

# Rising Japanese Aggression

## *From Feudal Nation to Imperial Power*

When Japanese aggression in Asia finally brought her into conflict with the western nations, those nations mainly faced an enemy of their own making as Japan's imperialism was largely modelled on their example. Threatening Tokyo Bay with military destruction if he was not allowed to negotiate a trade treaty, US navy Commodore Matthew Perry\* had set a precedent in 1854 that the Japanese would remember for a long time. Being at mercy of Perry's small but modern fleet of steamships, the pressed Tokugawa shogunate\* could do nothing but accept his terms at that time. These terms, drawn up by President Fillmore\* himself and approved by Congress, included permitting the American whaling fleet to stock up coal and supplies and American merchant ships to use several harbours. For more than two hundred years, Japanese ports had been closed to international business although Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese traders had originally been warmly welcomed by the curious Japanese when they first arrived in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. But as Portugal and Spain started to use their trading connections to evangelise Japan and as their missionaries started to destroy traditional temples, the shoguns threw them out. Only the Dutch traders were allowed to stay, making them the country's sole contact with the world beyond Asia. Thus the American claims represented a drastic change in Japanese history as they were about to help flood the somewhat backward country with western products and influences. To some young samurai\* it became evident that they had to act resolutely to save their country's independence. Attributing Japan's loss of power to several decaying shogunates\*, these samurai aimed at restoring the emperor as the central authority. Therefore they helped modernize young Emperor Mutsuhito's\* army along the lines of European standards and, with this army, finally succeeded in overthrowing the last old shogunates in 1868. With his advisors initiating wide-ranging military, educational, political, and economic reforms, Mutsuhito became known as "Meiji" – the enlightened – and his rule as the Meiji Restoration\*. This term is misleading, however, since it sounds like Japan was restored as a sovereign nation, but traditional Japanese values and ways of life were not restored. They were abandoned in order to keep up with the west. The hierarchical class system was rendered more flexible by land reforms and by extending suffrage to male taxpayers, yet such reforms were not intended to liberalize Japan. Politically, the restored Japanese Empire rather followed the German model with its strong executive. What such reforms really aimed at was transforming Japan into an industrialized nation. By allowing the peasants to leave their land, a migration to the new industrial centres was made possible, and by including property qualifications in the voting system, it was guaranteed that big business – and not workers' unions – could control economic development. Though such measures would later lead to typical social problems as experienced by all industrial European nations, they definitely strengthened the economy at first. For example, within twenty years of these reforms, coal

production increased eightfold, the number of companies threefold, and the size of Japan's merchant fleet almost sevenfold. Developing into a global leader in exports, Japan reformed its foreign policy as well. Only forty years after Japan had to open up to western trade in the face of supreme military power, she now began to copy this strategy. However, unlike Commodore Perry in 1854, Japan would not leave it at the mere threat of violence.

With her army modernized by Prussian advisors, Japan forcibly pushed China out of Korea in 1895. Korea's independence from China was officially propagated to be a matter of national security because the Korean Peninsula was perceived as a geographical "dagger pointed at the heart of Japan." Though Korea had traditionally been a tributary state to her big neighbour China, a new threat was sensed when China sent more troops into the country to crush a rebellion in 1894. Japan immediately dispatched her own troops – officially to help put down the uprising. But the underlying aims of both, China and Japan, soon became apparent: Even after the Korean rebels had easily been beaten, neither China nor Japan were willing to draw back their troops and loosen their grip on a region rich in coal and iron ore. The inevitable clash between the powers, the First Sino-Japanese War\*, soon proved Japan's superiority as her smaller but much more effective army and navy defeated larger Chinese forces. According to the Treaty of Shimonoseki\*, China had to pay high reparations, open some ports to Japanese trade, and pass control over Korea and Formosa to Japan.

Gaining money to re-invest in the economy, precious resources, and exclusive markets for her products, Japan's 1895 victory did not only fuel her own economic rise. It also effectively ended China's position as Asian hegemonic power which the country had held for more than two thousand years. Of course, throughout the 19th century, European nations had already forced China to open her doors for their industrialized goods in several military conflicts like the Opium Wars\* or the Sino-French War\*. But the Sino-Japanese War was the first encounter in which another Asian nation managed to do so. The event also proved Japan's reaction to western imperialism to be more successful: While China had mainly relied on her own crumbling culture in vain, Japan had almost completely followed western guidelines on her way to a modern nation. Indeed, Japan had copied the western nations' model so much that she was already beginning to compete over pieces of the disintegrating Chinese Empire with them. The first bone of contention was the Liaodong Peninsula in the northwest of Korea.

