

# How Do People Respond to an Anticipated Future Crisis?

—Japanese Foreign Policy during the Former Half of the 19th Century

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## 1. Introduction

Dealing with the possibility of future long-term crises is one of humanity's most important tasks. After the great earthquake and tsunami that hit Northeast Japan in 2011, local governments in Japan began to prepare for the next great geophysical disasters.

It is common knowledge that the age of the dinosaurs ended with the collision of an asteroid. This single accident decimated a species that had dominated the animal world for over one hundred million years. Other crises, however, occur over shorter time-spans. Perhaps one of the most important, and more widely discussed, long-term crisis the world faces in the near future is an imminent energy shortage. This is one of the reasons why Japan is currently engaging in a sincere discussion on the necessity of nuclear power.

Some people insist that it is necessary because we will run out of biofuel within a few hundred years, even accounting for new shale gas deposits and other untapped methane hydrate reserves under the abyssal plain. They believe that only nuclear power can supply sufficient energy for future generations. Yet others worry of the unintended consequences of nuclear power, and point out the lack of safe storage space for radioactive waste. Finding safe ways of storing radioactive waste is a critical task, as it is impossible to find detoxicants for radioactive waste. In short, the energy issue demands debate about the long-term impacts across a variety of areas. Although our generation may not suffer from this problem, our descendants most certainly will.

It is rather common for people to avoid dealing with problems that have no immediate impact in their lifetimes. It is foolish, many believe, to worry about troubles that may not affect their lives. Disregarding long-term troubles—death, for instance—in many ways allows us to live happy lives. But I believe we have a responsibility to leave the world in a better place for future generations. When dealing with long-term problems, it is useful to look to historical precedents, particularly those in which people succeeded in solving an anticipated future crisis. What I am going to introduce you today is the long-term crisis in 19th century Japan that led up to the Meiji Revolution. This episode is one of the most salient cases when human beings succeeded in solving a long-term crisis. I believe this offers some clues to help us think about how to solve some of

the long-term crises we face today.

## **2. A foreign crisis anticipated**

—Japan's re-encounter with the West at the turn of the 19th century

Japan experienced one of the most important revolutions in the modern world during the third quarter of the 19th century. This revolution is called the Meiji Ishin, taking its name from Emperor Meiji, the first emperor of modern Japan. Although this revolution ended in the abolition of hereditary samurai aristocracy, this was not the reason the revolution began. The major issue people discussed was whether Japan should open up its ports to the West or not<sup>1)</sup>. When Tokugawa government adopted a policy of opening up, it lost its legitimacy to govern Japan and, ultimately, its hegemony.

### **Japan's seclusion policy**

Foreign policy was so important for the Japanese in mid-19th century because Japan had secluded itself from international relations for more than 200 years, outside of limited relations with Korea, Ryukyu, China and the Netherlands. But when the American envoy, Commodore Matthew C. Perry, used gunboat diplomacy to demand Japan open its ports in 1853, Japan was forced to decide whether to maintain its long-revered custom of seclusion.

Of course, recent research has revealed that Japan's seclusion policy was by no means static or unchanging. In the second quarter of the 17th century, the Japanese government's main concern was to contain Japanese people in Japanese archipelago. Foreign ships were allowed in Nagasaki in principle, except for the Spanish and the Portuguese, as both nations had violated the ban on proselytizing Christianity.

The seclusion policy was tightened, however, at the end of the 18th century when some Japanese political leaders and intellectuals began to anticipate a future crisis with the West. Their attention moved from containing the Japanese within the archipelago to the best ways to deal with the arrival of foreign ships. In 1792, when the first Russian mission traveled to Japan, the Japanese government declared to the envoy that Japanese ports are closed to any foreign ships in principle, with limited exceptions: Nagasaki would remain open to those countries with which Japan had maintained international relations since the 17th century.

