

# Japan's March Toward Militarism

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Japan's march toward militarism started soon after the overthrow of the Tokugawa shogunate and the beginning of the Meiji Restoration in 1868, with the Meiji oligarchs' adoption of a policy of *fukoku kyōhei* (rich country, strong military). Although the Meiji oligarchs showed restraint in outward expressions of militarism and imperialism in the first half of the Meiji period from 1868 to 1890, this does not mean they disagreed with the goals of foreign expansion and military build-up, but rather they first focused more on modernization and economic growth to catch up with Western industrial powers before they took significant steps to expand Japan's influence in foreign matters. The Meiji oligarchs' handling of Saigō Takamori's recommendation to invade Korea in 1873 reflects this philosophy. Although the Meiji oligarchs did not disagree in principle with Saigō's proposal, they prudently decided against the invasion because of its excessive cost, the need to focus investments on economic modernization, and the expected negative reaction from Western powers. The Meiji oligarchs' early leanings toward militarism and imperialism can be seen by the Conscription Law of 1873, which required all males to serve active duty in the military for three years and reserve duty for an additional four years, and by several small territorial acquisitions in the 1870s, such as the Ryūkyū Islands, Bonin Islands, and Kurile Islands.

Japanese militarism and imperialism steadily developed for five principal reasons. Although all five reasons existed from early in the Meiji period to the start of war in China in 1937, the relative importance of these reasons differed depending on the time period. The first two reasons, Japan's desire to be a Western-style imperialist power and Japan's concerns for its security and safety, played important roles in the growth of militarism up to the end of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. The next two reasons, Japan's belief in its leadership role for Asia and Japan's frequent provocations by Western powers, gave rise to an expansion of militarism and imperialism from 1905 to the 1930s. The final reason, Japan's desire to secure its economic interests, rose in importance as Japan entered the decade of the 1930s.

Western imperialism played an integral part in Japan's aggression toward foreign countries. As this essay analyzes the five causes of Japanese militarism and imperialism, the significant role of Western imperialism in each cause will become clear. In some cases Japan followed the examples of the Western imperialist nations, and in other cases Japan needed to counteract or defend against the actions of Western powers. The stubborn and provocative attitude of the imperialist Western nations toward Japan provided a favorable environment for Japan's advance toward militarism and imperialism, which ultimately led to World War II.

## Aspiration for Western-style Imperialism

The Meiji leaders sought to make Japan a first-rate nation (*ittō koku*), which included the prestige and power associated with foreign territorial possessions. During the 19th century, the Western powers of Britain, Germany, America, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Russia, and Italy made various overseas territorial acquisitions, many times through military means. Knowing very well the long history of Western imperialism, which began in the 16th century, the Meiji oligarchs desired to join the Western powers in demands for rights and privileges in other Asian countries. However, the oligarchs realized that the country needed to modernize and strengthen its military before it attempted to assert its demands to the Western powers.

Even after Japan had been building its military for several years, Japanese leaders realized in 1895 that the country still had not reached the same level as the imperialist Western powers. Although Japan won the Sino-Japanese War in 1894-95 and as a result acquired Formosa and forced China to pay a large indemnity, Japan could not stand up to the other Western powers when Russia, Germany, and France forced Japan in the Triple Intervention to give up the Liaotung Peninsula captured during the war. This led Japan to a rapid increase in military expenditures between 1895 and 1904.

## Security Concerns

Japan's militaristic attitude intensified as government leaders recognized the need to ensure the defense of the country against Russia and other Western powers. Observing the advanced technological achievements and superior military and naval power of the West, Japan had fears of being invaded by a Western country such as Russia. Also, with China being so weak militarily and economically in the late 19th century, Japanese leaders feared the rivalries of the Western powers could bring China to collapse, which would have profound implications on the security of Japan. Yamagata Aritomo, known as the father of the modern Japanese army, advocated expansionism more for security reasons rather than for conquest as an end in itself or for other reasons. Yamagata

recommended that Japan not only protect its line of sovereignty (*shukensen*) but also strive toward its line of advantage (*riekisen*), which meant that Japan should extend its influence and control beyond its national borders in order to ensure its security (Pyle 1996, 135).

