

# Opinion & Analysis

## Rethink postwar system from view of past

“**A**las,” said the Greek philosopher Plutarch in his “Moral Essays,” “the ear of society more easily captures unfortunate things than fortunate things.” This proverb can be applied to the unfortunate notion that Japan has no national strategy and its people lack a strategic way of thinking. This notion has considerably penetrated Japanese society itself.

The use of the term “strategy” is not limited to the military sphere. The concept of strategy also refers to a variety of scenarios worked out by various organizations, such as government ministries, business corporations and universities, to manage long-term plans and achieve certain goals



INSIGHTS  
into the  
WORLD

By Masayuki Yamauchi

for the future of a nation and its people. Edward Luttwak, an expert on strategies, asserts in “Nihon 4.0” (Japan 4.0), a recently released Japanese-language book, that the Japanese people have never been bad at strategy building; rather, they have employed a very advanced “strategy culture.” Reviewing Japan’s history of development through three phases — the Edo, Meiji and post-World War II periods — he thinks the Japanese have kept a “perfect strategic system” in place for about 400 years while occasionally updating it as required.

In the book, he refers to the Edo period (1603-1867) — the era of shogunate rule launched by Tokugawa Ieyasu — as “Japan 1.0,” or the initial stage of Japan’s peace and prosperity, followed by the Meiji Restoration of Imperial rule that marked the outset of the country’s modernization, or Japan 2.0. In this respect, I praise Luttwak for his historical acumen. Setting up a shogunate government in Edo (now Tokyo), Tokugawa Ieyasu imposed “gun control” nationwide to bring a complete end to a period of civil war waged by feudal warlords. He also successfully developed the best possible “alliance strategy” that led to the complete elimination of enemies by forcing daimyo feudal lords to follow a variety of acts of obedience set forth by the Tokugawa regime and enforcing rigid control on them. Truly, the first shogun was a “strategist of genius” who was well-versed in the logic of alliance formation. The Edo system of securing peace and stability then remained effective for nearly 300 years.

Luttwak’s emphatic assessment of Tokugawa Ieyasu as one of the “highest-level strategists” is similar to my viewpoint on the first shogun. In the February 2018 issue of Bungeishunju magazine, I appreciated Tokugawa Ieyasu for the all-around capability he had developed as a rare military politician.

Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) was, in my view, more successful as a ruler than Julius Caesar and Napoleon Bonaparte in terms of maintaining both prudence and boldness and losing neither appetite for knowledge nor originality, whether in war or peace or diplomacy. Japanese feudal lords and strategists Takeda Shingen (1521-1573) and Uesugi Kenshin (1530-1578) could be comparable to

Saladin (1138-1193), who led Muslim forces during the Third Crusade. But, in terms of competence, the three could not even come close to Tokugawa Ieyasu, who realized a multidimensional and composite nation that was based on the separation of the authority of the emperor and the power of the shogunate.

### Essence of Japan’s failure

However, Tokugawa Ieyasu’s descendants failed to work hard enough to keep the Japan 1.0 phase in a “good state of repair.” So the Tokugawa shogunate had to give way to the Japan 2.0 phase, as described by Luttwak, or an era of modernization and industrialization in the wake of the Meiji Restoration that followed the arrival of the U.S. “Black Ships” and pressure from outside to open up Japan. The country entered the Japan 3.0 phase, or the post-World War II era during which Japan turned itself into a high-growth economy. As such, it can be said that Japan has managed to maintain and develop its statehood while choosing the most suitable systems and alliances, depending upon the circumstances prevailing in each given period.

In this kind of chronological review, Japanese society’s perspective of World War I tends to be overlooked, even though the war provided Japan with an opportunity to participate in a world-scale tumultuous event for the first time.

As this year marks the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I, I think we are in a relevant position to look back at the collapse of the Japan 2.0 phase and the start of the Japan 3.0 phase. What will be learned in such a process will become a good starting point for thinking about what kind of new strategy and system should be developed to cope with East Asia’s nuclear missile crisis, a situation Japan has never encountered before.

During World War I, Japan failed to learn two things of strategic importance — the need to convert from coal to oil as the new mainstay fuel for the military and industrial sectors and the concept of energy security. This failure was greatly responsible for the eventual dysfunction of the Japan 2.0 phase.

In 1912, Winston Churchill, who was then the first lord of the British Admiralty, said the Royal Navy warships that switched to oil fuels were able to sharply improve speed and range of action. The same was true for merchant vessels adopting the innovative fuel conversion. Churchill told the British Parliament in 1913 that “on no one country, on no one route and on no one field must we be dependent. Safety and certainty in oil lie in variety, and variety alone.” This insightful remark points to the essence of a strategy that is applicable to Japan, a country that does not produce oil, especially in terms of ensuring energy supplies from diverse and multiple sources.

In contrast, during World War I, Japan only made the world aware of its weakness: Its oil supply and demand characteristics placed it in a vulnerable position compared to the other two major naval powers of the day, the United States and Britain. As already pointed out by many academic experts, as of 1940 — the year before Japan went to war with the United States, Britain and their allies — Japan’s annual output of crude oil stood at 330,000 kiloliters, far below

its annual consumption of 4.6 million kiloliters. This means that Japan had to rely on imports for about 92 percent of its oil needs. Further, the country relied on the United States, the largest of its potential enemies, for 81 percent of its crude oil imports. The decision to go to war with the United States without overcoming the paradoxical energy-related pitfall is the most symbolic of the strategic failures of the Japan 2.0 phase. In related developments, even long after the end of World War II, the country’s strategic vulnerability became clear to people in Japan and abroad as the two oil crises of the 1970s shook the foundation of the Japanese economy, then in the Japan 3.0 phase.

