

# **(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**

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## **Abstract**

A few years after the end of World War II, with the U.S. military in control of Okinawa and the rest of the Nansei Islands, the United States announced in April 1948 that it would begin using Kōbi Sho, locally known as Kuba Island, for U.S. Air Force target practice and issued warnings to fishermen in the area. In April 1956, the U.S. military added neighboring Sekibi Sho, locally known as Taishō Island, to its list of bombing ranges, this time for the U.S. Navy. In the same year, management of the Kōbi Sho range was transferred to the U.S. Navy, and rent was paid to the island's owner, Koga Zenji. At the time of the return of Okinawa in 1972, Kōbi Sho and Sekibi Sho continued to be leased to the U.S. military by the Government of Japan as facilities no. 6084 and 6085, respectively, under the bilateral Status of Forces Agreement (of 1960). However, in 1978, the U.S. State Department issued a moratorium suspending the use of the ranges by U.S. forces, citing concerns about becoming involved in a Sino-Japanese dispute over claims to the islands. The two ranges have not been used since, despite the U.S. Navy's desire to do so. This article, based on declassified diplomatic and military documents as well as interviews, memoirs, and oral histories, examines the history of the acquisition and use of the islands as bombing ranges and the decision to discontinue their use in the late 1970s. It also explains the many problems and misunderstandings caused by the U.S. decision and argues that the ranges should be returned to use, including possible joint use with the Japan Self-Defense Forces, in light of the increasingly aggressive actions of the People's Republic of China in the area.

## **1. Introduction**

In April 2021, Kyodo News published an explosive article on the decision of the U.S. government in June 1978 to instruct the U.S. Navy to suspend use of Taishō Island, also known as Sekibi Sho, as a firing range out of fear the United States would be entangled in a Sino-Japanese dispute over the Senkaku Islands (Senkaku Rettō or Senkaku Shotō), which the People's Republic of China (PRC) call the Diaoyu Islands and the Republic of China (Taiwan) previously called the Tiaoyutai Islets but now calls the Diaoyutai Islets. The following year in 1979, according to the declassified documents obtained by Kyodo News, the U.S. government once again rejected a request by the U.S. military to be able to resume use of Sekibi Sho.<sup>1</sup> Neither Sekibi Sho, nor nearby Kōbi Sho, otherwise known as Kuba Island, has been used since then, suggesting that the moratorium is not only still in effect but that it was also applied either formally

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<sup>1</sup> "U.S. ceased using Senkakus firing range in 1978 to avoid riling China," *Kyodo News*, April 5, 2021 (<https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2021/04/57606c2b9e0c-us-ceased-using-senkakus-firing-range-in-1978-to-avoid-riling-china.html>).

or informally by extension, to Kōbi Sho.

More than 45 years have elapsed since that fateful decision, which understandably troubled the Government of Japan, and the damage to U.S.-Japan alliance interests is significant. Some of the negative effects include the wrong message it sends to the Japanese government and the citizens of Japan, as well as other countries in the region, that Japan's jurisdiction over the Senkaku Islands (despite the U.S. government's return of administrative rights to the Senkaku Islands to Japan in 1972) is imperfect and that the United States might not be there to support Japan if a conflict were to occur (despite U.S. repeated statements that Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security applies to the Senkakus).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it created the dangerous precedent by which the PRC can theoretically or even practically influence the ability of the United States to use facilities, which are otherwise guaranteed by the U.S.-Japan Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), in Japan. Moreover, it opens up the United States for criticism as being in violation of the SOFA, since it has not returned facilities it no longer uses to Japan, which is required of the SOFA.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the decision to suspend usage has deprived the U.S. military and presumably the Japan Self-Defense Forces (were the ranges to be made shared use with the JSDF which can be done through the Joint Committee established under Article XXV of the bilateral Status of Forces Agreement) of needed air-to-ground and other ranges in Japan to maintain or improve their respective warfighting capabilities.<sup>4</sup>

This study examines the history of the U.S. military's use of the two ranges in the Senkaku Islands during the postwar period and the sudden, unilateral, and unwise (in this writer's

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<sup>2</sup> Article 5 reads: "Each Party recognizes that an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional provisions and processes. Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall be immediately reported to the Security Council of the United Nations in accordance with the provisions of Article 51 of the Charter. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security." The latter clause is not particularly reassuring as, it should be remembered, the PRC is a permanent member of the UNSC since 1971, years after the 1960 U.S.-Japan security treaty went into effect. For a highly critical look at U.S. guarantees and policy as a whole, see 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](https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/resourcelibrary/pdf/ResourceLibrary_Territory_Eldridge_230906_r.pdf)).

<sup>3</sup> It can be argued that the U.S. government is in violation of Article II of the SOFA by not returning Kōbi Sho and Sekibi Sho, over the past half-century of non-use. Paragraph 3 of Article II states: "the facilities and areas used by the United States armed forces shall be returned to Japan whenever they are no longer needed for purposes of this Agreement, and the United States agrees to keep the needs for facilities and areas under continual observation with a view toward such return." Similarly, the preceding paragraph, Paragraph 2, states "At the request of either Government, the Governments of Japan and the United States shall review such arrangements and may agree that such facilities and areas shall be returned to Japan or that additional facilities and areas may be provided." Because the U.S. government has reportedly kept the Japanese government informed of its intentions regarding the two islands, the Japanese government has been unable to make the request to "review such arrangements." It can be surmised that the Japanese government wishes to keep the United States involved with the Senkakus and thus has not made the request for the return of the facilities (islands), but without the related documents regarding internal discussions within the GOJ, or between the GOJ and the USG, being declassified, it is difficult to know for sure.

<sup>4</sup> It can be argued that the ranges would have eventually become joint or shared use under normal circumstances as is the case with many other previously exclusive use U.S. facilities in Japan as part of the increasingly closer degree of cooperation, coordination, and interoperability. As such, the political decision of the U.S. government to suspend use of the ranges has slowed the momentum toward a more interoperable alliance in addition to depriving the two militaries, plus any other allies and friendly nations training in Japan, for improving their capabilities.

opinion) decision of the U.S. government to discontinue use of them. The article is divided into six sections, including this Introduction and a Conclusion, and is based on declassified U.S. and Government of the Ryukyu Islands documents, as well as memoirs, oral histories, and interviews with officials involved in policy at that time. Section 2 looks at the decisions to use Kuba Island (Kōbi Sho) and Taishō Island (Sekibi Sho) as ranges beginning in 1948 and 1956 respectively, and the challenges that arose over the management of the islands by the U.S. military. The section after that looks at the contract to lease Kuba Island from its owner, Koga Zenji, and a little about the history of Kuba and Taishō Islands prior to being utilized by the U.S. military. Section 4 explores the handling of the ranges at the time of return of Okinawa and the Senkaku Islands to Japan in 1972, and Section 5 examines the decision by the United States to suspend use of the ranges. The Conclusion looks at the problems this decision has caused for the U.S.-Japan alliance over the years and the status of the islands today.

