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“Accessing the Diplomatic and Military Archives in Japan.”

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Introduction

As a former Japanese Foreign Service officer, I did not imagine how hard it would be for outside researchers to identify and find archival documents relevant to their research questions. It was not until I searched the Japanese diplomatic archives myself as an academic that I learned the challenges foreign researchers faced in accessing governmental documents. Unfortunately, Japan is much less advanced in terms of the disclosure of governmental documents than the United States and Britain, and in addition to this, Japan’s archival system does not seem to assume that those who do not speak or read Japanese fluently might also use those documents. An increasing number of such non-Japanese researchers, however, are interested in Japanese foreign and security policies and try to understand potential security consequences of the rise of China in East Asia. Some progress seems to have been made, albeit slowly, in the last two decades, making it easier for researchers to find or request archival documents. This essay is thus an attempt to provide information on the current status of Japan’s archival system and some tips to help both Japanese and non-Japanese researchers access government archives with less difficulty than before.

Until 2009, Japan had no government-wide rules about how to file and manage governmental documents. Ministries and agencies had long kept their own documents individually and based on their respective self-imposed guidelines, while some, but not all of them, had transferred their files to the National Archives of Japan, which was established in 1971 to better preserve documents of historical value. As a result, *Kokuritsu Kōbunshokan* [the National Archives of Japan] should not be assumed to be an equivalent of the U.S. National Archives. In fact, most of the diplomatic and military archives are, and will continue to be, kept by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and the Ministry of Defense (MOD) respectively. The collection of about 1.3 million volumes preserved at the National Archives of Japan is thus largely unrelated to diplomatic and military affairs.

The following is a brief introduction of several different ways of finding diplomatic and military archives in Japan.

1) The *Nihon Gaiō Bunsho* [Documents on Japanese Foreign Policy] Series

First published by MOFA in 1936, the *Nihon Gaikō Bunsho* series compiles historical records such as treaties, official letters to and from foreign heads of state, and telegrams to and from overseas missions that have been held by MOFA since the Meiji Restoration in 1868. The series has 90 volumes covering the Meiji Period (1868-1912), 70 volumes on the Taishō Period (1912-1925), and 50 volumes on the pre-war Shōwa Period (1925-1945), with each volume consisting of records that are chronologically arranged under a specific subject or period. Most of the pre-war *Nihon Gaikō Bunsho* volumes are now available online.¹ Note, however, that some of the volumes on the pre-war Shōwa Period might appear to be incomplete, as MOFA claims that an important part of governmental documents of the 1930s and the 1940s was either destroyed or seized by the Allied Occupation Forces during the period between 1945 and 1951.

2) The *Gaikō Kiroku Kōkai* [Periodical Disclosure of Diplomatic Records] by MOFA

MOFA has periodically declassified post-war diplomatic archives since 1976, starting with the oldest documents; the most recent series of declassified documents have reached the period of the late 1970s. MOFA's declassification rules do not require documents more than thirty years old to be automatically put into the review process for declassification. Officials at MOFA's archival office at its Headquarters collect relevant files from its underground stacks based on a specific topic or event they choose after consultations with the MOFA bureaus that are responsible for the topic or event in question. For example, if they suggest U.S.-Japan relations with regard to the Okinawa reversion as one of the topics for the next declassification cycle, they would first have a discussion with the North American Affairs Bureau and the Bureau of International Laws to determine whether relevant files have historical value and whether the timing is appropriate, both politically and diplomatically, for declassification. If the answers to these two questions are both positive, then the officials will put the files into a review process, in which several retired MOFA officers are re-hired to go through each of documents in the files to see if there are phrases or words not to be disclosed for diplomatic or other considerations.

