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George Washington on the Sagami

Testament to Shared Community in Homeporting the First Nuclear-Powered Warship in Japan

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Abstract

Basing the first nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, USS GEORGE WASHINGTON (hereon referred to as GW) in Yokosuka, Japan, was never certain. Success required constant vigilance on the part of U.S. and Japanese policy leaders in order to navigate divergent conventional wisdoms, unfortunate incidents, and sharp political sensitivities. In the end, a high degree of trust built over decades based upon a shared sense of community in Yokosuka proved critical to GW's eventual 2008 arrival. That USS RONALD REAGAN replaced GW in 2015 with little fanfare is a testament to those close and enduring relationships. Those relationships will be critical in overcoming future bumps in the road."

The GW experience in Yokosuka provides a worthy lesson as our nation looks around the world for new partners in today's great power competition. These partnerships will be critical as we confront together a revanchist Russia and a confidently aggressive China. The 2018 National Defense Strategy makes clear, steadfast allies, such as Japan, are critical in protecting a rules-based international order that is key to our shared prosperity. Gradual but sustained commitments amongst our leaders, outreach between communities, and physical military presence will be key to building important new partnerships across the Indo-Asia-Pacific.

塵も積もれば、山となる

Even Dust, When Piled up, Will Become a Mountain" - Japanese Proverb

Aircraft Carriers and Great Power Competition in Asia

On a humid September morning in 2008, nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS GEORGE WASHINGTON (hereon referred to as GW) sailed up Tokyo Bay to its new homeport in Yokosuka, Japan. On that day, Chief Petty Officer Cleo Bowie sensed the importance: I think this is beautiful. A lot of people maybe haven t really taken it in yet, but once all the dust has cleared, then they ll start to really see—it s history."[1] Events in the intervening decade proved the Chief correct, and $67 million dollars to upgrade Yokosuka facilities was money well spent. Also, on the pier that day were leaders instrumental in GW s arrival, Yokosuka Mayor Ryoichi Kabaya and Rear Admiral James Kelly. This is the story on how a shared sense of community in Yokosuka overcame challenges, divergent conventional wisdom, and sharp political sensitivities to station the first nuclear-powered aircraft carrier in Japan.

However, GW wasn t the first carrier based in Yokosuka. First was the conventionally powered USS MIDWAY, which arrived in 1973. MIDWAY s arrival was overshadowed by summits and public protests over reverting Okinawa from U.S. possession to Japan (e.g. the December 20, 1970, Koza Riot).[2] Then as well as in 2008, GW s arrival occurred at a time of heightened regional tensions amidst great power competition, bringing significantly increased military capability and maturation in the U.S.-Japan defense relationship. The framework for this relationship is formalized in the U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines; which at the height of the Cold War in 1978, incorporated the presence of an aircraft carrier in Japan as an essential element of extended deterrence and rapid crisis response.[3] Despite precedence, GW s arrival would defy decades of conventional wisdom both in Washington and Tokyo. Namely, Japan s public, having suffered the horrors of two nuclear bombings, would not sanction hosting anything with the word nuclear" in it. Bridging countervailing conventional wisdom would require sustained effort on the part of both nations leadership while building public consensus in Yokosuka.

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[1] Teri Weaver, "USS GEORGE WASHINGTON Makes Historic Arrival in Japan," *Stars & Stripes*, September 27, 2008.

[2] Kazuhiko Togo, *Japan's Foreign Policy 1945-2003* (Leiden: Koninklijke brill, 2005), 64-70.

[3] Kotani Tetsuo, "Presence and Credibility: Homeporting the USS MIDWAY at Yokosuka," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 15, issue 1-2 (January 2008), 51-76.

Bedrock of the U.S.-Japan Alliance

Occasionally, the centrifugal force of unfortunate incidents risked the alliance, imperiling GW s arrival. Yet, personal bonds and trust built over decades between the shared Yokosuka communities have proven vital in navigating tough times. Professor Naoyuki Agawa in his book *Friendship Across the Seas* goes further, arguing that safeguarding these bonds built upon decades of exchanges and living as neighbors has been paramount in securing the alliance.[4] Another key population are the children of U.S. service members and Japanese, who oftentimes stay in Japan to raise their own families, acting as unpaid cultural ambassadors. A recent example is Ariana Miyamoto. The daughter of a Japanese mother and a U.S. service member father who was based in Sasebo, Japan, Miyamoto gained international attention when she was named 2015 Miss Universe Japan.[5] Moreover, base housing being limited, U.S. military families often live in Japanese communities. The bonds formed from these experiences over the decades have built an affinity amongst Japanese and Americans. These experiences have given rise to groups dedicated to bilateral bonds, such as the Japan-America Navy Friendship Association (JANAFA) and the $38 million trust fund the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission, founded with monies paid by the Government of Japan for the 1972 reversion of U.S. facilities in Okinawa.[6] The proximity and duration of our two peoples in Yokosuka has also deepened shared cultural bonds; such is the case with jazz music, which gained popularity during the 1940s occupation and spread from Yokosuka throughout Japan.[7]