## 2. The Respective Decisions to Use Kuba Island and Taishō Island as Ranges and Their Management by the U.S. Military

In light of tensions that were building in the region with the civil war on the Chinese mainland in the latter half of the 1940s, and the need for the U.S. military, especially its pilots, to be trained and ready, Captain Millard O. Engen of the U.S. Military Government of the Ryukyu Islands, a World War II veteran who later served in Korea after North Korea launched its attack in June 1950, announced on April 16, 1948, that Kuba Island, or Kōbi Sho, and the surrounding area would be used for target practice.<sup>5</sup>

This announcement was based on an earlier decision in January 1948 by the U.S. Air Force's 1st Air Division to identify ten locations under its command as air-to-ground training ranges, around which would be designated as "permanently dangerous areas."<sup>6</sup> The 1st Air Division, which had replaced the 8th Army Air Force in early June 1946 and was at Kadena until December 1, 1948, when it was inactivated, would be the first organization to use the range.<sup>7</sup>

The 1st Air Division had been assigned to Far East Air Forces on June 1, 1946 when it was activated and served as an air defense organization. Some of the components of the 1st Air Division on Okinawa included the 301st Fighter Wing, 51st Fighter Group, 337th Air Support Group (ASG), 316th Bomber Wing, 559th ASG, 822nd EAG, and 23rd Recon Squadron. It is unclear which units specifically used the Kuba Island (Kōbi Sho) range. Subsequently, when the

<sup>5</sup> See "Oral History with Millard Engen," Cactus Hills Arizona Heritage Project ([www.azhp.org/index-3.html](http://www.azhp.org/index-3.html), accessed June 2012). Although it is generally understood that the U.S. military began using Kuba Island in 1948, it appears that the U.S. Air Force used it as early as November 1945 according to a November 2, 1945 *Kanpo* (Gazette) announcement. The Japanese Navy Ministry's Military Affairs Bureau was responsible for sharing the information. The author is indebted to local Senkaku Islands researcher Kuniyoshi Makomo for bringing this announcement to my attention.

<sup>6</sup> "Memorandum from Commanding General, 1st Air Force, revising 1st Air Force Directive 55-8 of October 15, 1946," January 15, 1948, USCAR Files, Okinawa Prefectural Archives, Haebaru Town, Okinawa Prefecture, Japan.

<sup>7</sup> Miyako Minseifu, ed., "Kōkyū Kiken Kuiki (Permanent Danger Area)," *Kōhō "Shin Miyako"* (Public Announcement, "New Miyako"), No. 3 (May 6, 1948), cited in Senkaku Shotō Bunken Shiryō Hensankai, ed., *Senkaku Kenkyū Senkaku Shotō Kaiiki no Gyogyō ni Kansuru Chōsa Hōkoku: Okinawaken ni Okeru Senzen-Nihon Fukki (1972) no Ugoki* (Senkakus Research A Report on Fishing in the Vicinity of the Senkaku Islands Focusing on the Prewar and Pre-Reversion (1972) Period in Okinawa Prefecture), (Naha: Senkaku Shotō Bunken Shiryō Hensankai, 2010), p. 215.

1st Air Division was inactivated on December 1, 1948, it was the 20th Air Force that took over.<sup>8</sup>

With the announcement, Kuba Island and the surrounding vicinity were designated as “permanently dangerous areas” and fishing or other entry within the immediate area was banned. The following month more details were released, namely that fishermen and others were not to enter a five-nautical mile area around the island due to the dangers associated with the bombing range.<sup>9</sup>

These announcements, however, apparently did not get fully relayed to the fishermen (or perhaps were outright ignored by them due to the importance of the area as one of the best fishing areas) and the Air Force reported problems with the bombing training due to fishermen and others being in the vicinity.<sup>10</sup> Major Merle M. Glover, the military government officer of the Yaeyama Civil Administration Team, or YCAT, which had been stood up in March 1947 after the Yaeyama Provisional Government was disbanded, directed Yoshino Kōzen, governor of the Yaeyama Civil Government (*Yaeyama Guntō Seifu Chiji*), to ensure the word got out to all of the fishermen through the newspapers and public notices.<sup>11</sup>

To be on the safe side, early the next year, the military government dropped notices to fishermen to inform them about avoiding the range at Kōbi Sho and not entering the five-nautical mile circumference area.<sup>12</sup> There was some confusion around this time, however, as a second area (Tori Island) had been declared off-limits as well. Locally, Minami Island and Kita Island were known collectively as Tori Island, but the actual training range was on another island named

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<sup>8</sup> Established in World War II, the 20th Air Force had shifted from its original mission of strategic bombing over Japan to becoming a central component of nuclear deterrence and strategic air command in the 1950s with its primary mission shifting to nuclear deterrence against the Soviet Union. Under the umbrella of the Strategic Air Command (SAC), which it had become a part of in 1946, the 20th Air Force was responsible for maintaining a fleet of bombers ready to deliver nuclear strikes. Its bombers, including B-29 Superfortresses, B-36 Peacemakers, and later the B-47 Stratojets, were positioned to carry out long-range nuclear bombing missions if conflict erupted. During this period, the 20th Air Force operated various bomber wings responsible for conducting both nuclear and conventional missions. Bomber crews were trained to conduct strategic bombing missions deep into enemy territory, with bombers capable of reaching the Soviet Union from bases in the United States and allied countries. The 20th Air Force was also involved in strategic support during the Korean War, with its strategic bombers on standby for potential use if the conflict escalated. It did not participate directly in day-to-day combat operations in Korea but remained a key element of the overall U.S. military posture during the conflict. The focus on maintaining a credible nuclear deterrent meant the 20th Air Force was kept on high alert during much of the 1950s. As such, throughout the 1950s, the 20th Air Force was involved in rigorous training exercises to maintain readiness for nuclear and conventional conflicts. Training missions were conducted to simulate the bombing runs that would be required in case of an actual nuclear war. This training ensured that both crews and aircraft were maintained at a high state of readiness.

<sup>9</sup> Rinji Hokubu Nansei Shotō Seichō, ed., “Tokubetsu Kokuji Daiichigō (Ryūkyūgun Sakusen Yōkō Dainigō) (Special Proclamation No. 1 [Ryukyu Military Operations Order No. 2]),” *Rinji Hokubu Nansei Shotō Seichō Kōhō*, No. 35 (May 5, 1948).

<sup>10</sup> Senkaku Shotō Bunken Shiryō Hensankai, ed., *Senkaku Kenkyū Senkaku Shotō Kaiiki no Gyogyō ni Kansuru Chōsa Hōkoku*, p. 215.

<sup>11</sup> “Senkaku Rettō Kōbi Sho wa, Eikyū Kiken Chiiki (Senkaku Islands’ Kōbi Sho, Permanent Danger Zone),” *Nansei Shimpō*, November 3, 1948. The *Nansei Shimpō* was a small newspaper that began operations on September 6, 1945, and continued until December 28, 1951.

<sup>12</sup> “Senkaku Rettō ni Chikayoru Na Beikokugun ga Keikoku (Do Not Go Near the Senkaku Islands, U.S. Air Force Warns),” *Miyako Minyū Shimbun*, January 14, 1949. The *Miyako Minyū Shimbun* operated from July 10, 1946 to February 24, 1950.

