzers, and an unrestricted use of standard and chemical (orange agent) bombings in Vietnam as well as in Laos and Cambodia. But despite these advantages, the war did not progress in their favour and by 1973 the United States left South Vietnam who ultimately fell to the North in 1975, leading to a reunification of the country.

In total, over these three conflicts, the United States’ involvement led to 866,000 casualties, including 206,000 dead and 660,000 wounded, not accounting for equipment loss and overall cost of the war, but it positioned them as the first ever super-power, either in economic, diplomatic, military and influence terms as well as the first nuclear power, one of the key founders of the United Nations, and a major actor when not the winner of three consecutive major conflicts of the 20th century (for a total of six major conflicts in the 20th century, including the first world war, the Gulf War and the Balkans War) on top of becoming a major global security provider for the region through a series of mutual defense treaties with Australia and New Zealand (ANZUS treaty, 1951), the Philippines (1951), South Korea (1953), Southeast Asia (SATO Treaty, 1954), Taiwan (1955) and Japan (1960).

This strategy of liberal internationalism, meant at maintaining U.S. political predominance through the creation and maintenance of an extensive network of allies (exemplified by NATO and bilateral or multilateral alliances) and the integration of other states into U.S.-designed international institutions (such as the IMF, WTO/GATT, and World Bank); This strategy also included the creation of a network of military bases all over the world and the deployment of hundreds of thousands of soldiers as well as military equipment and weapon systems overseas,

whether in Asia, the Middle East, Central and Latin America and Europe, especially in the framework of its containment strategy of communist countries.

The post-Vietnam War era, a reduced presence in the Pacific amid global refocus toward the Middle East? (1973–2009)

Following the end of the American engagement in the Vietnam war in 1973, and led by increasing tension in the Middle East, the United States armed forces massively disengaged from the Pacific theatre in a concerted effort to refocus their attention to the Persian Gulf area, following a series of conflicts including the various stages of the Arab–Israeli conflict (since 1948), the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), the Iranian Revolution (1979), the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), and later the first and second Gulf wars (1990–1991 & 2003) and the war in Afghanistan (2001–2021). Also, the impact of the first and second oil crisis that took place in 1973 and 1979, should not be ignored, especially at a time of growing dependency in the United States toward oil and gas imports from the Middle East. This increased focus toward the Middle East led to an equal increase in the U.S. military presence in the area that included opening and/or negotiating access to military bases in Bahrain, Oman, Diego Garcia, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, and Qatar between 1971 and 2001.

During that period of shifting attention from one theatre to another, the Pacific seemed to have lost its importance to the United States, but it was only true in military terms. Even though they significantly reduced their military footprint, with a reduction of troops and the closing of bases, both the American government and its armed forces still maintained a significant presence, for a variety of purposes. This ranged from Soviet submarines hunting, the installation of early warning radars and mid-course missiles interception, intelligence gathering, space and ballistic programs as well as the War on Terror post-09/11 and the containment strategy against the spread of communism. The first and most noticeable element of that list is undoubtedly military disengagement. This process began after the end of World War II, was temporarily halted during the Korean War and again during the Vietnam War but resumed immediately afterward.

In Japan, U.S. troops, which had amounted to 300,000 after World War II, decreased to 150,000 after 1952 and kept decreasing steadily until they stabilized around 50,000 after the retrocession of Okinawa in 1972. In South Korea, the number of U.S. troops also passed from 325,000 in 1953 to around 40,000 in 1970 and 28,500 after 2000. In Taiwan, about 1000 American “advisors” left the country in 1979, after the PRC was recognized as the legal government of China. In different countries and territories, U.S. military bases closed, were decommissioned or relocated: Itazuke Air Base in Japan (1979), Clark Air Base and Subic Bay in the Philippines (in 1991 and 1992), Midway Atoll (1993), Naval Air Station Agana in Guam (1995), Johnston Atoll (2004).

Started in 1947, the Cold War was at its height in the 1970s and 1980s, and the competition between USSR and the United States was very much alive in the domain of submarine warfare. With a seemingly ever-growing presence of Soviet SSNs and SSBNs and the constant threat of possible submarine-launched ICBMs against North America, the United States permanently assigned 60–70% of its submarine force to the Pacific Fleet. In practical terms, it meant that approximately 40 SSNs and 20 SSBNs were deployed at either Pearl Harbor, Guam and Bangor. In addition to the deployment of naval assets, the United States expanded the “Sound Surveillance System” or SOSUS, a network of undersea passive acoustic radar initially designed in the 1950s to detect Soviet submarines in both the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans.

As part of their space, ballistic and anti-ballistic programs, the United States established a number of installations at various locations in the Pacific Ocean, but the Kwajalein Atoll, from the 1960s until today, had the particularity to concentrate all three dimensions between the islands of Kwajalein, with the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site, Meck, for a Nike Zeus optical satellite tracking system, and various anti-ballistic missile programs such as Nike-X, Strategic Defense Initiative and the THAAD, and Roi Namur, with a ARPA Long-Range Tracking

And Instrumentation Radar (ALTAIR). The Kwajalein Atoll comprised several core elements including tracking radars, stationary and mobile telemetry, optical recording equipment and a secured optic Fiber data network via the HANTRU-1 undersea cable. The Reagan Test Site also served as a tracking station for crewed space flight and NASA research projects. In addition to these government activities, it should be noted that Space X has also been using Omelek Island as an early test launch site.

This period was also the opportunity for the United States to develop, automatize and standardize intelligence gathering with their allies in the Pacific region, which led to the creation of the five eyes intelligence sharing alliance and the Echelon program, particularly well-known due the Pine Gap site in Australia. But the five eyes alliance involves other countries other than just Australia and the United States, including New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom, and the U.S. also share intelligence with its QUAD and QUAD+ allies, namely India, Japan and South Korea. This data gathering and sharing does not only transit through satellites but mostly via secured subsea cables, such as the PAC connecting Hawaii, Guam, and Okinawa, and the SSCS connecting Kwajalein Atoll, Guam, and Diego Garcia.

Less known, but very much active, was the War on Terror that followed the 09/11 terrorist attack in the United States. Even though it did not lead the United States in any direct conflict in the Pacific, it still led to an active engagement in support of allies and partners confronted to violent separatist and terrorist movements such as the MILF at the border between Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. As such, the United States has provided these countries with light weapons, training and various kinds of equipment, including – as part of the “Coast Watch South” project – the donation of dozens of naval radars to cover the Sulu and Celebes seas.

The pivot, a return of the United States? (from 2009)

Despite a global strategy of “strategic retrenchment”, also known as “Obama doctrine”, seen in the departure from Iraq and the progressive withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Obama administration initiated in 2009, in reaction to a growing China's assertiveness in its near seas and in Asia Pacific, the strategy of a U.S. pivot, or at least that officialised the necessity of an increased engagement, toward Asia (to compare with the previous neocons' strategy of a “Greater Middle East”). This strategy was made clear with Secretary Clinton's article in Foreign Policy titled “America's Pacific Century” and it officialised over President Obama's speech in Australia in 2011. Among its core elements, three played a crucial role in reshaping the relationship and cooperation between the United States and its allies and partners: the transformation of the U.S. military presence in the region, its expanding involvement across the Pacific, and significant investments in defense infrastructure throughout the area.

Diplomacy, in particular, held an important part, notably with ASEAN, the QUAD and the Pacific Island Nations. First with ASEAN, whom the United States became the very first dialogue Partner in 1977 and began participating in the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1993, this relation expanded in 2009 via the establishment of a Permanent Mission to ASEAN, then in 2015 with the establishment of the ASEAN-U.S. Strategic Partnership and in 2022 with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy reaffirming ASEAN's centrality to U.S. policy. Concerning the QUAD, this initially informal grouping comprising the United States, Japan, India and Australia was established in 2007 and then revived in 2017 as a response to shifting dynamics in the Indo-Pacific and China's action toward Taiwan and in the South China Sea. Initially limited in terms of scope, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue progressively expanded to a variety of domains such as infrastructure, climate change and cybersecurity. It also evolved into the QUAD+ format to include additional partner nations: South Korea, New Zealand, Vietnam, the Philippines, the United Kingdom, France and the European Union, some also contributing to the Five Eyes, and AUKUS.

With the Pacific Island nations too, the United States engaged itself by contributing to a number of regional-level groupings and organisations such as the Blue Dot Network, the Pacific Island Community, the Melanesian Spearhead Group, the Polynesian Leaders Group, the Pacific Islands Forum, the Partners in the Blue Pacific and the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission. More practically, the United States established diplomatic relations with Niue and the Cook Islands in 2023, reopened its embassy in the Solomon Islands the same year, opened two embassies in Tonga and Vanuatu, and is considering options to improve its representations in Kiribati, Fiji and Papua New Guinea. Beyond the signature of agreements and its diplomatic presence, the U.S. influence in the region was also greatly improved by the return or the expansion of the activities of two organisations: USAID (later dissolved in 2025), all over the Pacific, and the Peace Corps, currently present in Fiji, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu.

In terms of defense and maritime security cooperation, the United States has signed agreements covering various domains with its partners in the region: Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement, Fisheries law enforcement Agreement, Defense and Maritime Cooperation Agreement, General Security of Military Information Agreement, Maritime Law Enforcement Agreement, Military Use and Operating Rights Agreement, Shiprider Agreement and Status-of-Forces Agreement. These agreements are part of the new U.S. strategy of a wide but light and flexible military footprint that allow the country to be fully engaged in the entire Pacific while not maintaining a costly and growingly unpopular military presence, like in the case of Okinawa, while empowering its allies and partners.

