

Civilian and Military Power (Japan)

By [Frederick R. Dickinson](#)

Like the Sino- and Russo-Japanese Wars, the First World War gave an enormous boost to Japanese military operations and authority. The Imperial Navy deployed for the first time to the South Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean and the army occupied Shandong, China, and Siberia. After withholding funds during peacetime, parliament returned to full support for targets in the 1907 Basic Plan of National Defense. However, the systematic global campaign to regulate arms and territorial expansion after 1918 posed the greatest challenge to military authority in modern Japanese history and exacerbated civil-military and army-navy tensions through 1945.

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Introduction: Military in Meiji Japan (1868-1912)

The First World War is often described as the start of a new era of continental expansion and military authority in [Japan](#). Historians portray the comprehensive list of demands presented to [China](#) in January 1915 (the so-called “[Twenty-one Demands](#)”) as a new level of Japanese belligerence that would culminate in the Manchurian Incident (1931) and, ultimately, full scale war on the continent (the 1937 Sino-Japanese War).^[1] Confronted with the realities of [total war](#) in Europe, it is also argued, Japan’s military planners immediately began drafting outlines for general mobilization to prepare for another global conflagration.^[2] Detached from the looming history of the Second World War, however, Japan’s experience in World War I assumes a different hue. As with the war’s other main belligerents, the Great War marked the culmination of 19th-century [empire](#) and nation-building in Japan. It brought, most importantly, a dramatic transformation of civil-military and army-navy relations in Tokyo.

As with the great powers of Europe, military strength constituted a critical pillar of nation-building in 19th century Japan.^[3] A year after introducing compulsory education, Imperial Japan’s founders laid the basis for a modern military establishment. Although originally the source of contentious debate, national conscription produced an armed force that, by 1877, had vanquished the last feudal resistance (samurai rebellion) to the modern state. More importantly, by exposing young Japanese men of all classes from around Japan to a uniform set of drills, food, clothing, and song, national conscription played a critical role in fashioning a

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sense of nation. Coming of age after the Franco-Prussian War, Japan's modern military followed the wave of post-war military professionalization in Europe.^[4] Tokyo created an autonomous General Staff in 1878 and founded an Army War College in 1883. The Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors of 1882 sanctified the modern military's special status by accentuating a direct relationship with the emperor. The relationship was formalized in 1890 when the Meiji Constitution designated the emperor commander-in-chief. Two imperial ordinances in 1900 required the cabinet posts of army and navy minister to be staffed by officers on active duty.^[5]

Army Power and Status

Although Japan is an island nation, its military pioneers were all former samurai who from the start prioritized a robust ground force. Before 1886, Japan possessed only eight modern warships. By the early 1880s, however, Imperial Army founder [Yamagata Aritomo \(1838-1922\)](#) had begun transforming the small-scale, static accumulation of troops that typified French military organization (the garrison) to the large-scale, mobile, self-sufficient operational units combining [infantry](#), [cavalry](#), [artillery](#), engineers, and supply troops (the division) perfected by [France's](#) conqueror in 1871, Prussia. By 1885, a Prussian major, [Klemens Wilhelm Jacob Meckel \(1842-1905\)](#), supplied this expanded force with a new strategic objective. [Korea](#), Meckel stressed, was a "dagger at the heart" of Japan. Control over the peninsula by a third country would threaten the security of the home islands and had to be prevented.^[6]

By the mid-1880s, in other words, Japan's modern military establishment had identified continental stability as a strategic priority and championed the expansion of both ground and naval forces toward that end. It laid the foundation for both a robust offensive military establishment and continental empire. Indeed, in the name of securing Korean "independence," Japan would wage war against China in 1894-95 and [Russia in 1904-05](#). On the eve of the Russo-Japanese War (1903), the army had grown to thirteen divisions and the Imperial Navy to seventy-six ships totaling 250,000 tons. During and immediately after the Sino-Japanese War, defense spending had risen to 63.2 percent of the national budget.^[7]

These impressive military victories raised Japan's military establishment to its peak of political authority and spawned a strikingly ambitious plan for the future. The 1907 Basic Plan of National Defense outlined a "steady expansion" of Japanese interests in Manchuria, Korea, even South Asia and the western Pacific. It called for another major augmentation of Japanese armed forces, to twenty-five standing divisions for the army (with a mobilization potential of twice that) and two battle fleets, each headed by eight capital warships, for the navy. Most importantly, the manner of the plan's promulgation highlighted growing military autonomy from civilian rule. It was drafted exclusively by the military, presented to the emperor and bestowed by the emperor upon the cabinet for ratification without amendment.^[8] As the handiwork principally of Field Marshal Yamagata Aritomo and his deputy, Lieutenant Colonel [Tanaka Giichi \(1864-1929\)](#), moreover, the proposal solidified army authority over the navy by identifying, for the first time in writing, the army as the first line of imperial defense. In the same year, a new military ordinance placed decisions about military organization, education, personnel and rules of engagement in army hands without the necessity of a prime minister's signature or Privy Council deliberation. In December 1908, the war minister lost the right to approve changes in defense planning and force levels, thereby increasing general staff autonomy from the Ministry of War.^[9]