Tori Island closer to Kume Jima (and is still used today).<sup>13</sup> In order to clarify the areas, eventually the Air Force released on October 19, 1951, through the Okinawa Islands Government Economic Division (*Okinawa Guntō Keizaibu*) dates and specific latitudes and longitudes for when and where training would take place.<sup>14</sup> Afterwards, as well, prior to using the ranges, the U.S. military would inform the Government of the Ryukyu Islands (GRI) that it was declaring the areas off-limits, and the GRI, in turn, warned fishermen not to go near those waters through the Yaeyama Regional Office (*Yaeyama Chihōchō*).<sup>15</sup>

Kōbi Sho was used by the U.S. Air Force until 1955 for air-to-ground target practice, and then primarily by the U.S. Navy afterwards.<sup>16</sup> On November 9, 1955, Brigadier General Vonna F. Burger, the Civil Administrator of the Ryukyu Islands, along with Colonel Walter H. Murray, his deputy, convened a meeting to discuss the use of Kōbi Sho and other islands with about a dozen officials from the Navy and Air Force and relative departments of the U.S. Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands.

The reason for the meeting seems to have been due to requests from the Government of the Ryukyu Islands and other local officials and organizations based on the desires of local fishermen to ask the military to reduce the size of the no-entry area as the area around Kōbi Sho was particularly good for fishing.<sup>17</sup>

With regard to the use of Kōbi Sho as a bombing range, U.S. officials tentatively agreed that the military would continue to use it as an air-to-ground target and that restrictions as to ordnance, hours of use, and prior notice would continue, including special instructions. Importantly, however, they agreed that shore bombardment of the island would be discontinued after the present commitments had been completed. As a result, the officials decided to reduce the “danger area circle surrounding Kōbi Sho...to a minimum of preferably one hundred yards beyond the land area, subject to approval by the Com[mander] 7th Fleet.”<sup>18</sup>

At the time, the danger area was still approximately five miles surrounding Kōbi Sho, which hindered fishing. As a result of this change, the livelihoods of fishermen were greatly improved. However, beginning in mid-April 1956, the Navy also began using Sekibi Sho, or Taishō Island,

<sup>13</sup> To further confuse things, there is a second “Kuba Jima” belonging to Zamami Village in the Kerama Islands, closer to the main island of Okinawa. It, too, is uninhabited, and about almost twice the size as Kuba Island in the Senkakus.

<sup>14</sup> Senkaku Shotō Bunken Shiryō Hensankai, ed., *Senkaku Kenkyū Senkaku Shotō Kaiiki no Gyogyō ni Kansuru Chōsa Hōkoku*, pp. 217-218. Also see Ozaki Shigeyoshi, “Senkaku Shotō no Kizoku ni Tsuite, Chū,” *Refarensu* (Reference), No. 261 (October 1972), p. 96, citing *Ryūkyū Shiryō, 1945-1955, Vol. 8* (Naha: Ryūkyū Seifu Bunkyo-yoku, 1958), p. 59.

<sup>15</sup> An example of the announcement and copies of the leases can be found in *Kikan Okinawa*, No. 56, pp. 141-154, cited in Ozaki, “Senkaku Shotō no Kizoku ni Tsuite, Chū,” p. 58. According to Fung Hu-hsiang, “Evidence beyond Dispute: Tiaoyutai (Diaoyutai) is Chinese Territory!” ([www.skycitygallery.com/japan/evidence.html](http://www.skycitygallery.com/japan/evidence.html)), the U.S. military applied each time to the ROC government for authorization to use the islands for bombing practice, “confirming again that Tiaoyutai is ROC territory.” Fung, a controversial figure who died in 2021, was a former legislator in Taiwan and professor of philosophy at National Central University in Taipei. This explanation is highly unlikely, however.

<sup>16</sup> The Senkaku Islands Study Group, ed., “The Senkaku Islands and the Japan’s Territorial Titles to Them,” *Kikan Okinawa*, No. 63, p. 27. For more on this study group, established in April 1970, see Eldridge, *The Origins of U.S. Policy in the East China Sea Islands Dispute*, pp. 141-142.

<sup>17</sup> “Arasareru Kōbijima Gyoba’ Bakugeki Enshū Kuiki Henkō Uttaeru (Demanding a Change in the Bombing Practice Zone that is “Tearing Up the Kōbi Island Fishing Area),” *Miyako Mainichi Shimbun*, November 10, 1955. The *Miyako Mainichi Shimbun* had been established two month earlier in September that year and is still published today.

<sup>18</sup> “Memorandum for the Record of Conference on Use of Kobi Sho, Raleigh Rock, and Okinawa Daito Shima as Navy and Air Force Ranges, November 9, 1955,” USCAR Files.

which would affect fishermen there.<sup>19</sup> The danger area of Sekibi Sho, farther away, remained at five nautical miles as it does, nominally, today.

It is unclear why the U.S. military chose to begin using Sekibi Sho as an additional range at this point in the mid-1950s. It may have been to offset the limited usage area at Kōbi Sho. Or perhaps it had to do with tensions in the Taiwan Strait, or even as a result of the violence at sea seen in the March 1955 *Daisan Seitoku Maru* Incident, events that may have been inter-related in and of themselves.<sup>20</sup>

While the U.S. military's decision regarding adjusting the danger area around Kōbi Sho certainly did help Okinawan fishermen in the area, the problem did not go away in light of the expansion of use to include Sekibi Sho. It also impacted those outside of the prefecture as well.

During the 1950s, for example, the issue of the ranges was also taken up in prefectures in Kyushu that had boats going into the area, such as Nagasaki and Kagoshima Prefectures. In March 1954, a prefectural people's rally was held in Nagasaki against the training, and in September 1959, a similar rally was held in Kagoshima, both with large fishing communities.

The issue of U.S. military training in the fishing areas was subsequently taken up in the Diet, or National Parliament, in the agriculture and fisheries committee (*Nōrin Suisan Inkaï*) of the House of Representatives, or *Shūgiin*, in October 1959 and in the counterpart committee of the House of Councilors, or *Sangiin*, in November.<sup>21</sup> In the case of the House of Representatives (Lower House), the question had been raised by Akaji Tomozō, a Socialist Party (*Shakaitō*) representative from Kagoshima Prefecture. At the time, the revision of the U.S.-Japan security treaty was also being discussed between the two governments and in the Diet, where the Socialists were critical of the treaty, attention was particularly high.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to these political problems and requests to refrain from using the ranges, it is clear from U.S. documents that there were also a lot of problems with coordinating their use. Not only did Okinawan fishermen have to be warned from entering the area, fishermen and ships from mainland Japan and other countries also had to be informed. U.S. officials in Okinawa did not

<sup>19</sup> During this time, the Yaeyama Regional Office discovered the administrative responsibility for Sekibi Sho was unclear and requested an internal investigation. In some regulations and descriptions, the island appeared to fall under the jurisdiction of the Miyako Islands Regional Office (*Miyakotō Chihōchō*), but officials later found prewar Okinawa Prefecture records that found Taishō Island had been recorded as a part of Ishigaki City in 1921 (or the 10th Year of Taishō). See "'Sekibi Island' no Ishigakishi no Shokan, Taishō 10 Nen ni Taishō Island to Shite Tōroku ('Sekibi Island' Falls Under Ishigaki City, Registered in 10th Year of Taishō as Taishō Island)," *Ryūkyū Shimpō*, March 16, 1956. A month later, the U.S. Navy announced it was using the island for target practice. Senkaku Shotō Bunken Shiryō Hensankai, ed., *Senkaku Kenkyū Senkaku Shotō Kaiiki no Gyogyō ni Kansuru Chōsa Hōkoku*, pp. 231-232.