Although originally ceded to Japan in the Treaty of Shimonoseki, France, Germany, and Russia had protested against this decision in the "Triple Intervention." The three imperial nations knew that the peninsula was vital in controlling the sea-route to Peking and that it included the valuable natural harbour of Port Arthur. Facing such united opposition, Japan had to back down this time and accepted a larger Chinese indemnity instead. But it proved difficult to keep this region neutral as Russia was in desperate need of a warm-water port in the east of her empire. Dispatching a flotilla to Port Arthur in 1897, the Russians forced the weakened Qing Dynasty to lease them the harbour and surrounding areas. Then they began

constructing a railroad connection to Vladivostok, their commercial and military centre at the Pacific coast in the northeast of their empire. As this railroad line was bordering Japan's sphere of influence in northern Korea, tensions were about to mount again. However, the Japanese were not the only ones opposed to the railroad. The Boxers, or "Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists," were a Chinese movement discontent with growing western influence such as Christianity or opium trade. They saw the construction of the railroad as yet another encroachment on their sovereignty. When the Boxers finally rebelled in 1900, they also destroyed two of the new railway stations. But the Boxers' main focus lay on Peking. Here, they besieged the international legation quarters. As the Chinese Empress Dowager Cixi\* did not interfere and finally even supported the Boxers, Great Britain, France, the United States, Italy, Austria, Germany, Japan and Russia united in the Eight Nations Alliance to free their officials. This way, the Boxer Rebellion forged a temporary bond between Russia and Japan while it deepened their differences at the same time. To suppress Boxer attacks on Port Arthur and her railroad line, Russia had moved about two hundred thousand troops into Manchuria, promising their withdrawal once the rebellion was crushed. However, this promise had not been honoured by 1903 and the Japanese claimed repeated Russian infringements on Korean territory. To ease hostilities, Japan proposed setting up a free trade area with the Russians in Manchuria and the Japanese in Korea. But Tsar Nicholas II let negotiations drag on. It has been assumed that he hoped for the completion of the Trans-Siberian Railway which would have helped to transport his troops to the far eastern theatre of war, giving the Russians a huge numerical advantage. Probably aware of such a strategy, the Japanese attacked in a pre-emptive strike on 8th February 1904. After torpedoing the Russian Pacific fleet at Port Arthur, the Japanese also managed to defeat her Baltic fleet on its way to Russia's last Pacific Port at Vladivostok. Without a functioning rail connection or a navy, Russia could not supply her troops any longer and was forced to surrender. This unexpected defeat laid bare Russia's backwardness and helped trigger the Russian Revolution of 1905. Japan, on the contrary, had emerged as a serious contestant to the western powers in the 'Scramble for Asia.' Her victory was based on industrialized weaponry like sea mines and on comparably flexible tactics in the sea battles, showing Japan to be a military advanced nation. However, Japan soon felt that the western nations denied translating her actual power into political importance.

### ***Asian Alien***

From the start, the peace treaty, mediated by American President Theodore Roosevelt\* and signed in Portsmouth on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1905, was perceived to be too moderate by the Japanese public. Korea was again recognized as a Japanese sphere of interest and was officially annexed in 1910. But this merely confirmed the pre-war status quo and Japan was not allowed to gain any new territory on mainland China. From a neutral perspective, this might be owed to America's general Open Door Policy\* of that time. To the Japanese, however, it illustrated

implicit racism. This opinion was additionally fostered by the circumstance that Russia did not pay any indemnity. But as the Japanese felt they had been drawn into the conflict by Russia's aggressive behaviour in Manchuria, they were convinced to deserve reparations for their war efforts. This also appeared logical considering the high indemnities paid in all former colonial disputes, from the First Opium War down to the Eight Nations Alliance's victory over the Boxers just five years before. In public opinion, the only perceivable difference between those former conflicts and the Russo-Japanese War was the skin-colour of the defeated. For the first time in modern history, an Asian people had beaten a Caucasian nation – and the other white people did not seem to begrudge the Japanese this victory.