This periodic declassification took place almost once a year or once every couple of years between 1976 and 2008, making 80 to 200 files available to the public each time. After 2009, however, the declassification cycle became much shorter, leading to seven rounds of declassification within a year in 2010, partly because of the 2009 government change from the Liberal Democratic Party to the Democratic Party of Japan. The cumulative total of declassified files significantly increased as a result, as each round was still publishing between 80 and 200 files. PDF lists of all files that have been declassified in this *Gaikō Kiroku Kōkai* process are available on the MOFA website.²

However, quantitative improvements may not have been accompanied by qualitative ones. Having glanced through the long list of thousands of files that have been made public so far, it seems that about 80 per cent of those files likely consist of originally unclassified documents or those with low secrecy level because they concern multilateral international institutions such as the United Nations or the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Each file has a title that is not indicative of what kinds of documents are contained in it: for example, with a search term "U.S.-Japan relations Okinawa reversion," one

¹ The *Nihon Gaikō Bunsho* Series is accessible online at <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/annai/honsho/shiryō/archives/annai.html>.

² <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/annai/honsho/shiryō/shozō/gshir/index.html>.

might find a list of file titles like “Okinawa Reversion 7,” “Okinawa Reversion 16.” These files likely include documents with different levels of secrecy as well as of historical value, a mixture of wheat and chaff. It may be hard to pin down a file that contains the exact documents one is looking for. For example, there are several files concerning Prime Minister Eisaku Satō’s visit to the United States in January 1965, which may include topics ranging from itineraries to the list of delegates to the minutes of summit meetings to pure logistics including budgets for travel costs and gifts. Some files may also include non-confidential papers on U.S. domestic politics prepared by rank-and-file officers relying on open-source information. It may be hard to find evidence for leaders’ thoughts and strategies when they attended diplomatic meetings of historical importance. Unlike the practice of the U.S. government archives, internal memos prepared for the purpose of discussion between different MOFA bureaus are generally omitted from declassified files. As a result, it is not easy to learn how certain policies were developed and the nature of the major areas of disagreement between different leaders or different administrative branches in the government, unless one also relies on interviews and other research tools outside the archival system.

There is a recent positive qualitative improvement, however. Documents that came out through the *Gaikō Kiroku Kōkai* process before 2009 are mostly available on microfilms or CD-ROMs, which visitors to MOFA’s Diplomatic Archives bureau in Azabudai in Tokyo (see the last section of the paper for more details on this bureau) are allowed to see with relatively little delay. However, a search for documents declassified in or after 2009 requires a more complicated process: visitors have to fill in a request form, and wait for roughly half an hour for the files to arrive.

3) Requesting Information based on Japan’s FOIA

Perhaps the most popular way of finding diplomatic and military archives is to request documents directly at MOFA or other relevant ministries such as Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (formerly MITI) through the process of Japan’s freedom of information act.³ Roughly modeled on the U.S. Freedom of Information Act, this law provides the public with a legally enforceable right to request information including recent documents that are in the possession of the Japanese government.⁴ All national administrative agencies, including organs within the Cabinet or established under the jurisdiction of the Cabinet, are subject to these disclosure requests. After its adoption in 2001, the number of FOIA requests in Japan exploded. Ministries and agencies receiving more than 2,000 requests annually include the Ministry of Land and Transportation, the Ministry of Health and Labor, the Financial Services Agency, and the MOFA.⁵

Anyone, regardless of nationality, age or profession, can request information, for a fee of less than three dollars (300 Yen) per request and less than one dollar (100 Yen) for every 100 pages of documents. Requests for information can be made in person or by mail. Each of the government agencies has established an office in

³ The official title of Japan’s FOIA is “Gyōsei Kikan no Hōyu suru Jōhō no Kōkai ni Kansuru Hōritsu [Act on Access to Information Held by Administrative Organs] (Act No. 42 of May 14, 1999).”

⁴ More details on Japan’s FOIA are available at:
<http://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/law/detail/?id=99&cvm=04&re=02>.

⁵ <http://bkofsecrets.wordpress.com/2011/06/20/freedom-of-information-foi-in-japan/>.

Kasumigaseki in Tokyo with staff assigned to assist visitors with filling in request forms and identifying documents of interest. While the names of files held by the Japanese government are searchable with key words at the official website,⁶ one does not need to identify the file to request. It is sufficient to provide some basic description of information one look for such as “minutes of a ministerial meeting between Japan and France on February 15, 2005.” Once a decision is made to disclose requested documents, the requesters need to visit the office of the ministry at which they made their request. Documents can be viewed or photocopied on paper at the office.