<sup>20</sup> For more on that incident, see Robert D. Eldridge, "The First Senkakus Clash: The 1955 *Daisan Seitoku Maru* Incident, American, Okinawan, and Republic of China Responses, and Japanese Diplomacy," *Japan Review*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (September 2024), ([https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/japanreview/pdf/05JapanReview\\_Vol7\\_No1\\_Robert%20D%20Eldridge.pdf](https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/japanreview/pdf/05JapanReview_Vol7_No1_Robert%20D%20Eldridge.pdf)).

<sup>21</sup> See 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 Ichijō to Shite* (Senkaku Research Report on the History of Natural Use and Development of the Senkaku Islands and Related Data—Advice on Regional Promotion and Island Development in Okinawa), (Naha: Senkaku Shotō Bunken Shiryō Hensankai, 2011), p. 145.

<sup>22</sup> For more on the Socialist Party's criticism of the security treaty revision, particularly in the context of Okinawa, see Robert D. Eldridge, "The Revision of the U.S.-Japan 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. Also see the classic history of the treaty revision, George R. Packard, III, *Protest in Tokyo: The Security Treaty Crisis of 1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

have a way to contact foreign countries to instruct their vessels and fishermen to avoid the area and thus sometimes word did not reach them. Fortunately, none was mistakenly bombed, but it is likely that certain runs had to be aborted due to fishermen being in the area thus causing an impact on training.

On a slightly related note, in the late 1960s, after Taiwanese fishermen had illegally landed in the Senkakus, the Government of the Ryukyu Islands put up “no trespassing” signs at the suggestion of USCAR. (Denying access to areas is an important aspect to show ownership of land or property, and an important concept in real estate.) These signs were finally installed in July 1970, including on Kuba Island and Taishō Island.<sup>23</sup>



**The Installment of the No-trespassing Sign**

It was necessary for the officials to get special permission to go to the two training areas. This was granted at the end of June (1970). The relevant section of the letter sent to Chief Executive Yara Chōbyō on behalf of the Civil Administrator read:

The U.S. Navy, controlling agency for the ranges involved, has concurred with your request. Entry into the ranges for the installation of warning signs has been approved. Ranges 175 (Kōbi Sho) and 182 (Sekibi Sho) will be closed from 6 July through 15 July 1970 to allow your government sufficient time to accomplish the project. Upon completion of the project, it is requested that this organization be notified by telephone (71175) in order that the U.S. Navy can be so informed. Please caution those concerned to refrain from disturbing any ordnance on these islands in order to prevent possible injury or loss of life.<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly, while on Kuba Island, GRI officials discovered 14 Taiwanese illegally on the

<sup>23</sup> For a detailed discussion of how this came about see Eldridge, *The Origins of U.S. Policy in the East China Sea Islands Dispute*, pp. 82-86.

<sup>24</sup> “Letter from H. L. Conner to Chief Executive, Government of the Ryukyu Islands, on Request for Entry Permit into a Firing Range of the U.S. Armed Forces (Taishō-Jima) of the Senkaku Rettō and Suspension of Firing Practice (received July 1, 1970),” USCAR Files.

island.<sup>25</sup> They were told to leave, having been shown the “no trespassing” sign being installed.

### 3. Leasing the Islands and a Short History of the Islands

The history of the Senkaku Islands is explored in depth in the author’s 2014 award-winning book, *The Origins of U.S. Policy in the East China Sea Islands Dispute*, but to briefly introduce Kuba Island and Taishō Island here, the former was explored and eventually leased from the Japanese government by Koga Tatsushirō, a businessman originally from Fukuoka Prefecture since the late 1800s. His son, Zenji, subsequently purchased them from the Japanese government in the early 1930s, years after his father passed away and when the original lease was up. Kuba Island today remains privately owned by a family friend (Kurihara Kazuko) of the Koga’s but is leased by the Japanese government.<sup>26</sup> Nearby Taishō Island was and has always been owned by the Japanese government, although as this article explains, was used by the U.S. military beginning in the 1950s for target practice when the United States had “the right to exercise all and any powers of administration, legislation and jurisdiction over the territory and inhabitants of these islands, including their territorial waters” as per Article 3 of the San Francisco Peace Treaty.<sup>27</sup>

After moving to Okinawa at the age of 23 in 1879, Koga established a store in Naha, and by 1882, the shop had done so well that Koga established a second store on Ishigaki Island.<sup>28</sup> There, he learned from fishermen and others about the uninhabited Senkaku Islands and the fact the islands were a nesting area for birds. In 1884, Koga sent an exploratory party to the islands and learned that indeed the islands were a bird habitat and were rich in marine resources. The following year, he sent some workers to the islands to gather bird feathers and ocean products, and realizing that both supply and demand were promising, decided to make it a regular part of his business.

Koga would send workers there annually and a decade later in 1894, he applied to the appointed governor of Okinawa Prefecture, Nishimura Sutezō, for permission to allow him to develop Kuba Island. He seems to have made the same request to the Japanese government, such as the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce about that same

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<sup>25</sup> Eldridge, *The Origins of U.S. Policy in the East China Sea Islands Dispute*, p. 85.

<sup>26</sup> Kurihara Kunikoshi received the title to Uotsuri Island from Koga Hanako, the wife of Koga Zenji, in 1978. Kurihara had received the islands of Kita Kojima and Minami Kojima from Zenji, the son of the original developer, Koga Tatsushiro, in 1972. He and Hanako did not have children, and looked at Kunikoshi as almost like a son. Zenji died in March 1978 just before tensions rose over the Senkakus in April of that year. Hanako asked Kurihara to take Uotsuri off her hands when tensions rose. Kurihara Kazuko received Kuba Island in 1985 from Hanako, three years prior to the latter’s passing in January 1988. (It is unclear why there was a delay between selling the two islands.) It appears that the Kurihara family paid a total of 38,000,000 yen for the four islands (see “Senkaku 3 Tō o Kokuyūka’ Nihon Seifu ga Seisaku Henkō (3 Senkaku Islands to be Nationalized’ Japanese Government Changes Policy),” *Tōa Nippō*, July 9, 2012.) Also see Kurihara Hiroyuki, *Senkaku Shotō Urimasu* (Senkaku Islands for Sale), (Tokyo: Kōsaidō Shuppan, 2012), pp. 44-48. The current owner is Kurihara Kazuko, who is the younger sister of Kunikoshi and Hiroyuki (a middle brother passed away in 2003). Kunikoshi adopted Kazuko in 2009.

