

# War Aims and War Aims Discussions (Japan)

By [Rustin Gates](#)

**This article discusses Japan's war aims during the First World War, as well as the different policy approaches Japanese leaders employed to achieve those aims. It explores Japan's entrance into the war on the side of its ally Britain, its military actions against German possessions in the Asia-Pacific, and the fulfillment of its war aims, which included securing and expanding imperial interests in China and taking its place as a world power.**

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## Introduction: Japan's Entrance into the War in 1914

The Japanese leadership in Tokyo warmly welcomed the outbreak of war in the summer of 1914. Owing to the great distance between the archipelago and the battlefields of Europe, the war for the Japanese represented not a struggle for life or death, but an opportunity for [imperial](#) aggrandizement. Elder statesman [Inoue Kaoru \(1836-1915\)](#) regarded the war as "Heaven's help in the new Taishō era [1912–1927] for the fulfillment of Japan's destiny."<sup>[1]</sup> [Tanaka Gi'ichi \(1864-1929\)](#) of the army general staff believed the war provided a "one in a million chance" to solve the outstanding problems in Sino-Japanese relations.<sup>[2]</sup> [Japan's](#) destiny, mentioned by Inoue, and the problems referenced by Tanaka were one and the same: the consolidation and expansion of Japanese interests on the Asian

mainland. Japanese Foreign Minister Katō Takaaki (1860-1926) considered the war an opportunity to “complete some unfinished business in China.”<sup>[3]</sup> As [Frederick Dickinson](#) succinctly states, “Japanese policymakers universally greeted the outbreak of war in August 1914, then, as an opportunity to renew Japan’s quest for national glory in China.”<sup>[4]</sup>

While there was near unanimity over Japan’s war objectives, many in the Japanese army leadership held reservations about entering the war against [Germany](#), with which Japan’s military had maintained close relations since the 1880s. Prussian military advisors had influenced generations of Japanese officers who organized the army along German lines. Perhaps the most skeptical of declaring war was elder statesman Yamagata Aritomo (1838-1922), who regarded the Allies’ chance of winning as only 60 percent and believed the Germans would march into Paris.<sup>[5]</sup> He reminded Foreign Minister Katō that “Germany too is a friendly power.”<sup>[6]</sup>

In contrast, Katō considered Anglo-Japanese relations as crucial to Japan’s foreign policy. Katō’s strong Anglocentrism was despised by some in the Japanese [government](#), such as Yamagata, who commented that Katō was “practically British” (*marude eijin nari*).<sup>[7]</sup> Indeed, Katō had spent over a decade in London, first as a young Mitsubishi businessman and then as Japan’s representative to Britain, as minister (1895-1900) and as ambassador (1908-1912). It was during this second stint in 1911 that Katō assisted in renewing the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, an agreement for which Katō had advocated well before its original conclusion in 1902. Unsurprisingly, then, Foreign Minister Katō planted his foreign policy on the bedrock of the alliance and, with the outbreak of war in Europe, moved quickly to enter Japan on the side of its ally.

Even before receiving British Foreign Minister Edward Grey’s (1862-1933) 6 August 1914 request for Japanese assistance in neutralizing German merchant raiders, Katō had informed British ambassador to Japan Sir Conyngnam Greene (1854-1934) that Japan was making [naval](#) preparations for war.<sup>[8]</sup> To Katō, the German threat was real and immediate: “The Germans are sitting right in front of our entryway, interfering with our freedom of movement.”<sup>[9]</sup> Katō’s prompt affirmative reply to Grey’s telegram caused the British foreign minister, who had realized Katō was bent on joining the fight, to attempt to limit the geographical scope of Japanese operations. As he had with Yamagata’s skepticism, Katō brushed aside Grey’s efforts at constraint and then pushed his decision for war through the cabinet. On 15 August, Japan issued Germany an ultimatum, demanding the withdrawal of German vessels from Chinese waters and the surrender of Jiaozhou within one month. When the German authorities failed to reply by 23 August, the Japanese declared war.

## Japanese Military Activities

One of Japan’s war aims was simply fulfilling its duties as an ally to [Britain](#). Japan achieved this objective in large part through its navy which took on extensive duties covering nearly half of the

globe. The British navy welcomed Japanese aid in pursuing the German naval squadron, a menace to allied shipping in the Pacific. Other Japanese naval forces took over patrol duties for the British in Asian and Pacific waters. Naval forces also assisted in defeating German units during the Japanese seizure of the German imperial possession of Jiaozhou in [China](#). Soon after, in October 1914, naval squadrons occupied the islands of German [Micronesia](#) (the Marshall Islands, the Carolines, the Marianas, and the Palau Islands) with little resistance.

