

Intelligence in Public Media

Japanese Foreign Intelligence and Grand Strategy: From the Cold War to the Abe Era

Brad Williams (Georgetown University Press, 2021), 279 pages, bibliography, tables, figures, index.

Reviewed by W. Lee Radcliffe

In scholarship as in intelligence, sound sourcing and well-scoped context are critical elements that underpin cogent assessments. If either is incomplete, mischaracterized, or misrepresented, scholars and intelligence officers alike will quickly lose the trust of their respective audiences. While *Japanese Foreign Intelligence and Grand Strategy* features commendable portions, in too many instances readers will encounter problems with misrepresented sourcing and the lack of critical context that negatively impact the work overall.

Author Brad Williams is an associate professor in the Department of Asian and International Studies at the City University of Hong Kong, and the research for the book was fully supported by a grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, according to the acknowledgments section.^a

Problems with sourcing become apparent on page one. The book begins with a description of the September 1983 Soviet downing of Korean Airlines (KAL) Flight 007, in which the author seeks to demonstrate internal strife between Washington and Tokyo over the use of signals intelligence (SIGINT) intercepts of Soviet air-to-ground communications to publicize Soviet culpability. The author asserts: “later National Diet records reveal[ed] that the chief cabinet secretary, Gotōda Masaharu, declared” that Washington’s use of Japan-based intelligence resources “casts doubts over Japan’s status as an independent state.” The assertion as written seems a reasonable, matter-of-fact description of Gotōda’s attitude citing official Diet records.

Taking a closer look, however, the reader finds that the source is a conspiracy-laden diatribe by long-serving leader of the Japan Socialist Party, Seya Hideyuki, given in the House of Councillors in 1998, a full 15 years after the KAL shutdown.^b In the same statement, Seya declared that the passenger jet might have been “under the command of a certain country’s intelligence agency”—almost certainly a reference to the CIA, as Moscow-linked conspiratorial sources have sometimes claimed since 1984^c—which “intentionally invaded Soviet airspace for a specific purpose.”^d Seya’s statement was a series of allegations targeting both the United States and the Liberal Democratic Party, and his invocation of Gotōda’s supposed attitude was made to further a political agenda.

Sourcing issues and mischaracterizations surface in particular in the section titled “Intelligence Sharing to Manipulate a Junior Ally” (107–13), which features a deeply cynical view of Washington’s role in the US-Japan bilateral alliance. Williams, for example, misrepresents US personnel response to a U2 emergency landing at a glider club landing strip in September 1959. According to Williams, the emergency landing made local headlines, mostly because of the conspicuous actions of US security personnel who ordered the growing crowd away at gunpoint (112).

In this case, Williams cites *The CIA and the U-2 Program 1954–1974*, released in 1998. The actual description of the event in the declassified document, however, reads: “The crash did not cause any injuries or serious damage to the aircraft, but it did bring unwanted

a. Williams has also penned opinion pieces for Asian media outlets over the past decade, such as a January 2011 article in the South China Morning Post suggesting that Tokyo “concede” the “Diaoyu Islands”—Japan’s Senkaku Islands—to China. “Japan Should Concede the Diaoyus to China,” *South China Morning Post*, January 24, 2011.

b. In line with the opposition party platform at the time, Seya was vociferously critical of the bilateral alliance, having a year earlier proposed the termination of Tokyo’s budgetary support to US forces within five years (Sagara Yoshinari, *Mainichi Shimbun*, August 2, 1997).

c. In one of several examples, self-described “publicist” Takahashi Akio published disinformation-laden articles and books in Japanese from 1984 claiming US intelligence involvement that were amplified by the Soviet Union’s TASS news agency and other outlets. Novosti Press Agency Publishing House in 1984 published one of Takahashi’s books as *Truth Behind KAL Flight 007*.

d. Seya Hideyuki, “Questions on various issues revealed in the process of investigating the truth of the Korean aircraft incident,” 142nd Session of the Diet, March 13, 1998, <https://www.sangiin.go.jp/japanese/joho1/kousei/syuisyo/142/syuh/s142004.htm>. The source is cited by Williams as endnote 2.