<sup>27</sup> For the making of Article 3 and its interpretation, see Robert D. Eldridge, *The Origins of the Bilateral Okinawa Problem: Okinawa in Postwar U.S.- Japan Relations, 1945-1952* (New York: Routledge, 2001), particularly Chapter 7.

<sup>28</sup> Makino Kiyoshi, “Senkaku Rettō Shōshi (A Short History of the Senkaku Islands),” in *Kikan Okinawa*, No. 56, p. 65. For more about the Koga family, see Koga Zenji, “Senkaku Shotō no Aruji wa Watashi (I am the Owner of the Senkaku Islands),” *Nihon Keizai Shimbum*, August 26, 1971, and the interview with his wife, Hanako, in Arasaki Moriteru, ed., *Okinawa Gendaishi e no Shōgen* (Testimony about Modern Okinawan History), Vol. 2, (Naha: Okinawa Taimususha, 1982), pp. 129-132.



time. However, his request was denied since the ownership of the islands was unclear.<sup>29</sup>

Koga himself visited the Senkaku Islands the following year, traveling to Kuba Island. He would describe the visit in the following way: “there were many trees growing, and an infinite number of birds on the island. So numerous in fact, that you could catch one in your hand. The nearby waters were also rich in fish and other marine items. It is a very promising place to develop.”<sup>30</sup>

After this trip, Koga went directly to Tokyo and met with Minister of Home Affairs Nomura Yasushi on June 10, 1895, to describe the investigation he had conducted and request to be allowed to lease the islands. Importantly, the Japanese government had already approved earlier that year the inclusion of Uotsuri Island and Kuba Island as a part of Okinawa Prefecture (and thus a part of Japan), and therefore the situation was quite different from the previous year when Koga had last applied for permission to lease the islands. Legally speaking, according to international law scholar Okuhara Toshio, there was now no problem for the Meiji government to accept the request. However, because the islands in question had not been officially designated “national land,” or *kokuyūchi*, the minister decided to put off accepting Koga’s request.



**Koga Tatsushiro**



**Koga Zenji**



**Koga Hanako**

The history of the incorporation of the islands into Okinawa Prefecture, as well as the studies conducted, is covered in extensive detail in the author’s aforementioned book (particularly pages 31-36). Koga’s request to develop the islands was eventually approved in August 1896. He was allowed to use four of the islands—Uotsuri Island, Kuba Island, Minami Island, and Kita Island—for thirty years free of charge. (Taishō Island remained under the ownership of the central government, namely the Ministry of Finance, and continues so today.) Afterwards, when the thirty-year gratuitous lease expired, the four islands were leased from the central government on an annual basis for 136.61 yen beginning in September 1925.<sup>31</sup>

On March 31, 1932, at the solicitation of Koga’s son, Zenji, who had assumed ownership of the family business after his father passed away in mid-August 1918, the government sold the four islands to him at the price of 1,824 yen for Uotsuri Island, 247 yen for Kuba Island, 47 yen for Minami Island, and 31.50 yen for Kita Island.<sup>32</sup> The transfer of property rights was conducted later

<sup>29</sup> Okuhara Toshio, “Senkaku Rettō to Ryōyūken Mondai (The Senkaku Islands and the Territorial Problem),” *Sandei Okinawa*, No. 45 (June 2, 1973).

<sup>30</sup> Ozaki Shigeyoshi, “Senkaku Shotō no Kizoku ni Tsuite, Jō (Territorial Sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands, Part 1),” *Refarensu* (Reference), No. 259 (July 1972), pp. 43-44.

<sup>31</sup> Unryu Sukanuma, *Sovereign Rights and Territorial Space in Sino-Japanese Relations: Irredentism and the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), pp. 98-99.

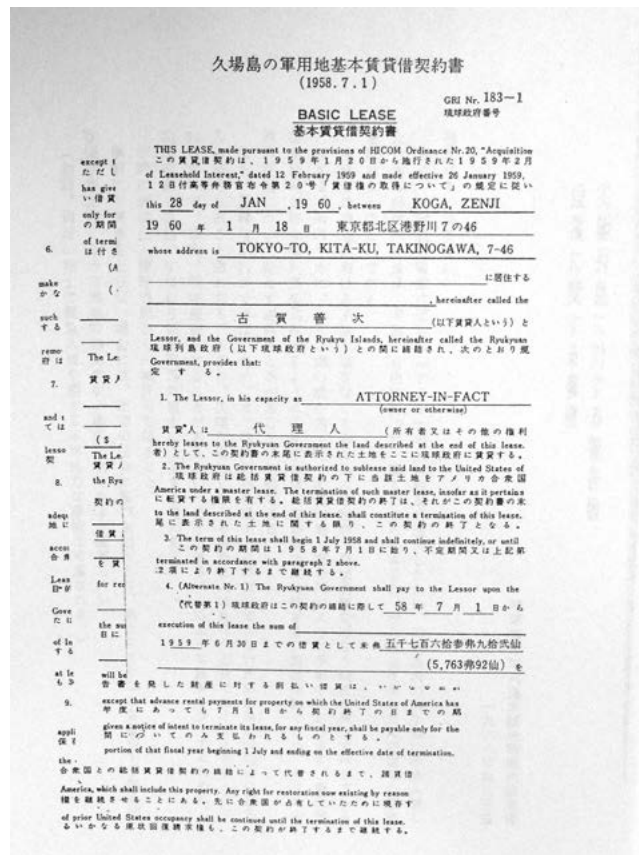
<sup>32</sup> Eldridge, *The Origins of U.S. Policy in the East China Sea Islands Dispute*, p. 36.

that year—May 27 for Uotsuri Island and Kuba Island, and July 28 for Minami Island and Kita Island.

Because four of the five islands were now privately owned, they became subject to property taxes. On December 15, 1932, the insular rental valuation was fixed at 9.30 yen, and the land property tax was calculated on this basis for the next few years.<sup>33</sup> On June 1, 1936, the rental valuation was adjusted, and the tax for Koga’s islands was lowered to 6.20 yen.<sup>34</sup> He would use the islands until 1940, when the workers were evacuated on the eve of the start of the Pacific War.

During the Battle of Okinawa, the United States came to control and occupy parts of Okinawa and its nearby islands. In September 1945, surrender ceremonies were held on the islands that had organized Japanese forces on them. At this point, all the Nansei Islands officially came under U.S. military control. The Senkaku Islands were unmanned, but were administratively under Ishigaki, and thus the aforementioned Yaeyama Civil Affairs Team was placed in charge of them.

Koga Zenji was no longer living in Okinawa at this point. He and his wife had left Okinawa in 1944 and lived in Nagano Prefecture and Tokyo. He would not return to Okinawa until 1961.<sup>35</sup> It is unclear in the chaotic, immediate postwar years when Zenji first learned that one of his islands was being used for target practice. In any case, according to him, the U.S. military began paying rent on Kōbi Sho in 1950 two years after usage began.<sup>36</sup>



Lease for Kuba Island

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., p. 40.