Later in the war, Japanese activities extended to the Indian Ocean, where Japanese squadrons protected allied troopship convoys sailing from [Australia](#) and [New Zealand](#). Another British request for assistance resulted in the dispatch in 1917 of a Japanese naval squadron – the Second Special Squadron – to the [Mediterranean](#) to escort transports and hunt enemy [U-boats](#). The capable and professional Japanese sailors acquitted themselves well in all of their varied duties, gaining praise from their British counterparts and helping to cement Japan's place as a world power.<sup>[10]</sup>

Meanwhile, in China, the Japanese army joined their naval counterparts in boosting Japan's international status and in expanding the Japanese empire by seizing German-controlled Jiaozhou. The first Japanese troops landed on the mainland on 2 September. The Japanese occupied the Shandong railway on 3 October and by 12 October had [surrounded the city of Qingdao \(Tsingtao\)](#), the leasehold's administrative center. Less than a month later, on 7 November, the city fell. It would remain under Japanese control until the end of the war. Added to the newly seized South Pacific Islands, Japanese-occupied Shandong fulfilled Japan's war aim of expanding imperial interests, all before the war entered its fifth month of fighting.

## Securing Japan's Objectives on the Continent

Japan moved quickly to capitalize on its new position of strength on the continent. Katō viewed Japan's [occupation](#) of Shandong as a bargaining chip with which to extract concessions from the Chinese that would solve the outstanding issues between the two countries.<sup>[11]</sup> The most central issue was the status of Japanese interests in south Manchuria and Eastern Inner Mongolia, for which Japan had paid Russia in blood in the [Russo-Japanese War](#). Although the Qing [government](#) had later recognized these interests, the leases on which they were based were due to expire over the course of the next decade. Katō desired to trade Japan's return of Shandong to China for strengthened and expanded Japanese rights on the continent north of the Great Wall.

While Katō sought mostly to secure economic privileges from China, others in the Japanese government desired far greater political advantages for Japan.<sup>[12]</sup> The foreign minister received numerous proposals, including those from Yamagata, War Minister [Oka Ichinosuke \(1860-1916\)](#), and the army general staff, demanding, among other things, China's assent to Japanese advisement on political, financial, and military matters. The most egregious of these demands had the potential of derailing negotiations over the concrete and attainable economic concessions that were Katō's focus. In the end, Katō chose to incorporate most of the proposals into his list of treaties to be

negotiated with China, later referred to as Japan's Twenty-One Demands.

The demands outraged Chinese president Yuan Shikai (1859-1916) when Japanese minister to China Hioki Eki (1861-1926) presented them on 18 January 1915. Yuan engaged all strategies to avoid agreeing to the demands. He first delayed the negotiations. While stalling, Yuan discussed the demands with the Chinese [press](#), whipping up sentiment against Japan. He did the same with foreign newspaper correspondents and then sought the friendly intervention of the Western powers. The [United States](#) initially greeted the demands with alarm but acquiesced, noting Japan and China's special relationship. However, when Tokyo attempted to apply pressure to China by reinforcing its troops in the region, the American response hardened into a declaration that it would not tolerate actions that infringed upon Chinese sovereignty.<sup>[13]</sup>

Domestic political pressure grew, too. With negotiations in Beijing moving slowly, Katō faced criticism that he was losing control of the situation. To be sure, Japanese leaders supported the demands, but had become increasingly convinced that Katō could not deliver them. The rift with Britain in particular alarmed the elder statesmen who met with Katō in early May 1915 to express their displeasure with his leadership. Katō had agreed to meet with the elder statesmen to obtain their approval on a recently drafted ultimatum to China over its acceptance of the demands. Yamagata requested that Katō personally travel to Beijing to negotiate with Yuan directly. Katō refused but, in the end, submitted an ultimatum to the Chinese that omitted the most objectionable of the Japanese demands.<sup>[14]</sup> Faced with the surprisingly generous ultimatum and lacking any real outside support from the Western powers, Yuan accepted Japan's terms on 9 May 1915.

