

SEARCHING FOR POLITICAL EFFECTIVENESS: THE STRATEGIES BEHIND THE MILITARY UNIFICATION OF JAPAN

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Abstract: *Over the course of millennia power laid in the hands of generals and rulers and their ability to act – but so did their downfalls. Thus, the first part of this presentation will be focused on the importance of strategy and tactics in any kind of rule. Furthermore, Japanese warfare will be anatomized – how the samurai became elite warriors, weaponry, the transition of samurai warfare during the Sengoku Period and its importance to the fight for supremacy between the Japanese Clans. The goal of this paper is to unravel the conundrums of The Age of War from a political frame of reference, under three powerful influences – Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu. The discussion will then shift towards analyzing the impetus that put in motion their plans and the ways they achieved power, their brilliant strategies and their undoing, whilst using the knowledge regarding Political Science and International Relations to determine the political legacy of their actions.*

Keywords: *Sengoku Period; strategy; subterfuge; warfare.*

Introduction

In a competition, strategy is the only aspect differentiating those who succeed and those who do not. In a rivalry-filled contention, the winner takes it all and the one who is vanquished suffers the loss of land, title and renown. In order to do so, being a master of the battlefield is a must.

One of the important factors in one's supremacy over another is adapting both the tactics and the warfare. Thus, we shall delve into Japanese warfare. Firstly, the Samurai will be the first towards which our focus will shift. The word Samurai comes from the Japanese verb *saburau*, which means "to serve" and it was initially used to refer to servants. Only in the 8th century it starts encompassing a military implication. *The nature of the samurai ensured that the history of samurai warfare involves two very important aspects: the military activities of the group, through strategy and tactics, and the military prowess of the individual warrior.* (Turnbull, 1996, 10) The samurai become an important factor in analyzing the political Unification of Japan because the Sengoku period brought a change observable only through the bond of loyalty.

Loyalty, both to the Shogun¹ and the daimyo² is expressed through a neo-Confucian concept called *taigi – meibun*. *Taigi* refers to the duty owed to the one above you and *meibun* is the moral imperative in the relationship the sense of duty creates. (Steben, 2002, 136) It is the perfect description between a benevolent lord and his loyal subjects. Following the "way of the warrior" was a matter of honor, superior morality and lifestyle, which propelled the Samurai to the top of the warrior class, being considered part of the elite. Many also chose to commit suicide to follow their lords even in death.

¹ A.N.: Hailing from families of esteemed ancestry, a shogun was appointed by the emperor and ruled the country

² A.N.: Daimyos were feudal lords that ruled over their respective clan's land.

1. The breaking point towards the age of warring states

The corrosion of Japan's stability started during the Ashikaga Period (Ashikaga *Bakufu*, 1336-1573) due to regionalization and the provincial's lords struggle for autonomy. *Their disinterest in and inability with regard to state administration, the weakening of the shōen system³ and the inheritance disputes that arose over land and property contributed to this process.* (Culeddu, 2018, 90) By the 16th century, the Ashikaga *Bakufu* was losing control, resulting in endemic civil wars. The loss of the authority of a central power to quell the fires of conflict led to chaos in Japan and to a period that remains known under the name of Sengoku Jidai, or the Era of Warring States (1573-1603)

The story of this period is one of careful planning, hidden deals, self-interest, bold action and, of course, massive bloodshed. (Andressen, 2002, 60) During the Sengoku Period (1467-1615) power was thrust in the hands of hundreds of warlords, or daimyo - some more covetous than others, but not all capable of fully attaining ultimate influence over the others. Each daimyo was in charge of his own territory, called a domain and each domain belonged to a clan (Uji), thus, making alliances became an important way of maintaining power and influence.

Further, we shall discuss the ascent to power of three most prevalent daimyo of the Era of Warring States, their downfalls and the focal point of their political legacy – the Unification of Japan – by presenting their way of thinking and the strategies they chose in dire situations through their most significant actions and battles.

2. The Strategy of Unification

The art of war is of vital importance to the State. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. (Sun Tzu, 2000, 3) Such was the case in 16th century Japan, where struggle for power overcame the country. In this time, three daimyos distinguished themselves from the others through their resolve, ingenuity and strategies, but also through their contrasting approaches, better expressed through an old Japanese anecdote: Encountering a cuckoo that would not sing, Nobunaga said he would kill it, Hideyoshi said he would persuade it to sing, and Ieyasu would wait for it to sing. (Cortazzi, 1991, 121) This shows how the traits that helped them rise above other daimyo and remain ingrained in the history of Unification.