10 Of course, Great Britain had congratulated the Japanese fleet on its success. There had even been an Anglo-Japanese alliance as Great Britain had legitimately hoped Japan might bind Russia's eastern fleet and stop her from interfering in Britain's own naval policy. Such political ties were kept secret, however. Public reaction was very reserved instead. This was also the case with the French and German populace. Japan's victory – even over a rival in the colonial race – was not cheered openly. And the USA even started excluding citizens of Japanese origin from public life. Segregation for Asian pupils was introduced at schools and adults were prohibited from purchasing land, for example. Due to such western distrust, Japan concluded to rely on herself and pursue her own interests in the world. Nevertheless, she tried not to dupe the west openly at first. The Triple Intervention against the Treaty of Shimonoseki had taught her how influential the west could be – if it cooperated. Fortunately, for Japan, such western cooperation was rapidly weakening because of the Balkan Crises\*. As soon as these crises had turned into full-blown warfare in August 1914, the major powers were bound in Europe. Now Japan took advantage of the favourable moment and boldly went ahead to enlarge her Asian Empire.

25 This was made easy as China was in turmoil, too, at that time. In 1912, after decades of political and economic failures, the Qing Dynasty had finally been overthrown. Officially, a republican government had been established. But as its members included anything from socialists to monarchists, they could not come to an understanding about China's future direction. Instead, regional warlords competed for power and constantly threatened the shaky central government. Vulnerable to attacks from within, the Republic of China was unable to put up any resistance to pressure from outside. Aware of this situation, Japan presented the "Twenty-One Demands"\* to Chinese President Yuan Shikai\* in 1915. These demands mainly guaranteed Japan larger spheres of interest and an exclusion of other nations from various Chinese markets. Japan could establish a de-facto rule over all of Manchuria effortlessly in this way. Nevertheless, this unauthorized action clearly undermined America's Open Door Policy for China. It therefore had to cause diplomatic difficulties with the western powers once they had their hands free again at the end of the First World War. Officially, Japan had even been allied during the war with those nations she was now excluding from profitable

Chinese trade. But she had never taken real action and had simply sided with France, Great Britain, and the USA as she hoped to receive some former German colonies as a reward. She had even joined allied intervention forces in the Russian Civil War in the hope of acquiring Siberia with its vast natural resources. Siding with her former enemy, the Russian Tsar, she had deployed troops to help defeat the Bolsheviks. Due to the fact that she had not been otherwise involved in the World War, it was easy for Japan to send a contingent of 70,000 troops to Siberia via her Manchurian colony quickly. But this geographical and numerical advantage made the other intervening forces fear Japanese predominance in this region. They had been suspicious of Japan's intentions anyway since the Twenty-One Demands had revealed her colonial ambitions in the Far East. Therefore, they pressured Japan into retreating from Siberia in 1925 although she had managed to hold out against the newly organized Red Army that far. Nevertheless, she was allowed to keep former German territories in China and New Guinea as these were regarded less influential at that time. Moreover, asking Japan to hand back these regions would have contradicted French and British acquisitions of former German colonies too starkly.

Comparable to her existing possessions, Japan exploited her newly won regions economically. For example, land reforms took away land from all peasants who could not prove their ownership in written form. As illiteracy was traditionally widespread among the peasantry, such reforms were indirect expropriations, and the land was then sold cheaply to Japanese settlers. Local protests were brutally put down by the Japanese army. Such measures did not only stir local antipathies, they clearly contradicted self-determination established in Wilson's 14 Points\* as well. The American president regarded imperialism as one major source of the First World War and therefore wanted to establish self-determination of the colonized peoples. However, Japan was obviously heading in the opposite direction. So Japan had become an empire in Asia but had at the same time become disintegrated from the Western powers and the Asian population. In Japanese propaganda, this position as the odd man out was turned around and transformed into a crude sense of mission. Taking up bits and pieces of Japanese history, an ideology was fostered which proclaimed the Japanese to be the most advanced of the Asian peoples and therefore the naturally ruling race.

### ***Establishing the Japanese Empire***

This ideology is comparable to that of Nazi Germany and would eventually bring those World War I enemies together more closely. Their future cooperation was further fostered by their mutual aversion towards the Soviet Union. While officially claiming to prevent the spread of communism, both nations really aimed at gaining more territory for themselves. In Northeast Asia, Japan dreamed of getting hold of Siberia again. However, under Stalin's\* draconian rule, the Bolsheviks had turned all parts of the former Russian Empire into Soviet Republics and had started to safeguard them by military means. The Japanese feared that this develop-