Troubled Times of Taishō (1912-1926)

In the [historiography](#) of modern Japan, the 1912 death of the Meiji emperor and rise of his successor, [Taishō, Emperor of Japan \(1879-1926\)](#), is often portrayed as a time of national distress. While military victory over [Russia](#) offered powerful validation of the success of the Meiji nation-building project, the death of the man in whose name all major reforms had been pursued raised fundamental questions about the appropriate trajectory for the future. More importantly, sustained peace following the Russo-Japanese War raised major hurdles to the unbridled territorial expansion and augmentation of army authority envisioned in the 1907 Basic Plan of National Defense. While the Imperial Diet ([parliament](#)) approved funds for six new army divisions and two [dreadnought](#)-class warships during and immediately following the war, from 1908 to 1911, Japan's MPs placed a cap on all military spending. When administrative reform freed up new monies for national defense in 1911, budget priority shifted to the navy. Yamagata and his supporters in the army watched with dismay as two successive cabinets authorized funds for naval modernization without providing for the army's new peacetime target of twenty-five divisions. When War Minister [Uehara Yūsaku \(1856-1933\)](#) resigned in protest in December 1912, he secured not more army funding but further erosion of army authority. In February 1913, a coalition of political parties toppled an oligarchic cabinet for the first time in Japanese history (Taishō Political [Civilian and Military Power \(Japan\) - 1914-1918-Online](#)

Crisis). The subsequent cabinet (February 1913-April 1914), led by Navy Admiral [Yamamoto Gonnohyōe \(1852-1933\)](#) and supported by a Constitutional Association of Political Friends Party (*Rikken Seiyūkai*) majority in the Diet, continued to chip away at army privilege; it eliminated the active duty requirement for service ministers of 1900 that War Minister Uehara and the army had used to fell the Second Saionji cabinet. It intruded, moreover, into army sacred ground in Manchuria by authorizing the appointment of *Seiyūkai* party members to the leadership of the South Manchuria Railway.^[10]

World War I as “Divine Aid”

Given the declining fortunes of the Imperial Army and its principal leadership faction from the former *Chōshū* feudal domain, *Chōshū* elder [Inoue Kaoru \(1836-1915\)](#) understandably viewed the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 as the “divine aid of the new Taishō era for the development of the destiny of Japan.”^[11] Since the first dramatic expansion of the Imperial Army and Navy had been guaranteed by the Sino- and Russo-Japanese Wars, another military engagement, it was hoped in part, would get the army back on track toward fulfilling the projections of the 1907 Basic Plan of National Defense. Indeed, the Thirty-Fourth Diet (4-9 September 1914) unanimously approved a war budget, and, while this included funds for ten new destroyers for the navy, the Thirty-Sixth Diet (May 20-June 9 1915) finally approved the army’s two-division expansion plan that had originally sparked the Taishō Political Crisis.

The Great War was also a boon on the battlefield for both services. Following [New Zealand’s](#) conquest of German Samoa (30 August) and [Australia’s](#) occupation of German New Guinea (13 September), the Imperial Navy assumed control of German [Micronesia](#) (Marshall, Mariana, and Caroline Islands) in October 1914. On 7 November 1914, 29,000 Imperial Army troops and 2,800 allied British soldiers recorded the second major allied victory of the Great War (following the [First Battle of the Marne](#) in September 1914) by [vanquishing the German fortress at Qingdao](#), China.^[12] From 1916 until the end of the war, a Japanese cruiser squadron in the Indian Ocean and destroyer flotilla in the Malacca Straits helped protect convoys of Australian and New Zealand troops from the Pacific to Aden. From 1917, two Japanese cruisers patrolled the Cape of Good Hope and two flotillas of destroyers joined the hunt for German [submarines](#) in the [Mediterranean](#).^[13]

Unexpected Consequences

Opportunity of Siberia

Given such opportunity for both services, one might have expected the war to eliminate any outstanding issues of inter-service rivalry. Unfortunately for the Imperial Army, the Ōkuma cabinet (April 1914-October 1916) continued to grant budget priority to the navy. Despite being headed by a protégé of *Chōshū* army faction kingpin Yamagata Aritomo, the subsequent cabinet (October 1916-September 1918) of General [Terauchi Masatake \(1852-1919\)](#) endorsed and received Diet authorization for the entire 280 million yen requested by the Imperial Navy for the 1918 fiscal year. The funds envisioned expansion of the 8-4 to an 8-6 fleet and represented the maximum possible utilization of Japan’s ship-building capacity. By contrast, Terauchi held the Imperial Army to 180 million yen, half the initial request and only enough to maintain the existing twenty-one division structure.^[14]