Oda Nobunaga: the man who mixed the dough

Oda Nobunaga is known as a brilliant but ruthless tactician, capable of learning from his mistakes and adapting to any situation. *He was the ultimate warlord, without peer when it came to brutality and self-interest.* (Henshall, 2012, 46) After the death of Oda Nobuhide, the Oda family enters into a crisis, as the relatively small size of the clan makes them an easy target to the bigger, more powerful clans. Hence, it comes as a surprise that he names Oda Nobunaga his heir in 1551 – especially since he was not well-liked due to his temper and non-traditional approach, some even committing seppuku as an act of revolt towards his newly acquired title. Despite this, he can also be considered an insurgent, his revolutionary outlook differentiating him in a chaotic and conventional state.

One of the first particularities we notice is his acumen, being capable of making good and strategic calls. We notice this during his war with Nobukata, his cousin, for the rest of the Owari province. Wanting to ultimately secure his position as daimyo, he recruits commoners and trains them, with the purpose of matching Nobukata's army in numbers and attacking – and

³ A.N.: An important element in medieval Japan's economy, the shōen system was focused on private ownership of estates, which were exempted from paying taxes. They became, in a way, a separate political and military power, whilst also forming alliances to further consolidate power.

he succeeds in doing so, rooting his decision on the Japanese notion of *On* which refers to repaying a favor received (Culeddu 2008, 195) This guarantees the full potential of the commoners he now marches to war.

His innovative approach is accentuated during the Battle of Ukino (1558), when he fundamentally changes the Japanese type of warfare. In 1543, Portuguese cargo shipwrecks in Japan and comes ashore on the island of Tanegashima south of Kagoshima (Hall, 1991, 1), leading to the first introduction of firearms in Japan. The issue was, however, a slow reloading time, the possibility of malfunctioning, the recoil and the abundance of smoke, which made them quite unappealing to some. (Turnbull, 1996, 74) But to Nobunaga, the Portuguese Arquebus becomes the key to victory. He buys a large quantity of firearms and creates a killing zone, leading Nobukata's soldiers to their demise. It is interesting to analyze how is it that Nobunaga's army wins, despite being less prepared in the art of battle. Samurai were trained soldiers, hardened by continuous war for hundreds of years. Despite this, the commoners, or *Ashigaru*, were driven by their need to acquire more. Simply put it – they didn't have much to begin with, but their recruitment in the warring ranks gave them a purpose and the possibility to gain more. And that is exactly what turned them into such a lethal force.

This is one of the crucial moments in Oda Nobunaga's life. He, in a way, earns legitimacy in the grander scheme of the warring lords, especially as the sole ruler of the Owari Province. But in 1560, his goals clash with Imagawa Yashimoto's ones, who wanted to seize the heart of the state. Claiming the capital, Kyoto, was an ambition amidst the daimyo - being the center of power of Japan, conquering it would mean uniting all the daimyo under a single, centralized power. This action puts the basis of one of the most important battle for Oda's strategic thinking and cunningness – the Battle of Okehazama, regarded as one of the *greatest combats in the world*. (Brinkley, 1915, 478)

Imagawa Yashimoto's entrance in Owari seems promising, as he manages to attack and capture some of Nobunaga's fortresses. Having such a large army at hand, he divides it in groups in order to cover more land, an action that ultimately seals his fate. Realizing that he is heavily overwhelmed, Imagawa's army outnumbering him 12 to 1 (Turnbull, 2002, 42), Nobunaga decides to outwit his opponent. Hence, he prepares a surprise attack, knowing that larger troops can be also a disadvantage to the lord – cut the head that holds them together, and they will be too disoriented and stunned to fight back. Without orders, the troops would scatter, not able to communicate to the daimyo to plan an attack *Most fortunately for the Owari troops, their movements were shrouded by a heavy rainfall, and they succeeded in inflicting serious loss on the invading army, driving it p le-m le across the border and killing its commander-in-chief, Yoshimoto*. (Brinkley, 1915, 478) The battle's importance is also amplified due to the fact that two of the most important people in the history of the Unification of Japan collide, forming an alliance – Oda Nobunaga and Tokugawa Ieyasu, the late Imagawa's general.