Still, this does not mean that U.S. forces have disappeared from the Pacific as they retain access to numerous military bases across the region. This presence can be naturally found through its own bases along the American coastline and in Hawaii and Guam, but also at partner countries such as Australia⁴, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines⁵ and Singapore⁶ (a members of the FPDA⁷). More recently, the United States has partnered with a new set of countries including Palau, Micronesia⁸ and Papua New Guinea⁹ for the reopening of WWII sites (Peleliu, Lombrum) and the building of over-the-horizon radars. From these bases, the U.S. deploys forces and assets on a rotational basis to replenish, repair, train and deploy. A good example being the deployment over the South China Sea of P8 Poseidon surveillance planes and drones from Guam, the Philippines, Japan and South Korea and that of B52-H bombers from Roesmin Nurjadin Air Base in Indonesia.

Over the past two decades, U.S. actions in the Pacific have grown significantly, with an increase in Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) both at sea and in the air, as well as Taiwan Strait transits, innocent passages, and port calls. In addition, U.S. forces have strengthened their relationships with allies and partners through enhanced cooperation, including 2+2 meetings, the exchange of officers for training, joint patrols, and a wide range of military exercises—spanning ground, naval, air, cyber, and general staff operations. These exercises, which occur at various levels (bilateral and multilateral) number up to seventy per year.

Finally, the U.S. is also acting as a net security provider through donations of new and

⁴ RAAF Bases Darwin and Tindal, Robertson Barracks, HMAS Stirling

⁵ The U.S. Armed Forces have access to EDCA+ sites: Antonio Bautista Air Base, Basa Air Base, Fort Magsaysay, Lumbia Airfield, Mactan-Benito Ebuen Air Base, Camilo Osias Naval Base, Lal-lo Airport, Camp Melchor Dela Cruz and Balabac Island

⁶ The U.S. Armed Forces have access to Changi Naval Base as well as Paya Lebar and Tengah Air Bases

⁷ Five Powers Defense Arrangements: series of bilateral defense agreements between Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the United Kingdom

⁸ The U.S. is building over-the-horizon radars at Yap, Falalop and Fais Islands

⁹ Lombrum port, Port Moresby, Lae and Momote airports

decommissioned equipment. To name a few examples we could talk about the delivery to the Philippines of a National Coast Watch Center in 2015, the donation of Scan Eagle drones and decommissioned cutters and patrol boats to several ASEAN countries under the Maritime Security Initiative.

CONCLUSION

These four different periods of time of the American presence in the Pacific Ocean, from the modest early days of American exploration in the early 19th century, to ubiquitous power, followed by a relative disengagement, and lastly the pivot to Asia, demonstrate a continuous presence and interest for the area. Whether it acts through diplomacy, economy, infrastructure, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief or military and security means, the influence of the United States in the Pacific Ocean is of major proportion. After experiencing different stages, from expansionism, to isolationism, liberal internationalism, the War on Terror and the pivot to Asia, the United States' Grand Strategy has evolved in very different ways before reaching the current strategy, made of a lighter, more flexible footprint, that contributes to making it more appreciated and accepted by the public opinions.

The American presence in the Pacific has been enduring for two centuries, and the United States holds a strong claim to legitimacy in the region as a Pacific Ocean nation itself. The U.S. coastline along the Pacific stretches nearly 2,000 kilometers, encompassing three states—California, Oregon, and Washington—as well as the states of Hawaii and Alaska. Additionally, the U.S. has numerous territories scattered across the Pacific, including the unincorporated and unorganized Palmyra Atoll, the unincorporated and organized Northern Mariana Islands (with commonwealth status) and Guam (without commonwealth status), and a range of unincorporated, unorganized territories such as Howland Island, Baker Atoll, Johnston Atoll, Jarvis Island, Kingman Reef, Midway, Wake Island, and American Samoa. Furthermore, countries such as the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau are affiliated with the U.S. through Compacts of Free Association. In total these territories represent a global population of fifty-three million people, one-sixth of the overall American population.

Challenges to the American presence are being felt in a more and more acute fashion as China is increasing its assertiveness in its near seas, from the South China Sea to the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and the South Pacific, but even though the Chinese navy has grown to four hundred vessels, the U.S. Navy still beats it 2:1 in terms of tonnage and has established a network of facilities to which it could disperse its assets in terms of direct, high intensity, conflict. In addition, the United States has also developed a network of partnerships and mutual defense treaties with like-minded countries, through initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative (MSI), the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) initiative, the QUAD and QUAD+. Nonetheless, tensions and disputes are escalating, while the U.S. fleet is aging, and the Chinese fleet continues to modernize and expand. At the same time, American defense-industrial capabilities are facing significant challenges, reaching an all-time low. This situation threatens to undermine the effectiveness of the AUKUS deal.

It now remains to be seen how the United States will be able to rely more on their allies and partners or to evolve their Indo-Pacific strategy in a direction that allows to fix the industrial, technical and technological flaws that have plagued its capacities and to maintain a lasting and effective deterrence toward China's Grand Strategy.

Japan's 1941–1942 Covert Intelligence Operations in Southeast Asia: Evaluating the Role of Iwaichi Fujiwara and *F Kikan* in Retrospect

Monika Chansoria*

Abstract

This paper delves into the life of Iwaichi Fujiwara (藤原 岩市), an officer in the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II, who later became a Lieutenant General in the post-war Japan Ground Self-Defense Force. Tasked with planning operations in South Asia and Southeast Asia, Fujiwara traveled to Bangkok in 1941 on an intelligence mission, and joined the Japanese Southern Expeditionary Army Group. He was the founding commander of the almost legendary *Fujiwara Kikan* (*F Kikan*), a Japanese special operations unit tasked with conducting covert operations supporting Japan's military operations in Malaya and Singapore. This paper evaluates Japan's 1941–1942 covert operations in Southeast Asia, and seeks to analyze the role of *F Kikan*'s intelligence mission network and its instrumental connection with the Indian independence movement spread across Southeast Asia during the critical pre-World War II years. The *F Kikan*, notably, developed and assisted the then ongoing independence movements in British India, Malaya, and Netherlands East Indies. Besides, the paper highlights the time when Fujiwara was into the thick of *F Kikan*'s intelligence operative tasks in Thailand in 1941, and undertook a rather interesting project on the sidelines named *Harimao* involving a Japanese in Malaya.

Major Iwaichi Fujiwara (藤原 岩市) was an officer in the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II, who later became a Lieutenant General in the post-war Japan Ground Self Defense Force. Fujiwara was the founding commander of the almost legendary *Fujiwara Kikan* (*F Kikan*), a Japanese special operations unit tasked with conducting covert operations in support of Japan's military operations in Malaya and Singapore, by means of developing and assisting independence movements in British India, Malaya, and Netherlands East Indies.¹ In September 1941, Fujiwara established the *F Kikan* in Japan. This step was also instrumental in the establishment of the Indian National Army (INA).

India gained freedom from the British rule following a long, protracted independence struggle, which had many phases, and defining moments. A significant one amongst them was the role of the Indian National Army under *Netaji* Subhash Chandra Bose with crucial assistance and aid from Imperial Japan. Bose's view of India's struggle for independence differed radically from *Mahatma* Gandhi's. For Bose, World War II presented a golden opportunity to reach out to the adversaries of Britain, namely Germany and Japan, and seek their assistance to free India from under the oppressive British rule.² The successful attempts of Fujiwara, Captain Hachirō Suzuki,

* Dr. Monika Chansoria is a Senior Fellow at The Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA) in Tokyo, and a Senior Contributing Author on Asia's geopolitics for the JAPAN Forward Association, Inc., Tokyo.

¹ For detailed further reading, and additional references on the subject see, Monika Chansoria, "Japan, *Hikari Kikan*, and Subhash Chandra Bose's Indian National Army: The Defining, Yet Unfinished 1940s Connect," *Policy Brief*, The Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA), Tokyo, February 5, 2021, available at https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/policybrief/pdf/PolicyBrief_Chansoria_210205.pdf

² Ibid.

and the *F Kikan* to enlist thousands of dissident Indians to fight against colonialism alongside the Japanese, and rallying up anti-British forces in Burma succeeded in laying the foundations of the INA in Singapore.³

It has often been argued that covert operations are the central pivot of intelligence services. This technique was widely practiced during World War II, wherein many organizations were formed by all belligerents. For instance, in the early phases of Japan's offensive in Southeast Asia, the strategic utility of Imperial Japanese Army's covert operations through its intelligence unit, *Fujiwara Kikan*, was striking. With the objective of conducting covert operations and fueling *Fifth Column* activities to aid Japan's military operations in Malaya and Singapore between late 1941 and beginning 1942, the *F Kikan* yielded mixed results in all.⁴ Besides, it reputedly gained the support of the local Malay royalty and the majority population of Malays for the Japanese cause, in addition to running a group of bandits who conducted sabotage behind British lines.⁵

Fujiwara and *F Kikan*'s Bangkok Chapter: A Backgrounder

Fujiwara's journey can be traced back to the milestone year 1939, when he was transferred to the military intelligence unit within the Imperial General Headquarters (IGHQ). Tasked with planning operations in South Asia and Southeast Asia, he later traveled to Bangkok in 1941 on an intelligence mission, and joined the Japanese Southern Expeditionary Army Group as its Chief of Staff. After its founding, the *F Kikan* was shifted to Bangkok and put under the overall command of the Southern Expeditionary Forces commanded by General Hisaichi Terauchi, and later under the operational control of the 25th Army under the command of Lieutenant General Tomoyuki Yamashita.⁶

In his memorandum as Chief of the *F Kikan* (*F Kikanchō no Shuki*) derived from his 1966 book entitled *F Kikan* [Jieitai, Tokyo 1959]⁷ Fujiwara recalled the day, 01 October 1941, as a hot, muggy day in Thailand when as a young Japanese major, he stepped out from a Douglas Dakota, only to be momentarily blinded by the rays of the scorching Bangkok sun. The officer was tense, given the nature of his mission as he drove to a Thai hotel. While he traveled to Bangkok under a civilian alias, Hirokazu Yamashita, he was in fact, Iwaichi Fujiwara, a young major in the 8th Section of the Second Bureau of the IGHQ.