When French Field Marshal [Ferdinand Foch \(1851-1929\)](#) in December 1917 proposed an allied expedition of troops to Siberia to stem the tide of Bolshevik influence east, Imperial Army leaders jumped at the opportunity to redirect Japanese defense planning toward the continent. By the summer of 1918, naval representatives on Vice Chief of the Army General Staff Tanaka Giichi’s Joint Committee on Military Affairs agreed to a combined military operation that envisioned ten Imperial Army divisions in the Russian Far East.^[15] In early September, the emperor conferred official sanction upon a major revision of the 1907 Basic Plan of National Defense that called for a wartime mobilization potential of forty-one new divisions. The new goal was the equivalent of 61.5 old divisions and represented a 23 percent increase over the 1907 target of fifty wartime divisions.^[16] Although the Terauchi cabinet had promised in July 1918 to dispatch no more than two divisions, by early December 1918, the army flooded the Russian Far East with more than 50,000 troops.^[17]

Challenge of Peace

If Field Marshal Yamagata had looked to the [Siberian Intervention](#) as the last chance of an opportune war to restore army
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centrality in Japanese national defense, he was soon sorely disappointed. One day after the official announcement of Japanese participation in the intervention, discontent over the exorbitant price of rice, which had simmered in Toyama Prefecture since the middle of July, leapt into the national headlines. The most spectacular symbol of Japanese [wartime economic growth](#), the so-called Rice Riots brought 2 million Japanese subjects to the streets and ultimately required a declaration of [martial law](#) and 100,000 troops to quell the demonstrations. Yamagata viewed the timing of the riots with “unbearable regret.”^[18] As Lieutenant General [Machida Keiu \(1865-1939\)](#) noted at the end of August, the Siberian expedition had “received a cold stare from the public.” It was a far cry from “the hearty send-offs and welcomes and cries of ‘banzai’ resonating at the train stations and ports each time the expeditionary forces passed in the last two great wars.”^[19]

But the tepid public support for Siberia was the least of army worries. Just as Japanese troops fanned out across the Trans-Siberian Railway, hostilities ended in Europe. Peace in November 1918 meant not simply the end of opportunity for Japan’s services. It ushered in a new age of civilian authority over the Japanese military. Given the victory for democratic regimes, the war marked a formidable boost for democracy in Imperial Japan. After decades of oligarchic rule, Japan’s first true political party cabinet emerged in September 1918, followed by a string of party cabinets between 1924 and 1932. The appalling wartime destruction, moreover, invited a systematic global campaign to regulate arms and territorial expansion. Japan’s political party cabinets actively joined this campaign, through membership in the [League of Nations \(1919\)](#) and participation in such pivotal interwar initiatives as the [Washington \(1921-22\)](#), Geneva (1927), and London (1930) Naval Conferences and in the Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928). The same party cabinets slashed military spending from 65.4 percent of the national budget between 1918 and 1922 to just 30.4 percent between 1928 and 1932.^[20]

By mid-decade, prevailing opinion among those with a high-school education in Japan, according to a conservative advocacy group, was “*gunjin girai, guntai girai*” (“hatred of servicemen, hatred of the military”).^[21] The Imperial Army fared particularly badly. Although the Washington, Geneva, and London Conferences targeted the Imperial Navy, by 1925, the army was compelled to eliminate four complete infantry divisions. At a time when a nation’s strength came to be defined less by territorial expansion than by international trade, moreover, reasons for Japan’s commitment to the continent and to a robust ground force were particularly unclear. The 1923 revision of the Basic Plan of National Defense replaced the number one strategic enemy in the 1907 Plan - the army’s continental foe, Russia - with the navy’s principal adversary, the [United States](#). Members of the Imperial Army would spend the next two decades struggling not only against a new level of civilian authority; they would continue to wage a pitched battle over budgets and strategic priorities with the Imperial Navy.

Conclusion

Far from ushering in a new golden age of military authority, the First World War spurred a major restructuring of civil-military relations in Japan. The Imperial Army and Navy had secured a central place in the modern Japanese polity through impressive battlefield victories against China and Russia between 1894 and 1905. Both services dramatically expanded their range of operations during the Great War - the navy to the South Pacific, Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean and the army to Shandong Province, China, and Siberia. These World War I campaigns helped catapult Japan from regional to world power and briefly stemmed the rise of civilian authority in the era of peace following the Russo-Japanese War. The new power of democracy and arms control after 1918, however, posed the most serious challenge to military authority in the history of modern Japan. A succession of political party cabinets pared both the number of Japanese capital ships and Imperial Army divisions and slashed military spending between 1918 and 1932. Both services responded to the new realities of the postwar era with major reorganization and modernization. But the position of the Imperial Army, whose authority as Japan’s first line of national defense had seemed absolute in the immediate aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War, was the most tenuous in an era touting international trade over territorial gain. When members of the Imperial Army provoked an incident along the South Manchuria Railway in September 1931 (the Manchurian Incident), they brought a dramatic Japanese return to continental empire and arms and, not by coincidence, Imperial Army authority. The bold bid for political revival would ultimately end with the obliteration of both the Imperial Army and Navy in 1945.

