

EDITORIAL

70 years since Pearl Harbor attack

Seventy years have passed since Dec. 8, 1941 (Japan time), when more than 300 Japanese bombers, torpedo bombers and fighters from an aircraft carrier task force attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. The attack exploded, sank or severely damaged five U.S. battleships, among other seacraft, and killed some 3,300 members of the U.S. Navy and Army.

The ensuing total war between Japan and the United States thus started, ending in August 1945 only after Japan suffered atomic bomb attacks in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Tactically, the attack, was a success for Japan. But it was not necessarily a strategic success. Japan inflicted no damage to U.S. aircraft carriers, which would play a crucial role in naval operations in the Pacific. At the time of the attack, no U.S. aircraft carriers were in Pearl Harbor.

More importantly, the attack infuriated Americans, ending isolationist sentiments in the U.S. and uniting American opinions in favor of war against the Axis Powers.

Japan has been dogged by the accusation for decades that it carried out a "sneak attack" because Japanese Ambassador to Washington Kichisaburo Nomura and special envoy Saburo Kurusu handed Tokyo's final memorandum addressed to the U.S. government to U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull about an hour after the Pearl Harbor attack.

In Japan, opinion persists that if the Japanese embassy staff in Washington had worked properly and the envoys had handed the memorandum to the U.S. in time, Japan would have been spared the stigma of having carried out a "sneak attack."

But this view is not tenable because Japan's final memorandum was not in the form of an ultimatum, which expresses the intention of entering into war. The memorandum only hinted that Japan would terminate negotiations with the U.S., as Mr. Takeo Iguchi, former Japanese ambassador to New Zealand and former professor at Tokai University, points out in his book "Demystifying Pearl Harbor — A New Perspective from Japan" (2010) and [his interview with The](#)

Japan Times, which appeared Dec. 7, 1999.

Even if the final memorandum had been handed prior to the Pearl Harbor attack, it would still have infuriated the U.S. as well. Mr. Iguchi was in Washington as an 11-year-old at the time of the attack because his father was counselor at the Japanese embassy.

He found that the Japanese Foreign Ministry had written a draft dated Dec. 3, 1941, which would have served as a true ultimatum. Its concluding paragraph said: "The government of the United States of America has not shown even the slightest degree of sincerity in the current negotiations, and the Japanese government regrets to have to solemnly notify hereby your government that we are forced to terminate negotiations, recognizing that the continuation of talks will in no way contribute to the stability of East Asia, and that you will be held responsible for any and all the consequences that may arise in the future."

The very last part of the paragraph was tantamount to a declaration of war.

But the last paragraph of the memorandum delivered to Hull was changed to: "The Japanese government regrets to have to notify hereby the American government that in view of the attitude of the American government, it cannot but consider that it is impossible to reach an agreement through further negotiations."

On the strength of the text alteration and other evidence, Mr. Iguchi says that the Tokyo government and the Japanese military tried not only to deceive the U.S. but also to keep the Japanese embassy in the dark as to what Japan was plotting.

The view is often expressed that the U.S.'s economic squeeze on Japan — achieved through methods such as the decision to terminate the bilateral commerce and navigation treaty, the embargo of strategically important materials, and the freezing of Japanese assets in the U.S. — led Japan to carry out the Pearl Harbor attack. But a longer-range view should be taken.

The U.S. actions were in reaction to Japan's military aggression against China, which had lasted for years, and Japan's recent invasion of French Indochina. The nature of Japan's war against China was such that Japan did not and could not declare war against China. This shows that Japan could not find a justifiable and convincing reason to declare war. Instead, Japan called the war a "holy war" to maintain the morale of Japanese soldiers.

It is symbolic that about one hour before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese Army units landed in Kota Baharu, of British Malaya, and in Songkhla, in southern Thailand. Japan militarily occupied or carried out operations in Southeast Asia mainly in order to secure materials

needed to conduct war against China and the U.S.

Many Japanese believed that after the Pearl Harbor attack, Japan's war turned into a war to liberate Asian peoples from the European and North American colonial powers such as Britain, the Netherlands and the U.S. But the war was primarily over which side would gain hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region. Japan's war not only caused some 3 million Japanese to die but also resulted in the death of several times more other Asian people.

Among the dead were people from Japanese colonies, Japan-occupied areas and Allied prisoners-of-war put to forced labor.

Japanese can learn an important lesson from the attitude of Mr. Masamichi Inoki, professor emeritus of political history at Kyoto University and former president of the Defense Academy. He strictly forbade his students from saying that Japan liberated Asian peoples through its war.

The Japan Times: Thursday, Dec. 8, 2011

(C) All rights reserved

[Go back to The Japan Times Online](#)

[Close window](#)