Yukio Okamoto’s Death Is a Tragic Loss for U.S.-Japan Relations

The master Japanese diplomat helped keep a complicated alliance on the rails.

Yukio Okamoto, a diplomacy analyst and former advisor to past Japanese prime ministers, in 2015. KYODO VIA AP IMAGES

It was a shock for many of us in Japan’s diplomatic corps to hear that our former colleague and incisive commentator Yukio Okamoto, who always appeared robust and full of energy, had succumbed to pneumonia caused by the novel coronavirus last month. Okamoto’s death is a tragic loss for everyone involved in U.S.-Japan affairs at a critical time in the two country’s relations.

Okamoto, who died on April 24 at age 74, followed a couple of years behind me as, successively, politico-military officer at the Japanese Embassy in Washington (1983-1985) and then as director of the Japan-U.S. security affairs desk and the Japan-U.S. political affairs desk in the North American Bureau of the foreign ministry (1988-1991). He continued his abiding commitment to the Japan-U.S. alliance for decades after he established his own consultancy, earning the nickname “Mr. Nichibei Kankei” (Mr. Japan-U.S. Relations). In his comments to the public broadcaster NHK, Richard Armitage, a former U.S. deputy secretary of

state and assistant secretary of defense, who had worked closely with Okamoto over the years, called him a “giant” and a true patriot.

Okamoto was far from the image of a conventional buttoned-up diplomat. He preferred acting on the spot to being desk-bound. While he was heading the Japan-U.S. political desk at the foreign ministry, the only sign of his presence was said to be his suit jacket draped over the back of his chair. Even his superiors did not know where he had gone AWOL, possibly running around the halls of the National Diet members’ office buildings or somewhere meeting his American contacts or opinion-makers in business, academia, and other circles.

As far as national security was concerned, Okamoto was considered a hawk or a conservative realist. In Japan, the domestic debate over the country’s place in the world was largely influenced by the idealistic pacifism and anti-militaristic tendencies caused by defeat in World War II. But Okamoto was consistently an advocate of a proactive Japanese role under the Japan-U.S. alliance and in the context of global peace and security.

In February 1986, there was a serious test of how Japan might inject itself into the early phase of the negotiations on the reduction of intermediate-range nuclear forces between the United States and the Soviet Union. Edward Rowny, U.S. President Ronald Reagan’s special envoy to the arms talks, came to Tokyo to broach to the Japanese leaders the U.S. proposal, in response to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s Jan. 15 disarmament proposal, to remove all Soviet SS-20 missiles from Europe (west of the Ural Mountains) and reduce the SS-20s in Asia by half.

This would create new and difficult circumstances for Japan, because the SS-20s remaining in Asia would pose a serious threat to the country, affecting the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent. Okamoto and three other colleagues in the foreign ministry subsequently dubbed the “Gang of Four” by their American counterparts, crafted in a rush the Japanese counterproposal, which was to concentrate all the SS-20s in the central Soviet Union (Barnaul, southwest Siberia) so that Japan and Western Europe would share the risk equally in the sense that they would both be within the striking range of the missile.

Okamoto immediately flew to Washington to brief Bob Linhard, the assistant to the president on arms control, on the Japanese counterproposal contained in

Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone's letter to Reagan. Some years later, Okamoto said that his American counterpart found the sharply focused specificity, as opposed to a simple "no," of the Japanese counterproposal "very refreshing." Influenced by the Japanese idea, Reagan presented to Gorbachev a revised version of his 1981 zero option, calling for the "elimination [by 1990] of U.S. Pershing II, GLCMs, and Soviet SS-20 missiles not only in Europe but in Asia as well." In July 1987, the Soviets accepted the double global option to eliminate all intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe and Asia and all short-range missiles worldwide, leading to the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in December 1987.

Japan was ill-prepared to tackle the challenge posed by the Gulf War of 1990.

Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu's government at the time was still conditioned to avoid entrapment in America's wars and was not ready to send Japan Self-Defense Forces troops to help the United States and the other coalition members. Japan instead chose to contribute by way of providing $13 billion in total to the war efforts, doled out in several installments and derided as too little, too late by the U.S. Congress and media. Amid this challenge, Okamoto spearheaded the efforts among working-level officials to supply as much materiel as possible to aid the U.S. military indirectly. He rushed into the Japan Seamen's Union office and successfully persuaded them to dispatch ships to supply four-wheel-drive vehicles to the U.S. troops in the Persian Gulf area.