While the advantage of this FOIA process is that it allows researchers to request specific information and helps accelerate the declassification of documents relevant to their research, it still takes at least one month, or on average six to ten months for researchers to learn of the decision as to whether the requested documents will be declassified. If the requested MOFA documents have been previously requested and obtained by others, they are mostly (except for the most recent ones) available on CD-ROM at the Diplomatic Archives of MOFA in Azabudai in Tokyo, and those CD-ROMs can be copied for a fee of five to seven dollars each. And the list of documents which have been declassified in the past based on the FOIA process is available on the website of MOFA.⁷ One might collaborate with fellow researchers working on similar research questions to coordinate requests in the FOIA process. In addition, the more popular the topic one is working on among other researchers, the easier it is for one to acquire relevant documents. For example, due to a recent much-reported allegation about a secret agreement between the United States and Japan to allow nuclear submarines to enter Japanese ports during the Cold War, and of course after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident in March 2011, an increasing number of Japanese researchers and journalists have been requesting documents on nuclear issues for the last five years, making it somewhat easier to look into Japan’s nuclear policy.

One should keep in mind, however, that documents from one ministry will not provide a whole picture of policy making on any one issue. In most cases, multiple ministries and agencies, including the Cabinet Secretariat, are involved in the decision-making process, whereas MOFA archives may only be able to reveal the perspectives of Foreign Service officers. In particular, political leaders and their aides played a major role in some of the most important diplomatic events in post-war Japanese history such as the reversion of Okinawa and Sino-Japanese diplomatic normalization. But historical documents prepared by those political actors are often not included in MOFA files. One should perhaps request documents on the same issue to multiple relevant ministries at the same time to be able to draw a better and more complete picture of policy making dynamics.

4) The National Diet Library *Kensei Siryōsitsu* [Political Documents Reference Room]

A fourth route to Japanese diplomatic archives is through the National Diet Library *Kensei Siryōsitsu* [Political Documents Reference Room]. It provides a rich array of memoirs, oral histories, memos, and diaries provided by the families of former Japanese political leaders in the periods between the Meiji Restoration and today (the 1860s through 2015). This office also keeps microfilms of U.S. government documents during the occupation between 1945 and 1951.

⁶ <http://files.e-gov.go.jp/servlet/Fsearch>.

⁷ http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/annai/honsho/shiryo/shozo/pdfs/mokuroku_data.pdf.

5) The National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS)

A fifth route to get Japanese primary sources is through the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), which has been collecting and keeping part of the official documents of the Japanese military from the pre-war period. Its collection consists of 58,000 volumes from the Imperial Army and 36,000 volumes from the Imperial Navy. The NIDS is a research institute affiliated with the Japanese Ministry of Defense. As Japan's major institute for security studies, it conducts research on war history, while training young men and women who will serve in the future as high-level officers of Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF).

Many of the inter-war documents of the Japanese military were either burned at the end of the war or seized by the Allied Occupation Forces, and some of them were kept at the U.S. National Archives for a period after the war. In 1958, however, the U.S.-held documents were returned and stored at NIDS. The most popular and heavily used documents kept at NIDS include:

(a) *Rikugunshō Dainikki*, or files from the Imperial Army dated from the Meiji Restoration (1868) through 1942. The files and their catalogs are available online at the Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (JACAR).⁸

(b) *Jinchū Nisshi*, or combat reports sent from Imperial Army field units to the Army Headquarters during the period between 1868 and 1945.

(c) *Kōbunbikō*, or files from the Imperial Navy dated from 1876 to 1937. The files and their catalogs are available online at the JACAR website.

(d) *Senji Nisshi*, or action reports sent by Imperial Navy field units to its Headquarters during the period between 1894 and 1945.

(e) *Senshi Sōsho*, or the War History Series that is comprised of 102 volumes compiled by Imperial Japan's Department of Military History and which focus on the World War II.