For many years, the U.S. and Japanese Yokosuka communities have hosted each other to military base open houses and local Bon Odori festivals, not as foreigners as much as neighbors. It s an openness dating from Captain Benton Benny" Decker s tenure as base commander. (The local Yokosuka theater is named after him.) During his tenure (1946-1950), his outreach and support to the local Japanese community was local legend. Decker directed the conversion of once imperial Navy warehouses and facilities into schools, churches, and hospitals.[8] His example set the standard for community relations based on trust and mutual respect that are today deeply ingrained, making the base walls a distinction

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[4] Naoyuki Agawa, *Friendship Across the Seas* (Tokyo: Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture, 2019), 253-257and 283-295.

[5] Kirk Spitzer, "Beauty queen fights racial bias in Japan," *USA Today*, 30 May 30, 2015.

[6] Japan - U.S. Friendship Commission, "About Japan - U.S. Friendship Commission," https://www.jusfc.gov/about/ (accessed April 22, 2019).

[7] Takuya Kuroda, "How Japan Came To Love Jazz," *NPR*, https://www.npr.org/sections/ablogsupreme/2014/04/30/308275726/how-japan-came-to-love-jazz (accessed April 19,2019).

[8] Commander Fleet Activities Yokosuka, "History," www.cnic.navy.mil (accessed April 14, 2019); and, Discover Yokosuka, "Yokosuka Navy Base's Fourth & Famous American Commander," www.deepyokosuka.blogspot.com (accessed April 14, 2019).

with little difference between two communities. Moreover, today Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces (JMSDF) maintain operational facilities on what had been an exclusive U.S. base during most of the Cold War, while those employed in the ship repair facilities and the myriad base services are managed and run by Japanese employees. Often times, the legacy children of Japanese and U.S. service members work in the housing and personnel offices. They are often the first people to explain to newly arriving service members and their families the Japanese culture of their new Yokosuka home. This is an especially important but under-appreciated channel of communication into the Yokosuka community, such as when—as happened in the lead up to GW s arrival—a service member commits a heinous crime.

The End of American Conventional Aircraft Carriers

Operationally, the imperative of basing a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier in Yokosuka has roots in decisions made in the 1970s. Starting with a bilateral accord signed August 31, 1972, intended partly as a cost reduction measure, the basing of USS MIDWAY in Yokosuka in 1973 assured a persistent carrier presence in Asia.[9] Next, during Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt s time as Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), he clashed often and publicly with the director of Naval Reactors, the notorious Admiral Hyman G. Rickover. Notable was these two admirals disagreement on the composition of the future fleet. Zumwalt advocated for a numerically larger fleet comprising smaller, less costly ships; Rickover favored a smaller fleet comprising larger nuclear-powered ships.[10] The debate was playing out in the U.S. Congress and was of particular importance in Tokyo, regarding the future U.S. Navy fleet s disposition in Japan. Admiral Rickover, while not totally victorious in this policy contest, was able to convince Congress that nuclear power was the most appropriate and effective means of propulsion for submarines and large navy warships.[11] As a consequence, the last U.S. conventional aircraft carrier was commissioned in 1968. Security practitioners in Tokyo took note. They realized that, while an unpopular proposal, ensuring a meaningful U.S. naval presence in East Asia at a time the Soviet Union was expanding its Pacific forces would require supporting increased presence of nuclear-powered warships in Japan.

In May 1998, any hope of a new conventional aircraft carrier being built was put to rest. That year, the Navy conducted an internal study and responded to the findings of the General Accounting Office (GAO), determining the most effective approach to its

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[9] Department of the Navy, "USS MIDWAY (CVB 41)," Naval Historical Center, www.navy.mil/navydata/nav_legacy.asp?id=57 (accessed April 14, 2019).

[10] John W. Finney, "Zumwalt Scores Rickover in Book," *The New York Times*, April 15, 1976.