Kunihiko Miyake, a diplomat focused on the Middle East, was working with Okamoto at the time on Japan's materiel support to the U.S. military. Miyake admired Okamoto, 10 years senior to him, as a man of ideas, action, and persuasive power. In 1991, Okamoto surprised his colleagues by leaving his foreign ministry job to start his own political and economic consultancy. In a recent radio interview, Miyake surmised that Okamoto must have decided to make the best use of his talents by thinking and acting outside the "box" of the bureaucracy.

Even in the private sector, Okamoto's work was dedicated to Japan's positive role in the world. In 2003 and 2004, as Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's special advisor, Okamoto played a key role in overseeing preparations for Japan's assistance to Iraq's reconstruction efforts following the U.S. invasion. This included the dispatching of Japan Self-Defense Forces troops there for

humanitarian reconstruction assistance. Thus he was actively involved in translating into reality what he had been advocating since the Gulf War over a decade earlier, namely, Japanese forces playing a proactive role for international security. Miyake, then acting head of mission in Baghdad, again worked closely with Okamoto, whom he saw as a mentor and role model, amid the tension and turbulence. Following in Okamoto's footsteps, he also resigned from the foreign ministry shortly afterward and is now active as a foreign-policy commentator.

One of the most painful issues in U.S.-Japan relations has long been the status of Okinawa, where the presence of U.S. troops is controversial among locals. Okamoto was appointed by Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto as special assistant on issues related to the island from 1996 to 1998. He felt deep empathy for the burden borne by the people of Okinawa.

I personally experienced the difficulty of managing the nitty-gritty of the Japan-U.S. alliance in Okinawa as ambassador in charge of Okinawan affairs in 2003-2004. The post is within the foreign ministry to help deal with issues related to the U.S. military presence there. Okinawans feel that they have been given a raw deal: Around 100,000 Okinawan civilian lives were sacrificed in the Battle of Okinawa in the final months of World War II, they were under U.S. administration until 1972, and even today more than 70 percent of U.S. bases in Japan and 60 percent of U.S. military personnel in the country are located there. Okinawans also feel that they have not been treated as equal partners by the United States and, traditionally, by mainland Japan. Thus they are viscerally averse to all things military and resent the NIMBY (not in my backyard) syndrome on the main Japanese islands with regard to the U.S. military while feeling that their own NIMBY sentiments have ample historical justification.

Okamoto plunged himself into this delicate tripartite relationship among the U.S. government, the Japanese government, and Okinawa. He paid a number of visits to Okinawa to establish rapport with the local people, including bouts of drinking *awamori*, the local brew. Thus he became the most consistent and trusted channel between the Okinawan capital of Naha, Tokyo, and Washington, urging both governments to realign and reduce the U.S. military presence on the island, including the relocation of the Marine Corps Air Station Futenma.

Among the Okinawans who mourned Okamoto's sudden passing was Seitoku Shimabukuro, a former mayor of Ie Village, where a fierce battle was fought in

the Battle of Okinawa between the Japanese Army and U.S. forces over control of the Japanese airfield. A third of Okinawa's Ie Island is used today as a U.S. Marine airfield. When Okamoto met the mayor in 1996, he listened with full attention and empathy to the mayor's tale of hardships, including mass suicide, suffered by the villagers as the island was decimated by U.S. troops in 1945, and his plan for the village's economic development. Shimamoto was so impressed that he named Okamoto an honorary resident of Ie, an unusual recognition given the often-fraught relations between Okinawa and the central government.

Okamoto performed an important role as a public intellectual. Keenly interested in nurturing a younger generation of talented individuals, Okamoto taught at Ritsumeikan University and other Japanese schools, and he was appointed as a senior research fellow at the Center for International Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He was a popular public speaker among Japanese business and other leaders, and a frequent guest on public affairs and news television programs. Unlike many Japanese public intellectuals, he was able to present his incisive views in fluent English to audiences in the United States and elsewhere in the world. He was reportedly in the process of writing a new book on Japan's foreign policy, apparently driven by his concern that Japan is being increasingly marginalized in the rapidly changing global power balance.

Born and raised on the Shonan coast not far from Tokyo, Okamoto had a lifelong love of the sea. He managed to find time to go diving and take marine photographs, which he shared with his friends. Many in Japan, the United States, and elsewhere wish they could still admire these photographs over glasses of his favorite chilled single-malt whiskey and listen to his insight on how this pandemic will affect the global power balance and Japan's role in it.

Sadaaki Numata is a retired Japanese diplomat who served as ambassador to Canada and Pakistan, and as foreign ministry spokesman.

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