6) Another Route –Retired Diplomats or Military Officers, and Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs)

Finally, one might rely on retired diplomats and military officers to identify and locate historical documents. They still likely remain in good contact with current high-level officers in the government who know what historical documents are now being prepared for declassification. Alternatively, they often have a good sense of whether one's FOIA requests are promising or not. If no current or retired diplomats and military officers are available, one might visit some NPOs with which retired government officers are often affiliated, such as The Institute for International Policy Studies (www.iips.org) (called *Sekai Heiwa Kenkyūjo* in Japanese), The Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE: www.jcie.or.jp), The Canon Institute for Global Studies (www.canon-igs.org), and The Japan Forum on International Relations (JFIR: www.jfir.or.jp). In addition, Information Clearinghouse Japan (www.clearinghouse.main.jp) also provides a good amount of resources and

⁸ <http://www.jacar.go.jp/english/index.html>.

assistance to help researchers and journalists become familiar with the FOIA process in Japan and identify the governmental documents they seek.

7) Logistics

a. MOFA's Diplomatic Archives bureau

The Diplomatic Archives (DA) is composed of two buildings located next to each other in Azabudai in Tokyo's Minato ward.⁹ The main building of the DA houses declassified diplomatic archives as well as a reference room. The other building, called "Annex," has an exhibition space open to the public, displaying some of the most important original documents from the end of the Tokugawa feudal period in 1868 to the San Francisco Treaty in 1951, in addition to holding seasonal exhibitions on a variety of different themes.

No prior reservation is required for visiting the DA. When arriving at the DA main building, visitors are asked to show their photo ID (one of which must be a governmental document such as a passport or driver's license) and don a visitor's badge before entering the building. Only personal items that can be carried in an A3-sized transparent plastic bag are allowed into the building, and so visitors have to leave their backpacks or outerwear in lockers located near the entrance reception of the building. The use of laptops and digital cameras is permitted within the reference room.

Once entering the reference room, visitors are asked to fill in a research application form with their personal information such as name, nationality, age, residential address, phone number, as well as the purpose of their visit and their research themes. The form is in Japanese only, and, as one staff member acknowledged, "we basically assume all visitors here are able to communicate in Japanese."¹⁰

About 25 desks are available for use. Visitors can consult three types of paper catalogs of all previously disclosed post-war diplomatic archives through the *Gaikō Kiroku Kōkai* process, according to different ways of searching documents: by disclosure date, by topic, and by the declassification numbers of the documents. There is also one catalog volume in which visitors can find a list of all documents that have been disclosed through the FOIA process mentioned earlier. These catalogs are only available in Japanese.

b. NIDS' Military Archives

NIDS' Military Archives is located in the Meguro-ward in Tokyo.¹¹ Anyone can access documents and materials that are stored there. No prior reservation is required for visiting the NIDS. When arriving at the

⁹ The address of the Office of Diplomatic Archives is 1-5-3, Azabudai, Minato-ku, Tokyo, 106-0041, Japan; Tel +81-3-3585-4511; Hours Mon. through Fri. 10:00am to 5:30pm. The closest subway station is either Roppongi-1 chome on the Nanboku Line or Kamiya-chō on the Hibiya Line. More details of access information are available at the Diplomatic Archives bureau's website at <http://www.mofa.go.jp/about/hq/record/service.html>.

¹⁰ One staff member at the Diplomatic Archives in a conversation with the author on January 9th, 2015.

¹¹ The address for the NIDS is 2-2-1, Nakameguro, Meguro-ku, Tokyo, 153-8648, Japan; Tel +81-3-3792-1093; Hours Mon. through Fri. 9:00-16:00. The closest railway and subway station is the Ebisu Station (West Exit) on

main gate, visitors are asked by a security guard to show their photo ID and fill in an admission request form. The NIDS Military Archives has a reading room with chairs for up to 32 visitors. There are catalogs for all accessible military documents preserved there. To have access to those documents, visitors need to fill in a form with information on the documents visitors are requesting, and then wait for about fifteen minutes for files to arrive. Visitors are not allowed to bring in their digital camera or take photocopies of the documents on site. Instead, a photocopying service is available with a fee, and copies are sent via the mail.

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the JR Yamanote Line and the Ebisu Station (Exit No. 5) on the Hibiya Line (Subway). More details for access information are available at the NIDS website at http://www.nids.go.jp/english/military_archives/index.html.