Control over Korea represented an essential element in the protection of Japan against Western countries due to the two countries' geographical propinquity and due to Korea's having borders with both China and Russia. Japan soon recognized that it needed control over the Liaotung Peninsula in southern Manchuria to ensure the defense of Korea. Although Japan captured the Liaotung Peninsula in the Sino-Japanese War, the Triple Intervention in 1895 forced Japan to give up its position. Russia moved into Port Arthur at the tip of the Liaotung Peninsula in 1898, which further increased Japan's sense of insecurity. Although the 1902 Anglo-Japanese Alliance provided Japan a potential ally in the case of attack, the continuing tensions with Russia soon led to the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-5.

### **Belief in Asian Leadership Role**

In the late 19th century, many Japanese leaders came to believe that their country had a "manifest destiny" to free other Asian countries from Western imperialist powers and to lead these countries to collective strength and prosperity. Fukuzawa Yukichi and other late 19th century writers supported foreign expansionism and Social Darwinism, which promoted survival of the strongest cultures by a process of natural selection.

In 1905, Japan became the first Asian country to defeat a Western power, namely Russia in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, which bolstered Japan's belief in its destiny to lead Asia and encouraged leaders in other Asian countries that they had a chance to stand against Western imperialist designs.

Several ultranationalist groups and writers, such as the Black Dragon Society and Kita Ikki, gained increasing popularity with their views that Japan should take leadership in Asia to expel foreign powers by means of a righteous war if necessary. Many of these ultranationalist groups believed that the moral purity of the Yamato race and Japan's unique ancestry as descendants of the sun goddess Amaterasu entitled the Japanese to such a leadership role in Asia.

### **Provocation by Western Powers**

A series of coercive acts, insults, and provocations by Western imperialist countries from the 1850s to the 1930s caused great anger to fester among the Japanese people. Japan's signing of unequal treaties with America, France, Holland, and Russia in 1858 placed restrictions on Japan's national sovereignty, such as extraterritoriality, which meant that foreigners in Japan had immunity from the jurisdiction of the Japanese legal system. The 1921-22 Washington Conference naval treaties forced on Japan an unfavorable battleship ratio of 5:5:3 for the US, Britain, and Japan respectively, and the Western powers at the London Naval Conference of 1930 coerced Japan to accept the same ratio for its heavy cruisers.

Strong racial prejudice by Westerners toward Japanese, in addition to Chinese and other Asians, led to several severely insulting incidents for the Japanese people. In 1919 at the Paris Peace Conference, Western countries rejected the simple Japanese request to have a racial equality clause included in the League of Nations Covenant. In 1905, California passed anti-Japanese legislation. In the following year, the school board in San Francisco ordered Japanese and other Asian children to attend segregated schools. In 1924, America passed the Japanese Exclusion Act to shut off Japanese immigration into the US. This series of international affronts to Japanese pride and status provided fuel to the militaristic and imperialist sentiments of Japanese government leaders and ultranationalists.

### **Economic Interests**

With Japan's heavy dependence on foreign trade, the world depression that began in 1929 caused great economic hardships for the Japanese people. This great worldwide depression came on the heels of the devastating Kantô earthquake in 1923 and economic stagnation during the 1920s, which especially hurt farmers and workers in small shops. Entering the decade of the 1930s, economic motives for Japan's imperialism became very strong in order to ensure continued foreign trade.

Economic growth required strong export markets for Japanese textiles and other goods. Other Asian countries, especially China, provided the best market opportunities for Japanese export products, so the Japanese government needed to ensure that this trade would not be interrupted by obtaining commercial and transportation rights in China. Japan's economy also required imports of raw materials to supply its manufacturing industries.

Manchuria's extensive land area and abundant natural resources such as iron and coal provided a ready solution to Japan's overpopulation problem and its need for raw materials to support its heavy industries, which focused on military equipment buildup. Japan seized Manchuria in 1931. Japan later moved into other countries in south Asia to ensure sufficient resources to maintain its self-

sufficiency. For example, Japan needed oil from the Dutch East Indies in order to keep its industry and military supplied.

## Works Cited

Pyle, Kenneth B. The Making of Modern Japan. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1996.

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