Although Fujiwara was not a stranger to Bangkok, for he had been sent down on a brief secret mission⁸ about eight months ago in late March 1940, he remained awed by the importance of his mission, and moreover, by his own lack of experience in the field of international intelligence. The Imperial Japanese Army was known to assign key missions to middle-ranking officers, and provide them with plenty of leeway to use their own initiatives in executing tasks. In this aspect, the Japanese Army differed from the British or American armies, and even the army of the Third Reich.⁹ Earlier, when Fujiwara was posted in the propaganda broadcasting affairs in the 8th

³ For details see, Louis Allen, *War, Conflict and Security in Japan and Asia Pacific, 1941–1952, The Writings of Louis Allen Series*, vol. 4, (Global Oriental Ltd., 2011), p. xx.

⁴ As cited in, Adam Leong Kok Wey, "Japanese Intelligence and Covert Operations: A Strategic Evaluation of *Fujiwara Kikan* in the invasion of Malaya and Singapore, 1941–1942," *Journal of Intelligence History*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2018, pp. 52–64.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Iwaichi Fujiwara, *F. Kikan: Japanese Army Intelligence Operations in Southeast Asia during World War II*, Translated by Akashi Yoji, (Hong Kong: Heinemann, 1983).

⁷ For further details see, Joyce C. Lebra, "Japanese Policy and the Indian National Army," *Asian Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1969, pp. 31–49.

⁸ Chansoria, "Japan, *Hikari Kikan* ...," *Policy Brief*, n. 1.

⁹ Lebra, *Asian Studies*, n. 7.

Section at the IGHQ in December 1940, he was responsible for providing safe passage to three Indian escapees from a British prison in Hong Kong on a Japanese ship bound for Bangkok. Upon reaching there, the exiles contacted the Japanese military attaché, and leaders of the Indian independence movement based and operating from Southeast Asia. The mission had been accomplished so discreetly that even the names of the three Indians were not recorded at the Headquarters.¹⁰

Subsequently, Chief of General Staff, General Hajime Sugiyama called in 33-year-old Fujiwara, and the five commissioned officers assigned to him on 18 September, 1941. Fujiwara was handed a typed directive:¹¹

You will assist Colonel Tamura in aiding movements in the Malayan sector, particularly in maintaining liaison with the anti-British Indian Independence League (IIL), the Malays, and the Chinese... Apart from your official duties, if an Anglo-Japanese war should break out, you will prepare to facilitate military strategy ... look at the total Indian situation ... and study the skillful organization and leadership of the British Indian army, which is designed to restrain any anti-British movements among the Indians.

Fujiwara's 1941 Bangkok assignment was a direct result of the increasing probability of an imminent war that was about to break in the Pacific. Bangkok, a key listening post for all of Asia, was already infested with British, American, Chinese, and German intelligence agents. Quite naturally, Japan stepped up its intelligence operations in Southeast Asia, which was a major source of tin, rubber, and oil supplies for Japan.¹² In the event of war in the Pacific, the Indian, Burmese, and Malayan [now western Malaysia] independence movements would assume greater importance for Japan. In that, the latter could recognize the aspirations for independence in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and substantially weaken Britain, the common adversary.

Fujiwara, though involved in an ideological warfare in Bangkok, was unable to speak Malay, or *Hindi*, with only a bit of English that he remembered from high school. Besides, he was rather disappointed on going through the library of General Staff Headquarters to find only an Indian travelogue by a Japanese, and a few other scattered references to India.¹³ It was quite apparent that given its push into Manchuria and China, the headquarters had not paid adequate attention to India, and had bypassed Southeast Asia. This became a primary driver for Fujiwara's sense of mission towards India and the Indian independence movement.¹⁴ He was quite certain from the very outset that political warfare had to be waged without pushing one's own interests too hard. He advocated that Japan must display genuine sympathy for the liberation movements in these regions, especially in British India. And thus, was born the *Fujiwara Kikan*. Fujiwara, undoubtedly, was instrumental in bringing India to the attention of the IGHQ in Tokyo and helping organize the INA. Research at archives reveals that it was Fujiwara who in 1941 established the initial credibility of Japanese aid for the Indian independence struggle, as well as established its critical liaison with the ongoing Indian independence movement activities in Southeast Asia at that time.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² For detailed further reading and references on Rash Behari Bose of Nakamura, see, Monika Chansoria, "Rash Behari Bose of Nakamura: From Being Exiled in Japan to Founding the Indian National Army and Promoting a Pan-Asianist Discourse," *Policy Brief*, The Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA), Tokyo, August 16, 2021, available at https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/policybrief/pdf/PolicyBrief_Chansoria_210816.pdf

¹³ For details see, Joyce Chapman Lebra, *The Indian National Army and Japan*, (Singapore: Asia Pacific Press Pte. Ltd., 1971).

¹⁴ Chansoria, "Rash Behari Bose of Nakamura ...," *Policy Brief*, n. 12.

F Kikan's Intelligence Mission Network: Connect with Indian Independence League's Pritam Singh

When Iwaichi Fujiwara took over the assignment to manage key intelligence operations in Bangkok in 1941, spreading from Thailand, to Malaya, and Burma, he was fully sensitive to the Thai government's response to competing foreign intelligence activities on their soil. While the Thai government maintained friendly ties with Britain, it simultaneously remained cordial in its relations with Imperial Japan. For Fujiwara, maintaining this fine political balance was essential, and he thus, he set out to maintain liaison with the Chinese, Malays, and most significantly, the Indian independence movement spread across Southeast Asia.

Given that Thailand was the central base for all these activities, Fujiwara's operations encompassed several projects including the Indian independence project, the Sumatra project, the Malaya Youth League project, and the overseas Chinese merchant's project. He was aware of the mammoth responsibility placed on his shoulders. For, the Japanese military strategy would not succeed in Malaya and Thailand unless Fujiwara delivered successfully. When he began interacting with his senior officer in Bangkok, Colonel Tamura, the latter directed Fujiwara to work closely on three specific projects: 1) the Indian independence movement; 2) the overseas Chinese merchants; 3) and the Malay organizations and royalty (*sultans*). Incidentally, there were many Japanese working in Bangkok, be it training the Thai army; doing business via the Mitsui Trading Company; or on political assignments such as arbitrating the Thai Indochinese boundary dispute. All along, Fujiwara remained cognizant that the Japanese should not appear as subjugators¹⁵ and that all Asian people should work together with mutual respect and harmony. Japan sought to encourage independence movements, without a hint of constraint.

Fujiwara's staff included a small unit of 12 members, along with a *Hindi*-speaking interpreter for the India project. Fujiwara named this group, the *F Kikan*, or *Fujiwara Kikan*¹⁶ (the word *Kikan* meaning "agency"). While his immediate objective was to familiarize and coordinate cooperation with all the above-mentioned groups, the final objective, of course, was facilitating Japan's military offensive in Singapore. To fulfill their mission of gathering intelligence, the *F Kikan's* staff undertook a variety of disguises including that of businessmen, watchmakers, druggists, hotel boys, mining engineers in mountain areas, and rubber merchants and brokers on plantations. The *F Kikan* members also became scouts for Japanese units, engaged in espionage, disrupting communications, collecting provisions and military material. When the Malays, Thais, Chinese, and Indians worked for the *F Kikan*, the effectiveness of the operations got amplified substantially, and the network spread from Bangkok through Thailand and Malaya, and further down south towards Singapore.

Later, while recording *F Kikanchō no Shuki*, the Memorandum of the Chief of the *F Agency*, [Jieitai, Tokyo 1959] Fujiwara recalled his memorable first meeting with an Indian leader of the Indian independence movement.¹⁷ He met a young turbaned Indian Sikh named, Pritam Singh, who greeted Colonel Tamura and Major Fujiwara with the traditional Indian salutation of hands clasped before him. Fujiwara was gripped by the Sikh's idealism, sincerity, and enthusiasm for India's liberation from British rule. Fujiwara conveyed to Singh, "I have come to help you realize your lofty ideal ... I have confidence that Indian independence will be achieved through devotion and friendship."

Though Pritam Singh shared with Fujiwara, India's antagonism towards the Japanese actions

¹⁵ For details see, the *Untitled Review Work* by Kernial Singh Sandhu of *Jungle Alliance: Japan and the Indian National Army* by Joyce C. Lebra, published in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, March 1973, pp. 141–143.

¹⁶ Lebra, *The Indian National Army and Japan...*, n. 13.

¹⁷ As cited in Lebra, *Asian Studies*, n. 7.

in China, he simultaneously conveyed the hopes of millions of Indians for their independence, while Britain was fighting in Europe. It appeared to be the perfect time for Fujiwara to begin his mission and for Indo-Japanese cooperation in Southeast Asia. This was also the time when Fujiwara decided to move out of the Thai hotel into a modest house near the Bangkok railway station. He usually met Pritam Singh in an unusual venue. It was the house of an Indian cloth merchant situated above a Japanese pickle factory, and regularly transmitted detailed reports of his meetings with Singh and the others through Colonel Tamura to the IGHQ in Tokyo.

Pritam Singh explained to Fujiwara about the two Indian organizations that were primarily active in Bangkok: 1) the Indian Independence League comprising mostly of Sikhs; and 2) an Indo-Thai cultural organization. Pritam Singh was associated with the former, with its men scattered through southern Thailand, and north-east Malayan coastal cities. Singh further apprised Fujiwara of the strong anti-British sentiment nurtured by Indian soldiers who were serving in the British-Indian Army.

