

Foreword

Message from the program director

Why have we launched the Investigation Commission on the Japanese Government's Response to COVID-19?

"The same crisis never occurs twice. ... The same good fortune never happens twice." ("The Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station Disaster: Investigating the Myth and Reality," the final chapter, "Lessons of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station Accident and the Quest for Resilience")

Based on the provisions of the revised Act on Special Measures for Pandemic Influenza and New Infectious Diseases Preparedness and Response, the government declared a state of emergency on April 7, 2020 for the COVID-19 pandemic in Tokyo and the six other prefectures of Kanagawa, Saitama, Chiba, Osaka, Hyogo and Fukuoka. In announcing the state of emergency, then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe emphasized that the measure would not impose city lockdowns as had been introduced in other countries, but that the government would seek to stop infections of the novel coronavirus by urging people to avoid the "Three Cs" – closed spaces, crowded places and close-contact settings – while maintaining as much as possible necessary economic and social services such as public transportation means.

It was the third time in Japan's postwar history that the government had declared a state of emergency – following those issued for the accidents at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station on March 11, 2011 and the Fukushima Daini Nuclear Power Station the following day, which had been based on the special law on nuclear power-related disasters. It was the first time ever that a state of emergency was declared for an infectious disease.

As a result of concerted efforts by the public under the measure, the daily number of new infections and deaths from COVID-19 started to fall. As it turned out, changes in people's behavior to a fairly significant degree had already begun to take place when the state of emergency was declared on April 7. In fact, the number of new infections (as counted by the day symptoms emerged) had already been on the decline.

Then, on May 25, the government lifted the state of emergency across the country. Prime Minister Abe claimed that the result was due to what he called "the power of the Japan model," noting, "We have been able to contain the number of infections and deaths in proportion to the population to levels by far the lowest among Group of Seven members and major industrialized nations. This is an objective fact backed up by the numbers."

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True, Japan's performance, as compared with other key advanced countries, appears to have been enough to get a passing grade. At the same day's regular news conference, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization, called Japan's efforts to contain COVID-19 infections successful, noting that its daily new infections had declined from more than 700 to roughly 40 and that its deaths from the novel coronavirus were low. However, Japan fared poorly against Taiwan, Vietnam, South Korea, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand or China in terms of the number of infections and deaths in proportion to the population. What's more, COVID-19 infections began to increase again in Japan after the state of emergency was lifted. The number of new infections hit a peak around July 27 to 29 and began to moderately decline again, according to Takaji Wakita, head of the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry advisory board on measures against the novel coronavirus. Bit by bit and using every trick available, we may be learning how to live with this coronavirus.

But we continue to feel uncertain. And a great deal about the novel coronavirus itself is shrouded in uncertainties. Yes, we managed to cope with the initial wave of infection. But was that not just by sheer luck? The "success" we had may only be transitory, and we may not be able to repeat the same performance the next time around. Such a sense of insecurity refuses to go away.

And we are not even sure what in fact the so-called Japan model was. No wonder people's sense of uncertainty will not disappear.

What was indeed the "Japan model"? On May 29, the expert panel advising the government on COVID-19 measures – while avoiding the term "Japan model" – cited the broad access to medical services under the public health insurance system, the high public health standards backed up by a nationwide network of public health centers, and a high degree of people's compliance with requests from the government and the expert panel for change in their behaviors as key factors that contributed to bringing the virus under control. But people's access to PCR tests was uncertain and inadequate, and operations at the public health centers were "clogged" as they were overwhelmed in dealing with the crisis. At times, the government and the expert panel sent contradictory messages to the public.

The government should be able to proudly declare the success of the "Japan model" only as long as it succeeds in both bringing the virus under control and stabilizing the economy. However, the government itself has so far been unable to clarify the logic behind its model, nor has it given any official explanation on the matter. If it is going to present such a model, the government needs to first examine its measures/policies and their effects, and identify the causal link and correlation between them. At this point (Sept. 20, 2020), the government has made no decision as to when it will launch a full-scale study into the question. There are no signs that the Diet will engage in such an endeavor either.

