

Week Topic : Japan's military strategy (week 4)

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The Strategy of the Maritime Nation Japan: From Yukichi Fukuzawa to Shigeru Yoshida

(Conflicting Currents, Murray and Ishizu, Chapter 3)

Summary

In the end of the 19th century, for China the threat of the West was confined to the Southern regions. In Korea, there was the long and shallow Han River which leads to the Capital, Soeul, and thus the barbarians could not reach it so easily. But for Japan, in the final years of the Tokugawa period, the militarily superior Western “black ships” posed a direct threat. The Western intrusion posed a danger because of Japan's geographical features and the military perspective of the leaders of Japan.

When Perry visited Japan, Japan possessed no Western-style vessel. In the subsequent years, Japan threw considerable resources into purchasing and building ships, and in 1874m Japan launched its first overseas military expedition to Taiwan.

In the 1890s, China twice outmaneuvered Japan (the Jingo and Koshin incidents) and the apparent naval inferiority of Japan made Japan launch ambitious shipbuilding

programs and building up its navy.

Who most supported expanding the navy was Yukichi Fukuzawa. He also believed Japan needed an ally (he favored an alliance with Britain). The lack of such might have been the main factor behind the Triple Intervention (Russia, France, Germany) after the victorious Sino-Japanese War in 1895.

In the mid-Meiji Period, the true objective of Japan was not land, but commerce and naval expansion was part of the vision of Japan as a trading nation.

On the outset of the Russo-Japanese War, the Russian Navy constantly menaced communication between Japan and the mainland. When the Korean government fell under Russian influence, to Japan it was of decisive importance to prevent the Korean peninsula from falling into hands of any other great power.

The constant friction between the Army and the Navy intensified after the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, when Japan gained interests on the Asian mainland (Manchuria and Mongolia). The protection of those became a national priority and thus the Army was considered more important for this end. The Navy refused to be satisfied with the subordinate role, but with the outbreak of the WWI. In 1914, this confrontation abated in the victory for the Army and its view that Japan should seek a continental empire.

In the 1920s, the vision of Japan as a maritime nation predominated and was characterized by moderate diplomatic policies promoting trade as the chief engine of national growth.

As China attempted in the Chinese revolution to reclaim rights it had ceded to Japan and other powers, Shigeru Yoshida (vice-minister of foreign affairs) argued for taking a hard line and defend its interests in Manchuria with force if needed. On the other hand, he stated that Japan's commercial interests were the most profitable of all its overseas interests.

In the 1930s with the Great Depression and protectionist policies of Britain and the United States, for Japan procuring resources became the most important. This was also the justification for the Manchurian Incident in 1931. Yoshida was not completely improving of this incident, because of the importance of good relations with the Anglo-American powers. He criticized Japan for not cooperating with them.

Becoming a trading state certainly requires a strong navy, but Shigeyoshi Inoue (vice-minister of the Navy) was critical of any expansion by force, which guaranteed a conflict with the United States. Should Japan go to war, economic and geographic factors insured defeat. From the U.S. perspective the largest vulnerability of Japan lay in the transportation routes inking Japan with the Asian mainland. The defense of these assumed paramount importance. Building battleships with overwhelming firepower (rather than air power or submarines - failure to defend Japan's shipping routes sealed Japan's fate later in the WWII) were typical in the early Showa years and was seen by many as inconsistent as a maritime trading state.

The policy that Yoshida pursued after the WWII. was one to work with the U.S. in an effort to rebuild the economy. Later, he refused U.S. demands to rearm because of fear it could end up becoming involved in the Korean War. Yoshida believed Japan

did not need a large land force as long as the U.S. Navy and Air Force controlled the seas and skies.

In 1980s, President Reagan and Prime Minister Nakasone strengthened the U.S.-Japan alliance. But when the Gulf War broke out, Japan hesitated and sent out minesweepers only in 1991. Also, in the war with Afghanistan Japan's cooperation was symbolic (logistical support)