This policy change laid the basis for the later political discussions. Japanese during the 19th century seldom argued about whether Japanese should be able to leave the archipelago. Instead, they focused on whether Japan should open relations with the West. Had this change not been made, Japan would have been able to open relations with both Russia and the United States, because both countries had not been banned from Japan before the end of the 18th century. This small change ensured that the Tokugawa government would become vulnerable to political outcry

after Perry's arrival in the mid-19th century that Tokugawa government violated the sacred 'tradition' of seclusion. That was the beginning of the collapse of the Tokugawa government.

A) Fujita Yukoku: warning against a future crisis with Russia

At the end of the 18th century, Yukoku FUJITA, an intellectual from the Mito domain in Eastern Japan, formulated the doctrine "Revere the emperor, expel the barbarians," a doctrine that would dominate the political discourse during the third quarter of the 19th century. On the one hand, this doctrine maintained that the Japanese should strengthen national solidarity through a shared reverence of the emperor in Kyoto as their eternal sovereign. On the other hand, it also sought to provoke antipathy toward the West. It was not intended to support the policy of seclusion; instead, Yukoku hoped to initiate a radical reform of Japan by provoking a war against the West.

Why did Yukoku create such an extremist doctrine? The doctrine owed to his belief that Russia would invade Japan, which had been in an era of great peace for about 200 years. In 1797, he wrote the following in a memorial to his lord:

Since the Tokugawa family established its dynasty through military virtue, our nation was relieved of any dangers for around 200 years. We need not watch out for thieves or burglars in daily life and people become aged and die without experiencing wars. This is the first, great era of peace since our country was established.

Thus, samurai warriors began to enjoy their hereditary status, to indulge in delicious foods and merry banquets. This made our body and soul weak and useless. All in Japan live idly and forget the possibility of war. This is the evidence of historical climax of our nation, too.

In contrast, villains from the North [the Russians] continued to plan Southern expeditions to usurp our sacred country. Alas! The Japanese today are too proud of their shortsighted intelligence. They never realize the fact that the Russians are too wise to launch large-scale campaigns.

The current situation in Japan is very dangerous. I do warn that there is no more important issue facing Japan today.

Yukoku was obsessed by the decay of the samurai's warrior virtues. He thus criticized his colleagues by praising the hateful Russians. His denunciation continued:

The danger from the North is getting graver year by year. Yet, the leaders in this coun-

try tend to neglect it to keep people's minds quiet. In my view, they do not know how dangerous this era is.

People today gauge others, people with far sights, by their small measures. It is like summer insects doubting the existence of ice in winter. Thus, they laugh at the person who is eager to argue about military affairs as a lunatic. All people say "It is suffice to maintain the status quo by neglecting trifle incidents during our lifetime. We need not worry about the era after our death."

Obviously, Yukoku worried about a long-term crisis, one that would not happen during his lifetime. It took half a century for his prediction to come true. We can easily understand why ordinary men of his time did not pay sufficient attention to his concerns. Most, after all, would rather enjoy their daily lives without worrying whether the improbable will come to pass.

Yukoku was impatient enough to criticize his lord in plain terms. The lord of the Mito domain, despite being proud of his vassal's learning and reputation, was forced to deprive him of his position and confine him to his house.

Yet, Yukoku was not alone in worrying about a future foreign crisis.

B) Sadanobu MATSUDAIRA: the founder of Japanese foreign policy during the first half of the 19th century

Today, Sadanobu is famous as the leader of the Tokugawa government's second great reform at the end of the 18th century. One of his major concerns was to reorganize foreign policy to prepare for a future crisis with the West. He tightened the seclusion policy, ordered the coastal lords to present coastal defense reports, asked a Dutch factory in Nagasaki whether they would be willing to import Western ships, and began to incorporate all of Ezo into Japanese territory.

In all, his foreign policy was composed of three dimensions: the tightening of seclusion laws, the control of conflicts, and coastal defense. When he sent a letter to Adam Laxman, the Russian first envoy who visited Ezo in 1792, he at first declared that anyone who landed Japan would not be allowed to return home. But in the end, he gave Laxman a license to enter Nagasaki if Russia was eager enough to come again. This clearly announced the seclusion policy as a principle while avoiding conflict with Russia. In truth, however, Sadanobu was afraid that the mouth of Edo bay was too wide to prevent the Russian ship from entering. Once in Edo bay, any ship could sail near downtown Edo. He thus gave the license to enter Nagasaki to prevent the Russian envoy from searching for the way to Edo.