As our commission proceeded with its work, a key high-ranking official in the

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government told us that it was premature for the government to examine its COVID-19 actions – that the government still “did not have the luxury” of trying to review the effects of what it has done. From an entirely different perspective, a senior official in the Cabinet Secretariat noted that the tough question is who in the government is going to assess its own response to COVID-19, given that Japan has few top-level experts on infectious diseases except for those who served as key members of the government’s Expert Meeting on the Novel Coronavirus Disease Control. Undeniably, this crisis is still ongoing and there is too much uncertainty in the path ahead. We must have a fair degree of resolve as we embark on the task of examining what the government hesitates to examine yet. We have to be cautious to avoid conducting a hasty review.

Still, we believe that by examining how much of the initial uncertainty over the novel coronavirus has been cleared up, what measures have been taken to what effect (or produced disappointing results), or what remains uncertain about the virus, we will be better able to prepare against the next big wave of COVID-19 infections, or an even more deadly pandemic in the future. What were the good practices among the steps taken so far? What did not prove successful – and why? What are the lessons we can learn from the failures? This will provide important clues for Japan and the whole world. We believe there is value in a private-sector think tank, independent of the government, engaging in such a task.

We have just been reminded that an infectious disease poses a grave threat to people’s health and lives, livelihood and daily lives, as well as freedom and human rights – and that controlling such diseases constitutes a core part of the nation’s crisis management and a key challenge to national security. From that perspective, the COVID-19 crisis showed that Japan was far from being prepared.

We must examine our actions now – so that we can be better prepared.

So, what shall we examine? We have decided to primarily look into the Japanese government’s response and measures taken against COVID-19. Various theories have been suggested as to why Japan (and many other nations and regions in East Asia) suffered from far fewer infections/deaths in proportion to the population than European and North American countries, such as the gap in BCG vaccination ratios, as well as racial factors – the so-called factor X – including the differences in genome and immune response between races. However, we did not take up these elements as the subject of our research – partly because many of those theories are little more than hypotheses at this point. We also believe what is most important for us in order to be better prepared for the next pandemic is to examine the government’s measures, including the steps taken to bring about the changes in people’s behavior, and the nature of governance in its crisis response.

Another question is what to think of the “Japan model.” Japan’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic had Japanese characteristics, which the government called the “Japan model.” However, the objective of this report is not to explore “Japan model”

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theories, but to examine the Japanese government's response to and measures taken against the crisis. In the first place, we should be quite cautious in using the term "Japan model" because the term carries the risk of leading us into being complacent that we have done enough – at least for Japan to cope with the crisis.

"The same crisis never occurs twice. ... The same good fortune never happens twice."

What is stuck in my mind are the warnings that we issued in the final chapter of our report on the 2011 Fukushima nuclear power plant accident – that the same crisis never occurs twice, and that the same good fortune never happens twice.

Nevertheless, we ended up examining the "Japan model" – as the characteristics of Japan's response to COVID-19 – in this report. That is why Part I of the report is titled, "What Is the Japan Model?"

We also debated the time frame of our examination. We hoped to include the most recent developments, because that would enable us to take a better look into the past. But we eventually decided to cover the period from mid- to late January of 2020 – when the first case of infection in Japan was confirmed (on January 15) and Japanese nationals and their families in Wuhan, China were repatriated on chartered flights (the first flight was on January 29) – to the June 17 close of the regular Diet session, the announcement the following day of the government's plan to begin talks with Vietnam, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand for lifting the ban on mutual travel, and Cabinet approval on July 17 of the year's economic and fiscal reform policy. This covers the two month-plus period leading up to the declaration of the state of emergency, as well as roughly the two months after the state of emergency was lifted. The essence of Japan's experience with the first wave of COVID-19 infections is reflected in this half-year process, and that is where we can possibly identify the truths and fallacies of the "Japan model."

