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CHAPTER 3

Okinawa Reversion as a Turning Point in Postwar U.S. - Japan Relations

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In the 1950s and 1960s, the U.S.–Japan Security Alliance was politically vulnerable. It was a constant target—often *the* primary target—of opposition parties seeking to dislodge the LDP from its Diet majority. It was the cause célèbre for student activists, Japan's presumed future generation of leaders. And it was the policy achievement about which Tokyo government leaders spoke most reluctantly. Indeed, they avoided anything that might resemble, even faintly, the public political-military consultation and the close operational cooperation that characterized America's other trans-oceanic alliance.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the U.S.–Japan Security Alliance was politically solid. Opposition parties first muted their attacks, then moved increasingly to other issue terrain. Students stopped caring. Government leaders spoke more regularly about the American alliance. Though one Prime Minister's characterization of his nation as an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" spurred criticism, he continued in office several years thereafter, even pushing Japan's defense spending (temporarily) through the hitherto sacrosanct ceiling of 1% of GDP. And joint military activities increased markedly. Of course, economic conflicts could and did multiply. But political-security relations merited the characterization which officials repeatedly employed: they had "never been better."

Between these very different twenty-year periods came, of course, Okinawa reversion. President Richard Nixon and Prime Minister Eisaku Sato agreed to return the islands to Japanese control at the White House in November 1969; the actual transfer of administration took place two-and-one-half years later, an event this conference commemorates. Not only did reversion separate the two periods chronologically, but it was one important reason why U.S.–Japan security relations were so much smoother from the 1970s onward.

Maintaining and strengthening those security relations was a central goal of those in both nations who conspired to bring about reversion. One way they pursued this goal was to use the negotiations to buttress Japan's security commitments. They could and did exploit a logical connection: since return of the Ryukyus made Japan fully sovereign over all its territory, it was reasonable that Tokyo should now bear more responsibility for the secúrity of East Asia. Sato was personally in favor of doing so; the reversion agreement gave him a perfect rationale. One result was Tokyo's public recognition, for the first time in the postwar period, that South Korea was "essential" to Japanese security.

More importantly, reversion buttressed the security relationship through crisis avoidance. While few could have forseen, in 1969, the peace that would descend upon the alliance thereafter, almost all of those who worked for reversion feared the opposite: that failure to achieve timely reversion could well prove disastrous. Their nightmare was all too plausible. The campaign for reversion in Japan would grow, bringing thousands of protesters to the streets, forcing the Tokyo government to intensify its demands,

pressing it to commit to a reversion formula that would severely restrict the freedom of action of U.S. forces based on Okinawa. The U.S. military position would stiffen in response. The White House—enmeshed in the protracted war in Vietnam—would not feel able to confront the Pentagon on this issue.

The resulting Okinawa crisis would peak around 1970, when the initial ten-year term of the revised security treaty ran out. And unlike the flare-up of 1960, it would not be possible to resolve this one through a prime minister's forced resignation. Meeting Japanese needs would now require a humiliating American retreat, one for which no U.S. President would wish to take responsibility, and one which the Senate was unlikely to endorse with the two-thirds majority required for treaty ratification. Yet it would be hard to think of a better way to undermine the alliance than for the United States to keep occupying Okinawa against active, assertive Japanese opposition.

Fortunately, as other papers presented to this conference will recount, events did not play themselves out in this fashion. Together the two nations accomplished a political rarity: action in advance to avert a crisis that was not yet certain, not yet broadly visible, and therefore not yet exerting strong pressure on the politicians in the nation that needed to be moved.

How and why did Japan and America accomplish this? Critical, of course, was the role of political leaders. Lyndon B. Johnson was willing to move things forward in 1967; Richard M. Nixon made the final key decision in 1969. Critical also was Eisaku Sato's persistence and prudence. He underscored reversion's importance by staking his reputation and career on resolving it, but he recognized the need for consensus in both capitals, and took care not to get too far ahead of the process in either one.

Important also was the crisis that *had* happened in 1960, and widespread concerns over a recurrence. History may seldom repeat itself, but sophisticated people frequently fear that it will, and this danger can be used by those seeking change. If Tokyo had been turned upside down by a treaty revision which actually strengthened Japan's relative position, how much more might the alliance be threatened by a U.S. insistence on retaining control of territory even John Foster Dulles had recognized as Japanese! And the revised security treaty made 1970 a natural target date—its initial term was ten years, after which either nation could withdraw on twelve months' notice. If an Okinawa crisis was festering then, it would surely give potency to opposition demands that Japan take that very action.