This anxiety led Sadanobu to launch a big project strengthening coastal defense around Edo, from the Izu peninsula to Kujyukuri beach and the mouth of Edo bay. He even went out to inves-

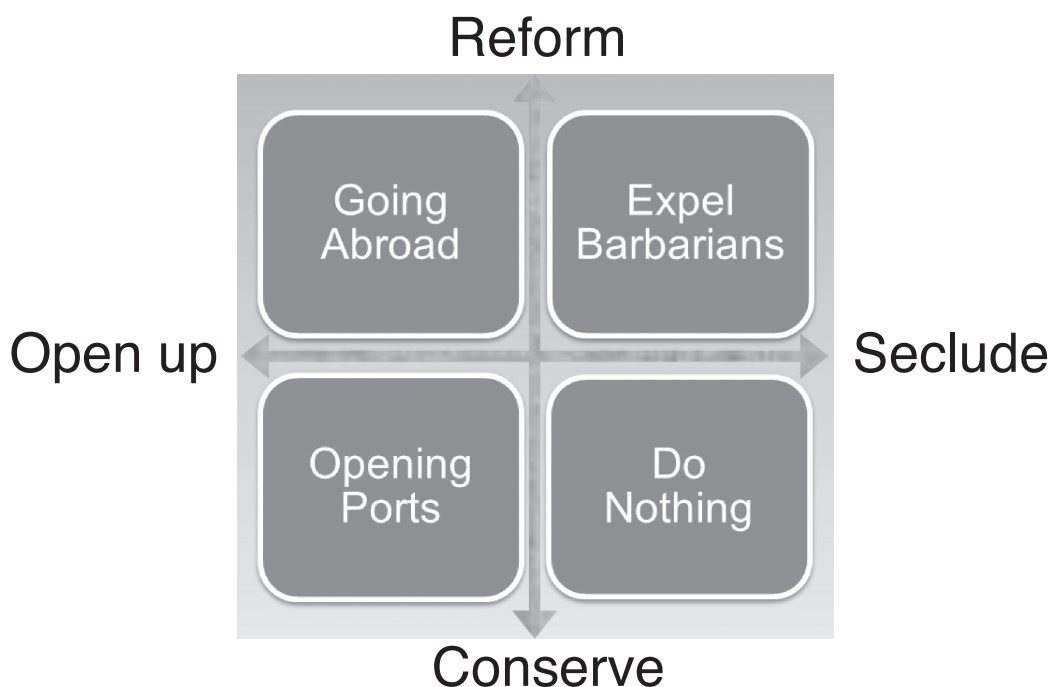
tigate the western part of this project in 1793. However, Sadanobu was forced to step down as prime minister one month after his return to Edo. It is not difficult to understand why. Sadanobu's plan to fortify Edo, after all, was a costly and difficult means to meet an imagined threat. For ordinary officials, Sadanobu's project must have been seen as too ambitious and risky.

This was the political climate in which Yukoku Fujita presented the above mentioned vehement memorial to his lord.

### C) Before China's Opium War (1838–41)

After Sadanobu resigned, the Tokugawa government pursued seclusion only, abandoning both coastal defense and concern of the West. The Tokugawa absorbed the island of Ezo into Japan. When the second Russian envoy, Rezanov, came in 1804, Japan refused to open trade with Russia, confiscated the envoy's license to enter Nagasaki, and forced him to leave Japan.

This cold reception led to small-scale armed conflicts with Russia in the Northern territories, which were solved by a peace agreement in 1811. After the agreement, Russian ships stopped approaching Japanese coasts. This led the Tokugawa government to believe that the West would not willingly travel from the opposite side of the globe just to invade Japan. At the same time, the Tokugawa government did not want to spend time and money watching out for the potential ar-



rival of Western ships. Thus, in 1825, Tokugawa issued an edict ordering lords to expel any Western ships that approached the Japanese coast.