[11] Francis Duncan, *Rickover and the Nuclear Navy: The Discipline of Technology* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 1990), 147-169.

next generation CVX carrier would be to design it as nuclear-propelled.[12] This decision killed any lingering hope for a new conventional aircraft carrier, making it unavoidable that U.S. policy leaders find a solution acceptable to Japan that retained a carrier in Yokosuka.[13] Conventional wisdom then in Washington was solidly against the Japanese accepting a nuclear-powered warship. Over the next several years, policy leaders and U.S. Navy planners busily searched for solutions that would see a continued conventional carrier presence in Japan. However, these proposals would have only forestalled the inevitable by a year or two. With no viable solutions, some senior leaders began considering a way ahead that would lead to Japanese public support. One approach attempted by Commander Seventh Fleet was to desensitize the public by routinizing the presence of nuclear-powered aircraft carriers in Japan. In this regard, the May 2003 visit by the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS CARL VINSON to Yokosuka was timely.[14] While helping to routinize their presence, this visit provided invaluable knowledge regarding needed pier modifications and facility modernizations required for the larger nuclear-powered aircraft carriers. Lastly, these visits made clear that larger crews and new maintenance needs would necessitate expanding base and local community capacity to house a larger population of U.S. families and attract more Japanese employees to the base.

A key moment was the assumption of command in September 2005 of U.S. Naval Forces Japan (CNFJ) by Rear Admiral James D. Kelly. The choice of Rear Admiral Kelly was prescient: having commanded the Carrier Strike Group led by the conventional aircraft carrier the USS KITTY HAWK in Yokosuka, he understood the operational imperatives and had the needed personal connections in Yokosuka. For the next few years as CNFJ, GW's arrival would be a central focus as he partnered with the local JMSDF Fleet Commander Vice Admiral Yoji Koda, whose enduring support would be important.

Criticality of a Nuclear-Power Aircraft Carrier in Japan

It's hard to overstate the criticality for a Japan-based carrier to secure U.S. Indo-Asia-Pacific interests today. For one, the cost of maintaining a persistent forward presence in Asia of one carrier would be fiscally unacceptable. Using a familiar rule of thumb, it takes three U.S. based carriers to provide the same amount of naval presence in Asia versus one home-ported in Yokosuka. At a time of significant downsizing in the 1990s, then the stresses of fighting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, expanding the carrier fleet proved cost

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[12] U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), *Report to Congressional Requesters: Navy Aircraft Carrier Cost Effectiveness of Conventionally and Nuclear-Powered Carriers* (Washington, D.C., August 1998), 147-148.

[13] Ronald O'Rourke, "Navy CVN-77 and CVX Aircraft Carrier Programs: Background and issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service (July 1998).

[14] Yokosuka City, "Nuclear Powered Warship Visits," https://www.city.yokosuka.kanagawa.jp/2220/kithitai/06/documents/0606.pdf (accessed May 3, 2019).

prohibitive. The 2003 decision by CNO to decommission the USS ENTERPRISE, thus saving several billion dollars, made maintaining a nuclear-powered carrier in Japan essential.[15] Another benefit of being based in Yokosuka is proximity to Asian flash-points, days versus over a week for West Coast-based carriers to arrive at a hotspot over 5,000 miles away—the so-called tyranny of distance." But most important was the permanence of U.S. power and commitment to the alliance symbolized by a carrier with thousands of service members and families. Such skin in the game" has at times helped steady anxious allies.

On the day of assuming command of CNFJ, in conversations with then Commander of Pacific Fleet Admiral Gary Roughead, it was clear Admiral Kelly s top priority would be GW s arrival. A press conference was planned in Yokosuka later the next day, but delayed when the U.S. Ambassador called and asked it to be held in Tokyo.[16] Ambassador Tom Schieffer, a confidant of then President George W. Bush, beginning before his Senate confirmation, was briefed on the strategic importance of basing a carrier in Japan. It would be one of the biggest challenges of his Ambassadorship.[17] Shortly after arriving in Tokyo in April of 2005, he knew this would be a nation-to-nation issue and wanted to ensure highest levels of visibility in both Tokyo and Washington, D.C. Their joint press conference at the Embassy showcased the partnership between the CNFJ and the Embassy, and that the nation was prioritizing this effort.[18] It also importantly ensured highest levels of access to leadership in both capitals vital in resolving issues expeditiously.