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

publicity to the U2 program. Much of the publicity resulted from the actions of Detachment C's security unit, whose conspicuous Hawaiian shirts and large pistols drew the attention of Japanese reporters. One reporter even flew over the area in a helicopter, taking pictures of the U-2. These photographs appeared in many Japanese newspapers and magazines.^a Nowhere is there any mention of US personnel brandishing weapons at any Japanese crowds. Moreover, while the author names an alleged location from which the specific U2 operated citing the document, the declassified document contains no location information. This gives the impression that an official US government source confirms details presented in the book, but it does not.

In his treatment of the MiG-25 incident in September 1976, when defecting Soviet pilot Viktor Belenko landed his state-of-the-art aircraft at Hokkaido's Hakodate Airport, the author incorrectly charges that US intelligence withheld foreknowledge of Belenko's plans to defect "in order to encourage its junior ally to purchase a substantial airborne early-warning capability." The author speculates, for example, that the fact that "US experts flew into Japan only 18 hours" after Belenko's arrival "suggests prior knowledge of the defection" (108), citing a single *Washington Star* article published in 1981.^b

However, as detailed in a 1980 book on Belenko's defection, the US government in the early 1970s had completely revamped its handling of any defecting

Soviets after a November 1970 incident in which a US Coast Guard cutter returned a defecting Russian seaman to his crewmates, who proceeded to beat the would-be defector on the spot. Within hours of Belenko's landing in Hokkaido on 6 September, watch centers throughout Washington were "crowded with men and women called out of their sleep to study the messages flooding in from the Embassy, the Pentagon, the CIA, the Fifth Air Force in Japan, and the wire services."^c US personnel immediately prepped to head to the scene in line with US national policy on handling defectors,^d and with the bonus of getting to examine the MiG-25 in detail.^e Moscow sent at least four intelligence officers to Hakodate within the first 24 hours as well.^f

Chapter 2 in its entirety is problematic. Titled "US Covert Action in Japan," it focuses on Washington's purported post-war covert involvement in Japan primarily in the 1950s and 1960s, sourcing some declassified US government files and longer works in both Japanese and English of varying reliability. The chapter seeks to examine US efforts to strengthen "bilateralism" following World War II, which is at best tangential to the primary topic of Japanese intelligence capabilities. The chapter often uses passive voice and ambiguous terminology that insinuates more than warranted (for example, the CIA had "courted Japanese elites" and "maintained a relationship with" various groups), while the reader learns later from quotes of declassified files that the US "had no control

a. Gregory W. Pedlow and Donald E. Welzenbach, *The CIA and the U-2 Program, 1954–1974* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998), 218–19, <https://www.cia.gov/static/37e56c57ddf41f9c85f357a04900e1e8/CIA-and-U2-Program.pdf>

b. Soviet disinformation probably fed into the May 1981 *Washington Star* article. Moscow has pushed a variety of disinformation regarding the Belenko defection. As recently as September 2021, marking the 45th anniversary of the defection, Russia's MK Online suggested in a bizarre story that Western intelligence had replaced the real Belenko with a "double," and the "fake Belenko" subsequently stole the plane and flew it to Japan. See Aleksandr Dobrovolskiy, "Угон за границу секретного истребителя: вскрылись новые подробности" ["Hijacking a secret fighter overseas: new details revealed"], *MK Online*, <https://www.mk.ru/social/2021/09/05/ugon-za-granicu-sekretno-go-istrebitelya-vskrylis-novye-podrobnosti.html>.

c. John Barron, *MiG Pilot: The Final Escape of Lieutenant Belenko* (McGraw-Hill, 1980), 126–30.