Pritam Singh struck a deal with Fujiwara wherein the former, in the event of a Japanese offensive into Malaya, will attempt to sow discord within the Indian Army ranks by raising Indian nationalist and anti-British sentiments. The IIL would also appeal to the Indian population in Malaya to support the Japanese. The defected Indian soldiers would be sent back to the front lines to spread disaffection within the ranks of British Indian soldiers and undermine their morale, thus enticing them to defect to the Japanese side.¹⁸ Pritam Singh was promised that the defected Indian soldiers would later be organized into an independent free Indian army, used to fight for the cause of India's independence with the support of Japanese forces after the successful capture of Malaya, Singapore and Burma.¹⁹ This was an important facet of *F Kikan's* propaganda campaign as two-thirds of the British forces based in Malaya and Singapore, i.e., about 58,000 out of 86,895 soldiers were from the British-Indian Army.²⁰

Furthermore, Pritam Singh suggested that anti-British broadcasts should be beamed from Tokyo across India, given that the listening audience would be limitless. Singh was already in contact via telegraph with the Indians in Shanghai and Tokyo. The Japanese technical assistance in this regard was to be instrumental in unifying the entire movement. Incidentally, Fujiwara recalled noticing a young Sikh officer after delivering a speech²¹ to the Indian prisoners of war, which was being translated into *Hindi* by Pritam Singh:

Among four company commanders, one small Sikh captain whom I took to be a senior officer drew my attention. This was because his attitude was dignified and he was brisk and smart (*kibikibi*). His gaze revealed a sharp intelligence, unalloyed enthusiasm, and a strong will. You could see at a glance he was a first-rate young officer... After he received the battalion commander's orders, with an energetic and simple gesture he gave a grave and dignified salute, and shot me a glance full of friendliness... The battalion commander introduced the captain to Pritam Singh and myself. This was Mohan Singh who was to become the historic founder of the Indian National Army.

As per Louis Allen's account, when it came to addressing the higher authority, Fujiwara acted throughout as a negotiator for the Imperial General Headquarters. His personal involvement with the first INA and its commanding general, Mohan Singh, was intense. However, Mohan Singh, subsequently, came into conflict with the Japanese authorities, was arrested, and removed from

¹⁸ Wey, *Journal of Intelligence History*, n. 4.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ For more details see, Harchand Singh Bedi, "Forgotten Deeds of Sikh Heroism: The Battle of Malaya," May 19, 2010, available at <https://www.sikhnet.com/news/forgotten-deeds-sikh-heroism-battle-malaya>

²¹ Fujiwara, *F Kikan*, pp. 118–119, cited in Allen, n. 3.

his command.²²

In the backdrop of all the above developments, the British Government, by the end of 1941, wanted to negotiate with the Indian leadership how to prevent Japan's aggressive movement towards British-India's eastern frontier.²³ However, this move was countered by the narratives of *Netaji* Bose, Iwaichi Fujiwara, Pritam Singh, Mohan Singh, Rash Behari Bose of Nakamura, and many others who were based in Japan, and across Southeast Asia. They all were critical in telling the other side of the story, in terms of how the counter-narrative to the British was gaining ground. And thus, the British feelers failed. India was firm on its stand of non-cooperation with the British. By August 1942, *Mahatma* Gandhi launched the *Quit India Movement*, a non-violent protest movement demanding an end to the British rule in India.²⁴

Fujiwara's 1941 *Harimao* Project involving a Japanese in Malaya

By the time Iwaichi Fujiwara got into the thick of *F Kikan*'s intelligence operative tasks in Thailand, he undertook a rather interesting project on the sidelines named *Harimao*. It involved a Japanese contact in Malaya. *Harimao* was the Japanese translation for "Tiger" in Malay, and the project revolved around a passionate [bordering on being fanatical] young Japanese man, who later earned Fujiwara's respect immensely. Known as the "Tiger" of Malaya, this was the story of Yutaka Tani.

When Tani was an infant, his parents moved from Japan and arrived in Malaya in 1911. They prospered by opening a barber shop in Kota Bahru and began raising their family. By 1932, Japan had taken over Manchuria, and a gush of anti-Japanese sentiment ran across China's merchant community. This gradually spread among the Malays as well. The Chinese merchants began organizing boycotts, and harassing customers at Japanese shops, with the support of the local police. The situation reached a point when mobs began targeting and killing the Japanese upon sight, including infants and young children. One such victim in November 1932 was the eight-year-old sister of Yutaka Tani. The shocking murder of his sister infuriated 21-year-old Tani, who went on a revenge spree following the brutal incident by planning retaliatory strikes with the support of a group of Malays and Thais.

In a short span of time, *Harimao*'s legend spread throughout Malaya. By November 1941, *Harimao*, who spoke Malay and Japanese fluently, was brought to the attention of the *F Kikan* members especially Captain Kamimoto. According to Shizuo Maruyama, who wrote "*Himitsu no Tatakai*" (Secret Struggle) in the *Biruma Hen* (Burma Volume), *Hiroku Dai Toa Senshi*, edited by Yu Ikeda (Tokyo 1953), Kamimoto apprised Fujiwara about Tani and showed the latter's photo. Initially, Fujiwara was not too impressed. In the photo, Tani's rugged, unshaven look in torn clothes was not a sight to be beholden. Tani had collected a band of between 1,000 and 3,000 bandits from Malays in the northern state of Malaya, Kelantan, and Southern Thailand. Kamimoto described the actions of Tani and his gang and convinced Fujiwara that in Tani, the *F Kikan* had found a readymade agent, and an ideal operative. The *F Kikan* and Kamimoto rescued Tani from a jail in southern Thailand, and decided to co-opt Tani as an *F Kikan* asset.

Soon Fujiwara and the *F Kikan* members discovered that Tani was constantly being tailed by the Japanese-speaking Thai police.²⁵ Tani used to remain in hiding during the day, and came

²² Allen, *War, Conflict and Security in Japan and Asia Pacific...*, n. 3, p. 272.

²³ For details see, Sudheshna Bhattacharya, "The Making of a Popular Base for the Quit India Movement: The Impact of the Pacific War on the People and the Colonial State in India (1941-42)," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 63, 2002, pp. 683–694, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44158136>

²⁴ For further details, references, and reading on India's 1942 *Quit India Movement*, see, Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, et al., *India's Struggle for Independence*, (Penguin Publishers, Reprint Edition, 2016).

²⁵ Lebra, *The Indian National Army and Japan*, n. 13.

out in the guise of a fish vendor at night. Hidden under the pile of fish, were hand grenades and explosives. The *F Kikan* benefitted from the valuable intelligence inputs provided by Tani on the local terrain and routes into north Malaya, which apparently speeded up Japan's Malaya operations substantially. In another incident, the British-sponsored *Malay Volunteer Army* was confronted at Ipoh by "Tiger" Tani.²⁶ This army of young Malays acted as railway guards for the British army and coordinated sabotage activities behind British lines with a group of anti-Chinese and anti-British bandits (composed majorly of Malays) led by *Harimao* of Malaya, Yutaka Tani. Dressed in Malay guise, Tani encouraged the volunteers to return home. The volunteers were reorganized later to assist the Japanese army in defense of their occupied areas. Tani, in the meantime derailed British trains, and cut numerous British communication lines.²⁷

In the subsequent months, Tani's group had spread out in the central mountain ranges, through jungles, and rivers. These heavily-forested areas were infested with poisonous snakes and insects. Soon enough, malaria caught many members of the Tani gang, and finally hit Tani too. Upon arriving at Johore Bahru at the rear approach to Singapore, Tani collapsed. Being a patriot, Tani wrote a letter to his mother describing his love for his nation, and his family. Meanwhile, his work as an undercover for the *F Kikan* during the final years of his life somewhat redeemed him.²⁸ Major Fujiwara met Tani when the latter was on his deathbed owing to malaria. Fujiwara brought with him a letter for Tani from his home, seeing which, both could not hold back their tears.²⁹ Association with the *F Kikan* made Yutaka Tani a legend in the Japanese army. A wartime song "*Harimao*" took Tani's story forward, spreading it across the Japanese fighting forces.

Anglo-Japanese History and Reconciliation:

A Review of the Works of Ian Nish and Louis Allen on Fujiwara and the *F Kikan*

World War II shaped up many prominent scholars who were deeply versed in history, culture, and society of former adversarial states. In 2011, two books by Ian Nish and Louis Allen, providing personal histories of these two historians were published consecutively by *Global Oriental*. Although these two books are of different character, they display similar intellectual trajectory emanating from their own firsthand experiences during the mid-1940s.³⁰

Ian Nish, a leading historian of Anglo-Japanese relations, published meticulously researched books on the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. These include, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance: The Diplomacy of Two Island Empires, 1894–1907*, and *Alliance in Decline: A Study in Anglo-Japanese Relations, 1908–23*. These have long been considered as the most authoritative works on the subject. In particular, Ian Nish's remark about historians' role for reconciliation at an Anglo-Japanese conference remains etched in the memory of many, for times to come. Nish commented:

Historians should resist politicization, sensationalization, and fragmentation of history. Historians should continue to ponder how they can contribute to reconciliation without being self-complacent.³¹

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Fujiwara, *F Kikan*, n. 6, pp. 191–192.

³⁰ Ian Nish and Louis Allen's works, reviewed by Yoichi Kibata, (Professor, Faculty of Law, Seijo University, Setagaya, Japan) which has been published in the *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, vol. 14, no. 1, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 151–154.

