



Prepared for the IIPS Symposium on

Japan's Position as a Maritime Nation

16 – 17 October 2007

Tokyo

Session 3

Wednesday, 17 October 2007

The Japanese and British Naval Heritage

Philip Towle

University of Cambridge

THE JAPANESE AND BRITISH NAVAL HERITAGE

PHILIP TOWLE
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Geopolitics

Japan and Britain share many geopolitical features as small, densely-populated islands, dependent on trade and located off great continents. They have both ‘learnt the hard way’ that the sea can be a defensive shield if it is in friendly hands and an avenue for invaders if it is dominated by hostile states. For a thousand years from the Romans to the Normans the British Isles were subject to successive waves of invaders, it was hardly surprising that the English devoted so much effort, however intermittently, over the next millennium to building a strong navy and to monitoring political change on the continent.¹ The Japanese tried to isolate themselves from the outside world for 200 years and then also began to build up one of the world’s great navies at the end of the 19th Century.²

Yet the culture and circumstances of the two states have also been very different. China was the predominant land power in East Asia until it was crippled by Western aggression in the 19th Century. Europe, by contrast, has never had such a power after the fall of the Roman Empire. When a hegemonial state threatened to arise, the weaker states combined against it often financed and led by Britain as the predominant naval power. European history has, therefore, been more turbulent than Asian, since the object of the balance has not been to keep the peace but to preserve the independence of individual states, however small.³

Historic Precedents

There are, nevertheless, some parallels between the current East Asian situation and the correlation of European forces before 1914. Then, as now, a number of new great powers had begun to emerge. Just as British naval dominance, investments by the City of London and Britain’s free trade policy facilitated world-wide economic development in the 19th Century, so US naval dominance since 1945 and its free trade policy have enormously benefited the rising powers. The greatest economic and political success story since 1945 has been the export-led development first of Japan, then of the Asian Tigers and China, and now of India. But Asian economic success has naturally led to the emergence of new naval and military powers, precisely the situation which the Europeans failed to manage before 1914. Chun Kun Lee of the Korean Institute for Maritime Strategy calculated that World military spending fell by 31.4% between 1985 and 1996 while East Asian spending grew by 39.9%, representing a very

¹ Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, *Statesmen and Seapower*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1946; Garrett Mattingley, *The Defeat of the Spanish Armada*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1962; Norman Longmate, *Defending the Island: From Caesar to the Armada*, Grafton, London, 1989; N A M Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815*, Allen Lane, London, 2004.

² For a brief history see Stephen Howarth, *Morning Glory: A History of the Imperial Japanese Navy*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1983.

³ Max Beloff, *The Balance of Power*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1968.

considerable East Asian arms race, particularly when the collapse of the Soviet Navy in the area is taken into consideration.⁴

It is, of course, the rise of China and the Chinese Navy, which causes most anxiety in Washington and Tokyo. The official 2006 Chinese paper on National Defence states that:

The Navy aims at gradual extension of the strategic depth for offshore defensive operations and enhancing its capabilities in integrated maritime operations and nuclear counterattacks. The Air Force aims at speeding up its transition from territorial air defense to both offensive and defensive operations, and increasing its capabilities in the areas of air strike, air and missile defense, early warning and reconnaissance, and strategic projection.⁵

In fact, the Chinese are apparently not, for the moment, planning to follow the policy pursued by Germany under Tirpitz and Doenitz of threatening both their potential enemies' trade and their main fleet, but rather they seem to see their navy as a wing of the land forces in the protection of the homeland and its vicinity. Nevertheless, their 2006 paper revealed that the 'official', annual average increase in Chinese defence expenditure from 1990 to 2005 was some 15.35%, despite the end of the Cold War. Of course the Chinese fleet still does not compare technically with the carrier battle groups of the US Navy but, like the German High Seas Fleet in 1914, its rise will make it more difficult for the predominant navy to operate close to its coasts. This is all the more the case since it would coordinate its activities with land based anti-ship missiles which have already proved their effectiveness against the warships of other navies.