ment would sooner or later lead to renewed conflicts over Manchuria as well. This area, containing raw materials like coal, iron ore, and oil, had become vital for Japan's economy since these resources would have otherwise had to be imported from the USA, making Japan dependent on a country with whom it was growing diplomatically estranged. Furthermore, Manchuria had also become the destination of Japanese emigrants trying to escape unemployment when the Great Depression hit their home country. Consequently, Japan longed to station her troops in the region to defend her economic interests. In order to do so, Japanese military advisors staged the "Mukden Incident"\* in 1931. Blaming Chinese traitors for the act, they set off an explosion on the tracks of the Manchurian Railway which the Japanese had won from the Russians in the Russo-Japanese war of 1905. Though the explosion caused little damage, the Japanese army was sent in immediately to suppress such alleged acts of terrorism in the future. To camouflage her military dictatorship, Japan transformed the area into the state of Manchukuo\* which was proclaimed on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1932 and officially headed by Puyi\*. Appointing this last member of the deposed Qing Dynasty leader of the state, Manchukuo was made to look like the legitimate succession state to the Chinese empire. Of course, such see-through tactics were not accepted internationally. US Secretary of State Henry Stimson\* sent a doctrine to Japan and China stating that forceful territorial changes would not be accepted and that the USA regarded the Open Door Policy still to be valid. Also, a report commissioned by the League of Nations claimed that Manchuria remained a part of China. In response, Japan simply withdrew from the League in 1933. This constituted the first real setback for the organization designed to secure world peace. Sending armed forces to the other side of the globe to interfere in a conflict which did not at all concern them was not acceptable to the populace of the western democracies, especially as the horrors of World War I were still very much alive in their memories. And even severe economic sanctions were out of the question as the industrial nations feared they might disrupt budding world trade so shortly after the Depression. To Japan, this behaviour signaled that she could enlarge her Asian empire without having to worry about far-reaching repercussions.

Using tactics similar to the Mukden Incident, the Japanese claimed to have been attacked by Chinese soldiers at the city of Shanhaiguan, located at the very eastern end of the Great Wall. In the following 'counter-attack,' the Japanese gained control of this strategically important place. With the Shanhaiguan Pass of the Great Wall secured, access to China's northern provinces of Jehol\* and Hebei\* was easy and they were incorporated into the Japanese Empire. From then on, Japan attempted to gain control of mainland China step by step over the next couple of years. This proved to be a successful strategy because China was torn apart by a civil war between Chiang Kai-shek's\* nationalist Kuomintang\* and Mao-Tse-Tung's\* Communists and could therefore hardly counter outside pressure. When the Kuomintang seemed to crush the Communists in the mid-1930s, the Japanese feared the nationalists might finally turn into serious enemies, however. So Japan planned to cut the Kuomintang's supply

route by driving Chinese forces away from the Marco Polo Bridge and the adjacent modern railroad bridge in the southwest of Beijing. This would have kept the Kuomintang in the south and would have guaranteed Japanese command of all north-eastern China, but this time, Chinese forces could not be driven away that easily. Japanese military actions, planned as just  
5 another minor 'incident,' eventually turned into full-scale warfare on 7th July 1937. To defend their home country, the Kuomintang and the Communists united and tried to drive out the invaders in the ensuing Second Sino-Japanese War\*. Faced by a real opponent now, the Japanese grew ever more brutal and started to play out the advantage of their industrialized forces against Chinese civilians as well. The most notorious examples of this course of action were  
10 the bombings of Shanghai and Nanking by the Imperial Japanese air force in 1937. In December of that year Nanking was conquered and an orgy of violence ensued. About 200,000 people were murdered and around 20,000 women – some less than 12 years old – raped.

Though such actions helped Japan win the Battle of Shanghai on the one hand, they undermined her diplomatic position on the other hand. Shanghai was a city with international  
15 citizens and many western businesses, and Japan's brutality was therefore not simply an Asian problem any longer. Though no direct intervention followed, the bombing of Shanghai had stirred the western powers, especially the USA. From now on, the USA imposed economic sanctions, starting with the cancellation of commercial treaties, then prohibiting imports of much needed resources like petrol and scrap metal to Japan, and finally freezing all Japanese  
20 property in America. Additionally, the USA also began to station their Pacific fleet closer to the Japanese Empire by transferring it to Pearl Harbor. Well aware of these growing tensions, Japan undertook two steps to secure her empire in the long run: Firstly, cut off from international supplies, Japan headed for all the natural resources in her Asian sphere. Thus, from 1940 onwards, she invaded Dutch Indonesia, French Indochina and British Malaya to secure  
25 vital goods like rubber, oil, and iron ores. Of course, this had to lead to counter-attacks from the western allies once they were not preoccupied with the European theatres of war any more. Consequently, to keep France and Britain engaged in Europe, Japan signed the Tripartite Pact\* with fascist Germany and Italy in 1940. Secondly, Japan planned a pre-emptive strike against the USA, hoping to evict them from Asia before they could intervene in what  
30 was considered to be Japanese affairs.

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