³¹ For further reading see, Phillida Purvis, "Kioku, rekishi, wakai... Louis Allen to Nichi-ei wakai (*Memory, History and Reconciliation... Louis Allen and Anglo-Japanese Reconciliation*)" in Fumitaka Kurosawa and Ian Nish, eds., *Rekishi to Wakai* (History and Reconciliation), (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 2011).

Nish was mobilized in Edinburgh, and after being taught Japanese in India, began working in Singapore as an interpreter-translator. Subsequently, he was sent to Japan as a junior officer of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF) in October 1946. His main task in Japan was to translate newspaper articles and documents.³² Ian Nish's work³³ majorly comprises materials collected by the author during his stay in Japan as a member of the BCOF between 1946–1948.

Besides, Louis Allen's book is a collection of his articles and papers. It also includes an autobiographical essay by Allen³⁴ where the specialized subject of military intelligence from the point of view of Allen's personal experiences in Southeast Asia has been discussed at length. In his analysis of the various Japanese intelligence systems, including signal intelligence, field security, police (including military police (*Kempei*)), Allen found it difficult to draw any comparisons given the stark differences from the Western systems. Louis Allen, remained famous in Japan as an author of a detailed history of the Burma campaign, *Burma: The Longest War 1941–1945*.³⁵ However, this volume clearly demonstrated that Allen's research interest in the history of the Asia-Pacific War covered many other aspects as well. Allen was mobilized as a student of Manchester University in 1942. He was sent to the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London to study Japanese. In 1944, he was attached to the British-Indian Army in Delhi, and began work on the translation of documents captured from the Japanese.³⁶ Thereafter, he joined a translation section in Burma and continued his work there after the Japanese surrendered. He interrogated Japanese, including members of the Burma *kempei-tai* (military police).

In his autobiographical essay, Allen narrated of the time when he moved to Singapore. At Changi, he was engaged in the interrogation of surrendered Japanese, including Iwaichi Fujiwara who was the central figure of *F Kikan*, the famous Japanese intelligence organization.³⁷ Allen collaborated with Hugh Cortazzi, who later became Britain's ambassador to Japan in the 1980s. Allen recalled Fujiwara as the real co-founder of the Indian National Army itself, which would have got nowhere without the latter's energy and drive. Allen got to know Fujiwara very well in the post-war years, when Fujiwara returned to the uniform in the Self-Defense Forces. In the 1960s, he became Lieutenant General in command of the 1st Division at Nerima, Tokyo.³⁸ During post-war interrogations conducted at Changi by Cortazzi and Allen, Fujiwara spoke of his views on the war, Burma, India, *Netaji* Bose, and the future of world politics. Allen preserved the

³² For further reading and related references see, Ian Nish, "Britain and the Occupation of Japan... Some Personal Recollections," *Proceedings of the British Association for Japanese Studies*, vol. 4, 1979; and see, Ian Nish, "Early Experiences in the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan," *Proceedings of the Japan Society*, vol. 128, 1996.

³³ For further details see, Ian Nish, *The Japanese in War and Peace, 1942–48: Selected Documents from a Translator's In-tray*, (Folkestone, Kent: Global Oriental, 2011); also see, Ian Nish and Mark Allen, eds., *War, Conflict and Security in Japan and Asia-Pacific, 1941–52: The Writings of Louis Allen*, (Folkestone, Kent: Global Oriental, 2011).

³⁴ Louis Allen was a Reader in the School of Modern Languages at the University of Durham (1961–1991). He served during WWII as a Japanese-speaking Intelligence Officer in India and Burma, and after the war in Malaya, Thailand, and French Indochina (Vietnam). His books include *Sittang* (1973), *Singapore 1941–1942* (1977) and *Burma: The Longest War, 1941–1945* (1984); for more see, Kibata review, *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, n. 30.

³⁵ For further details see, Louis Allen, *Burma: The Longest War 1941–1945*, (Cassell/Phoenix Press, 2000).

³⁶ See Kibata review, *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, n. 30.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Louis Allen, *Autobiographical Essay*, "Innocents Abroad: Investigating War Crimes in Southeast Asia," cited in Allen, *War, Conflict and Security in Japan and Asia Pacific...*, n. 3, p. xxviii.

original Japanese manuscript for decades, until handing it back to Fujiwara many years later at the latter's house in Musashino.³⁹ Allen described the essays to be particularly interesting since they provided a version of Fujiwara's views on people like Bose much nearer in time to the views he actually held.

Many years later, when Allen happened to read *F Kikan* incidentally, he became aware that Fujiwara's response on being interrogated in Singapore, did not, in the least, match Allen's own recollections of what they were like. Fujiwara's account stated how intensely he resented being held in Changi, for being interrogated instead of being sent home to Japan.⁴⁰ Allen accepted that Cortazzi and he were only interested in knowing of the historical and background aspects of Fujiwara's activities. He was held in Malaya on his way back from acting as a witness in the Red Fort INA trials. He had been flown from Delhi to Malaya partly because he was the only surviving member of General Yamashita's 1942 staff that was readily available.⁴¹

Allen's manuscript contained 24 articles written by him that were divided into three parts: 1) the Asia-Pacific War; 2) Japanese military intelligence; and 3) national security and post-war conflicts in Burma, Malaya and Indochina.⁴² Though many of them are taken from published sources, few papers are from academic meetings and some are unpublished typescripts. In his review, Professor Kibata highlighted the chapters concerning Japanese intelligence. Allen was familiar with various aspects of Japanese intelligence, and utilized his wartime experience effectively in researching and writing about the subject.

Besides, according to a 1987 article titled "Japanese Intelligence Systems" published in the *Journal of Contemporary History*, an early and succinct overview of Japanese warfare has been presented.⁴³ Allen's own experience of interrogating Japanese intelligence officers in Singapore can also be detected in the background of other articles titled "Fujiwara and Suzuki: The Lawrence of Arabia Syndrome" and "The Nakano School" (the Japanese intelligence training establishment at Nakano, Tokyo). Kibata's review highlights Allen's dexterity in the former article, wherein Iwaichi Fujiwara and Keiji Suzuki, the head of the *Minami Kikan* (another intelligence organization) have been compared with the Lawrence of Arabia.⁴⁴

The debate on the role and net strategic effectiveness of Iwaichi Fujiwara and the *F Kikan*'s covert activities in the run up to World War II shall remain open for historians and analysts. In all, the *F Kikan*'s covert operations were influential towards achieving Japan's military success in the Malaya and Singapore sector, given that British armed forces' heavy commitments in the European and Mediterranean theatres of operations in 1940 were severely limiting Winston Churchill's strategic options in defending Malaya and Singapore.⁴⁵ Moreover, there were enough indicators that the *F Kikan*, through its propaganda and subversion campaigns, caused quite a few British-Indian soldiers to defect to the Japanese side, which was instrumental in forming the first INA, and setting up the foundation for future Indian nationalism.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Kibata review, *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, n. 30.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ See, Wey, *Journal of Intelligence History*, n. 4.

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

Robert D. Eldridge

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 Unryū 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 Haku 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 Chōsa 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.

Eighty Years after WWII: A Comparative Analysis of Historical Reckoning in Europe and Asia

Valérie Niquet

Abstract

Eighty years after the conclusion of the Second World War, historical memory remains a constitutive element of both European and Asian political orders. This article undertakes a comparative analysis of Germany and Japan, two former aggressor states whose trajectories of postwar “reckoning” illustrate divergent institutional, societal, and geopolitical dynamics. In the German case, the consolidation of a remembrance culture—anchored in law, education, and symbolic acts by political elites—has long been presented as a model of contrition, even as the rise of nationalist movements reveals the fragility of consensus. Japan, by contrast, has issued multiple apologies and statements of remorse, yet the persistence of regional disputes underscores the constraints imposed by domestic factional politics and the instrumentalization of history by neighboring states. The contrast between Europe’s dense institutional frameworks and Asia’s fragmented security environment demonstrates how memory functions as a strategic resource, shaping legitimacy, diplomacy, and regional stability in the twenty-first century.

Introduction

The eightieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War is more than a commemorative date. It is a vantage point from which to examine how states and societies have integrated the consequences of a conflict that was both global in scope and regional in its effects, still felt today. The war’s end in 1945 did not erase the political, moral, and territorial questions it had generated. In both Europe and Asia, it reshaped political orders and embedded historical narratives that continue to influence policy and diplomacy today.

The legacies of that war are not simply about territory lost or won, or about the treaties signed in its aftermath. They are about how two former aggressor states—Germany and Japan—can be accepted as “normal powers” in the international system. This is not only a matter related to History; it is also about how societies and their political leadership choose to present themselves to their citizens and the world and how the world accept this presentation.¹ The “reckoning” with the past, a phrase often used in academic and political commentary, encompasses education policy and memorialization, the words used in official statements, the silences maintained for domestic political reasons, as well as the exploitation of historical memories by non-democratic regimes.

The dominant international narrative frames Germany as the model pupil of postwar repentance. The Federal Republic is often credited with having squarely faced the crimes of the Nazi regime, embedding remembrance into law, culture, and education. Germany’s political leadership—whether centre-right or centre-left—has generally treated responsibility

¹ Ian Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan*, (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1994).

for the Holocaust and wartime aggression as non-negotiable elements of national identity, particularly since the second half of the 1970s, after the disastrous aftermath of the terror attack against Jewish athletes at the 1972 Olympic Games in München.² Today, it explains in part the unwavering support Germany gives to Israel. High-profile symbolic acts, such as Chancellor Willy Brandt's kneeling at the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial in 1970, or Chancellor Helmut Kohl's 1989 visit to Auschwitz alongside Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, are presented as evidence of a political class committed to moral clarity.