During World War I, from 1914 to 1918, the general public in Japan was less conscious of the fact that their country, too, was in a state of war as it was in an alliance with the Allied Powers. Therefore, almost no atmosphere of tension permeated the Japanese population — the men in military uniform and the people at large — in a way that would have impressed upon them a life-or-death lesson about energy security. In that war, Japan, while making almost no sacrifices, seized Germany’s Pacific territories north of the Equator, and, with the defeat of Germany, those islands came under Japanese control as League of Nations mandated territories. In China, Japan had Britain, France and Russia agree to its temporary takeover of German concessions in the Shandong Peninsula. Thus, Japan succeeded in improving the balance of power against the United States in the Asia-Pacific region for the time being.

Additionally, the Japanese economy began booming in the second half of 1915, the second year of the war. The boom eventually became something Japan had never experienced before as products exported from Japan dominated the Asian market, where exports from European countries virtually vanished as they were too busy manufacturing weapons and other military goods. Especially, Japan’s mining, shipbuilding and trading companies prospered so tremendously that many of them offered extraordinarily high dividend yields of 50 percent or even 70 percent per annum, making many people rich overnight.

According to statistician Takahide Nakamura (1925-2013), who taught at the University of Tokyo, and other scholars, the value of gold reserves held by the Japanese government and the Bank of Japan surged from about ¥340 million to about ¥1.59 billion over an 18-year period from 1914. The accumulation of sovereign wealth transformed Japan from a debtor country in the pre-WWI period, with external debt amounting to as much as about ¥1.1 billion, to a creditor country with external financial assets worth more than ¥2.77 billion as of 1920. Japan also turned from a farming country into an industrial country with the development of heavy and chemical industries. While a feeling of optimism prevailed across Japan with the essence of tragedy wrought by war ignored, there was at least one Japanese who harbored a sense of crisis over the vacillating future of the country. That person was no one else but Emperor Showa.

### Emperor Showa at WWI battlefield

In March 1921, five years before his enthronement, he set out on a six-month tour of Europe as crown prince, visiting Britain first. In the eyes of Britain’s King George V, Japan-

ese society appeared to cherish an illusion that peace had returned with almost nobody wounded or killed. So, the king recommended that the crown prince go to World War I battlefields on the European continent filled with the memories of disastrous battles. The crown prince visited Ypres, Belgium, where one of the fiercest battles was fought, and sent a telegram to King George V in June 1921, saying, “As Your Majesty told me, the scene in front of me acutely reminded me of what Your Majesty mentioned as ‘ghastly bloodshed in the battlefield of Ypres’ and I was immensely moved and prayed devoutly.” When he decided 24 years later to accept the Potsdam Declaration, which demanded Japan’s unconditional surrender in World War II, it is said that the ghastliness of the European battlefield he visited was present in his mind. His August 1945 strategic decision to make a declaration of surrender on his own should be interpreted to mean his determination to bear the blame alone.

Finally, I would like to cite a case of strategic failure within the Imperial Japanese Navy dating back to the latter stage of World War I. In April 1917, Japan, complying with a British request based on a 1902 agreement, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, dispatched a naval flotilla, the Second Special Squadron, to the Mediterranean to protect Allied shipping from German submarines. The flotilla, first comprising a cruiser and eight destroyers with the addition of four vessels later in the mission, carried out anti-submarine escort duties along the Mediterranean sea lanes connecting Malta and Alexandria, Egypt, among other Allied ports. Until its mission was over in 1919, the Japanese squadron escorted a total of 788 Allied vessels and about 700,000 troops and rescued a total of 7,075 crew members from Allied vessels torpedoed by enemy submarines. Japan lost 78 members of the squadron, who remain buried in Malta.

However, the Imperial Japanese Navy ignored a series of precious lessons the special squadron learned during its Mediterranean escort operations. The naval leadership could have seriously recognized the importance of the war tactic of deploying submarines to destroy commercial shipping as done by Germany in the Mediterranean. It also could have learned ship-versus-sub or sub-versus-sub tactics in clashes with enemy submarines trying to disrupt sea lanes or impose blockades. Nonetheless, about a quarter of a century later during the Pacific War, the Imperial Japanese Navy did not have commercial ships to turn into defensively armed “merchant navy” ships or adopt convoy operations — and thus the U.S. Navy easily and catastrophically destroyed Japan’s commercial shipping.

“If you want to predict the future, you should look at the past.” These words from Machiavelli’s “Discourses” can be applied to Japan, as it now has no choice but to review its “postwar system,” which has made the country incapable of coping adequately with the harsh international security environment in East Asia, instead having created a comfortable internal realm and minimizing the burden it would otherwise have had to bear for the security of the region.

Special to The Yomiuri Shimbun

Yamauchi is a professor at Musashino University and a professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo, where he previously headed the University of Tokyo Center for Middle Eastern Studies (UTCMES). He was a member of the government panel of experts tasked in 2016 and 2017 with discussing measures to reduce the Emperor’s burden of official duties.