d. Williams also charges that Belenko's passing of a note in English asking for asylum and to speak with US intelligence was another indication of US foreknowledge. Actually, Belenko had waited until after entering Japanese airspace to write out his intentions to defect on a flight notepad first in Russian and then in very limited English using a small pocket dictionary during the flight. He could neither speak nor write Japanese, but he wanted to provide as much information as possible to ensure his safety immediately after landing. Barron, *MiG Pilot*, 108.

e. *Japanese Foreign Intelligence and Grand Strategy* also does not examine Tokyo's failure to adequately identify and track Belenko's MiG-25 as it approached Japan's airspace and the fierce bureaucratic in-fighting over how to handle the defection. See Richard Samuels, *Special Duty: A History of the Japanese Intelligence Community* (Cornell University Press, 2019), 111–2, for a full description. The incident highlighted the failure of Japan's *hoppō jūshi* or "emphasis on the north" security strategy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and briefly reignited discussion of nascent proposals to consolidate Japan's defense intelligence capabilities. See my *Goraikō: Japan's National Security in an Era of Asymmetric Threats*, 6 and 408, for additional discussion.

f. Barron, *MiG Pilot*, 131.

whatsoever” over some of the subjects profiled earlier in the chapter (80).

There is a lack of important context, too, concerning the broader security environment. Williams states at the outset that his book “does not explicitly examine Japan’s efforts to protect its national secrets and institutions against hostile nations’ or forces’ secret penetration and disruption operations” (2), but the historical vice institutional aspects of counterintelligence is critical context for readers’ understanding of the security environment driving US whole-of-government policy at the time.

After devoting a mere paragraph to Soviet operations in Japan (76), in a bout of hindsight bias the author severely downplays intensive Soviet efforts by focusing solely on low Japanese affinity for Russia because of, for example, “the Soviet Union’s occupation of the Northern Territories” (81). Readers do not learn that Japan was one of the main target countries for KGB operations into the 1980s.^a Readers never learn of persistent Soviet operations, from planting propaganda and running agents of influence in most media outlets and in various political parties, to espionage and preparing for sabotage operations in Japan. And readers never learn the extent of spying by other Communist countries: the British government in 1983 estimated that in addition to the approximately 100 Soviet intelligence officers in Japan in the early 1980s, 60 intelligence officers from China and 60 more from other Communist countries were operating in Japan. The numbers “far surpass[ed]” comparable allied efforts according to Japanese intelligence expert Kotani Ken.^b

The periodic misrepresentation of sources and mischaracterization of events are unfortunate, because other portions of the book are interesting in their own right. The book’s introduction after describing the KAL 007 shoot-down provides an accessible overview of Japan’s intelligence structures. Chapter 1, “Japanese Grand Strategy and Embedded Norms,” details Japan’s transition from the post-war “Yoshida Doctrine” to the mid-2010s “Abe Doctrine,” and while it might seem pedantic to some, a deeper understanding of security norms is helpful when considering Japan’s unique post-war experience and current challenges. Chapter 4, on Japan’s foreign economic intelligence efforts, details Japan’s public-private approach to systematically researching and appropriating intellectual property from more-developed countries, with the United States a particular target of post-World War II activity. And the final chapter closes with a discussion of Japanese proposals for a stand-alone “JCIA,” pointing to further transformation of Japan’s intelligence structure in the medium term with the United Kingdom’s MI6 as a “possible model for Japan” (215).

But in the final evaluation, readers must trust that the underlying sourcing is accurately represented and that context is complete throughout the book in order buy into an author’s central narratives. Having uncovered multiple discrepancies in a cursory review of sources, this reviewer finds that trust is challenging to maintain.



The reviewer: W. Lee Radcliffe is a member of the Senior Digital Service in the Directorate of Digital Innovation, CIA. He has more than 20 years of experience covering Asia and Eurasia.

a. Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (Basic Books, 2006), 310. Separately, Samuels in *Special Duty* noted Moscow engaged in “‘active measures’...quite successfully in Tokyo” (26).

b. “Communist Intelligence Officers Active in Japan: 1983 UK Report,” *Kyodo*, July 31, 2013.