The Impact of Victory: A Change in the International Environment and the Japanese Army in the Aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War

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I. Introduction

Meiji Japan was subject to two quite distinct views regarding international relations. One, that Japan was part of the traditional hierarchical order centred on China. Two, Commodore Matthew Perry’s arrival in 1853, gave Japan little choice but to participate in the western-ordered system of international relations that was then moving to dominate the globe. Moreover, since Asia proved to be a key theatre where the great powers played out their rivalries, amongst Japanese statesmen and intellectuals there grew a strong sense of the dangers posed by the outside world. Thus it was that Meiji Japan aimed at joining western society by, simultaneously pouring its efforts into forming a “civilised” modern nation state, and devoting enormous resources and labour into ensuring its security and the independence. The tensions produced between the push-and-pull of these two views caused great stress in Meiji Japan.¹

For most of the nineteenth century, the power most recognised as a direct menace to Japan in East Asia was the Qing Empire, which sat at the very centre of this traditional Chinese world order; followed by Russia, which also held territory in close proximity to Japan.² Wedged between these two great powers, how was Japan to enrich the nation and to preserve its independence? A great turning point came with victory in the 1894–95 Sino-Japanese War. This heightened tensions
with Russia, that foreshadowed future problems.

II. The Birth of Imperial Japan as the ‘Leader of Asia’

Victory in the 1904–05 Russo-Japanese War resulted in a significant breakthrough for Japan by raising its international standing and enhancing its national security. Concretely, the manifestations of these achievements were the annexation of Korea in August 1910, and the conclusion of a new Treaty of Commerce and Trade signed in February and April 1911 with Great Britain and the United States respectively. The former guaranteed national security and the latter signified Japan’s acceptance as an equal and sovereign power within the framework of western international relations. Thus it was that Japan resolved the diplomatic concerns it had pursued since early Meiji. Symbolic of the Japanese victory over Russia and its enhanced international position, the British lost no time in upgrading the status of its mission in Japan to embassy in December 1905.

Japan’s participation in Western international society as an equal sovereign nation connoted the recognition of Japan as a key participant in global imperialism. Therefore, the advent of a new era of Japan’s diplomacy coincided with the dawn of the globalization of the West’s international system. Given this, the Russo-Japanese War was a conflict which marked the ‘beginning of the twentieth century’ as one of ‘global conflicts amongst the great powers’.

The annexation of Korea, moreover, was accomplished by the Japan-Korea Treaty of Annexation, that is, a treaty between two sovereign nations in accordance with international law. At the same time, it is also important to note that the Japanese emperor issued an imperial rescript acknowledging the former Korean sovereign as a king with a standing equal to the Japanese imperial family. The traditional hierarchical order of Asia with China at its centre had collapsed with Japan’s triumph in the Sino-Japanese War. Still, the concept of the traditional hierarchical order persisted, but now with Japan at its centre. In this sense, victory in 1895 and 1905 signified the rise of imperial
Japan as the ‘leader of Asia’.

III. Japan’s Transition to being a Continental Asian State and a Strategy of Aggression

How did and in what ways did Japan’s military change its perceptions of Japanese security and strategy following the changes in Japanese international standing and security, developments that it had indeed played a role in bringing about. Prior to the Russo-Japanese War, the military, in accordance with the Army’s annual strategic plans, anticipated a defensive war fought in the Japanese home islands against an enemy attack.iii This strategic concept of an ‘island empire’ which had as its axis a naval defence of the Japanese main islands appealed to the Imperial Navy, and was an important representation of Japan and its strategic thinking. This view of an island nation, heavily reliant on foreign trade, informed Navy Minister Yamamoto Gonbei’s strategic thinking. In June 1903, on the eve of the Russo-Japanese War, Yamamoto viewed that ‘it would be acceptable to lose Korea as it would suffice that the Empire defend its core island territories’.iv