The conflicts with Russia left a number of possible policies to pursue toward the West. Here is a diagram that shows four attitudes toward the West. There are two axes: first, the foreign policy considerations of whether or not Japan should keep its seclusion policy; and second, the domestic political considerations of whether Japan should engage in thorough reforms in order to cope with the Western threats.

The majority wanted to keep the policy of seclusion to maintain the status quo. After the Russian crisis, Tokugawa officials believed that Japan could sustain its seclusion policy as it had for more than 200 years. They did not want to engage in reforms that would impose strains on the samurai and the populace. After all, they believed a future crisis was improbable.

Intellectuals held three general opinions on the crisis. First, there was Yukoku Fujita's doctrine, "Revere the emperor, expel the barbarians." It called for conflict and even war against the West. For proponents of "Revere the emperor, expel the barbarians" thought, the seclusion policy was not an absolute, necessary condition. They were more concerned with using possible foreign wars to initiate fundamental reforms in Japan.

The second opinion called on the Japanese to go abroad to recover their spirit. A professor of the Tokugawa academy, Toan KOGA, wrote an essay recommending Japan send ships to Southeast Asia for trade. He justified this fundamental change in foreign policy by appealing to the precedents from the early 17th century.

The third opinion was to open limited ports to some Western countries. This was meant to forestall or prevent the escalation of conflicts with the West. The supporters of this policy also shied away from thorough reforms. They preferred mitigating the seclusion policy to domestic reforms that would be sure to evoke strong objections.

At first glance, it appears as if the supporters of the "Revere the emperor, expel the barbarians" policy were totally opposed to those who called for sending ships abroad. But, in fact, they belonged to the same camp that demanded the total reform of Japan. Thus the supporters of expulsion would later argue the necessity of sending ships abroad, after initially vacillating between the two policies. For instance, although the lord of the Chōshū domain had actively supported the expulsion policy, he later became an eager supporter of traveling abroad. Strikingly, Hirobumi ITO and Kaoru INOUE, Choshu samurai who later became leaders of the Meiji era, left for Britain to learn Western naval technology just before Choshu attacked Western ships at the Shimonoseki strait in 1863.

Politicians after Perry's arrival engaged in fierce arguments on whether Japan should open its ports to the West. But in reality their concerns remained sharply focused on the questions of

whether Japan should begin fundamental reforms, and, if so, how to realize those reforms.

(D) Masahiro ABE: policy changes after a long nightmare

After the Opium war in China, Tokugawa officials and intellectuals perceived that it would not take long for Western envoys to try to open up ports in Japan as well. The Japanese knew this from the news that arrived at Nagasaki, and a special letter from the Dutch King in 1844 confirmed the desire of the West to open up Japan. But Japanese elites were not united in how to deal with the foreign threat: policy views within Tokugawa government split into three.

Prime Minister Masahiro ABE initially decided to maintain the seclusion policy and strengthen coastal defense.

But officials in charge of finance obstructed Abe's policy. These officials wanted to do nothing because they were afraid that tax increases might ignite a series of popular riots. They preferred easing the seclusion policy to launching a new project of coast guard.

The third view was an open trade policy among the officials in charge of Uraga, the defense center of Edo bay. They maintained that the most important goal for Japan was the fortification of Edo bay, and they sought to use foreign trade to purchase armaments necessary for coastal defense.

In 1852, at the request of the US government, the head of the Dutch factory at Nagasaki informed the Tokugawa Shogunate that an American envoy would visit Edo next year with a number of American battleships. Abe and his officials kept silent. It was impossible for them to fortify Edo bay because they had just begun rebuilding Edo castle, which had burnt down a few months earlier. They did almost nothing to guard the coast, but took great care not to inflame public opinion about the arrival of the American envoy.