Japan, by contrast, is often portrayed as more hesitant. The criticism centers on perceived ambiguity in official language, misunderstood disputes over school textbooks, and the periodic visits of Japanese politicians to the Yasukuni Shrine, with poor knowledge of what it represents and its History.³ The absence of a Japanese equivalent to Germany's sustained public contrition is frequently cited as a key reason for persistent tension with China and South Korea. In this telling, including in the West, Germany is the gold standard of remembrance, while Japan serves as the cautionary tale.

However, the reality is more complex. In Germany, the political elite has indeed established a robust culture of remembrance, but parts of the electorate—particularly in economically disadvantaged regions of the former East, where the Communist regime never undertook the work of remembrance that was carried out in West Germany—are increasingly receptive to nationalist rhetoric. The rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), a far-right party polling around 35% in some eastern states, demonstrates that historical consensus among elites does not guarantee consensus in society at large. In Japan, the hesitation to issue more statements of repentance often reflects the internal dynamics of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), where an influential faction opposed to an attitude of excessive repentance can exercise pressure over the use of sensitive language. This is less about widespread hostility to apology and more about the arithmetic of party politics.

The context of 2025 gives the comparison added relevance. Prime Minister Ishiba issued a statement expressing deep remorse (反省), using the word for the first time since 2012, following a prolonged debate within the LDP.⁴ However, this comes against a backdrop of repeated Japanese apologies: the 1993 Kōno Statement on “comfort women,” the 1995 Murayama Statement on colonial rule and aggression, the 1998 Obuchi–Kim joint declaration, the 2005 Koizumi reaffirmation, and the 2015 Abe statement marking the 70th anniversary. These examples complicate the claim that Japan has “never” apologized.⁵

The question, then, is not simply whether each country has acknowledged its past, but how the structure of domestic politics, the priorities of foreign policy, and—a dominant factor in East Asia—the behavior of neighboring states play a role in sustaining or softening historical disputes. In both Europe and Asia, memory is not a static inheritance from 1945; it is an active element of political strategy. Governments invoke it to bolster legitimacy, critics use it to challenge powers in place, and foreign states mobilize it as a tool of leverage.

Eighty years on, the politics of remembrance remain entangled with present-day strategic concerns. In Europe, Germany faced renewed debates over reparations with Greece and Poland

² Federal Ministry of the Interior, *Re-Examining the Attack on the Israeli Olympic Team at the 1972 Summer Games*, <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/schwerpunkte/EN/histcom-1972/historikerkommission-1972-artikel.html>, view 12-07-2025.

³ Edo Naito, “Dispelling the Myth of Yasukuni Shrine,” *The Japan Times*, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/commentary/2025/08/13/japan/the-myths-surrounding-yasukuni-shrine/>, 13-08-2025.

⁴ Himari Semans, “As Japan Marks 80 Years since WWII Surrender, Ishiba Expresses remorse,” *The Japan Times*, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/08/15/japan/politics/end-of-ww2/>, 15-08-2025.

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Issues Regarding History,” https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/q_a/faq16.html, 01-02-2021.

—debates given fresh urgency by economic crises and EU politics. In Asia, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and South Korea continue to link History to current disputes over security policy, trade, and regional leadership. Both Germany and Japan are targets of external expectations about repentance, yet each also faces domestic constraints on how far it can go to meet those expectations.

This essay will examine these dynamics in a comparative framework. It will first explore the evolution of Germany's postwar reckoning, from Allied-imposed denazification to domestically sustained remembrance, and then Japan's complex relationship with its wartime past, shaped by both domestic political structures and regional diplomacy. It will then consider the strategic implications of these findings for Europe and Asia in the twenty-first Century.

Europe's Experience: Germany's Reckoning and Its Contradictions

The postwar narrative of responsibility

When the Third Reich ended in May 1945, Germany was a country under direct occupation, stripped of sovereignty, and confronted with the evidence of its crimes. The Allied powers, each with its own strategic and political agendas, set out to dismantle the Nazi regime's structures and to re-educate German society. This process, known as *denazification*, was uneven in application, but it established the framework for what later became a distinctive German approach to historical reckoning.⁶

In the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), founded in 1949 in the western occupation zones, the early years were marked by ambivalence. Many Germans saw themselves primarily as victims of bombing, displacement, and Soviet occupation—rather than as perpetrators of crimes against humanity. The Nuremberg Trials of 1945–46, which prosecuted the foremost Nazi leaders, were conducted by the Allies and often viewed domestically as “victor's justice.”⁷ However, over time, as democratic institutions took root and a new generation entered public life, this perception began to shift.

The turning point came in the late 1960s and 1970s, when a younger generation challenged the silences of their parents. The student and intellectual movements of 1960s demanded a whole confrontation with the Nazi past. Universities, media, and political parties gradually integrated this reckoning into the national narrative. The concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—coming to terms with the past—moved from academic discourse into the language of everyday politics.

Political leadership played a decisive role in consolidating this shift. Chancellor Willy Brandt's 1970 highly symbolic gesture—the spontaneous kneeling at the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial—had an immediate impact.⁸ Images of the moment circulated globally, signaling a readiness to acknowledge guilt without defensiveness. Two decades later, in 1989, Chancellor Helmut Kohl stood at the site of the Auschwitz concentration camp.⁹ This was more than a symbolic act; it came at a time when the Cold War order was dissolving, and Germany sought to reassure its neighbors that reunification would not bring a resurgence of old ambitions. However, regime change in

⁶ British Online Archives, “Building a New Germany: Denazification and Political Re-Education, 1944–1948,” <https://britishonlinearchives.com/collections/127/building-a-new-germany-denazification-and-political-re-education-1944-1948>, view 07-08-2025.

⁷ Benjamin Kane, “Victory for Justice or Victor's Justice?: Due Process and the Legacy of the Nuremberg Trials,” [https://doi.org/10.4079/2578-9201.4\(2021\).02](https://doi.org/10.4079/2578-9201.4(2021).02), 2021.

⁸ Peter Hille, Rosalia Romaniec, Ralf Bosen, “50 Years since Willy Brandt's Historic Gesture in Poland,” Deutsche Welle, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-poland-reconciliation-willy-brandt/a-55828523>, 12-06-2020.

⁹ Mary Battiata, “Kohl Visits Auschwitz, Lays Wreath, Bonn Soothes Poles on Reunification,” *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1989/11/15/kohl-visits-auschwitz-lays-wreath/dcab686a-29e3-4685-8589-3e16a3a9b4b0/>, 15-11-1989.

Poland and the Eastern Bloc also allowed for a positive shift in attitudes toward Germany.

In addition to symbolic gestures, the German state embedded remembrance into law and education. Holocaust education became mandatory in schools, with visits to concentration camp memorials often part of the curriculum. Public memorials, such as the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, were designed to confront tragedy. Commemorations were often accompanied by explicit recognition of responsibility, making denial or relativization was socially unacceptable in mainstream politics.

Current political tensions challenge this moral posture.

The durability of this moral and institutional posture has been tested in recent years. The rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), a party founded in 2013 initially to oppose eurozone bailouts, has brought nationalist rhetoric into the mainstream of German politics. While its initial focus was economic, the Party has increasingly embraced themes of cultural identity, immigration control, and, in some cases, historical reinterpretation. Some of its leaders have downplayed the uniqueness of Nazi crimes with a criticism of “Shame Culture” (*SchuldKult*), statements that would have been politically unthinkable in the early postwar decades.

The AfD’s electoral strength varies significantly across different regions. In the former East Germany, it has reached or exceeded 35% in polls, becoming the leading Party. This regional concentration is not coincidental. Under the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR), the official narrative framed the East German state as the legitimate heir to antifascist resistance, portraying Nazism as a specifically West German problem. This allowed East German society to avoid a more profound reckoning with questions of collective responsibility. After reunification in 1990, the rapid collapse of local industries, high unemployment, and demographic decline generated resentment toward the federal government and the political establishment in Berlin. In this environment, nationalist and anti-establishment appeals have found fertile ground.

This dynamic contrasts with Japan. In Germany, the political elite across major parties remains firmly committed to guarding against historical revisionism. The pressures toward nationalist reinterpretation come primarily from parts of the electorate in economically disadvantaged regions. In Japan, by contrast, the electorate at large remains indifferent to issues of historical apology. At the same time, the political leadership must contend with the political influence within the ruling Party, whose posture is not so much the result of historical denialism as it can be in Europe, but rather out of frustration in facing the constant use of historical issues by some neighboring countries.

Lingering postwar tensions in Europe

However, eighty years after the war, Germany’s relations with some of its European neighbors still bear the imprint of History. In the case of Greece, the issue of wartime reparations resurfaced dramatically during the eurozone crisis of the late 2000s and early 2010s. As Athens faced harsh austerity measures in exchange for international bailouts, Greek politicians invoked the memory of the Nazi occupation (1941–44) to argue that Germany owed not only a moral debt but also financial compensation.¹⁰ The claim included demands for repayment of a forced wartime loan and damages related to atrocities committed during the occupation. While the German government maintained that all reparations claims had been settled in previous agreements, the political symbolism was potent: austerity was framed not just as economic policy, but as a continuation of historical injustice.

Poland has also revived the issue of reparations. In 2022, the Polish government formally

¹⁰ BBC, “Greece Nazi Occupation: Athens Asks Germany for €279bn,” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32202768>, 07-04-2015.

demanded hundreds of billions of euros in compensation for wartime destruction.¹¹ This demand came amid broader political tensions over the rule of law, migration, and EU governance. As in the Greek case, the reparations debate served multiple purposes: it appealed to domestic nationalist sentiment, pressured Berlin in EU negotiations, and reinforced a narrative of historical grievance.

Other, less publicized disputes also exist. In parts of Eastern Europe, memories of German wartime occupation intersect with concerns about contemporary German influence in EU policy-making. While these tensions rarely escalate into open diplomatic conflict, they illustrate that even in a highly institutionalized regional order like the EU, History can be mobilized when political circumstances make it advantageous.