Articulating these concerns—and skillfully exploiting them, was an atypically strong and forward-looking group of middle-level officials in Washington: Richard Sneider, Japan Country Director at State[1]; John McNaughton and Morton Halperin as co-conspirators at Defense. Under their leadership, it was possible beginning in 1966 to get civilian and military officials to focus on the problem—political pressures in Okinawa and Japan—to develop broad recognition of the need for a resolution by 1970, and to achieve general agreement on the U.S. bottom line: flexibility in use of the bases within a strong Japanese alliance.

This led logically to the need to move expeditiously toward reversion, and for the U.S. military command to take initial steps in this direction. Through this process, U.S. military leaders were encouraged to explore conditions under which reversion might be consistent with their basic needs. In Japan, U.S. Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson worked to pave thé way with General Ferdinand Unger, the High Commissioner who governed Okinawa. And as the bilateral dialogue developed, Japanese officials took U.S. military sensitivities into account in how they pressed the issue and in what they sought.[2]

When the Nixon administration came to power, key officials moved into even more important positions. Johnson became Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs. Sneider and Halperin were invited to join Henry Kissinger's NSC staff, where they could take the lead in a comprehensive review of relations with Japan, one of the first of the broad national security studies initiated by the new regime. Around mid-year, Sneider would then move to Tokyo as Deputy Chief of Mission. With a

President sympathetic to Japan and sensitive to the basic issues, it proved possible for the United States to make *the* crucial compromise, to promise that the same rules would govern nuclear weapons on the Ryukyus as applied to U.S. deployments in Japan proper. This was generally interpreted as meaning there would be no such weapons present when reversion took place.

So reversion was achieved, on statesmanlike terms. But while it clearly averted a new security treaty crisis, it did not lead immediately to an era of good feelings across the Pacific. The immediate reason was the textile issue, "unconnected with Okinawa but destined to be intimately linked to it"[3] Nixon (and Kissinger) could not resist the opportunity to use Sato's need for reversion as leverage for an agreement which would deliver on Nixon's campaign promise to the U.S. textile industry. And Sato played along, dispatching an emissary to work out the details and promising Nixon—face-to-face, twice—to conclude an agreement imposing comprehensive curbs on Japanese sales of textiles and apparel to the American market.[4] When Sato twice failed to deliver, relations were embittered. There followed the two "Nixon shocks" of summer 1971—the breakthrough in U.S. relations with mainland China, and the decision to stop supporting the dollar through sales of gold.

The humiliating way Sato learned of Henry Kissinger's secret visit to Beijing is well known: "via a phone call from his [Washington] Ambassador, just as Nixon's statement [announcing the breakthrough] was being carried on the wires"[5] In retrospect, the secrecy seems excessive, though clearly useful for foreign policy and domestic politics alike.[6] But it was clearly the way Nixon and Kissinger handled such matters, whether or not they involved Japan. Indeed, Secretary of State William P. Rogers did not learn about the trip until Kissinger was well on his way.

For the Gaimusho, this was the fulfillment of the "Asakai nightmare" As that postwar Japanese Ambassador to Washington had feared, Japan had faithfully followed the American lead, tilting toward Taipei and spurning Beijing, only to wake up and learn that America had changed course. Yet paradoxically, Nixon's opening to China liberated U.S.–Japan security relations just as Okinawa reversion did. It did so by removing the other major political burden that the relationship carried.

China was and is enormously important to Japan, of course—culturally, politically, and economically. During the negotiation and ratification of the 1951 peace treaty, however, Japan was squeezed by the United States into recognizing the Republic of China on Taiwan. As years went by, the Japan–Taiwan connection prospered, and Sato—for one—was in no hurry to shift to recognition of the mainland. But the U.S. alliance was visibly denying Japan the opportunity to develop the full range of relations with the mainland. Belief that this was unfair and unreasonable stretched well beyond the Socialist and Communist opposition.

By the early seventies, both nations were moving to broaden ties with the PRC. At the State Department–Gaimusho level, they were coordinating their efforts, to assure that the Asakai nightmare did not come to pass. Kissinger's secret visit exposed these consultations as a sham, and delivered a humiliation from which Sato never recovered.