Katō bumbled his way to a successful conclusion of Sino-Japanese treaties that delivered the Japanese demands concerning Shandong, south Manchuria and Eastern Inner Mongolia, Fujian, and the Han-Ye-Ping mining company. Still, his monopolization of foreign policymaking angered elder statesmen Yamagata, who schemed politically to oust the foreign minister without success in mid-1915. Curiously, Katō himself did what Yamagata had failed to do by resigning from the cabinet in a reshuffle several weeks later. Hoping to capitalize on the political standing he achieved early in the war, Katō sought to escape the shadow of Prime Minister Okuma Shigenobu (1838-1922) and establish his own cabinet. This proved to be a miscalculation. When Okuma attempted to make way for Katō to become premier in 1916, Yamagata blocked the move and instead orchestrated a new cabinet headed by his ally, General Terauchi Masatake (1852-1919).

Even before the installment of the Terauchi cabinet in October 1916, Yamagata had already reasserted his influence in foreign policymaking with the reshuffled Okuma cabinet. With Katō out of way, Yamagata was able to achieve his long-desired reorientation of Japanese diplomacy away from Katō's favored Britain to tsarist [Russia](#) by pushing through his plan for a bilateral [alliance](#). The Russo-Japanese convention of 1916, which included secret provisions that came to light a year later in the 1917 Bolshevik [revolution](#), stipulated that the two powers would defend the other's interests in Asia against a third-party attack. Yamagata had many of the same aims as Katō (e.g. protecting and augmenting Japanese interests on the continent) but he believed Japan could achieve those aims

more effectively via St. Petersburg rather than London.

Despite a proclamation trumpeting a new approach to China, the fundamentals of the Terauchi cabinet's policy – respect for China's territorial integrity, Sino-Japanese friendship, and the maintenance of existing interests – were not a significant departure from its predecessor.<sup>[15]</sup> The Terauchi cabinet, however, did employ a new kind of diplomacy to China: financial diplomacy in the form of the Nishihara loans. Private Japanese financier Nishihara Kamezo (1873-1954) arranged a series of loans to Chinese leader Duan Qirui (1865-1936) in return for Chinese confirmation of Japan's possession of Jiaozhou, control of the railways in Shandong province, and further rights in Manchuria. Katō and Terauchi shared similar foreign policy goals but, at least in this case, achieved them by different means.

Not all in the Japanese leadership supported Terauchi's financial diplomacy in China. General Tanaka Gi'ichi for example desired a more direct and military-oriented approach to China policy. To combat the influence of Tanaka in foreign policymaking, Terauchi sought approval of his plans from the political party presidents. These meetings would come to be formalized in the establishment of the Advisory Council on Foreign Affairs (*Gaikō chōsakai*), a group that included the party presidents, members of the cabinet including the premier and foreign minister, and representatives from the armed services and the Privy Council among others. The council provided the Terauchi cabinet's foreign policy the cover of consensus but also worked effectively to limit Tanaka's influence on China policy.<sup>[16]</sup> While Japan's war aims of securing its interests on the mainland remained steadfast, the question of how best to achieve that aim increasingly became a flashpoint for domestic politics.

As events unfolded in Europe, the Terauchi cabinet trained its sights on the continent north of the Great Wall. The Russian Revolution of 1917 created a power vacuum in the Russian Far East, into which Terauchi and the advisory council, with the strong backing of Yamagata, sought to insert the Japanese military. Japan first achieved an understanding with the United States regarding China through the Lansing-Ishii Agreement in November 2017, in which Tokyo confirmed its support for the principles of the Open Door and Chinese territorial integrity and Washington recognized Japan's special interests in China. Terauchi then sought to extend Japanese influence and interests in north Manchuria, Primorskaya Oblast, and Siberia by negotiating the Sino-Japanese Military Agreement of May 1918 that allowed for joint military operations in the region against the new threat posed by the Soviet Union. This agreement then provided the legal basis for further Japanese military operations on the continent as part of the allied Siberian Intervention beginning later that year.<sup>[17]</sup> These later military exploits on the continent proved to be far less popular domestically and significantly less successful in expanding Japanese imperial interests in China than did efforts earlier in the war.

Cementing Japan's wartime gains fell to Prime Minister Hara Takashi (1856-1921), whose cabinet succeeded Terauchi's in September 1918. Hara's main goal at the Paris Peace Conference was to obtain formal recognition in the treaty document of Japan's military and diplomatic victories during the war that resulted in the expansion of the Japanese empire in China and the South Pacific. In this way, the new Hara cabinet pursued the same war aims as the Okuma and Terauchi cabinets that

preceded it.

