



## Militarism in Japan: An Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

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Militarism is a belief that a country should be placed entirely under the absolute military control and foreign expansion should be carried out. For several centuries before emperor Meji regained political power in 1968, Japan was ruled by shogun. Under his rule Japan was a military dictatorship. Even after 1868, the military still enjoyed superior status under Meji constitution. They had direct access to the emperor and were not under cabinet or direct control. They could even stop the formation cabinet by not appointing army and navy ministers to it. From the time of restoration down to the 1930s, Japan had been motivated by a sense of insecurity, both physical and cultural and by ambition for national power, respect and equality. All these motives intertwined with each other to develop a peculiar kind of nationalism. During the militarist era Japan attempted to establish willfully its own way international affairs and attempt to establish its own destiny in defiance of the forces rising against it. There are mainly four major reason for the coming up of the militarist regime in Japan.

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1. The failure of the party politics
2. Depression
3. Manchurian incident
4. Continental aspiration

World war has transformed the international system in context of Japanese domestic politics. Finding itself isolated in the Triple Intervention in 1895, Japan had skilfully worked out its way into the power structure by using skilfully diplomacy backed on occasion by military forces. In a series of agreement United States acknowledged Japan's position in northeast Asia. At the same time Japan and Russia had delimited its spheres of interest with the former now eliminated to protecting its remaining hold on northern Manchuria.

World War One<sup>2</sup> upset this balance and eventually the East Asian power structure collapsed. The outbreak of war in Europe in the summer of 1914 and the preoccupation of European power allows Japan under the guise to seize German holdings in shantung and German held island in the south pacific. Japan's 21 demand on China was an incident which has a relative importance with regard to future international relations in east Asia, first because it was interpreted as a unilateral departure from the system of understanding developed among the powers in the preceding two decades and second because it marked a growing Japanese-American estrangement and the emergence of united states role as protector of the new Chinese Republic.

The twenty one demand sought Chinese recognition of the transference of German rights in Shantung to the Japan; the employment of Japanese officials as political, financial and military advisors in China; Chinese purchase of arms from Japan; and permission of Japan to construct railways connecting the

Yangtze Valley with South China coast. In response to this American president Woodrow Wilson says that Americans must be the champions of the sovereign rights in China.

Yamagata was especially disturbed having warned one year earlier that if we fail to dissipate china's suspicion of us it will rapidly turn against us and turn more and more to America. The Japanese government subsequently modified its demands but it hardly made any difference, as Yamagata had feared the 21 demands was been understood by nascent Chinese nationalism<sup>3</sup> as a predatory design by Japan, nationalism took on an increasing anti-Japanese tone in the aftermath.

### **The Washington Treaty**

Hara and other Japanese leaders were acutely aware of such 'new world trends' and came to feel that Japan should move in accordance with it. They were willing to cut down its continental aspiration, accept the disappearance of formal order of imperialist diplomacy and participate in a redefinition of mutual relations among the powers.

A conference for this purpose was convened in Washington, at American initiative, in the autumn of 1921. A four power treaty was drawn between Japan, America, France and Britain, where they agreed to confer if any of the four positions in the Pacific be threatened. A nine power treaty laid down the principles that were to guide the new order in East Asia; condemning spheres of influence in China, pledging equal opportunity for commerce and industry and promising to respect the sovereignty, the independence and the territorial and administrative integrity of China.

Five Power Naval Limitation Treaty which restricted competition in battlefields and aircraft carriers by setting the ratio of 5:5:3 for Britain, the United States and Japan respectively. Japan delegates believed this ratio enough to guarantee Japanese domination

Japanese acceptance of the new framework of international relations was exemplified by the attitude of Shidehara Kijuro who was a Japanese ambassador. He shared the American vision of liberal capitalist world order characterized by peace, political harmony and economic interdependence

United States was Japan's largest supplier of capital and best trading customer<sup>4</sup>, purchasing 40% of Japan's exports in the 1920s. Shidehara therefore advocated a careful posture of internationalism and peaceful development of Japan's international trade. Japan's policy he held should be to seek economic

advancement in china and promotion of its own interests within the framework of international agreement.

