



The G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting that led to President Obama visiting Hiroshima — Increased focus on “looking to the future” from all concerned

US Secretary of State John Kerry visited Peace Memorial Park while in Japan for the G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Hiroshima. Following a concerted effort from the Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Kishida Fumio, atomic bomb survivors and various other parties, this ultimately led to a visit by President Obama. We take a look at what actually happened.

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April 11, 2016, G7 foreign ministers and the EU higher representative laid wreaths and stand in front of the Cenotaph for the A-bomb Victims at Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima.
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After laying flowers at the Cenotaph for A-bomb Victims, US Secretary of State John Kerry put his arm around the shoulder of Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs Kishida Fumio and spoke to him, while pointing in a certain direction. Kishida appeared to look uncertain for a moment, but nonetheless visibly nodded in agreement. After commemorative photos had been taken, they began walking in that same direction. As they did so however, an almost panicked cry rang out from the security forces. Following the order to “halt!,” officers formed a line to prevent any outsiders from approaching.

The group had diverted from their planned schedule and were making their way towards the Genbaku Dome (A-bomb dome) on the river bank some 300 meters away. Kerry wanted to get a closer look at this world heritage site, which was built 100 years ago last year and has remained standing for 70 years since the atomic bomb was dropped.

As a leading figure from the country that dropped the bomb, he had started walking towards the dome because he wanted to know more about the damage that had actually been inflicted. You could say that was one of highlights of the meeting, as it moved the history of nuclear weapons on to a new page.

The build-up of emotions that led to an actual visit

Ahead of the G7 Summit (Ise-Shima Summit) on May 26–27, foreign ministers from the world's seven most powerful countries (G7) came to Hiroshima on April 10 for a two-day meeting.

Alongside Japan and the United States, foreign ministers from Canada, France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, and a senior representative from the European Union, met to discuss a number of international issues. They issued a joint statement that included strong criticism of nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches by North Korea as well as a pledge to step up anti-terror measures, and adopted a "Statement on Maritime Security," calling on all countries to act in accordance with international law, in light of Chinese incursions into the South China Sea. As the meeting took place on the site of the atomic bomb being dropped on Hiroshima however, attention was inevitably focused on the "Hiroshima Declaration," which underlined a resolute determination to achieve nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. The ministers' visit to the Peace Memorial Park, built on the site where the bomb was dropped, also attracted a lot of attention.

This was the first time that cabinet-level ministers from the United States, United Kingdom and France, all of which have nuclear weapons, had visited the site. The foreign ministers visited Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, whose exhibits include personal items belonging to victims and the remains of buildings hit by the bomb, and then laid flowers at the cenotaph.

The visit to the museum lasted roughly 50 minutes, overrunning the allotted 30 minutes. At a press conference, Kerry commented, "it is a stunning display. It is a gut-wrenching display. It reminds everybody of the extraordinary complexity of choice in war and of what war does to people, to communities, to countries, to the world. This was a display that I will personally never forget. I don't see how anyone could forget [...] what happened on August 6th 1945."

"It's been a long time coming, but we've finally got what we wanted. Hopefully we can start to move in a better direction now." These were the words spoken by Takahashi Fumie, a resident of Hiroshima's Nishi Ward, to a photo of her deceased husband as she watched the Secretary of State on television. Her husband, Akihiro, who passed away in 2011 at the age of 80, was the former director of the museum. At the age of 14, he had suffered serious burns all over his body when his junior high school was hit by the blast 1.4 kilometers away. He had also suffered from radiation sickness for many years.

John Kerry's visit to Hiroshima was something that the Takahashis has longed for. They empathized with Kerry when he was first elected as a US senator because he had served in Vietnam and been involved in the antiwar movement. They had sent him at least six letters from 1984 onwards, asking him to visit the site of the atomic bomb and calling for an end to nuclear weapons. In 1985, they received a reply from Kerry, including comments such as "nobody should have to suffer the tragedy of an atomic bomb ever again."

After laying a floral tribute, the Secretary of State was presented with a garland made from origami paper cranes by a group of local elementary school students. That garland had been made by Takahashi

Fumie at the request of the City of Hiroshima. “I made it in the hope that we can make some progress towards nuclear disarmament. I’m sure my husband would have loved to meet Mr. Kerry. I hope his visit will pave the way for the future,” she commented with a tear in her eye.

She wants people to come to Hiroshima and experience for themselves just how many lives nuclear weapons cost, and how they destroy people’s lives. She wants those experiences to motivate people to take action, to rid the world of nuclear weapons. Countless atomic bomb survivors feel the same way. They go around the country telling people about their experiences of being bombed, and write letters to policymakers both at home and overseas. Kerry’s visit to Hiroshima was undoubtedly an event that struck a chord with survivors such as these.

At the same time however, there was criticism over the fact that there was no opportunity for Kerry to talk directly to survivors, and that he studiously avoided saying or doing anything that could be construed as an apology.

“Looking to the future” holds the key

Do the survivors of the atomic bomb still feel animosity towards the United States? Do they still want an apology?

The Yomiuri Shimbun Hiroshima Bureau has joined forces with the Hiroshima University Institute for Peace Science to conduct an opinion poll of survivors in Hiroshima and Nagasaki over the course of spring and summer every year since 2010. In last year’s poll, when asked “Do you still feel animosity towards the USA for dropping the atomic bomb?,” 446 of the 1,943 people surveyed (23%) answered “Yes, I still feel animosity.” More than half of those surveyed however responded “I used to feel animosity, but not anymore,” accounting for 54% of the total (1,050 people). 332 people (17%) replied “No, I have never felt animosity.”