However, the Hara cabinet did make adjustments to Japanese diplomacy. The first “commoner” appointed as prime minister, Hara sought successfully to wrest control of Japanese foreign policy away from the elder statesmen and their allies in the military and bureaucracy who had controlled it (save from Katō’s success earlier in the decade) since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In one example of this effort, Hara pushed through the restoration of the Jiaozhou concession to China, over the objections of some in the government, but not before Germany unconditionally conferred it to Japan via the peace treaty. The Hara cabinet also discontinued Terauchi’s financial diplomacy in China by announcing that Japan would refrain from offering financial assistance since it might “foment political complications in that country.”<sup>[18]</sup> In a further departure, Hara, who prioritized cooperation with the United States, worked to improve relations with Washington as seen, for example, in Japan’s participation in the Washington Conference (1921-1922).<sup>[19]</sup>

In these and other ways, the Hara cabinet came to monopolize foreign policymaking to the point that the advisory council increasingly lost influence and was eventually disbanded in 1922. The Hara cabinet realized a shift in control of Japanese diplomacy, which Katō initiated at the outset of the war, away from the elder statesmen and military to party politicians and the foreign ministry. This new reality would continue throughout the 1920s. However, Japan’s overarching diplomatic aims of protecting and expanding its interests on the continent and maintaining its status as a world power would remain constant.

## Conclusion: Fulfillment of War Aims

By most measures, Japan successfully achieved its war aims. Japanese leaders regarded the war as a great opportunity and they seized it. Tokyo successfully raised Japan’s international status by providing all manner of aid to its allies during the war. Japanese shipping carried [supplies](#) between Britain and France, while cargo ships routinely plied the [seas](#) between Japan and Europe. Some of that cargo included war materiel, as Japan provided weapons and even warships to the allied effort. Japan’s booming economy allowed Tokyo to provide financial assistance through loans and direct aid.<sup>[20]</sup>

The end of the war found Japan a valuable member of the victorious Entente; Japan had proven its worth through the activities listed above and as a loyal British ally fighting against Germany in Asia and conducting maritime operations around the globe. The powers regarded Japan as one of the “Big Five” victors (along with France, Britain, Italy, and the United States), and welcomed Japanese plenipotentiaries to the Paris Peace Conference where they collectively dictated the terms of peace to the Central Powers. Moreover, Japan’s role in founding the [League of Nations](#) and its status as one of four permanent members of the League Council earned it a privileged place within the league leadership. Lastly, the powers recognized and affirmed Japan’s new status as a Pacific empire by giving Japan the islands of German Micronesia as a League of Nations class C mandate. Although

there was some lingering skepticism if not downright concern on the part of the Allies over Japan's actions in China with the Twenty-One Demands and in the Russian Far East with the Siberian Expedition, Japan's position as a world power in 1918 was undeniable.

In conjunction with securing recognition as a great power, Japan's other primary war aim was to protect and enhance its interests in China. Here, too, Japan could point to a long list of successful endeavors. The most pressing objective was to extend Japanese leases in south Manchuria, something Japan accomplished via a 1915 treaty with China that emanated from the Twenty-One Demands. The treaty stipulated ninety-nine-year leases for the Kwantung Territory and the South Manchuria Railway, in addition to granting Japanese citizens freedom of residence and the right to lease land in south Manchuria, and the right to joint agricultural or industrial undertakings with Chinese residents in Eastern Inner Mongolia.<sup>[21]</sup>

Japan was similarly successful in Shandong province, effectively taking over Germany's sphere of interest in China. In another 1915 treaty, China consented to recognize any agreement that Japan might make with Germany concerning its rights and interests in Shandong. This had the effect of a complete transfer of the German concession to Japan. The Japanese wasted no time in waiting for Germany's capitulation in Europe to capitalize on its new position in China. Japanese officials and civilians quickly took over railways, civil administration, businesses, and many industries. The Japanese population in Shandong's capital city Jinan (Tsinan) went from 450 before the beginning of World War I to 25,000 at its conclusion.<sup>[22]</sup> Owing to secret treaties with Britain, France, Italy, and Russia signed during the war, in which the powers agreed to support Japanese claims in Shandong in return for Japanese naval assistance in the Mediterranean, Japan was able to assure that the Versailles Treaty included the stipulation that Germany transferred its Shandong concessions to Japan.<sup>[23]</sup> Although Japan later restored Chinese sovereignty over Jiaozhou in 1922 following the Washington Conference, it retained certain economic privileges and significant influence in the province.