This willingness to abstain from the aggressive pursuits of its political interests in china was of course pleasing to American policymakers.

But there were many flaws in the visions that Shidehara and the American policy makers shared. A fundamental flaw in the new international vision was the failure of the high hopes held for economic expansionism. Owing to the mistakes Japanese economic policymakers foreign, foreign trade did not perform up to expectation.

There were many obstacle. The United States followed a strongly protectionist course and Britain was making preferential tariff agreements within its empire that were detrimental to Japanese exports. In china too the nationalist movement demanded tariff autonomy and increasingly opposed to Japanese economic interest. The great obstacle was the onset of great depression and therefore the discontent rose with Shidehara internationalist diplomacy.

The most ominous threat to the Shidehara diplomacy<sup>5</sup> was the challenge that the rising tide of nationalism in china presented for Japan's interest there. Shidehara worked with considerable skill to remove the obstacles to the expansion of Japanese trade and investment in china but history was hardly on his side.

### **The Joining of Domestic and Foreign Crisis.**

From 1928 to 32 the ferment of political community at home was brought to crisis point by the onset of the depression and by the rising opposition to the framework of foreign relations established by the Washington conference.

Resentment against the government's china policy was intense among the leaders of the Kwantung Army, the unit of the Japanese interests in Manchuria. They feared that without strong measures an opportunity to secure the Manchuria<sup>6</sup> would be lost. Extremist element in the Kwangtung army arranged for the bombing of the train which they thought would create disorder and give a pretext to expand th3ir control in Manchuria. The inability of Tokyo to punish the extremist elements in the army revealed not only the weakness of party government but also the potential for future subordination.

Increasing tension with China coincided with mounting discontent and unrest at home as conservatives in and out of the government believed that Japan was besieged by radical thought.

### **Depression**

The sense of crisis in society was further heightened by the collapse of the economy and the hardship it brought. From 1929 to 1931 exports fell by 50% with disastrous effect on both city workers and farmers. In the cities unemployment rose and in the countryside real income was reduced. There was a crop failure occurred in north-eastern Japan and Hokkaido. Images of depression were formed by this evident where children were begging outside the dining cars and the agents of city brothels contacted the starving farmers who had nothing left but to sell their daughters.

The blame for the depression fell on the parties, this was because the party leaders in the public mind were intimately associated with the zaibatsu, the bureaucracy and the urban white collars class. The Meiji vision of growth in 1920 called for limited democracy and paternalistic capitalism at home working in cooperation with the great powers abroad.

The depression questions the validity of this international economic order. Another thing seems particularly significant that, Germany, the most admired Western Nation turned its back to democracy and was looking to authoritarian and militarist policies as the wave of the future.

Those who advocated a greater role for the army at home asked further Japan could afford to depend on the world economy whether in view of rising tariff barriers, protests against cheap Japanese goods and the problem of finding adequate raw materials and markets. They argue that military expansion abroad could create an autonomous empire within which Japan could insulate itself from the forces of the world economy.

During this time many left group association also formed which the nervous bureaucrats sought to control while at the same time simultaneously another big threat emerged i.e., the emergence of the ultranationalist group. Such an atmosphere made the party governments which had failed to develop a sense of legitimacy in the Japanese value system was vulnerable to charges like failure and corruption.

Above all it made the maintenance of Shidehara's diplomacy with its emphasis on internationalism and cooperation with the Anglo-American powers increasingly difficult.



The London Naval Conference of 1930<sup>7</sup> intended to extend the Washington treaty to light cruiser as well where it applies the ratio of 10:10:7 ratio. Admirals in all the three countries opposed to the treaty but the volatile situation existed in Japan the opposition was explosive. Japan prime minister was charged of compromising Japan's national security and having adjusted the independent judgement of naval command for the sake of a spurious friendship with the Anglo American powers.