Before 1914 the great powers made a number of abortive efforts to enhance international security by reducing the arms race. The Tsar convened the Hague Peace Conferences of 1899 and 1908 to control military spending, but these succeeded only in negotiating relatively peripheral agreements. Bilateral Anglo-German negotiations to abate the most important naval arms race failed because the Germans insisted that Britain should promise to be neutral in the event of a continental war and this was precisely what the British could not agree because of the fear that Germany would become the continental hegemon.⁶ In the last days of peace the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey tried desperately to convene a conference to arbitrate the dispute between Austria-Hungary and Germany on one side and Russia and Serbia on the other, but this too failed because the Austrian and German Emperors insisted that the assassination of the Austrian Archduke, Franz Ferdinand was an affair of honour not open to a negotiated solution.⁷ The Concert of Europe, arms control and disarmament had all proved abortive.

One further reason for that failure was the assumption by the European general staffs that they had to mobilise, or strike first, in the event of a crisis. This greatly shortened the time available to statesmen to find a solution and enabled the armed forces to overrule the German, Austrian and Russian Emperors and insist that, once started, their mobilisation timetables could not be halted or reversed, even if this

⁴ Chun Kun Lee, 'Seapower and security at the close of the Twentieth Century', in David Wilson and Dick Sherwood (Editors), *Oceans Governance and Maritime Strategy*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards NSW, 2000, p 33 ff.

⁵ *China's National Defense in 2006*, Information Office, Beijing, 2006, p. 13.

⁶ Fritz Fischer, *War of Illusions: German Politics from 1911 to 1914*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1975. pp 129-130; Zara S Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1977, pp. 94-99.

⁷ Prince Lichnowsky, *Heading for the Abyss: Reminiscences*, Constable, London, 1928.

made war inevitable. Despite fears expressed at the time, the naval balance was, in fact, more stable. The British First Sea Lord, Sir John Fisher had suggested on a number of occasions before 1914 that the Royal Navy should launch a preventive attack to destroy the German High Seas Fleet before it became too powerful, but, fortunately, the government dismissed his suggestions. The British have pre-empted navies in wartime- at Copenhagen in the Napoleonic Wars and at Mers el Kebir in the Second- but they have not generally staged preventive or pre-emptive attacks in peacetime. The Japanese may have gained militarily more than they lost politically by their pre-emptive attack on the Russian fleet moored outside Port Arthur in 1914, but their similar attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 made the United States absolutely determined to crush its opponents at whatever cost and however long it took. Powerful democracies are not likely to compromise, as the Russian autocracy did at Portsmouth in 1905, without avenging their hurts.

Wartime Precedents

While Britain gave priority to its navy rather than its land forces, both Services often languished for lack of finance in peacetime. The consequence was usually a series of defeats at the beginning of a great war from whose effects Britain was only saved by the protection offered by the English Channel. Before the Battle of Trafalgar in October 1805 and again before the Battle of Britain in 1940, the country was under direct threat of invasion. Only once, before the First World War because of the efforts of Sir John Fisher, was the Royal Navy generally well prepared for the ensuing conflict with many more battleships than the High Seas Fleet and with most battleships withdrawn to home waters and the Mediterranean, thanks to the Anglo-Japanese alliance.⁸ In the inter-war period the Royal Navy was much less successful than the Imperial Japanese Navy or the US Navy in developing large aircraft carriers with the most modern aircraft- a development which was all the more ironic since the RN had pioneered this area. This was in part due to faulty RN doctrine, partly due to continual financing problems and, above all, due to the way in which priority was given to the Royal Air Force and particularly bombers in the 1930s, at the expense of RN aircraft.⁹

In the Falklands War, the RN's last major engagement, its forces had been developed for anti-submarine operations in the North Atlantic on the assumption that the Soviets would be the enemy. Instead, the Royal Navy had to cope with Argentine anti-air operations in the South Atlantic despite the lack of airborne early warning aircraft or conventional fighters. The consequence was, and was expected to be, the loss of a number of ships including two cruisers and a converted helicopter carrier during the recapture of the Islands. However the British claimed to have shot down at least 72 Argentine aircraft, 20 of those by STOVL Sea Harriers and 21 with shipborne missiles.¹⁰ It was a typical triumph of determination over resources.