Building Trust and Confidence in the Navy s Nuclear Program

While the Yokosuka communities were close, Japanese national politics were such that agreeing to host a nuclear-powered warship would have been tantamount to political suicide. Moving the Japanese public to accept the GW would require support of politicians in the Diet, and getting their support required Mayor Ryoichi Kabaya in Yokosuka being onboard. An outdated remedy would have seen Japanese leaders explain the GW as being foisted on them per terms of the security treaty—the traditional Japanese concept of *gaiatsu* (foreign pressure). Thankfully this was not done as Admiral Kelly and Ambassador Schieffer worked out their approach, it was clear the only way to persuade the Japanese public was to be upfront and honest.[19] It was an approach based on a mutually held belief

[15] Senate Appropriations Subcommittee for Defense, *Statement of Admiral Vern Clark, U.S. Navy Chief of Naval Operations*, 108th Congress, April 2, 2004.

[16] Rear Admiral James Kelly, phone interview by author, March 7, 2019.

[17] Ambassador Tom Schieffer, e-mail message to author, April 26, 2019.

[18] Ambassador Tom Schieffer, e-mail message to author, April 26, 2019.

[19] Ambassador Tom Schieffer, e-mail message to author, April 26, 2019.

that the collective security of the alliance was the best hope for peace and prosperity in the region.[20]

A first step was a month-long effort in concert with Naval Reactors to produce a publicly releasable nuclear-powered warship safety fact sheet.[21] This fact sheet provided an unclassified overview of the design and training of Navy s nuclear power program, which has ensured no nuclear accidents or harmful release of radioactivity for over fifty years. The document alone was not enough to convince many in Japan, and more would be needed to get Mayor Kabaya s public support. Political sensitivities necessitated discretion, and the mayor s connections to Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, also born in Yokosuka and representing the district at the Diet, Japan s national legislature, ensured national leadership attention. Taken together, galvanizing support for GW amongst the public and national leadership in Tokyo would require a public statement of support from Mayor Kabaya.

To gain the mayor s support, following release of the fact sheet, in May and in August 2006, CNFJ organized two trips to San Diego, home to nuclear-powered aircraft carrier and submarines. The first trip was with Yokosuka civic and business leaders, who upon return petitioned for the mayor s support. In August, Mayor Kabaya traveled and directly asked numerous local San Diego civic and government leaders regarding relations and concerns with nearby nuclear-powered warships. Their response and comfort with the U.S. Navy s safe, long-running nuclear presence assured him. Upon his return, encouraged by Yokosuka chamber of commerce and industry leaders, the mayor publicly supported hosting GW for the first time.[22] These trips helped communicate that the U.S. Navy would be providing Japanese citizens the same stringent assurances of nuclear safety as that of U.S. citizens.

The mayor s trust was further solidified in November 2007, when the U.S. military participated for the first time in a Yokosuka City disaster reaction drill. Since 2002, the city had conducted annual radiological disaster drills in light of visiting U.S. nuclear-powered warships. However, CNFJ had resisted participation for fear of divulging sensitive operational information.[23] Conduct of the drill was on the personal request of Mayor Kabaya, and U.S. participation greatly enhanced the mayor s reputation and bolstered local

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[20] Ambassador Tom Schieffer, e-mail message to author, April 26, 2019.

[21] Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *Fact Sheet on U.S. Nuclear Powered Warship Safety* (Tokyo, Japan, April 2006).

[22] Allison Batdorff and Hana Kusumoto, "San Diego Visit Eases Concerns of Yokosuka Officials," *Stars & Stripes*, May 11, 2006.

[23] "Yokosuka Base Holds Joint Nuclear Leak Drill," *The Japan Times*, November 9, 2007.

support for GW s arrival.[24] Having demonstrated U.S. preparedness and transparency to protect both U.S. and Japanese citizens against a nuclear incident, the mayor s and public s support for GW s arrival was at a high point.

Near-Miss

Support for GW seemed cinched, until two horrific crimes were committed by U.S service members and there was a significant fire on GW. The 2006 murder of Ms. Yoshie Sato (56 years old)[25] and the 2008 murder of Japanese taxi driver Mr. Masaaki Takahashi (61 years old)[26] by U.S. sailors, inflamed national anti-U.S. base sentiment. Then, a 2008 fire on the GW caused several million dollars of damage and delayed GW s planned arrival by almost six months.[27] Only the direct intervention of the senior naval officer in Japan, Vice Admiral William D. Crowder, Commander of Seventh Fleet, and Ambassador Schieffer, were able to abate the negative sentiments building from these incidents. Luckily, the delay did not see any new crises that further imperiled GW s arrival.