Shidehara's hope of establishing a new order in East Asia<sup>8</sup> through cooperation with the United States and England were dashed by the determination in the Kwantung army who believed that the Anglo American had not done enough to encourage and aid the hopeful efforts to Shidehara. It is been said that a strong government in Japan could have restrained army action in Manchuria but Tokyo was too weak and the government was subjected to increasing pressure from the rival politicians and from the press to assert Japan's supremacy.

The weakness of the government, the diffuseness of the decision making power, the general confusion all created an opportunity for a resolute action by the Kwantung army. The government of Wakatsuki although made an attempt to control the sphere of army action in Manchuria it proved ineffectual. Wakatsuki resigned and was replaced by Inukai Tsuyosi which was the last party government. The ageing Inukai efforts to restore the order were ill started. Soon ultra-nationalism gained importance as a popular phenomenon. fanatic groups pledged for the cleansing of the body politics by replacing the political and the economic elites and carrying out restoration, assassinated the former prime minister and the the chief director of zaibatsu.

### **Going it alone**

Popular nationalism emerged and made its grip in almost every part of the society. Even the communist in overwhelming numbers underwent conversion where they abandoned their previous theories and enthusiastically joined the rhetoric of nationalism<sup>9</sup>.

For the next four years the country was governed by admirals twice headed by admirals. It was not easy to maintain a moderate policy in the face of growing ultranationalist sympathies which was fuelled by the growing isolation as the seizure of Manchuria drew international condemnation.

### **Rightist Movement**

Also in the 1920s a radical conservative right wing has emerged who were alarmed by the problem of national disunity and inclined to place much of the blame for it on those who are in power. The right wing radicals believed that the pursuits of profits, materialism and self-interest had deflected the nation's leader from pursuing the public good and maintaining social harmony.

A revolutionary rightist movement was carried out from 1931-36 by the right wing people which was opposed to the internationalism and favoured to Japanese expansionism and Pa-Aisanism.

In 1931 military and civilian ultranationalist groups joined in two plots to overthrow the government and establish a 'national defence state' under an army led cabinets. In 1932 the civilian league of Blood assassinated a party politician and then a Mitsui executive.

On May 1932 a group of junior officer assassinated the Prime Minister Inkaui and attacked the Seiyukai headquarters, the bank of Japan and various official residence and the Tokyo police headquarters. The troops organized one last rebellion in the streets of Tokyo where they killed the cabinet ministers and members of the imperial households.

Manchurian incident was thus considered to be a turning point because it marked the a point at which Japan abandoned the general policy of cooperation with powers, which had for the most of the part controlled its international behaviour since 1868 and chose to pursue its own destiny in east Asia to trust its own strength to protect and advance its interests. It also brought an end to politics dominated by civil politicians. The leadership now speaks of an 'Asian Monroe doctrine', declaring Japan's responsibility to maintain peace in Asia.

The Mukden incident that often lead to Japanese war in China<sup>10</sup> is often been described as a coup carried out by junior officers without the knowledge of their superiors but this was really not the case. At this point the parties became the victims of the methods which they had used so successfully for four decades. They had risen to power by manipulating other elites and by compromise. In 1932 compromise could lead only to a weakening of party power. The party needed string leaders but no one was forthcoming.

By now withdrawing itself form the Washington's treaty system it now set a formidable requirements for the nation's defence.

Japan now need military power for three major tasks: to defeat the soviet army, who was threat to the Manchurian borders, to guarantee the security of the home island against the American fleet and to compel the home island against the American fleet and to compel the china's government to accept Japan's position in Manchuria and northern china.