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Notes

1. ↑ Andrew Gordon speaks of a Japanese attempt at “colonization” of China during the war. Gordon, Andrew: *A Modern History of Japan. From Tokugawa to the Present*, New York 2014, p. 173.
2. ↑ For the latest version of this argument, see Shin'ichi, Yamamuro: *Fukugō sensō to sōryōkusen no danzō. Nihon ni totte no dai'ichiji sekai taisen* [Fault Line of Complex War and Total War: The First World War from the Perspective of Japan], Tokyo 2011.
3. ↑ For details, see Westney, D. Eleanor: *The Military*, in Jansen, Marius B. and Rozman, Gilbert (eds.): *Japan in Transition. From Tokugawa to Meiji*, Princeton 1986, pp. 168-94.
4. ↑ The best in-depth study of these developments is Presseisen, Ernst: *Before Aggression. Europeans Train the Japanese Army*, Tucson 1965.
5. ↑ Humphreys, Leonard A.: *The Way of the Heavenly Sword. The Japanese Army in the 1920's*, Stanford 1995, p. 8.
6. ↑ Crowley, James B.: *From Closed Door to Empire: The Formation of the Meiji Military Establishment*, in: Silberman, Bernard S. and Harootunian, Harry (eds.): *Modern Japanese Leadership. Transition and Change*, Tucson 1966, pp. 276-7.
7. ↑ Takafusa, Nakamura: *Economic Growth in Prewar Japan*. Robert A. Feldman (trans.), New Haven 1983, p. 39, table 1.22.
8. ↑ Shimanuki, Takeji: *Nichi-Ro sensō igo ni okeru kokubō hōshin, shoyō heiryoku, yōhei kōryō no hensen* [Post-Russo-Japanese War Changes in the Basic Plan of National Defense, Required Armaments, and the Outline of Necessary Troops], in *Gunji shigaku* 8/4 (1973), p. 3.
9. ↑ Imai, Seiichi: *Taishōki ni okeru gunbu no seijiteki chii* [The Political Position of the Military in the Taishō Era], pt. 1, in *Shisō* 399 (1957), pp. 5-6.
10. ↑ See Dickinson, Frederick R.: *War and National Reinvention: Japan in the Great War, 1914 -1919*, Cambridge 1999, p. 67.
11. ↑ Kaoru, Inoue: *Kō denki hensankai: Segai Inoue kō den* [Biography of the Late Lord Inoue], vol. 5, Tokyo 1968, p. 367.
12. ↑ Figures from Keiichi, Eguchi: *Futatsu no taisen* [Two World Wars], Tokyo 1989, p. 20.
13. ↑ Howarth, Stephen: *The Fighting Ships of the Rising Sun: The Drama of the Imperial Japanese Navy 1895-1945*, New York 1983, pp. 128-129.
14. ↑ Shin'ichi, Kitaoka: *Nihon rikugun to tairiku seisaku* [The Japanese Army and Continental Policy], Tokyo 1978, pp. 320-322.
15. ↑ Morley, James W.: *The Japanese Thrust into Siberia*. New York 1980, pp. 336-7.
16. ↑ Kitaoka, *Nihon rikugun to tairiku seisaku* 1978, p. 327.
17. ↑ Tatsuo, Kobayashi: *Suiuso nikki: Itō ke monjo* [Green Rain Diary: Itō Family Papers], Tokyo 1966.
18. ↑ Tokutomi monjo (Tokutomi Sohō Papers) 40-42, Yamagata to Tokutomi, 5 September 1918, in: Takashi, Itō et al. (eds.): *Tokutomi Sohō kankei monjo* [Papers Relating to Tokutomi Sohō], vol. 2, Tokyo 1985, p. 395.
19. ↑ Uehara monjo (Uehara Yūsaku Papers) 102-19, Machida Keiu to Uehara, 28 August 1918. In *Uehara Yūsaku kankei monjo kenkyūkai*, ed. Uehara Yūsaku kankei monjo (Papers Relating to Uehara Yūsaku), Tokyo 1976, p. 484.
20. ↑ Nakamura, *Economic Growth in Prewar Japan* 1983, p. 39, table 1.22.
21. ↑ *Jiji tanpyō* [Brief Roundup of Current Affairs], in: *Daitō bunka* 2/3 (March 1925), p. 45.

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