The European context in comparative perspective

The European case offers two important insights for the comparative analysis with Asia. First, even the most rigorous and sustained program of historical reckoning does not eliminate the political uses of the past. Germany's example shows that remembrance can be institutionalized and culturally embedded, yet still challenged by political actors when economic or social grievances create an opening.

Second, Europe benefits from an extensive network of institutions—the EU, NATO, the OSCE—that provide channels for dispute resolution and cooperation. These structures do not erase historical tensions, but they create incentives for compromise and mechanisms to contain disputes.¹² Asia lacks equivalent institutions with comparable depth and binding authority, making historical disputes more vulnerable to sudden escalation; moreover, the ideological divide characteristic of the Cold War still exist in Asia with the absence of regime change in the PRC and North Korea.

Asia's Experience: Complex Relationship with the Past

The standard narrative and its limits

Japan's postwar handling of historical responsibility has long been framed—both in regional diplomacy and in global commentary—as hesitant, incomplete, or even evasive. Critics point to disputes over the content of school textbooks, political visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, and carefully worded official statements.¹³ In this simple narrative, this is Japan's lack of a sustained, unambiguous stance on its wartime record that explains the persistence of tensions with its neighbors, particularly China and South Korea.

Nevertheless, this portrayal is partial. Japan's postwar governments have, on multiple occasions, issued explicit apologies or statements of remorse for the suffering caused by Japanese aggression and colonial rule. The 1993 Kōno Statement expressed “sincere apologies and remorse” to the victims of sexual exploitation during the war.¹⁴ The 1995 Murayama Statement, delivered by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama on the fiftieth anniversary of the war's end, recognized that Japan had, “through its colonial rule and aggression, caused tremendous damage

¹¹ “Poland Claims €1.3 Trillion in War Reparations from Germany,” *Le Monde*, 01-09-2022. The Case has been dropped in 2024 after a change in electoral majority.

¹² Valérie Niquet, “Territorial Conflicts in Europe: Possible Lessons for Japan ?,” *Japan Review*, Vol 6 n° 1, 2023.

¹³ Ironically, these debates were first initiated by Japanese scholars more than two decades before the PRC began to take notice.

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Statement by the Chief Cabinet Secretary*, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page25e_000343.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com, 04-08-1989.

and suffering” and offered “deep remorse” and a “heartfelt apology.”¹⁵

In 1998, Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi and South Korean President Kim Dae-jung issued a joint declaration in which Obuchi expressed “deep remorse and heartfelt apology” for the colonial period.¹⁶ In 2005, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi reaffirmed the Murayama Statement. And in 2015, marking the seventieth anniversary of the war’s end, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe explicitly stated that Japan had “repeatedly expressed the feelings of deep remorse and heartfelt apology” and that this position “will remain unshakable into the future.”¹⁷

Despite this record, official apologies have rarely succeeded in ending diplomatic disputes over History. Part of the reason lies in the cyclical nature of these controversies: when political or strategic tensions rise, past issues are revived or reframed. Another factor is the nature of Japan’s national narrative. While official statements directed to outside audiences have addressed Japan’s role as aggressor, the domestic focus of wartime memory often falls on Japanese suffering—most notably the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 but also the incendiary bombings of Tokyo and other major cities that caused hundreds of thousands of deaths and were never properly acknowledged by the United States. These events occupy a central place in public commemoration and education, shaping an image of Japan as both a perpetrator and a victim. This dual framing complicates the politics of remorse, as acknowledgment of guilt exists alongside, and sometimes in tension with, narratives of victimhood. In Europe, Austria has also been affected by this double narrative reflecting to contradicting memories.¹⁸

The year 2025 adds a new layer to this picture. The Japanese Prime Minister, Shigeru Ishiba, apparently hesitated to deliver a statement on August 15, the date marking Japan’s surrender. The omission was not the result of public hostility toward expressions of regret. Opinion polls indicate that the Japanese public is primarily concerned with current economic and social issues. The decision was primarily driven by intra-party politics: Ishiba faced resistance from different opinions within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), but also the surge of the Sanseitō, a relatively new political party that obtained 14 seats (8 % of the votes) at the July 2025 Upper House election.¹⁹

Political Dynamics within Japan

The internal politics of the LDP also help explain Japan’s uneven approach to historical issues. Since its formation in 1955, the Party has been a coalition of factions, each with its networks, funding sources, and policy priorities. While the majority of LDP politicians accept the need for diplomatic caution on historical matters, another wing is more cautious and resists further concessions. Some members express a nostalgia for Japan’s pre-war certitudes and tend to see repeated apologies as unnecessary or even harmful to national pride. The majority however, voice a legitimate concern about the futility of constant apologies to regimes that, by their very nature, must keep Japan in a perpetual ‘culprit’ role in order to diminish its influence in the region.

In such a context, Prime Ministers may avoid controversial acts of contrition not because they fear a backlash from the electorate at large, but because they wish to maintain factional support

¹⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Statement by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the War’s End*, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/press/pm/murayama/9508.html>, 15-08-1995.

¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Japan-Republic of Korea Joint Declaration*, 08-10-1998.

¹⁷ Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, *Statement by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe*, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201508/0814statement.html, 14-08-2015.

¹⁸ Austria was both a perpetrator and a victim of Nazi Germany.

¹⁹ “Right-Wing Sanseito Party’s ‘Japanese First’ Policy Inspires both Hope and Worry: Poll,” *The Mainichi*, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20250813/p2a/00m/0na/018000c>, 14-08-2025.

within the Party. This is a key difference from Germany, where the major parties operate within a relatively centralized structure and are united in strongly opposing historical revisionism.

The case of Shinzo Abe illustrates the complexity of this dynamics. Often portrayed abroad as a historical revisionist, Abe reaffirmed previous apologies during his tenure. His core strategic priorities lay elsewhere: revising Japan's constitution to allow for a more active security role, revitalizing the economy, and strengthening alliances, particularly with the United States. His engagement with nationalist symbols, such as visits to Yasukuni or more cautious language on wartime responsibility, was like his predecessor Junichiro Koizumi (2001–2006), more a strong will to respond to outside pressure from antagonistic countries like the People's Republic of China, than a primary policy goal.

Public Attitudes and Regional Perceptions

In contrast to Germany, where historical remembrance remains a live issue in public debate, Japanese society at large is relatively disengaged from the politics of wartime memory. Support for the Sanseitō, which remains moderate, stems more from resentment toward overtourism and a sense of humiliation over Japan's economic difficulties than from any revisionist stance.

Regionally, the picture is mixed. In Northeast Asia, China and South Korea remain the most vocal critics of Japan's historical stance. Both governments—but mostly China these days—have institutionalized wartime memory in education, public culture, and diplomacy. Chinese state media regularly highlight anniversaries of wartime events, framing them as lessons in vigilance against a resurgent Japan. South Korea's disputes with Japan have extended into the legal domain, with court rulings ordering compensation for forced labourers, sometimes in defiance of bilateral agreements. These attitudes, however, are closely tied to internal politics. In the case of China, the global strategic situation, notably China-US relations, is a significant factor. Since the return of President Donald Trump to power in January 2025, the regime's attitude toward Japan has been less consistently aggressive. South Korea, sharing the same strategic concerns, is also eager to build closer relations with Japan, looking toward the future.²⁰

The divergence between official positions and popular behavior in these two countries is striking. Despite recurring tensions, Chinese and South Korean tourists consistently rank among the largest groups of foreign visitors to Japan. Four years after the end of the COVID pandemic, they account for a substantial share of inbound tourism. This suggests that, for many individuals, historical grievances do not preclude personal engagement and the attractiveness of contemporary Japan.

In Southeast Asia, the stance toward Japan is even more pragmatic. Countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines endured Japanese occupation during the war. However, these states have generally been less vocal in pressing Japan on historical issues. Economic factors play a significant role: Japan has been a key source of investment, development assistance, and infrastructure financing. Strategic considerations also matter: shared concerns about China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific have made Japan a valued partner in defense and maritime security.

The Asian case shows that historical disputes do not operate in a vacuum. They are embedded in broader strategic and economic relationships. In Northeast Asia, where territorial disputes, security dilemmas, ideology, and competition for regional leadership are acute, History serves as both a moral claim and a strategic instrument. In Southeast Asia, where economic interdependence and maritime security concerns dominate, History is less frequently invoked in bilateral relations.

²⁰ Jesse Johnson, « At Meeting Rich in Symbolism, Ishiba and South Korea's Lee Agree to Steadily Build Ties, » *The Japan Times*, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/08/24/japan/politics/south-korea-japan-ishiba-lee-summit/>, 24-08-2025.

Japan's domestic politics adds another layer of complexity. Unlike Germany, where the electorate is the primary source of nationalist pressure, Japan's public is detached mainly from these debates. The constraints come from within the political elite, where factional bargaining play a role.

Regional Dynamics and the Use of History

China's strategic use of historical grievances

For the People's Republic of China, the Second World War—referred to domestically as the “War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression” (1937–1945)—is not only a chapter in national History; it is a foundational narrative of the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy.²¹ The victory over Japan is presented as a triumph of Chinese unity under Communist leadership, even though, in reality, the role of Nationalist forces was much more significant, despite its limitations.

The CCP has enforced this narrative in ideology, education, media, and public commemorations particularly after 1989. School curricula devote substantial time to wartime history, often in a way that frames Japan's aggression as part of a broader story of “a century of humiliation” at the hands of foreign powers. The purpose is twofold: to foster national pride in resistance and to maintain vigilance against fabricated threats.