When asked why they no longer feel animosity, the most popular response was “forgiveness is part of the peace process” (37%), followed by “feeling animosity doesn’t achieve anything” (27%) and “it was a long time ago” (21%).

The survey results paint a picture of a typical atom bomb survivor who has got past personal grievances and just wants peace now that they are in their 70s, albeit tempered by an array of suffering and complicated feelings. The figures coincide with actual impressions formed by journalists who have met with numerous survivors.

Immediately after Kerry’s visit, Tsuboi Sunao, Chair of the Japan Federation of A- and H-Bomb Sufferers Organizations (Hidankyo), was surrounded by the media as he made the following comments. “Our feelings of animosity towards the United States have not gone away completely, but we have overcome those feelings with rationality. We are not demanding an apology, we are seeking their will to apologize. Neither will we be satisfied by this one visit. Nonetheless, we believe that this is a good start.”

The Japanese government adopted a similar position – that a visit did not mean an apology – as it worked with its US counterparts to scrupulously prepare for the visit. The government saw this as an opportunity to look to the future rather than the past, and to call for nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. It took care at every turn to ensure that nothing that was said or done during the visit could be linked to an apology. The fact that the media weren’t allowed into the museum was presumably to avoid any photos of Kerry alongside photos or artifacts showing the devastation caused by the bomb.

The aim was for ministers from countries with nuclear weapons to come face-to-face with the realities of an atomic bomb and express their determination to abolish nuclear weapons from the site itself. One man who was particularly committed to that aim was Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio, as the local elected

official for Hiroshima District 1 and the chair of the Foreign Ministers' Meeting. He was personally involved in various aspects of the preparations and was even spotted carrying out meticulous checks along the route that the visitors would take around the museum on March 27, a full two weeks before the meeting.

There has been a sense of stagnation surrounding nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation in recent years, evidenced by the fact that a Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference in May last year ended without agreement on a final text, and the fact that North Korea has continued to step up its nuclear development program irrespective of condemnation from the international community. During the press conference after the Foreign Ministers' Meeting, Kishida emphasized that the meeting had issued a "strong message based on discussion and a shared view among the G7 countries, comprised of both nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states," calling it "a historical step toward reviving international momentum for a world without nuclear weapons."

Paving the way for a visit from President Obama

John Kerry's visit to Hiroshima was the final litmus test for a visit by US President Barack Obama.

In April 2009, not long after being elected President, Obama made a speech in Prague in the Czech Republic that included the following statement. "As the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon, the United States has a moral responsibility to act [...] to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons." In December that same year, he was presented with the Nobel Peace Prize. Obama seemed hopeful about visiting an atomic bomb site too, commenting during his first visit to Japan in November 2009 that it would be "a great honor" if he could arrange such a visit in the future.

At home in the United States however, there is a deep-rooted feeling, especially among veterans, that dropping the atomic bomb was a justified act on the grounds that it hastened the end of the war and saved the lives of countless US soldiers on the battlefield. That meant strong opposition to the president visiting a bomb site, in case it could be regarded as an apology. More recently, some have expressed concerns that such a visit could influence the presidential elections. The US government therefore continued to keep a close eye on public opinion, as it searched for possibilities and a suitable time for a visit.

John Roos, the then US Ambassador to Japan, became the first key figure in the Obama administration to visit Hiroshima when he attended a peace memorial ceremony in August 2010. In April 2014, US Under Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller laid a floral tribute at the cenotaph and listened to the testimonies of atom bomb victims. Gottemoeller also attended a peace memorial ceremony in 2015. The next visit was John Kerry, almost as if the US government were moving up one step at a time and analyzing the reaction back home.

Kerry commented, "everyone should visit Hiroshima [...] so I hope one day, the President of the United States will be among the everyone who is able to come here." The response to that remark in the US media was largely favorable, suggesting that opposition was limited to a very small section of the public. Current US Ambassador to Japan Caroline Kennedy meanwhile has visited Hiroshima, in both official and unofficial capacities, on numerous occasions since her appointment in November 2013, and worked hard to lay the groundwork. All of this led to Obama's decision to become the first serving president to visit the site of an atomic bombing.

Late on May 10, the Japanese and US governments announced that President Obama would join Prime Minister Abe Shinzo on a visit to the Peace Memorial Park on the evening of May 27, after the end of the Ise-Shima Summit. Although his schedule is yet to be finalized at the time of writing (May 12), Obama is expected to spend several hours in Hiroshima, lay flowers at the cenotaph along with Prime Minister Abe,

and make a short speech or statement. Whatever words President Obama says at the site of the atomic bombing, there can be no doubt that it will be a historic moment that will attract even more attention worldwide than his Prague speech.

A world without nuclear weapons will not materialize overnight, but this is an opportunity to take a definite step closer to that goal. Even if things don't go smoothly, we can but hope that this is more than just another ceremony. Atom bomb survivors and the general public alike have high hopes for President Obama's visit and the future thereafter.

Author's note:

Finally, I would just like to add that I have compiled this article as a representative of the Yomiuri Shimbun Hiroshima Bureau, based on research carried out by countless journalists on behalf of the bureau, including quoted passages and discourse.

Related websites:

G7 Foreign Ministers' Hiroshima Declaration on Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation

<http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000147442.pdf>

G7 Hiroshima Foreign Ministers' Meeting

http://www.mofa.go.jp/ms/is_s/page24e_000138.html

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