Japan's experience in World War I, however, was not without some setbacks. In fulfilling its war aims on the continent, Japan sparked intense anti-Japanese sentiment amongst the Chinese throughout the war. These feelings coalesced in the May Fourth Movement when, after hearing Japan would not be required to restore Jiaozhou to China as part of peace treaty in Paris, Chinese students took to the streets in protest against both the peace conference and the Chinese government. The demonstrations spread throughout the country and soon involved striking workers and a general boycott of Japanese goods. The protests intensified a [nationalism](#) in China that would regard Japan and its imperial interests in the country as enemy number one throughout the 1920s.

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## Notes

1. ↑ Quoted in Burkman, Thomas: *Japan and the League of Nations*, Honolulu 2008, p. 1.
2. ↑ Dickinson, Frederick R.: *War and National Reinvention. Japan in the Great War, 1914-1919*, Cambridge, M.A. 1999, p. 52.
3. ↑ *Ibid.*, p. 39.
4. ↑ *Ibid.*, p. 35.
5. ↑ Chiba, Isao: *Kyū Gaikō no Keisei. Nihon Gaikō, 1900–1919 [The Formation of Old Diplomacy. Japanese Diplomacy 1900-1919]*, Tokyo 2008, p. 282.
6. ↑ Quoted in Dickinson, *War and National Reinvention* 1999, p. 45.
7. ↑ Yamagata quoted in Dickinson, *War and National Reinvention* 1999, p. 37; and Chiba, *Kyū Gaikō* 2008, p. 282.
8. ↑ Lowe, Peter: *Great Britain and Japan's Entrance into the Great War, 1914-1915*, in: O'Brien, Phillips Payson (ed.): *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance, 1902-1922*, New York 2004, p. 161.
9. ↑ Quoted in Chiba, *Kyū Gaikō* 2008, p. 280 [translated by author].
10. ↑ Nish, Ian: *Alliance in Decline. A Study of Anglo-Japanese Relations, 1908-23*, London 1972, p. 146.
11. ↑ Naraoka, Sochi: *A New Look at Japan's Twenty-One Demands*, in: Minohara, Tosh et al. (eds.): *The Decade of the Great War*, Leiden 2014, p. 192.
12. ↑ Dickinson, *War and National Reinvention* 1999, p. 92.
13. ↑ Bryan to Guthrie, 11 May 1915. Full cable reproduced in Maki, John M. (ed.): *Conflict and Tension in the Far East. Key Documents, 1894-1960*, Seattle 1961, pp. 38-39.
14. ↑ There is some historical controversy over this ultimatum. Yamagata believed that he had convinced Katō to drop group five from the ultimatum and thereby avoided war with China. Dickinson believes this to be nonsense, instead arguing that Yamagata did not necessarily wish to avoid war, nor did he convince Katō to omit group five. Rather, Katō revised the ultimatum to not include the group due to Britain's strong negative reaction to the demands. Dickinson, *War and National Reinvention* 1999, pp. 108-111. Other scholars, such as Naraoka, continue to put forth Yamagata's interpretation of the events by claiming the elder statesmen most likely convinced Katō to modify the ultimatum. Naraoka, *A New Look* 2014, p. 208.
15. ↑ Nish, *Alliance in Decline* 1972, p. 198.
16. ↑ Dickinson, *War and National Reinvention* 1999, p. 168.
17. ↑ Itoh, Mayumi: *The Origins of Contemporary Sino-Japanese Relations*, New York 2016, p. 104.
18. ↑ *Dai-46 kai Teikoku Gikai, Kizoku-in iinkai giji sokkiroku [Proceedings of the House of Peers in the 46th Imperial Diet]*, 3rd session, 24 January 1923, Tokyo, pp. 49-52.
19. ↑ Asada, Sadao: *Between the Old Diplomacy and the New, 1918-1922. The Washington System and the Origins of Japanese-American Rapprochement*, in: *Diplomatic History* 30 (2006), pp. 211-230.



20. ↑ Dickinson, Frederick: More Than a “Moment”. Woodrow Wilson and the Foundations of Twentieth Century Japan, in: Japanese Journal of Political Science 19 (2018), p. 591.
21. ↑ Full text of the treaty in Maki, Conflict and Tension 1961, p. 40.
22. ↑ Masaru, Ikei: Santō Mondai, go yon undō wo meguru nicchū kankei [The Shandong Issue. The May 4th Movement and Sino-Japanese Relations], in: Hōgaku kenkyū 43/1 (1970), p. 211.
23. ↑ This stipulation only granted European recognition of the transferal of German rights in China to Japan, since China refused to sign the treaty and the United States government ultimately failed to ratify it.

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