This historical framing serves several political and strategic functions. Domestic political cohesion is reinforced by stressing the external threat posed by Japan, which highlights the CCP's role as the protector of the Chinese nation. By reminding citizens of past atrocities, the Party aims to cultivate loyalty and deflect attention from domestic problems.

On a second level, China can frame Japanese initiatives to expand its security role—such as constitutional reinterpretation or increased Defence spending—as evidence of a dangerous “return to militarism.” By keeping historical grievances active in the bilateral relationship, China ensures that Japan is on the defensive in diplomatic encounters, expending political capital to respond to past issues rather than advancing its strategic priorities. In August 2025, Foreign Minister Wang Yi once again asked Japan to “make the right choice,” as if the Japan of today, 80 years after the end of World War Two, were not a completely different country.²²

From Beijing's perspective, even genuine and repeated Japanese apologies cannot “settle” History. The value of the grievance lies precisely in its renewability: each anniversary, each new school cohort, each diplomatic incident provides an opportunity to reassert the narrative. This instrumentalization is not unique to China—other states have also used historical memory for political ends—but its systematic integration into governance and foreign policy is notable.

South Korea's legal and political disputes

South Korea's relationship with Japan over historical issues has its dynamics, shaped by the colonial period (1910–1945). The 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations normalized diplomatic ties and included Japanese financial assistance, which both sides considered a final settlement of economic claims. However, opposition in South Korea denounced it as an agreement between elites that did not reflect popular sentiment. As a result, there have been cycles of diplomatic tension.

The emotive nature of these issues makes them politically potent in South Korea. Politicians across the spectrum have invoked History to mobilize support, particularly during election periods. However, as in the Chinese case, there is a disconnect between official narratives and

²¹ Valérie Niquet, “History and Memory Issues in Europe and Asia: Acknowledging Similarities for a Better Understanding of Contemporary Tensions,” *Japan Review*, vol.2 n° 1, Summer 2018

²² Jiji, « On Anniversary of WWII's end China Urges Japan to Make the 'Right Choice', » *The Japan Times*, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/08/16/japan/politics/japan-china-wwii-south-korea/>, 16-08-2025.

personal behavior. Japanese popular culture, fashion, and design enjoy popularity in South Korea. Tourism flows between the two countries remain substantial. The strength of common strategic challenges in Northeast Asia and economic challenges at the global level seems to lead, at least for the time being, to a break in the negative cycle of tensions between the two countries.

Another striking features of Northeast Asian historical disputes is the coexistence of tension at the political level with strong economic interaction. Even during periods of diplomatic chill, trade continues—except in sectors weaponized by the PRC, such as a ban on importing fish and agricultural products from Fukushima Prefecture—and people-to-people exchanges flourish. This suggests that History is essentially used as a political tool.

In the EU context, historical disputes are generally contained within institutional frameworks and do not prevent extensive cooperation. In Northeast Asia, the absence of such mechanisms—and the persistence of the Cold War framework despite economic opening up—means that regimes like the PRC and North Korea are still in place, allowing disputes to be rekindled quickly.

History as a strategic resource: similarities and differences with Europe

When we compare the use of History in Asia with that in Europe, several similarities emerge. In both regions, History can be mobilized to strengthen domestic legitimacy, put pressure on foreign governments, or frame current disputes in moral terms. The persistence of grievances is not necessarily correlated with the absence of apologies or compensation. Both Germany and Japan have made repeated gestures of contrition, yet both still face demands for further acknowledgment or reparations. Public opinion does not always align with official narratives. In Germany, parts of the population are more receptive to nationalist reinterpretations than the political elite; in Japan, the political elite is more constrained by factional politics than the general public.

However, there are also structural differences. Europe's dense network of political and economic institutions helps manage disputes and incentivizes compromise. Asia lacks comparable structures, making historical issues more likely to be used as tactical instruments in bilateral relations. Moreover, in Europe, NATO provides a framework for collective defense that reduces the military dimension of historical disputes. In Asia, where regional security rivalries are acute, historical narratives can directly influence perceptions of military policy.

For Japan, managing historical disputes is not simply a matter of diplomacy; it is a question of strategic positioning. Balancing acknowledgment of the past with resistance to its political manipulation is a delicate task. Overstressing apology risks emboldening those who would use History to constrain Japan's security role and its legitimate return to the status of "normal power"; on the contrary, minimizing it risks alienating potential partners in and far away from the region, affecting public diplomacy initiatives.

Japan's comparative success in building strong relations with Southeast Asian states offers a potential model. These relationships are grounded in economic cooperation, development aid, and shared strategic concerns, rather than in contested narratives of the past. While they do not erase the memory of wartime occupation, they demonstrate that forward-looking partnerships are possible even without complete historical consensus. They are also based on a shared perception of the strategic evolutions in the region since the end of the Second World War and the emergence of a revisionist, more aggressive China aiming to reestablish its vision of unipolar Asia centered around its strategic interests.

Comparative Insights: Europe and Asia Eighty Years Later

Common patterns in the politics of memory

Eighty years after the end of the Second World War, both Europe and Asia demonstrate that historical memory is not a fixed legacy, but a living, dynamic political resource. It can be

mobilized to legitimize governments, challenge rivals, or frame contemporary policies in moral terms. This mobilization is not necessarily diminished by repeated apologies or compensation. Both Germany and Japan have, at various points, expressed contrition in explicit and public terms, yet both still encounter demands for further acknowledgment.

In both contexts, the persistence of grievances reflects several underlying patterns. Nations tend to emphasize parts of their History that support contemporary identity and policy. Germany's remembrance culture focuses on acknowledging guilt and preventing recurrence; Japan's domestic narrative highlights both guilt and victimhood, particularly through the powerful lens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Historical grievances can be reactivated when useful in current disputes. Greek reparations demands intensified during the eurozone crisis; Chinese criticisms of Japan often spike during periods of heightened strategic tension.

In Germany, elites are the primary defenders of a culture of remembrance, while segments of the public—especially in economically distressed areas—are more open to nationalist reinterpretations. In Japan, public opinion is detached mainly, while nationalist pressure primarily comes from within the ruling Party's elite.

Legal or diplomatic settlements rarely close the door entirely. Even after treaties or joint declarations, disputes can resurface in altered form, often linked to changes in domestic politics, particularly in authoritarian regimes, as exemplified by the tensions between France and its former colony, Algeria.²³

Structural differences between the two regions

Despite these similarities, Europe and Asia differ in ways that shape how historical disputes unfold. Europe's postwar reconciliation was embedded in dense networks of integration—the EU, NATO, the Council of Europe—that create forums for dialogue and mechanisms for dispute resolution. These institutions do not eliminate grievances, but they provide incentives for cooperation and penalties for escalation. In Asia, the absence of comparably binding structures leaves historical disputes more exposed to fluctuations in bilateral relations and domestic politics.²⁴

Postwar Europe developed a norm of public contrition as part of the process of interstate reconciliation. Leaders like Brandt and Kohl made gestures that became reference points for acceptable conduct. In Asia, reconciliation has been less about public contrition and more about pragmatic engagement. Japan's relationships with Southeast Asian states improved rapidly through economic cooperation, with less emphasis on symbolic acts.

From a comparative perspective, the key lesson is that historical reconciliation is not a linear process. It is shaped as much by contemporary politics as by past events. In Germany, the culture of remembrance was not inevitable; it developed through deliberate political choices, generational shifts, and integration into European and transatlantic structures. In Japan, repeated apologies coexist with selective domestic narratives, constrained by factional politics and a security environment in which rivals can weaponize History.

Strategic Implications for the 21st Century

Germany's principal challenge is to preserve its culture of remembrance in the face of shifting domestic and international pressures. The rise of nationalist rhetoric, particularly in the East, underscores the need to address socio-economic disparities that fuel political discontent. This

²³ Valérie Niquet JR Algeria.

²⁴ Valérie Niquet, "Territorial Conflicts in Europe: Possible Lessons for Japan ?," *Japan Review*, Vol 6 n° 1, 2023.

requires investment not only in economic development but also in civic education that links historical awareness to contemporary democratic values.

At the European level, managing historical disputes constructively is essential for maintaining cohesion. The re-emergence of reparations claims from Greece and Poland illustrates how easily historical grievances can intersect with contemporary crises. In an EU facing geopolitical competition, migration challenges, and the war in Ukraine, the instrumentalization of History could undermine collective action.

Japan's strategic challenge is more complex. It must navigate between acknowledging its past and resisting attempts by rivals to use that past as a means of constraining its present and future. This balancing act is not about evading responsibility but about ensuring that History is not used to veto legitimate policy choices. Internationally, Japan's close ties with Southeast Asian states demonstrate that constructive relations are possible even where historical issues exist, provided that economic and strategic cooperation are prioritized.

Conclusion

Eighty years after the end of the Second World War, History remains an active element of both European and Asian politics. Germany's experience is often cited as a model of contrition, yet nationalist sentiment persists, particularly in regions facing economic hardship. Japan's record of apology is frequently questioned. However, the constraints it faces are more about domestic political structures and regional strategic rivalries as they are about an unwillingness to acknowledge the past.

The comparison reveals that the politics of memory cannot be reduced to a binary of contrition versus denial. It is a dynamic process in which domestic politics, regional institutions, and security environments interact. In both Europe and Asia, the instrumentalization of History poses risks to stability and security. Historical reconciliation and reckoning WW Two both in Europe and Asia, is a challenge: it demands vigilance against both refusal to acknowledge the past and glorifying a romanticized version of what should be national pride; and the exploitation of grievance by adversaries.

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3rd Floor, Toranomom Daibiru-East Building, 3-8-1 Kasumigaseki Chiyoda-ku,
Tokyo Japan 100-0013

Tel: +81-3-3503-7261 (International)

Fax: +81-3-3503-7292 (International)

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