36 Koga Zenji, “Mō San, Satō San Senkaku Rettō wa Watashino ‘Shoyūchi’ Desu (Mr. Mao, Mr. Satō: I Own the Senkaku Islands),” *Gendai*, Vol. 6, No. 6 (June 1972), p. 145.

In July 1958, for reasons unclear, the United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands (USCAR) had the Government of the Ryukyu Islands act as its proxy in signing a lease with Koga, perhaps due to his physical unavailability.<sup>37</sup> According to the terms of the contract (Basic Lease, GRI, No. 183-1), USCAR paid Koga an annual rent of 5,763.92 U.S. dollars, which was raised to 10,567 dollars in 1963.<sup>38</sup> Koga began paying 400 dollars in taxes the following year to Ishigaki City, and for year 1971, he paid 450 dollars.<sup>39</sup> Koga, who was born in 1893, eventually died in 1978 at the age of eighty-four. But Kōbi Sho as well as three other islands remained privately owned until recently when several of them (Uotsuri Island, Minami Island, and Kita Island) were purchased by the Japanese government in September 2012 for ¥2.05 billion (\$26 million) as alluded to earlier, changing the title of the islands back to nationally owned land.<sup>40</sup> Kuba Island remains privately owned by Kurihara Kazuko but is leased to the Japanese government. As explained earlier, Sekibi Sho had always been state-owned.

#### 4. Continued Use of the Ranges after Okinawa's Reversion in 1972



**Reversion of Okinawa Ceremony, Tokyo, May 15, 1972**

As part of the revised bilateral security treaty, signed in January 1960 and going into effect in June that year, as well as the related Status of Forces Agreement (which also went into effect at

<sup>37</sup> Ozaki, "Senkaku Shotō," pp. 58-59.

<sup>38</sup> The Senkaku Islands Study Group, "The Senkaku Islands and the Japan's Territorial Titles," p. 27. Also see "Kuba Jima no Gunyōchi Kihon Chintai Keiyakusho (Basic Lease for Military Land on Kuba Jima)," in *Kikan Okinawa*, No. 56, pp. 142-149. See Toshio Okuhara, "The Territorial Sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands and Problems on the Surrounding Continental Shelf," *The Japanese Annual of International Law*, No. 15 (1971), p. 101.

<sup>39</sup> Koga, "Mō San, Satō San," p. 145.

<sup>40</sup> See Robert D. Eldridge, "Behind the Japanese Government's Purchase of the Senkaku Islands," *The Japan Times*, September 15, 2022 (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2022/09/15/commentary/japan-commentary/senkaku-islands/>). This article includes interviews with former Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko and other key players, such as Ishihara Shintaro and Nagashima Akihisa, in events at the time.

that time), the Japanese government continued to allow the United States Navy to use the ranges following Okinawa's reversion in May 1972. Kōbi Sho Range was identified as W-175 (Facility No. 6084) and Sekibi Sho Range as W-182 (Facility No. 6085).<sup>41</sup> Both continued to be managed and primarily used by the U.S. Navy.

According to declassified documents that are similar to the pre-1972 period but were updated with new range designations and maps, Kōbi Sho is described in the following way.

Location: The Kōbi Sho Range is an uninhabited island about 215 nautical miles west of Okinawa (see figure).

Access: The island is used solely as an air-to-ground range and due to its remote location is relatively inaccessible. Access is by helicopter or surface vessel.

Real Estate: Kōbi Sho is approximately 87 hectares (215 acres of land). The range includes the water surface area contiguous to Kōbi Sho out to a distance of 100 M.

Surrounding Land Use: The nearest inhabited islands are Miyako Jima, Ishigaki Shima and Iriomote Jima which are approximately 75 nautical miles to the south.

Terrain: The island is circular in shape with a diameter of about 1,100 meters. The island consists of a rocky outcropping rising to the highest elevation of about 118 m.

Training: The USFJ [U.S. Forces Japan] is authorized to use Kōbi Sho for air-to-ground bombing and gunnery utilizing all conventional aircraft ordnance.<sup>42</sup>

The same declassified document includes a description and map and figure for Sekibi Sho as well, stating:

Location: Sekibi Sho is a special use air and surface space over open ocean located 160 nautical miles west of Okinawa (see Figure).

Access: The island is relatively inaccessible to most activities due to its remote location. The primary users are ships transiting through the Okinawa OPAREA [Operations Area]. Access to this range is by helicopter or surface vessel.

Real Estate: Sekibi Sho contains approximately 4 hectares (10 acres) of land. The controlled area is circular and extends out from the island to a distance of 5 nautical miles with the center being at 25° 54'00"N, 124° 34'00"E. The airspace has the same surface boundary up to an altitude of 1,200 M (3,940 FT).

Surrounding Land Use: The nearest inhabited islands are Miyako Jima, Ishigaki Shima and Iriomote Jima which are approximately 75 nautical miles to the south.

Terrain: The island is rectangular in shape with dimensions of approximately 350 meters by 120 meters. The island is a rocky outcropping rising to an elevation of about 81 meters.

Training: The USFJ is authorized to use Sekibi Sho for ship-to-shore and air-to-ground bombing and gunnery, utilizing all conventional naval and aircraft ordnance.

The importance of the training ranges was clear at the time of Okinawa's reversion and hence their continuance. They provided a remote and relatively safe location to conduct live-fire exercises against the backdrop of the war in Vietnam and the need to be prepared for other contingencies.

<sup>41</sup> It is unclear why the Chinese reading of the islands' names, rather than the Japanese—Kuba Island and Taishō Island, were employed in the documents exchanged at the time of Joint Committee meeting on May 15, 1972, when the use of the continued ranges was agreed to and signed for.

<sup>42</sup> Department of the Navy, "Military Training Facilities in Okinawa (MILTRAIN-OKI), Okinawa, Japan, September 1985," pp. 34-36. A note describes the entire island of 215 acres as the "impact area."

The U.S. military continued to use these ranges after the end of the Vietnam War in the mid-1970s, although the frequency seems to have decreased somewhat. During this time, relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China were improving after President Richard M. Nixon's visit in February 1972, and military tensions in the region eased slightly (and throughout the world during the several years of détente with the former Soviet Union), leading to less frequent use compared to the height of the Cold War. These factors may have created the backdrop against which U.S. officials felt that they could suspend use of the ranges later.

## 5. The Decision by the United States to Suspend Use of the Ranges

While usage may have decreased, it had not ended.<sup>43</sup> For example, the U.S. Navy used the ranges in December 1977 and was planning to do so again in 1978 when the U.S. State Department directed the U.S. military in Japan to not use them that spring. The State Department turned down the U.S. Navy's request the following year as well.

