

Japan Freezes Out US Navy Ship

 11

 7

 Save



A Chinese military vessel (back R)—some 5 miles away—observing as the Arleigh-Burke class guided missile destroyers USS Sterett (front) and the USS Rafael Peralta (behind) are seen from the deck of the USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier as they join a three-day maritime exercise between the United States and Japan in the Philippine Sea on Jan. 31, 2024. (Richard a. Brooks/AFP via Getty Images)

 Copy







By Grant Newsham
3/18/2024 Updated: 3/18/2024

  Print

Commentary



Share

A U.S. Navy destroyer, USS Rafael Peralta, recently visited Japan's Ishigaki island, between Okinawa and Taiwan. It wasn't exactly welcomed with open arms. At first, the local authorities refused permission for the ship to dock, claiming the water wasn't deep enough. They later relented, but the local dockworkers union went on strike to protest the ship's visit.

Okinawa's prefectural government also opposed the visit.

This isn't the first time U.S. Navy ships have had trouble getting into Japanese "civilian" ports.

Keep in mind that Japan is said to be America's strongest ally and is supposedly in "lockstep" with the United States. The United States is also obligated to defend Japan—and has been since 1960 when the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty was signed.

So what's going on?

The incident reflects U.S. military operational requirements to maintain deterrence and, if necessary, fight to defend Japan, running up against local opposition to military activities and an even more powerful opponent—the "burden business."

First, the Operational Requirements

The Americans don't send ships to Ishigaki and other Japanese ports to be difficult.

Rather, the U.S. military wants access to as many ports as possible to mount an effective defense. And it's important to use them in so-called phase zero—peacetime, or, at least, before the shooting starts.

It helps to be familiar with a location and operating environment (including the local inhabitants) rather than figuring things out on the fly once trouble occurs.

If you've been somewhere and "done something," it's different than showing up for the first time. A military practices for the same reasons a baseball team or an orchestra does.

Having more ports to operate from also makes you a harder target and gives you better odds of surviving a strike on your “main” base and still being able to operate. And that’s an obvious vulnerability for U.S. naval forces in Japan—now operating out of a small number of bases—that are easily targeted by Chinese missiles.

It’s not just ports and the U.S. Navy that face the same problem of overconcentration on a small number of facilities. The U.S. Air Force, Marine, and Navy aviation units face the same problem.

Japan has 100-plus civilian airfields, having been overbuilt during the bubble era. Most of these airports are underutilized.

The Japanese should open them up to U.S. military aircraft—and to the Japan Self Defense Force (JSDF)—for the same reasons mentioned above.

The Americans ought to make an issue of it.

Political Reasons for Ship Visits

There’s also a political aspect to U.S. Navy ships using civilian ports in the Nansei Shoto (Japan’s southern islands)—and anywhere else in Japan.

Under the U.S.–Japan Status of Forces agreement, the Japanese government is obligated to allow U.S. forces access to Japan’s ports and airfields.

For decades, Americans haven’t exercised these rights as fully as they should have, and this “right” has atrophied.

It’s important that the Americans get over their self-imposed restraint and do what’s necessary to protect Japan and increase their own odds of success and survival.

Getting out and about and using ports like Ishigaki is important for setting a precedent—not to mention demonstrating that both countries will live up to their treaty obligations.

These need to be regular visits—and in many more parts of Japan.

Of course, there's a necessary balance between local sensitivities and doing what's necessary to defend Japan. But things shifted much too far in the wrong direction over the years and haven't shifted back enough.

Some progress is being made—as evidenced by the Iron Fist exercises that recently concluded in the Nansei Shoto. The training between U.S. Marines and Navy and Japanese forces included a landing on Okinoerabu, halfway between Okinawa and Kyushu (Japan's southernmost main island).

This wouldn't have been possible not so many years ago owing to local opposition and central government over-sensitivity.

It's a gradual improvement, but there's reportedly still obstruction at local and central government levels and within parts of the Japanese defense ministry.

Japanese Opposition

Some of the opposition is principled—citizens opposed to all military operations. And given Japan's horrific experiences in World War Two, that's understandable. The protesters are generally elderly and few in number.

There is, in fact, much support for the presence of the U.S. and Japanese military on Okinawa island, especially on the other islands along the Nansei Shoto chain.

Press reporting seldom mentions this fact.

But aside from local opposition, maybe a bigger impediment is the “burden business.”

The “burden business”? Put simply, localities get money from the central government for “allowing” military training nearby. Complain and play difficult, and the money keeps flowing. Complain enough, and you might even get more money flowing.

Yes, it's a shakedown racket. Bureaucrats go along with it because they always have, and there's the inordinate fear of being criticized. The Japanese military is not in a position to complain.

The Americans grin and bear it, trying to move things forward but noting privately the absurdity of often having to leave Japan to train to defend Japan.

US Political Considerations?

One would get the impression that only Japanese politics matter.

But consider things from the U.S. public's perspective—Japan is saying: “We want you to be here to die for us when we snap our fingers. And until then, stay in your cage or on a short leash.”

That's not entirely fair, but that's how it will be characterized—and China's “white” lobbyists in Washington will make that case when the time comes.

And that could resonate with many Americans—on and off Capitol Hill.

Given the Chinese threats to Japan (and the United States), we should not be dealing with obstructions of the sort USS Peralta experienced on Ishigaki.

If Japan and the alliance can't stand U.S. Navy ships using more Japanese ports—or American aircraft using more Japanese airports—it won't be able to withstand the stress of U.S. servicemembers dying by the thousands for a Japan that didn't let them prepare properly to defend the country.

Time is running out.

Views expressed in this article are opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.

Sign up for the Epoch Weekly Debrief newsletter. Get an easy, digestible roundup of 2 to 3 of the most important stories from the past week. [Sign up with 1-click >>](#)

SHARE THIS ARTICLE



Grant Newsham

Author

Grant Newsham is a retired U.S. Marine officer and a former U.S. diplomat and business executive with many years in the Asia/Pacific region. He is a senior fellow with the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies (Tokyo) and Center for Security Policy and the Yorktown Institute in Washington, D.C. He is the author of the best selling book “When China Attacks: A Warning to America.”

Author’s Selected Articles

Japan: Patriot Missiles as Smoke and Mirrors

Dec 29, 2023



China’s Nukes: Part of a Much Bigger Problem for the USA

Nov 28, 2023



Don’t Think the Chinese Military Is a ‘Paper Tiger’

Nov 09, 2023



RELATED TOPICS

U.S. Navy USS Rafael Peralta Navy destroyer Ishigaki island