Further, Owari Province's daimyo continues with his victories, seemingly becoming more and more ruthless in his mission to seize the capital and subsequent power this action would bring. In 1568 he manages to capture Kyoto, but he faces opposition of both daimyos (Asai and the Asakura families) and the Ikko-Ikki buddhist sect, while the threat of peasant rebellion looms over his head. (Turnbull, 2002, 43-44) However, he deems the Ikko-ikki as the more pressing issue on account of being the cause of many uprisings and having a general displeasure towards daimyo, realizing that *political independence of the Buddhist sects stood between him and national domination*. (Maison & Caiger, 1997, 175)

He reveals his controversial and relentless character even more during his attack on the monks of Mount Hiei in 1571. *This was probably the only military action of Nobunaga's career so controversial that even some of his own generals opposed the move, but it happened nonetheless*. (Turnbull, 2002, 44) Mount Hiei has been generally appreciated as a place of peace

of holy origins, warding out the evil. But, because of the alliance the monks made with the Ikko-ikki, they became a deterrent aimed towards anyone who dares oppose him. Despite the clear warning, this action also enraged the other daimyo and made Nobunaga a target even more than before.

Despite his forceful approach, Nobunaga attended civil affairs and build better castles (more detail here). He gradually started gaining control of the country through under the apothegm inscribed on his personal seal – Tenka Fubu, meaning “A Unified Realm under Military Rule” (Henshall, 2012, 47) He only achieved half of his goal when he was assassinated by one of his generals in 1582.

3. Toyotomi Hideyoshi: the man who baked the cake

Toyotomi Hideyoshi, despite his humble origins, rose to hold Oda Nobunaga’s place after his death. *He was a self-made man, a peasant foot-soldier’s son who rose through the ranks to become one of Nobunaga’s most capable generals. Perhaps most importantly, Hideyoshi was known as a brilliant leader, able to win friends and forge alliances to avoid needless bloodshed, yet he could fight ruthlessly when necessary.* (Andressen, 2002, 61)

Although he took any occasion to form alliances, avoiding bloodshed when needed, his strategic prominence is highlighted by the battles he did fight. One of the first issues that arise after his coup (having seized power from the heirs Nobunaga named) was his war with Shibata Katsuie and Sakuma Morimasa in 1583. During this battle, Shizugatake castle had become a nodal point between the two rival sides, particularly because it was the last one standing. Sakuma Morimasa’s mission was to siege it and break down the barrier the three castles represented -However, Hideyoshi unexpectedly attacks, winning the Battle of Shizugatake. (Brinkley, 1915, 495) This victory ensures his role as Nobunaga’s successor, making him the *de facto* ruler of Japan.

One of the threats he encounters in his stature of power was Tokugawa Ieyasu, with whom he had to form an alliance, which he manages to do by marrying his sister with Ieyasu, exchanging hostages and offering him a pledge of alliance. (Mason, 1997, 47) The hostage system is once again proof of Hideyoshi’s --- thinking. Two hostages are to be exchanged, both of them of great importance. For instance, Tokugawa gave Hideyoshi his second son, while the latter offered his mother. (Henshall, 2012, 48) This ensured that the alliance would not be broken, as the hostages would be executed.

The sole reason for Toyotomi’s relative smooth ascent was the fact that one of the major set-backs he had was solved – his origins. Nobunaga might not have had an extremely remarkable bloodline, but he was a small-scale daimyo. On the other hand, Toyotomi Hideyoshi was a peasant warrior, an Ashigaru - and that makes the titles he acquired during his lifetime even more momentous. Consequently, *in 1585 he had himself adopted by Kono Sakihisa, who could boast of the most exalted lineage within the Fujiwara line,* (Hall, 1991, 46)

After fully gaining the power, Hideyoshi sets his sight on the political and social scene, trying to establish a sense of order and stopping daimyo and commoners alike from rebelling. If Nobunaga’s way of doing so was dominating the world through weapons, Toyotomi used subterfuge and tactical decisions. In contrast, Nobunaga’s time can be considered one of military consolidation and the time following Toyotomi’s coming of power one of institutional changes.

One such important decision is the *kunigae* (province-change technique). He would send vassals, whose loyalty he would question in remote areas in order to burn their power from the roots, whilst the loyal would be held closer to him, in the epicenter of their potential. It was especially easy to do so due to the fief redistribution strategy, which consisted in seizing the land of the opposing daimyo and redistributing it to those loyal as a reward. (Andressen, 2002, 62)

Acknowledging the threat of the now-armed peasants left behind, he enforced the “Sword Hunt” in 1588, during which peasants were forced to give up their armor and swords.