Timing was critical: had GW not arrived in September 2008, it is unlikely the alliance and goodwill alone could have overcome the political changes soon to rock Tokyo. A year later, following historic national elections on September 16, 2009, left-leaning Democratic Party of Japan s (DPJ) Yukio Hatoyama became prime minister. He won on a platform re-examining ties with the United States and a move to a more Asia-centric foreign policy.[28] Most troubling during his tenure was the abrupt abrogation of the 2006 agreement to relocate Marine Corps forces in Okinawa. Had GW s arrival in Yokosuka remained unsettled, it is not unreasonable to expect that a Hatoyama government, or its immediate DPJ successor, would have been unable to support GW s arrival.

Thankfully, the question of GW s arrival was resolved in time, continuing the presence of a preeminent symbol of U.S. naval power. GW s arrival would also prove advantageous in ways not expected in 2008. Since the mid-2000s, Chinese intrusions into Japanese waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands were increasing amidst persistently negative diplomatic relations. The steadfastness of U.S. presence at this time provided a stabilizing force as tensions over maritime intrusions persisted, sometimes resulting in

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[24] Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Record of Discussion on the Replacement of USS KITTY HAWK (Tokyo, Japan, June 2006).

[25] Tomoko Otake, "Family's pain over 2006 Yokosuka murder reflects desire for SOFA rethink," *The Japan Times*, June 23, 2016.

[26] "U.S. Sailor Gets Life in Japan Murder," *CBS News*, July 30, 2009.

[27] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Announcement by the U.S. Government on the USS GEORGE WASHINGTON Fire," July 31, 2008, https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/announce/2008/7/1182359_1030.html (accessed 22 April 2019).

[28] Jeffrey W. Hornung, "Japan Chair Platform: Assessing the DPJ's Stewardship of the Alliance," *Center for Strategic & International Studies* (March 15, 2013).

casualties.[29] But the most visible benefit was U.S. support in operation Tomodachi (meaning friendship" in Japanese) following the March 2011 Great Tohoku earthquake and ensuing Fukushima nuclear disaster, which galvanized public support for the Alliance. The GW s, and subsequently USS RONALD REAGAN's presence in Yokosuka meant there was a ready cadre of equipped and practiced personnel to assist in 2011. Their efforts contributed to the assessment and containment measures early during the Fukushima nuclear crisis. Additionally, while many foreign nationals fled Tokyo, sardonically referred to as fly-jins, historically Tomodachi, Following assisted. and stayed military U.S. the [30] low favorability for Self-Defense Forces and U.S. military received overwhelming domestic public support, with approval rates remaining above 85 percent.[31] To this day, the efforts of sailors, soldiers, and airmen of Operation Tomodachi are celebrated in Japan and at the Japanese ambassador s residence in Washington, D.C. Had the GW and its trained crew and support personnel not arrived in 2008, crises with North Korea, tensions with China over maritime disputes in South and East China Sea, and Russia in the waters surrounding the unresolved Northern Territories (Southern Kurile Islands) would have been more perilous.

Conclusion

As we confront a dangerous new era, Japan will remain a steadfast ally with shared interests in a rules-based international order. This partnership will be critical as together we confront a revanchist Russia and a confidently aggressive China. The arrival of GW was a test of our alliance and the Yokosuka community, an outcome predicated on the decades of goodwill, trusted personal relationships, and tireless dedication of community leaders. The fact that the USS RONALD REAGAN replaced GW in 2015 with little fanfare is a testament to those close and enduring relationships, which will be critical in overcoming future bumps in the road. As we look around the world for new partners in today s great power competition, the noteworthy shared experiences in Yokosuka should inform our approach and impress leaders in both Tokyo and Washington. Per the proverb at the beginning, steady and sustained effort over time will produce truly remarkable results. In this way, the gradual but sustained commitments amongst our leaders, outreach between communities, and physical military presence is vital in building new partnerships across the Indo-Asia-Pacific.

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[29] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Trends in Chinese Government and Other Vessels in the Waters Surrounding the Senkaku Islands, and Japan's Response," April 5, 2019, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page23e_000021.html (accessed April 22, 2019).

[30] "Fly-jins" is a reference to foreign nationals that chose or were requested by their home nations to depart ('fly') Japan in the days following the nuclear crisis at Fukushima; see *Japan Times* article at https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2012/05/06/editorials/flyjin-rather-few/.

[31] Bryce Wakefield, "Japan and the United States after the Great East Japan Earthquake," in "Report of the 3rd Japan-U.S. Joint Public Policy Forum," The Sasakawa Peace Foundation and Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (October 27, 2011), 9 and 13.

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