The direct reason for the State Department's moratorium was related to the tensions that had risen between the PRC and Japan in April 1978 (and that have continued since then) and the U.S. government's desire not to get involved in questions of sovereignty over the islands. An indirect reason for the moratorium had to do with U.S. interest in working with the PRC toward mutual recognition, as talks were about to begin again between the two governments, which may have led the U.S. government to compromise in the hopes of moving discussions along.<sup>44</sup>

On April 12, 1978, some 80 Chinese fishing vessels appeared in the vicinity of the Senkakus. Many of them were armed, some with machine guns.<sup>45</sup> Eventually, that number grew to more than 200, and they would remain for the next couple of weeks.<sup>46</sup> This mass-intrusion occurred right after calls by members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party who to resolve the Senkakus issue between Japan and the People's Republic of China at the time of the bilateral treaty of peace and friendship which was being negotiated at the time.<sup>47</sup>

The reason for this mass-intrusion remains unclear, but there were several interpretations at the time including that it was a counter-assertion of sovereignty or an effort to derail the

<sup>43</sup> While the specific dates of the usage are unknown, the number of days the islands were to be used as ranges were as follows. Kuba Island, 1972 (0 days), 1973 (11 days), 1974 (1 day), 1975 (2 days), 1976 (0 days), 1977 (16 days), 1978 (116 days), and Taisho Island, 1972 (2 days), 1973 (13 days), 1974 (52 days), 1975 (55 days), 1976 (17 days), 1977 (41 days), 1978 (67 days). The author is indebted to Kuniyoshi Makomo for sharing this information.

<sup>44</sup> If this explanation is true, it would be similar to the decision made by the Nixon Administration in June 1971 at the time of the final negotiations over the Okinawa Reversion Agreement when the U.S. government decided to take a neutral stance on the issue of sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands despite longstanding policy to the contrary out of concern for the PRC with which Kissinger was secretly negotiating at that precise moment to arrange for Nixon to visit the PRC. (See Eldridge, "U.S. Senkakus Policy and its Contradictions," and Eldridge, *The Origins of U.S. Policy in the East China Sea Islands Dispute*, Chapter 5.) National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski seems to have fallen into a similar trap in his hurried efforts to negotiate official recognition with the PRC. See Richard H. Solomon, *Chinese Negotiating Behavior: Pursuing Interests through 'Old Friends'* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 1999). Also see Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1983).

<sup>45</sup> Daniel Tretiak, "The Sino-Japanese Treaty of 1978: The Senkaku Incident Prelude," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 18, No. 12 (December 1978), p. 1235.

<sup>46</sup> Nakama Hitoshi, *Kiki Semaru Senkaku Shotō no Genjō* (The Dangerous Situation Today Facing the Senkaku Islands), (Tokyo: Adobansu Kikaku, 2002), p. 137.

<sup>47</sup> Tretiak believes the efforts of the Diet members, who were opposed to a peace treaty with the PRC, may have been "a last-ditch attempt to thwart the treaty." See Tretiak, "The Sino-Japanese Treaty of 1978," p. 1241.

negotiations, both of which will be explored in a future article. Other explanations, such as one incorrectly told by PRC Foreign Minister Huang Hua to U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski who visited Beijing the following month, that “As for Chinese fishing boats in the neighborhood of the Senkaku Islands, they have been doing so for many years. It is not just this year that they have begun to do so.”<sup>48</sup>

The U.S. government, in any case, monitored the situation very closely, gathering information from Tokyo, Beijing, Taipei, Hong Kong, and elsewhere over the coming days, weeks, and months.

While the official position of the PRC was that the fleet had simply followed the fish and was unaware it had gotten close to Japanese waters, an explanation reportedly put forward by the Japanese side was that the Chinese in fact wanted to put pressure on the U.S. government by sending its fleet close to Kuba Island and Taishō Island.

On April 14, two days after the appearance of the Chinese boats, the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo informed the State Department that the Ohira Masayoshi, Secretary-General of the LDP, apparently “believed one reason for [the] presence of Chinese-fishing boats in the Japanese-claimed territorial waters off Senkakus was that [the Government of Japan] had allowed some of those islands to be used by [the] US military for bombing and shelling practice.”<sup>49</sup> Ohira, according to a Japanese newsman who told a U.S. Embassy officer about the LDP official’s comment, told reporters on background that the information had come from confidential documents provided by MOFA in late March as a backgrounder for use in explaining GOJ policy regarding the Senkakus.

A Washington Post correspondent in the interim had picked up on the story and asked for U.S. Embassy confirmation, but the latter refused to comment. The embassy thus wrote the State Department to inform them of developments and recommend that spokesmen from the Embassy or State Department “be authorized to comment along line that longstanding U.S. Forces utilization of range [sic] in question has grown out of fact that Japan’s exercise of facto sovereignty over islands and that the United States had not taken formal position as to sovereignty.”<sup>50</sup>

Based on the recommendations of the Embassy, the State Department decided to prepare a statement on its position on the Senkaku Islands and shared it with the Japanese side. On April 17, Political Counselor Arima Tatsuo from the Japanese embassy in Washington, D.C., called on Nicholas R. Platt, the Japan Country Director at the State Department, to discuss the “press guidance.” Platt and Arima were classmates at St. Paul’s School and Harvard College and had known each other a quarter century by this point.<sup>51</sup> Their longtime friendship seems to have allowed them to speak frankly.

Arima explained the background details of the Senkakus issue, including the Japanese acquiescence in 1971 to the U.S. position, but emphasized that the Japanese side had not been adequately consulted at the time and was “troubled by some of [the] wording of [the] basic

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<sup>48</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, “Summary of Dr. Brzezinski’s Meeting with Foreign Minister Huang Hua, Beijing, May 21, 1978,” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Vol. XIII, China*, p. 422.

<sup>49</sup> “Telegram 06519 from [Ambassador] Mansfield to State Department, April 14, 1978,” Record Group 59.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Author’s interview with Nicholas R. Platt, November 4, 2024, New York City, New York. Also see Nicholas Platt, *China Boys: How U.S. Relations with the PRC Began and Grew, a Personal Memoir* (Washington, D.C.: ADST-DACOR, 2010), and “Interview with Nicholas Platt, March 7, 2005,” The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Foreign Affairs Oral History Project (<https://adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Platt-Nick.pdf>). Also see Arima Tatsuo (edited by Takenaka Harukata), *Taiōbei Gaikō no Tsuioku, 1962-1997* (Recollections on Diplomacy with Europe and the United States), (Tokyo: Fujiwara Shoten, 2015).

position and expressed [the] view that reiteration of [the U.S. government's] position as now set forth particularly at time of [Prime Minister] Fukuda [Takeo]'s visit might cause GOJ embarrassment."<sup>52</sup>

Arima requested that the U.S. government delete the word "current" from the first sentence of the press guidance, repeating a similar request made by Tamba Minoru, who previously served in the Japanese embassies in Beijing and Washington, D.C., and had recently been assigned to head the Japan-U.S. security treaty division in Tokyo.<sup>53</sup>

Platt responded that the U.S. side would attempt to adjust the press guidance regarding American bombing ranges in the Senkakus to meet the present situation, including consideration of deletion of the word "current," but that changing the basic U.S. government position on the Senkakus—which "had been formulated with full regard for long-term U.S. needs and that it continued to meet those needs now as it had in 1971"—would be a "major exercise involving policy review at [the] highest level."<sup>54</sup> Platt added his personal view that the "objective situation" had not changed since 1971 and thus he "could not be sanguine about the outcome of any such review."<sup>55</sup>

The author finds this view odd in light of all of the changes that had occurred since June 1971, when the Okinawa reversion agreement was signed.<sup>56</sup> Namely, the U.S. and PRC has accomplished rapprochement, efforts to explore and exploit resources in the surrounding areas were continuing apace, tensions had arisen in the South China Sea, and the PRC had sent a large nominally fishing fleet near the Senkakus.