(Mason, 1997, 78) By restricting their access to weapons, they could quell an uprising before it even began.

After gaining control of almost all of Japan, Hideyoshi is left with only two threats: Date Masamune and Hojo Ujimasa, for they did not proclaim their allegiance. (Brinkley, 1915, 495) After the Hojo clan exhibits a hostile attitude towards Hideyoshi, *he employed the familiar tactic of surrounding the castle with an overwhelming force and waiting for the inevitable surrender* (Mason, 1997, 177) which comes in July 1590. When Date Masamune learns of the Hojo Ujimasa's loss, he realizes he is the only one standing between Hideyoshi and his control over Japan, therefore he decides to comply to the daimyo's rule and terms. *Thus, for the first time since the middle of the fifteenth century, the whole empire was pacified.* (Brinkley, 1915, 504)

Having Unified Japan under his rule, during the 1590s Toyotomi Hideyoshi aims at an even bigger goal, planning on attacking China and Korea – nonetheless, although he manages to weaken the first and destroy certain parts of the latter, but he never manages to create an empire.

Before dying due to sickness in 1598, he names his son, Hideyori, as his heir and implements a Court of Regents to make sure history does not repeat itself. *Given the tradition of centuries of scheming and treachery among leaders vying for power, however, it comes as no surprise that the structure Hideyoshi left in place did not last long after his death in 1598.* (Andressen, 2002, 64)

At the end, *"Peace" was the slogan that Hideyoshi carried with him as he unified the country* (Hall, 1991, 47), setting up the locus for Tokugawa Ieyasu's rise to power as Shogun.

4. Tokugawa Ieyasu: The Man Who Ate the Cake

Unlike his predecessors, *Tokugawa boasted of descent from the Minamoto clan* (Culeddu, 2013, 68), meaning he could be appointed Shogun. Despite being part of the Court of Regents selected by Hideyoshi, Tokugawa disputes the matter of the succession, wanting to gain the power for himself – but in the process, the other daimyo turn against him because of their fear of Tokugawa's power and legitimacy. One such warlord was Ishida Mitsunari, who in 1600 attacks Ieyasu's forces at Sekigahara. Ieyasu mobilizes his and his allies' forces, and plans to attack Ishida's ally, Uesugi, from five different directions, having a total of 75 000 men under his command. (Brinkley, 1915, 560) After the outnumbered forces of the Ishida's coalition scatter, Tokugawa Ieyasu at last has no threats left and can start consolidating his road to the ultimate goal – becoming shogun. The Battle of Sekigahara ended the Era of Warring States and marked the beginning of Tokugawa's hegemony, *which gave rise to a highly centralized power structure, capable of exerting nationwide enforcement over military and fiscal institutions.* (Hall, 1991, 4)

It takes him three years to finally ascend to the throne, and, in 1605, he passes the title to his son, while he keeps making decisions unofficially. After over a century, *the shogunate itself, the government of the Tokugawa hegemony, gave form to the "Great Peace" that was to last until well into the nineteenth century.* (Hall, 1991, 1)

Conclusions

The struggle for maintaining, and later acquiring power during a near continuous state of decentralization and civil war is an interesting matter, as it brings unexpected turns and high-stakes. Hence, we saw how in a "daimyo phenomenon" (Hall, 1991, 1) dominated state three great warlords stood out from the rest through their brilliant strategies and callousness, perseverance and machinations and at the end, forbearing attitude and consistency.

The Sengoku Jidai revealed a weakened Japan, that was prone to crumbling in the face of any threat. The power void was filled. In the research article *The Antecedents of*

Deinstitutionalization, Christine Oliver considers deinstitutionalization as involving three processes: dissipation, rejection or replacement, which refer to the outcome of the vacuum of power left behind. It can either dissipate (thus stop existing altogether), the rule can be rejected or it can be replaced by a more proficient one. We see that Japan follows the latter process, rebuilding itself on the stability the three successive daimyos attained.

Ultimately, we not only see a period of unending bloodshed and cruelty, *but a period that began with wars fought with bow and arrow from wooden stockades and ended with stone castles bombarded with cannons. It was an age that began with an isolated Japan where the wars of continental East Asia had little influence, and ended with a Japan that traded with Europe and sent mercenaries to fight abroad* (Turnbull, 2002, 14)

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