Despite inadequate finances, the British naval tradition, following Sir Francis Drake and Admiral Nelson, has been offensive. In practice, this was often disadvantageous, as when the RN was reluctant to form convoys of merchant ships

⁸ Arthur J Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, five volumes, Oxford University Press, 1961-1970; Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy 1889-1914*, Routledge, London, 1989.

⁹ Richard Harding, (Editor), *The Royal Navy 1930-2000*, Frank Cass, London, 2005, chapter three; Andrew Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East 1919-1939*, Frank Cass, London, 2004.

¹⁰ *The Falklands Campaign: The Lessons*, Cmnd 8758, London, December 1982.

against submarine attacks during the First World War and almost starved the country as a consequence.¹¹ The Imperial Japanese Navy similarly failed to devote sufficient attention to the protection of seaborne trade in the Second World War with calamitous affects. By the end of the conflict, Japan and the whole of its Empire were reverting to a subsistence economy and slowly starving.¹² The Japanese armed forces were both extremely daring and resourceful, often carrying out operations which Occidental armed forces would have regarded as impossible, such as using their air forces in a number of theatres at the same time and transporting personnel over the sea before maritime control had been gained. This paid off during the first phase of the war, it became increasingly wasteful as the tide of battle turned against them.¹³

The Royal Navy is currently following its tradition of preparing for offensive operations by procuring two aircraft carriers over 50,000 tons, more than twice the size of the Harrier carriers currently in operation. Equally, it is still hampered by peacetime finances, and the procurement of suitable Joint Strike Fighters for the carriers from the United States is currently causing budgetary problems because the RAF is rearming with Typhoon aircraft, the RN also needs to replace the Trident submarines and the army needs fighting vehicles appropriate for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In contrast, the Maritime Self Defence Force has been based on much greater financial stability and has focused its attention on convoy protection. This focus is hardly surprising given the experience of the Second World War and Japan's position as a maritime nation. The MSDF is slightly larger than the Royal Navy with some 44,000 personnel against under 40,000 in the Royal Navy and with the International Institute for Strategic Studies listing over 53 principal surface combatants in the MSDF against 34 in the RN.¹⁴

Conclusion

Both the Royal Navy and the Maritime Self Defence Force operate in uncharted waters because they depend upon their stronger ally to balance the power of potential enemies. Japan, the other Asian nations and the United States have to manage the re-emergence of China as a great power without a calamity of the sort that the Europeans brought upon themselves in 1914 and 1939. There are many more maritime and territorial disputes in East Asia today between Japan and Korea, Korea and China, Taiwan and China, China and Japan, Russia and Japan, than there were between the major European nations before the First World War; then the only significant one was between France and Germany over Alsace and Lorraine and the French were not going to wage war over that issue. Naval power and the introduction of confidence building measures between navies are going to play a major role in Asia and the Pacific over coming decades.

On the positive side is, firstly, the cat's cradle of regional bodies to improve relations which the Asian states have established in recent decades and which are of a

¹¹ John Winton, *Convoy: The Defence of Seaborne Trade 1890-1990*, Michael Joseph, London, 1993; John B Hattendorf et al, (Editors), *British Naval Documents*, Scholar Press, Aldershot, 1993, pp.76-766.

¹² Philip Towle, *From Ally to Enemy: Anglo-Japanese Military Relations 1900-45*, Global Oriental, Folkestone, 1905, chapter 10.

¹³ Jeremy Black (Editor), *The Second World War Volume 111: The Japanese War 1941-1945*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2007, pp. 160, 172.

¹⁴ *The Military Balance 2006*, Routledge, 2006.

sort undreamt of in Europe before 1914.¹⁵ Secondly, trade between the USA and China is now regarded as symbiotic, rather than strictly competitive, as Anglo-German trade was before 1914.¹⁶ Thirdly, all the major regional powers, -Japan, China and the Republic of Korea- have played a constructive role in the recent Six Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear programme which appear, as of September 2007, to have been successful. Fourthly and most importantly, the nuclear arsenals of the Great Powers have made them much more cautious about allowing themselves to be drawn into conflicts than their predecessors were in 1914.

¹⁵ Melissa G Currey and Nicholas Thomas Editors, *Advancing East Asian Regionalism*, Routledge, London and New York, 2007.

¹⁶ Bernard Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1960.