

# Self-Defense Forces and the Constitution: Heed the past to find a path to the future

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“Why are our leaders trying to side with the United States?” Kiyoshi Watanabe wrote in his diary in February 1946. “Of course it’s for the money. Talk about cold, calculated pragmatism. They’d do anything to advance their own interests.”

Watanabe was still under the age of consent when he enlisted in the Imperial Japanese Navy during World War II. He returned home after the country’s defeat, having watched many seamen die in action. Watanabe was deeply critical of the nation’s conservative politicians who held the reins of government.

During the Korean War, there arose the question of whether Japan should send Hoantai (The National Safety Force-the predecessor of the Self-Defense Forces) troops to Korea to assist the U.S. military.

A Hoantai soldier told an interviewer in May 1953: “Would I go to Korea? My answer is ‘No.’ I believe we have the right to refuse to go.”

Another soldier said: “Were Japan being invaded by foreign forces, that would be a national catastrophe, and of course I would risk my life for the nation, not just to protect my own family. But being sent overseas to die? That’s a meaningless sacrifice. No matter how hard I try, I just can’t see why I have to get killed in combat when the Japanese people are living safely at home.... And I couldn’t possibly ask my wife and children to bear the pain of my death in such circumstances. It would be too heartless to even ask.”

Also, during the Korean War, Genzaburo Yoshino, editor-in-chief of Sekai (World) magazine, advocated pacifism and neutrality from both superpowers-the United States and the Soviet Union.

Yoshino wrote in April 1952, “There are certain principles even the superpowers must abide by. Should we fail to believe in such principles and lose our resolve to assert what must be asserted, how could we maintain our own independence? How could we get over our defeat in the war and rise again?”

These are among the many “voices” of postwar Japan that I collated in my book “Minshu to Aikoku” (Democracy and patriotism), where I attempted to examine Japanese thought from 1945 to around 1970.

Those voices are hardly perfect samples to represent the era in question. Still, I think they serve as a mirror for us to hold up and examine ourselves today.

My decision to write this book had to do with a surge of interest, since the latter half of the 1990s, in re-examining or redefining the term “postwar.” As a corollary, there emerged a movement to explain controversial issues of history and education in terms of “defects” in the postwar education system.

And in any discussion of social issues such as the “collapse of the middle class” and “deterioration of academic standards in the classroom,” there was the tacit understanding that what was always referred to as the “postwar era” was coming to an end everywhere-in politics, economics, education and so forth.

True, the present society is changing rapidly. Since the end of the Cold War and the start of an economic downturn around 1990, the nation’s traditional political system that dated from 1955 began to shake, as did all sorts of other practices or policies people had always taken for granted-the lifetime employment system, for instance, and the diplomatic principle that precluded any chance of Self-Defense Forces troops being sent overseas.

Against this backdrop, it was only natural that “postwar” values should come under critical scrutiny to explore the future. But much of the argument that ensued made me wonder how many of us correctly understood what “postwar” really implied to validate the argument itself.

Obviously, failure to correctly understand the object of criticism can only lead to a flawed conclusion that will be of no use to anyone. In this sense, little can be gained by criticizing “postwar democracy” and “postwar pacifism” if the very premise-what “postwar” implies-is misunderstood or misrepresented.

Let me cite constitutional debate as one case in point. So-called postwar progressive intellectuals were by and large critical of the Constitution that was forced on the nation by the occupation forces. But these people switched to a pro-Constitution position around 1950 mainly in reaction to America’s changed Japan policy. Because of the Cold War, the United States began demanding that Japan rearm itself and sends its troops overseas.

For this reason, even such a rightist as novelist Yukio Mishima conceded, “If we go the way of constitutional amendment, we would only be playing into America’s hands.” At the time, rewriting the Constitution was tantamount to acquiescing to U.S. policy, while defending the Constitution and pursuing pacifism stood not only for “democracy” but “independent statehood” and “patriotism” as well.

But such an understanding is often lacking in recent discussions about the Constitution, SDF dispatch abroad and patriotism. And some advocates of constitutional revision have even begun citing “a general sense of frustration in society” as a reason for change, as if a new Constitution could perk people up like some new fashion trend might. This is cavalier at best.

Former German President Richard von Weizsacker warned in 1985, “Anyone who closes his eyes to the past becomes blind to the present.” These words are often quoted when issues of war responsibility are debated.

As the domestic and international orders fluctuate in this century, the term postwar has become a thing of the past. We need to heed the voices from the past and re-apply their messages to our present world, so that we may be able to continue discussing how best to explore the future.

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