Initially, the reorientation of national policy seemed to be a success. In spite of the league's condemnation, Manchuria was now secure to be developed and integrated into the Japanese industrial machine. Japanese economic policy scored phenomenal success in achieving rapid recovery from the depression. In the aftermath of Manchuria the government was required by the international conditions to begin a rapid build-up of its industrial and military plant. Over the next two years the government increased expenditure by 26% under the great deal of pressure not to raise the taxes. The private demand also increased which stimulated the economy.

Most of the increase in Japan's spending<sup>11</sup> was for the military purposes but all the sectors of the economy benefitted. Japan gave up the gold standards in December 1931 and this proved to be boon in Japanese export.

### **The China Quagmire**

The central reason for the increased army influence in national politics was the deeper commitment of Japanese military power and national prestige on the Asian mainland. In January 1932 when fighting broke out between Chinese and the Japanese forces in shanghai, one faction of the army led by the Nagata Tet Suzan, urged an expansion of military operations in china. But there was considerable opposition the move. The finance ministry objected that it would place an unbearable strain on the economy, the navy high command feared that it would invoke hostilities with Britain and America and the imperial generals thought that it would deflect the energies for preparation of the war with Russia.

In contrast to the hesitation by civilian officials in Tokyo, the Kwantung army, with the backing of elements in the central army high command, it continued to occupy Chinese territory. Claiming to defend the military necessity of Manchukuo borders, Kwantung<sup>12</sup> army forces moved into Jehol. In April Japanese signed the Tangku truce agreements with the Chinese government under which the Japanese area of occupation was extended to great wall.

Encouraged by their successes local Japanese commanders began to promote a 'north china autonomy movement' in 1935, in the hope creating a buffer zone for Manchukuo. Their aim was to keep the

Chinese divided and weak and to link the resources of north china to the Manchurian economy, perhaps in the preparation for further moves into Mongolia.

These tactics of aggression were successful largely because there was no effective resistance to the Japanese by forces within china. Chiang-kai-shek was well aware of Japan's military superiority. In 1935 Chiang made overtures to Tokyo for a Sino Japanese treaty friendship. But the long march by the communist coupled with the anti-Japanese sentiments among the students put Chiang under heavy pressure to reverse his priorities. This shift made the Sino-Japanese war inevitable.

On July 7, 1937 there was only a minor skirmish which occurred between the Chinese and the Japanese troops at Marco Polo Bridge which then further turned out into a great conflict but the Japanese neither had a long range plans for operation in china nor had adequate equipment's.

The Konoe government and many of the officers of the General staff were expecting that China would collapse under a series of blow or attacks but it proved from them difficult to fight in the vast geographical expanse of china and they knew that Japan was not prepared economically and industrially for a full scale war.

Moreover they were in a fear that it will exhaust the military resources that was required for their war with Japan. The early military success in china especially the fall Nanking only made things more difficult for konoe government. When Chiang refused to give its recognition to Manchukuo, the Konoe government announced its unwillingness to negotiate further with chiang and sought to go for a military war with china.

By the summer of 1939 the worst prediction of general staff had come true. After two years of military hardships their operation came to a halt because their borders in Manchuria were being threatened by Soviet Union. The nation also had a conflict with the American fleets in the pacific. By the spring of 1940 the Japanese navy general staff had concluded that America crash programme would result in its gaining naval hegemony in the Pacific by 1942 and that japan must have access to the oil of the Dutch East Indies in order to cope with American powers.

The foreign minister of Konoe government signed a Tripartie pact with Germany and Italy in which the signatories pledged to aid one another if they were being attacked by another power. The foreign minister Matsuko hoped to isolate America and dissuade it from conflict with Japan, thus opening the way for Japan to seize the European colonies in south East Asia, and grasp the resources it needed for

self-sufficiency and cut-off the Chinese supply lines. It also signed a neutrality pact with USSR in 1941. American reaction to the Tripartite pact unexpectedly strong. Roosevelt forbade the export of any further shipment of scrap iron into Japan.

Thus all these circumstances ultimately lead to the coming of the militarist era in Japan.

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