The Asia Pacific Initiative, an independent think tank, thus launched the Independent Investigation Commission on the Japanese Government's Response to COVID-19 on July 30, 2020 to examine how the government dealt with the pandemic crisis. Yoshimitsu Kobayashi, chairperson of Mitsubishi Chemical Holdings Corporation and former chairman of Keizai Doyukai (Japan Association of Corporate Executives), agreed to chair the commission, and Hiroko Ota, senior professor of the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies and former economic and fiscal policy minister, Hiroshi Kasanuki, specially-appointed professor at Waseda University and former dean of Tokyo Women's Medical University, and Shuya Nomura, professor at Chuo University Graduate School of Law and special counsel with Mori Hamada & Matsumoto, were tapped as its members.

Kobayashi, who currently heads the government's Council for Regulatory Reform, is an international- and reform-minded executive who represents the nation's business community. He keeps up his spirit as a scientist – since his younger days when he studied abroad and obtained his PhD – and promptly accepted our request to lead the

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commission. Ota, an economist specializing in public economics, took charge of economic/fiscal analysis in the Cabinet Office and served as economic and fiscal policy minister under Prime Ministers Shinzo Abe and Yasuo Fukuda before returning to an academic career. She is a policy entrepreneur who has mastered both theory and practice. Kasanuki, a medical doctor who has long specialized in cardiology and has also majored in biomedical science, now serves as deputy chief of the Japan Medical Association's COVID-19 expert panel. Nomura, known for his studies on corporate governance, compliance and regulatory reform, became the first private-sector expert to be tapped as counselor to the Financial Supervisory Agency in 1998, and was a chief examiner in the Diet commission investigating the Fukushima nuclear power plant accident.

It was more than I could have dreamed of that we were able to launch the commission with this excellent team. Each of the members have been asked to contribute their messages to this report. The commission held four meetings – on July 30, August 29, September 19-20 and October 6. Members of a working group created prior to the formation of the commission engaged in research, interviews and compiled the text, which was then submitted to the commission to be completed as a report under its authorship. We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to each of the commission members for their active discussions at the meetings and instructions from wide perspectives on the direction of the report.

A total of 19 people took part in the working group, including co-chief examiners Akihisa Shiozaki, partner lawyer at Nagashima Ohno & Tsunematsu, and Mitsuyoshi Urashima, professor of the Jikei University School of Medicine and specialist in pediatrics, as well as co-deputy chief examiners Yoshiko Hashimoto, editor in chief of m3.com at M3, Inc., and Tsubasa Watanabe, associate at Nagashima Ohno & Tsunematsu. Each member's background and the issues they covered are listed at the end of the report.

A particular mention needs to be made here of the contribution made to the report by Nagashima Ohno & Tsunematsu, a leading Japanese global law firm. Nagashima Ohno & Tsunematsu recognized our project as the firm's pro bono project, and not only did its partner Akihisa Shiozaki and associate Tsubasa Watanabe join as chief examiner and deputy chief examiner, respectively, but other lawyers at the firm – Takeho Ujino, Tomohiro Hen, Yu Yuasa, Kenta Isshiki, and Takumi Naito – took part in the working group. Each of them gave full play to their professional skills in thorough research, fact-checking, as well as concise and competent reporting. We express our deepest gratitude to Nagashima Ohno & Tsunematsu for extending full support to the project, including help from its assistant staff and use of office resources.

I cannot find words enough to express our thanks to members of the working group, who gave up their summer vacations to devote their time in July and August to interviews, collating materials and writing the report. Of the members, Akihisa Shiozaki, Yoshiko Hashimoto, Goro Umeyama and Kazuto Suzuki had also taken part in the working group of the Independent Investigation Commission on the Fukushima nuclear power plant accident produced by API's predecessor, the Rebuild Japan Initiative

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Foundation (RJIF). Mitsuyoshi Urashima and Yoshiki Hiruma, along with Shiozaki and Umeyama, had also joined RJIF's simulation project "Japan's Worst-Case Scenario: The Nine Blind Spots" (Shinchosha, 2013). In the latest COVID-19 project, we have adopted the same approach as we took in examining the Fukushima nuclear accident. It was very encouraging that our team was staffed by professionals experienced in such an investigation.