At this point, Abe appeared firmly in the financial officials' camp: he appeared to support the easing of the seclusion policy. The survey of Edo bay had revealed that Japan could not protect itself from more than a one armed ship from the West. Japan would have to protect itself through negotiation. But he was different from financial officials on the issue of coastal defense. He in fact waited for the arrival of American envoy to persuade Japan's financial officials to disburse the funds necessary to guard Japan.

Thus, the reception policy of American envoy was almost predetermined when Perry arrived with four battleships in 1853, bearing a letter from the US president. Abe chose to receive the letter and, when Perry returned in 1854, decided to conclude a treaty opening ports to American ships. This first treaty, however, contained no articles for trade or diplomatic relations. Perry was pleased with opening two ports to provide US vessels with fresh water, vegetables and harborage. A similar treaty was concluded with Russia in the same year.

The Tokugawa government justified the treaties as a natural extension of its relations with the Dutch, and in doing so escaped public denunciation for the moment. Abe then shifted to the “open up” policy two-and-a-half years later. He instructed government officials, “Utilize the profits from foreign trade to build a rich and strong country.” In 1857, the government concluded additional treaties with the Netherlands and Russia to open trade and, the following year, proceeded to open diplomatic relations and trade with the US, Britain, and France. By that time, the Tokugawa government had begun importing Western science and technology: a navy with steamships, armies with firearms, and a college to study European languages. The Tokugawa government after Perry’s arrival made a smooth transition to a new foreign policy, one that adopted Western knowledge in the name of national power.

But Perry’s arrival had also caused a severe trauma throughout Japan. The samurai harbored a strong sense of indignity that Japan had meekly accepted the treaties without resisting. Once a domestic catastrophe broke out in 1858, this sense of indignity added fuel to the fire of the “Revere the emperor, expel the barbarians” movement that would end the Tokugawa regime. During this period, the lord of Choshu fought against Western ships. Yet, Japan escaped from the large-scale wars that China had experienced. This owed to the fact that the Tokugawa government remained faithful to its treaty obligations. Moreover, it resulted from the decision of the lord of Choshu to abandon their commitment to expelling Western power before they launched a coup d’etat that toppled the Tokugawa regime.

### **3. Lessons**

Japan barely escaped from an impasse that dominated politics before Perry’s arrival. Had the Tokugawa government fought against Perry’s squadron, Japan might have suffered prolonged conflicts with the West and been forced to make territorial concessions. Instead, Japan avoided an intervention from the West, and bought sufficient time to engage in much-needed reform.

Why was Japan successful in escaping this grave crisis, a crisis that dominated the politics of most other non-Western countries in the modern era?

One reason was that Japan had a wise and able leader at a crucial historical moment. Prime Minister Abe was flexible enough to reverse his policy from expulsion to opening up to the West. The second reason was that Abe had a variety of foreign policies from which to choose. His letters clearly show that he thought deeply about the three dimensions of foreign policy: seclusion, coastal defense, and avoiding conflicts. Sadanobu Matsudaira had created this framework sixty years earlier. Thus Japanese elites in fact grappled with possible choices to deal with a future crisis with the West for more than 60 years. It was this history of grappling with the problem that led to Japan’s ability to pursue a flexible response. Experiences, memories and virtual simulations, all



matter in coping with big structural changes. We should not laugh at the people who warn about or prepare for future crises because their prediction is vague on how or when it will come to pass.

Then, why was the Japanese at the turn of the 19th century so sensitive to the international system? Their attitude was quite different from the contemporaries in China and Korea. It may be because they were not so confident in the strength or longevity of their polity. Chinese and Koreans had little interest in watching or learning from the outside world because they were so confident that their polity embodied Confucian truth along with most impartial system of civil service examinations. This comparison indicates flexibility alone is not sufficient to deal with future crises—we must be willing to think about issues or concerns that are far removed from our daily lives.

### **Notes**

- 1) For historical facts, see Hiroshi Mitani, *Escape from Impasse: The Decision to Open Japan*, 2nd. ed. (Tokyo: I-House Press, 2008).