But if the immediate effect was negative, the longer-term impact was positive. For Japan was freed to pursue its own interests in dealing with its massive neighbor. Sato's successor, Kakuei Tanaka, soon leapfrogged Washington by establishing formal diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1972. In subsequent years, this relationship became part of an informal China–Japan–United States alignment against the Soviet Union, one which lasted until the latter's demise. It brought economic benefits to Japanese also, without costing much if anything in dealings with Taiwan.

By the time of the actual transfer of administrative control over Okinawa, therefore, the stage had been set for a much stronger U.S.–Japan security relationship. By 1982, former Ambassador Edwin Reischauer could declare to a Japanese journalist that U.S. ships did in fact carry nuclear weapons into Japanese ports, and trigger only a ripple of political

reaction in Tokyo.[7] In the 1970s and 1980s, Japan raised her defense spending substantially and supported U.S. engagements in Turkey, Pakistan, and elsewhere on the Soviet periphery. The relationship had become an enormous strategic asset to the United States, and the framework within which Japan broadened—very gradually—its engagement in global political-strategic issues.

How much was Okinawa reversion responsible for this change? Certainly other forces were at work also. One was, ironically, U.S. defeat in Vietnam, which made Japanese less likely to resent the U.S. presence and more prone to consider the consequences of a U.S. absence. Another was, of course, the entrenchment in power of the LDP, whose economic policies had brought Japanese living standards up into the front ranks of the world. A third was the maturing of the Japanese political process. And the fourth was the already-discussed transformation of China policies, the issue that was handled, from a U.S.–Japan relations point of view, as badly as Okinawa was handled well.

On the China issue, good policy substance overcame bad policy process. The content of the historic Nixon–Kissinger action was more durable, in its impact on U.S.–Japan relations, than the deeply disruptive means by which it was achieved.[8] But on Okinawa reversion, good process was essential to achieving the right substantive outcome. Without careful domestic and bilateral political management, it is hard to see how agreement could have been achieved at all. Reciprocal sensitivity and political skill were a prerequisite for wise substantive resolution of the thorny Okinawa issue.

A similar conclusion seems appropriate concerning reversion's contribution to the stronger bilateral security relations which followed. It was far from the sole contributor. But it was an important one. And it was a prerequisite.

Notes

1 In March 1966, State renamed its desk officers "Country Directors" with the aim of making them government-wide policy leaders. The reform was generally a failure, as few who held the title were able to play this role. But Sneider was universally cited as an exception, both by insiders who participated in the process and outsiders who studied it.

2 This summary draws upon the unpublished case study prepared by Priscilla Clapp and Haruhiro Fukui for the Brookings Institution study in which this author participated. For a summary, see Destler et al, *Managing an Alliance: The Politics of U.S.-Japanese Relations*, Brookings Institution, 1976, pp. 23-35.

3 Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), p. 329.

4 Unraveling the details of that negotiation consumed about three fascinating years in the life of this author and his Japanese collaborators. See I. M. Destler, Haruhiro Fukui, and Hideo Sato, *The Textile Wrangle*, (Cornell University Press, 1979; Japanese language edition by Nihon Keizai Press).

5 U. Alexis Johnson with Jef Olivarius McAllister, *The Right Hand of Power*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984), p. 554.

6 Kissinger offered a modest *mea culpa* in his memoirs: "I believe in retrospect that we could have chosen a more sensitive method of informing the Japanese." (*White House Years*, p. 762.) And U. Alexis Johnson reports that "the initial plan . . . was to send me directly to Japan to inform Prime Minister Sato on behalf of the President." Johnson reports learning from Kissinger that "Nixon's phobia about leaks caused him to cancel my trip." (*The Right Hand of Power*, pp. 554-55.) Nixon's frustration with Sato over unfulfilled textile promises may have contributed as well.

7 There was also an earlier statement to this effect, made to a Congressional committee by retired Admiral Gene LeRocque. But his word did not, of course, have comparable credibility in Japan.

8 The same could be said of "closing the gold window" and moving to flexible exchange rates—it led, in the mid-1970s, to improvement of the U.S. trade balance and contributed thereby to maintenance of the open trade policies upon which Japan depended.