The September 1905 Portsmouth Treaty, however, granted Japan concessions and privileges in Port Arthur, Dairen, the southern branch line of the East China Railway (south of Changchun), making it possess enormous interests in Manchuria. Further, through the formal annexation of Korea, its development as a Japanese defensive barrier, and the acquisition of colonies and interests on the Asian mainland, maritime Japan also developed as a continental power. Earlier, Yamagata Aritomo, the Japanese Army’s senior figure, made this clear in his policy speech as prime minister to the first session of the Imperial Diet in December 1890. That is, the ‘way to Japan’s independence and self defence’ lay in the home islands being the ‘line of sovereignty’. In turn, their security in actual fact resided in preserving the Korean Peninsula as the ‘line of strategic interest’.v On such geopolitical matters, phrases such as ‘line of sovereignty’ and ‘line of strategic interest’ speak volumes of Japan’s subsequent emergence as a
At this point there is clearly a major transformation of an Imperial Japan having a defensive strategy to that of being a continental power advocating a strategy more orientated towards offense. In the ‘1906 Outlines of Imperial Japanese Army Strategic Planning’, issued by Emperor Meiji in February, the Imperial Army for the first time proposed an offensive continental strategy. This found expression in Japan’s first national-defence policy known by the general title of ‘The Policy for Imperial Defence’ (*Teikoku kokubô hôshin*) in April 1907, that subsumed three related plans: ‘A Policy of National Defence for the Empire of Japan’ (*Nihon Teikoku no kokubô hôshin*), ‘Troop Strength Required for National Defence’ (*Kokubô ni yôsuru heiryoku*) and ‘A General Outline of the Strategies of the Imperial Forces’ (*Teikokugun no yôheikôryô*). The military factors that made this shift to an offensive continental policy possible was Japan’s naval victory in the Russo-Japanese War. In other words, it was the Imperial Navy’s overwhelming superiority in East Asia and its ability to secure control of the seas, which permitted the projection of military force on to the Asian continent.

**IV. Renegotiating the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and the Establishment of an Imperial Defence Policy**

Fearful of a Russia bent on a war of revenge, led Japan’s political and military leaders to renegotiate the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in August 1905 in the waning days of the Russo-Japanese War. By the revision, the Alliance came to include stipulations concerning mutual-defence obligations; that is, if Great Britain and Russia came to blows, then Japan would enter the conflict and attack Russian forces in Manchuria. This new military commitment was a factor in the Imperial Army’s conversion to a more aggressive strategy towards the continent. Moreover, by the new Treaty, Great Britain was no longer
obligated to maintain its Far Eastern Fleet at a level superior to that of any naval force, which handed to the Imperial Navy a new role of providing a maritime defence of British regional interests. By this means, Japan was beckoned to maintain a significant naval presence. This meant that the revised Anglo-Japanese Alliance undergirded military support for Japan’s shift to becoming a continental power.

These arrangements under the new Alliance obligated Japanese military authorities to formulate specific plans to co-ordinate their military activities with those of Great Britain. In turn this development required the adoption of a grand plan for national defence and led to the ‘Policy of National Defence for the Empire of Japan’ with Russia as the main hypothetical enemy.

As we can see from the above, the development of Japan as a continental power, subsequent to its victory over Russia and the conclusion of a revised Anglo-Japanese Alliance, had a significant impact on the Japanese military. This meant that the Army would be directly involved in protecting Japan’s continental interests and in maintaining and expanding its colonies. The Navy, for its part, would secure the sea-lanes between Japan and the continent and repulse any maritime foreign threat to Japan. Together, they gave fresh support to Japan’s continental policy. The new significance for the military was the shedding of the factionalism of the Meiji period, and the rise of an independent policy-making institution with its own agenda.

V. The Cost of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and Russo-Japanese Accord

The Anglo-Japanese Alliance was beneficial to the Imperial Navy in that it would curtail the resurrection of Russian naval power (in the Far East), but the Army, which was hypothesising along the lines of a Russian war of revenge against Japan, gained relatively little. This imbalance was recognised, for example, by the General Staff Office’s Lieutenant-colonel Tanaka Gi’ichi, a key strategist who drafted the Army’s proposals for imperial defence in August 1906, that were
incorporated into Yamagata’s ‘Policy for Imperial Defence’ in October later that year. According to Tanaka, in the event of war with Russia, any British military operations on the Russo-Indian frontiers would have no impact upon Japanese operations should Russo-Japanese hostilities break out in Manchuria. However, should a Russo-Japanese war break out following an Anglo-Russian War, this conflict will not be contained as a side show but will instead be the major conflict. Therefore, the ‘benefits of the Alliance will be entirely England’s’. He candidly remarked: I am at pains to see any strategic benefits redounding to our Army, but see merely political considerations involved. Tanaka therefore had given voice to those the Army who had grave doubts about the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and expected little stemming from England’s military cooperation with Japanese forces.

Tanaka himself highly valued British colonial interests in South China, including concessions along the Yangtze River. This can be seen in his ‘Random Thoughts’ (Zuikan zatsuuroku) which was written over April–July 1906. In it he candidly stated that he would find it expedient to rid ourselves of the alliance with Great Britain in favour of an alliance with Russia. This would allow us to take over British concessions in the Far East while Russia could bear down upon Britain’s crown jewel, India. However, this Defending the North while Advancing South (北守南進) conception of an anti-British alliance was suppressed through the formation of ‘the Policy for Imperial Defence’, which was predicated upon the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Yamagata, on the other hand, in his evaluation of national security requirements following the Russo-Japanese War called for strengthening the partnership with the Qing Empire. He was particularly concerned that Russia, the foremost enemy and China, the second greatest threat would unite and confront Japan. In other words, based on his concern that China would become a power and be again a military threat to Japan, Yamagata believed that it was necessary for Japan to be prepared for a war against Japan by a united Russia and China.