The major role of a think tank is to recommend policies as well as to engage in policy entrepreneurship in order to have those recommendations put into action. What is important in this process is to examine the facts from an independent standpoint – and to share those findings with the world for the purpose of dialogue. API's motto is "truth, independence and being global" and we value our position that there is no investigation without truth and no recommendations without investigation. We impose the following principles on ourselves as we proceed with our investigations, and we strove to never deviate from this spirit in the latest project.

1. Follow the spirit of positivism and pursue investigation based on evidence.
2. Listen carefully and thoroughly to the people directly involved, and draw a conclusion inductively based on what we have learned.
3. Conduct a critical review, instead of trying to paint a picture of the good and the bad.
4. Think from the viewpoint of the people actually involved. We are not prosecutors or judges. We should have the perspective of people in charge of policy matters and imagine what we would have done if we were in their shoes.
5. There are near, medium and distant causes in a causal relationship. Medium and distant causes are the social, historical background and systemic factors that influence people before they make decisions. That is where we must explore.
6. In examining the response of the government and the state in a national crisis, we should make our analysis and evaluation primarily by assessing the elements of risk, governance and leadership.
7. There is a trade-off in any policy and measure. We must take that into account and make recommendations based on our assessment of its cost-effectiveness.

Members of the working group and our secretariat spoke with a total of 97 people – at the Prime Minister's Office (the office of the prime minister, the "situation office" for assistant chief Cabinet secretary in charge of situation response and crisis management, and the National Security Secretariat), the Cabinet Office, the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, the Foreign Ministry, the Defense Ministry, the Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Ministry, the Expert Meeting on the Novel Coronavirus Disease Control, the Advisory Committee on the Basic

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Action Policy and the Novel Coronavirus Disease Control Subcommittee, public health centers, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, Kanagawa Prefecture, the Japan Medical Association, the Liberal Democratic Party, All Nippon Airways and others involved in the response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe; Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga; Health, Labor and Welfare Minister Nobukatsu Kato; Yasutoshi Nishimura, minister in charge of the COVID-19 response; Shigeru Omi, president of the Japan Community Health Care Organization; Yasuhisa Shiozaki, manager of the LDP's Administrative Reform Headquarters; Keizo Takemi, chairman of the LDP Policy Research Council subcommittee on the governance of the response to COVID-19; and Yoshitake Yokokura, honorary chairman of the Japan Medical Association (all in their respective titles as of January to July 2020) gave their interviews on the record. Interviews with government officials and members of the expert panel were made in the form of anonymous, background briefings. Omi, who served as deputy chair of the expert panel and later as chair of the subcommittee, kindly gave us a 100-minute interview, which is presented later in the report. I would like to express our utmost gratitude to all the people who allowed us the opportunity to speak with them.

Science journalist Takashi Otsuka, who edited our previous report on the Fukushima nuclear power plant accident, served as editor of this report on COVID-19. We thank him for the super-human efforts he made to complete the book under an extremely tight deadline. As in the Fukushima accident report, Discover 21 Inc. took charge of publishing the book despite the very tight schedule. Our special thanks go to Motoshi Watanabe and Hiroyoshi Fujita at the publishing house.

On API's end, fellows Yoshiyuki Sagara and Jun Mukoyama took charge of the project. They also took part in authoring the text of the report, and ran the whole project with precision and speed as playing managers. API staff Yukari Utsumi and Takako Yatabe, as well as interns Shinya Oguma, Mami Shimokawa, Tatsuaki Tsukuda, Kento Mashiko, Takatomo Yamamoto, Takuma Iseki, Keinosuke Iwama, and Akihiko Kikuchi, provided valuable assistance to the project.

I would also like to express our deep gratitude to the Ogasawara Toshiaki Memorial Foundation for kindly providing us with a subsidy for the project.

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Yoichi Funabashi