Arima also seems to have felt Platt's explanation was problematic. He admitted that MOFA was aware at the time of the reversion negotiations that the U.S. government "did not wish to become involved in any Senkakus dispute and therefore [MOFA] did not raise any objection to [U.S. government] position [in 1971]" but argued that the Japanese side "would view with alarm an unresponsive U.S. attitude in the face of some clearly aggressive act by the PRC in the Senkakus."<sup>57</sup>

Arima added his personal opinion that "such a development could call into question the U.S.-Japan mutual security treaty," to which Platt responded (again without the proper context) that "since the security treaty [was] not questioned in 1971 when [the U.S.] position [was] originally formulated and published, there seemed no reason why treaty should be questioned now."<sup>58</sup>

Platt said that the U.S. government fully understood delicacy of the Senkakus issue for Japan and therefore wished to avoid to the extent possible public reiteration of the U.S. basic position at this time. He further told Arima that if the latter sought a review of U.S. policy, the Japanese government would have to present its position in detail and develop supporting arguments for consideration. Arima said he would check with his government for instructions.

It is unclear if Arima did so and what discussions took place with the U.S. government, but Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher in the meantime informed the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo that it could revise the press guidance so that it read: "The longstanding U.S. forces' utilization of two bombing ranges in the Senkaku Islands has grown out of the period of U.S.

<sup>52</sup> "Telegram 101664 from Platt to U.S. Embassy Tokyo, April 21, 1978," Record Group 59.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. For more on his work at the embassies and within MOFA, see Tamba Minoru, *Waga Gaikō Jinsei* (My Life in Diplomacy), (Tokyo: Chūō Kōron Shinsha, 2011).

<sup>54</sup> "Telegram 101664."

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> For details, see Eldridge, *The Origins of U.S. Policy in the East China Sea Islands Dispute*, particularly chapters 4, 5, and Conclusion.

<sup>57</sup> "Telegram 101664."

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

administration of these islands and from the fact of Japan's exercise of authority over them. The U.S. uses these facilities in accordance with the Mutual Security Treaty and its related arrangements."<sup>59</sup> Christopher also instructed the Embassy to "emphasize to MOFA, however, that the basic [U.S. government] position remains unchanged," and that the rest of the guidance remained in effect.<sup>60</sup>

Despite these assurances, the State Department directed the military to stop using the ranges. It is unclear when this decision was actually made and in what way the directive was delivered— orally or in writing, and what its contents were. This is because the actual directive has not been located. (And if it was oral, was there a written record of the conversation or telephone call preserved?) In any case, there are numerous references to the "moratorium" in later declassified documents.

It is also clear in some of those declassified documents that the U.S. military desired to use the ranges again once they were permitted. For example, according to a February 1986 Department of the Navy document, under the "Comments" section for both the Kōbi Sho and Sekibi Sho ranges respectively, the following sentence was added, "This range should be used when the SECSTATE moratorium is lifted."<sup>61</sup> While this view was stated in the middle of 1980s when the Cold War was at its peak, one could argue that in the current new Cold War situation today with competition by an aggressive and expansionist PRC, the need to use the training ranges is more than ever.

## 6. Conclusion

As this article has explored, the decision of the United States to suspend use of the training ranges on Kuba Island (Kōbi Sho) and Taishō Island (Sekibi Sho) was highly problematic for the following reasons. First, it was inconsistent with (the admittedly problematic) U.S. policy on the Senkakus. Namely, the United States recognizes Japanese administration over the Senkaku Islands, and the United States is permitted by the SOFA to use the two ranges on the Senkaku Islands. However, it somehow chose not to use the ranges for fear of being entangled in a Sino-Japanese dispute over the islands. Second, the U.S. decision to suspend use of the ranges sends an unfortunate message to an ally, Japan, that the United States does not support its position and thus will not be there to defend the islands (or might even perhaps be willing to divide the islands between Japan and the People's Republic of China, as Former President Ulysses S. Grant had proposed for the Ryukyu Islands in the 19th Century and another administration, that of President Nixon, was advised to do during the final weeks of the Okinawa reversion talks<sup>62</sup>). Third, it creates a dangerous precedent of allowing the PRC to dictate which facilities under the U.S.-Japan Status of Forces Agreement in Japan the United States will use. Fourth, it places the United States in violation of the SOFA by not returning the ranges as required when no longer needed. Fifth, the uncertain status of the two ranges necessitates the Japanese government to continue to maintain the facilities for the United States and to pay the owner, Kurihara Kazuko, for the lease of Kuba Island with taxpayer money. Sixth, the suspension of use of the ranges prevents the U.S. military from getting the necessary training nearby and denies the U.S. and Japanese militaries from being able to work and train together were the ranges made joint use.

In light of these problems, this writer believes the United States should lift the moratorium on use of the two ranges and allow the U.S. military to use them again. In addition, the U.S. and Japanese governments should explore in the Joint Committee allowing aircraft from the Japan Self-Defense Forces to also them together with the use military. This is something the 1997 or

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> "Final Report for Military Training Facilities in Okinawa," pp. 36, 38.

<sup>62</sup> See Eldridge, *The Origins of U.S. Policy in the East China Sea Islands Dispute*, specifically pp. 223-225.



especially the 2015 Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation could have easily addressed.<sup>63</sup>

It should be noted, however, that this writer is unaware of any Japanese official ever having asked the U.S. government to return the ranges. One reason for this lack of certainty is that Japan remains particularly slow in declassifying documents on sensitive matters (and has an unnecessarily expansive definition of “sensitive,” whose effect is to limit declassifications). If it is true that the Japanese government has never requested their return, then it is likely because the Government of Japan may wish to keep the United States engaged in the Senkakus issue by maintaining the provision of the two ranges to the United States military for its use. Perhaps we can call this situation, “lease ambiguity,” for lack of a better phrase. It serves the interests of both Japan and the United States.

Indeed, one former U.S. official involved in the decision to suspend military use of the ranges explained to the author that “sometimes it is not in your interest to make a decision. It may be better to let the issue continue.”<sup>64</sup> With regard to the two bombing ranges in the Senkakus, however, it is now time to reuse them as needed to both enforce U.S. rights, to improve U.S. and Japanese capabilities, and send an unambiguous message to the region and world.

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<sup>63</sup> The 2015 Guidelines state, for example, “The two governments will enhance cooperation in joint/shared use of facilities and areas.” See “The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation, April 27, 2015,” <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000078188.pdf>, p. 13.

<sup>64</sup> Author’s interview with Ambassador Nicholas Platt, New York City, November 4, 2024.