Moreover, Matsuishi Yasuharu (General Staff Office, Second
[Intelligence] Division head and contributor to the ‘Imperial Defence Policy’) posed the question in his December 1906 work, ‘Opinions on National Defence’: namely, what form would the Anglo-Japanese Alliance take in the future? He not only conceived of Russia as a hypothetical enemy, but also raised the possibilities of a Russo-Chinese as well as a Russo-German Alliance. ‘The Policy for Imperial Defence’ (A Policy of National Defence for the Empire of Japan) even suggested that given a Russo-German Alliance, Russia will feel secure in its western borders, so that it will then be able to deploy its maximum troop strength and railway resources for operations in East Asia. In this way a Russo-German Alliance was the stuff of nightmares in terms of Japan’s defence environment.

Japanese leaders perceptions of the international situation based on their judgment of the value of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, (their judgment of) Russia’s place in the international sphere, and added to their projections of Japan’s national defence requirements, were affected by the changes in the imperialistic international in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War that brought Japan, England, Russia, and France in close proximity in their need to consider their respective interests. All the foregoing were major factors in driving Tokyo to conclude the first Russo-Japanese Accord in July 1907.

VI. Conclusion

Russia and Japan gradually strengthened the Accord through several revisions (July 1910 and July 1912), and with the Fourth Accord (July 1916), they emerged as allies in a defensive partnership directed at China. Yet, it must also be remembered that in no way whatsoever was this new alliance based on mutual trust.

For example, in 1911 Yamagata Aritomo indicated his belief that ‘Russia bore an enormous grudge’ towards Japan and that ‘sooner or later, will plan its revenge against us’. In reality, both nations worked towards expanding and developing their armed forces. To the very end, any Russo-Japanese accord was simply no more than a marriage of
convenience between two imperialist nations.

Moreover, in terms of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, which originally construed Russia as the mutual enemy, this new Russo-Japanese friendship worked to weaken the basis of Japan’s British alliance.

It is similarly important to note that in the Third Anglo-Japanese Alliance, the United States was actually removed from the list of hypothetical enemies. In the midst of US and Japanese antagonism, which became increasingly apparent over Manchuria and Japanese emigration to America, this revision was proposed by the British as they struggled to find a way to sustain the Alliance in light of their own accord with the United States (that war with U.S. is inconceivable) and the Japanese perception of Washington as its second hypothetical enemy. While Japan accepted this revision, in actual fact the capacity of the Alliance to curtail the United States would now be lost.xx

In response to these developments, the Imperial Navy held ‘a critical view that the Alliance is on the verge of ending in complete ineffectiveness’xxi In a similar vein, Yamagata was also expressing concerns on this matter and stated that ‘in the event of war with the United States we can rule out any co-operation from Great Britain.’xxii On the eve of the November 1911 Chinese Revolution, fresh questions were again asked on the significance itself of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance.xxiv On the other hand, there were still those, such as Foreign Minister Komura Jutarô and the Japanese ambassador to Great Britain, (and former Foreign Minister) Katô Takaaki, representing the pro-Anglo-Japanese Alliance position and who were intimately involved in re-negotiating the Alliance speaking loudly on its behalf. In the aftermath of the victory over Russia, the Japanese military, in particular the Imperial Army, continued to pay full heed to both the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and the Accord with Russia, and by this to play an active role in Imperial Japan’s continental policy.


x. Ibid., p. 144.

xi. Ibid., p. 152. Field marshals also were appointed as Governors-General of Kwantung, Korea and Taiwan. In this manner, the head of colonial administrative organs were all military officials which gave a new significance to Japan’s military forces.

xii. Ibid., p. 152.

xiii. Ōyama, *Yamagata*, pp. 290–301.


xvii. ‘Kokubō narabini sakusen keikakuron’ (Bōeishō Bōeikenkyūjo Toshokan shozō); Tsunoda, *Manshū*, p. 708.

xviii. The Imperial Defence Policy is re-printed in full in *Miyazaki Shūichi Shiryō* 39 (Bōeishō Bōeikenkyūjo Toshokan shozō). It is also re-printed in
parts in Shimanuki Takeji ‘Nichiro sensō igo ni okeru kokubō hōshin, shoyō heiryoku, yōhei kōryo no hensen’ part 1 in Gunji Shigaku, vol. 8, no. 4 March 1973; see also: Kobayashi Nihon no Tairiku Seisaku, pp. 160–1.

xix. ‘Tairo keikairon’ (July 1911) in Ōyama, Yamagata, p. 334.

Keywords
the Russo-Japanese War, The Policy for Imperial Defence, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, the Russo-Japanese Accord