

Student Background Reading

The United States and Japan, 1905-1933

In the early 1900s, one characteristic of a modern world power was that it had obtained overseas holdings. That is, it was an imperial nation. Japan achieved such status with its territorial winnings from the Sino-Japanese War in 1895. It then insured that status by defeating a major European power, Russia. As the victor in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, Japan acquired more territory.

The United States and Japan: Conflicting Interests in China

In the **Treaty of Portsmouth**, which ended the Russo-Japanese War, the Japanese won two major provisions. First, Japan was ceded control of Manchuria, an area in northeast China. Second, it was recognized as the exclusive foreign power able to operate in Korea. Korea was a big gain to the Japanese both politically and economically. But territorial expansion into China was the bigger prize for Japan's growing status as the dominant Asian power. The Japanese government's goals in Asia, however, conflicted with the "**Open-Door**" policy the United States had issued for China in 1899. This policy stressed equal access. No foreign nation operating in China was to be given a special position. Despite this friction over the legitimacy of foreign influence in China, Japan and the United States attempted to establish a cordial relationship. They recognized a need for one another to fulfill domestic wants.

When World War I broke out in 1914, Japan entered on the side of the Allies. Japan, France, Britain, Russia, and other European nations were allied against Germany. As part of the Allied war effort, Japan took possession of German colonial operations in China's Shandong peninsula. The United States entered the war in 1917. It signed an agreement with Japan as its Allied partner. This agreement, the **Ishii-Lansing agreement**, recognized Japan's special interest in Manchuria. In return, Japan recognized China's independence. In other words, the United States agreed not to interfere with Japan's pre-existing interests in Manchuria and Japan agreed not to interfere with America's pre-existing interests in China. At war's end in 1919, Japan, as a member of the victorious Allies, took part in the treaty negotiations at Versailles.

Increasing Tensions: The Treaty of Versailles

The Japanese delegation had two major goals for the Versailles peace talks. First, it wanted to establish clear control of the German colonial possessions in China that Japan had occupied during the war. Second, it wanted to be recognized as a nation equal with the other Western victors of the war. This latter goal included formal recognition of racial equality. Japan formally proposed to include a racial equality clause in the charter of the League of Nations, the international peacekeeping organization that was a major proposal of the peace negotiations. The Treaty of Versailles guaranteed Japan control of the previously German territories in China. However, the European Allies rejected the racial equality clause. This rejection planted the seeds for tension to grow between Japan and the leading Western powers. Eventually, it would lead to the Japanese government's evolution from cooperation with the West.

The Washington Naval Treaty, 1922

Prior to the negotiations at Versailles, the United States, Great Britain, and France had decided to intervene in the civil war that followed the Bolshevik (communist) Revolution in Russia. In

1918, U.S. President Wilson asked Japan to assist in this effort. The intervention was seen as a way to protect the Allied nations' interests in countering communism in Russia. For its part, Japan sought a sphere of influence in Russian Siberia, which the United States opposed. However, this collaborative effort eventually fell apart due to competing national interests. Ultimately, the mission in Russia was a failure for all. It left the U.S.-Japan relationship in a precarious position.

In 1921, in an attempt to rebuild relationships and maintain peace, the United States, Japan, and major European powers convened a conference. This conference, which continued into 1922, came to be known as the **Washington (DC) Naval Conference**. The nations agreed to consult each other in the event of controversy over any Pacific interest. They also agreed to restrict naval warship tonnage to a ratio of 5:5:3 (United States, Great Britain, Japan). Japan agreed to lower tonnage in exchange for a promise that the Western nations would not build naval fortifications in the Pacific. The nations also agreed to recognize the independence and territorial integrity of China.

U.S. Immigration Policy Leads to Further Decline in Relations

Also in 1922, a U.S. Supreme Court ruling caused further decay of the U.S.-Japan relationship. The Supreme Court ruled that no Japanese or other Asian immigrant could become a naturalized U.S. citizen. Two years later, in 1924, a new **Immigration Act** included a clause restricting immigration from nations whose people were ineligible for U.S. citizenship. Since the Supreme Court ruling made Japanese unable to become U.S. citizens, the new immigration law, in effect, barred all Japanese from moving to the United States.

Rising Japanese Militarism, 1930s

In 1929, the stock market crash in the United States and the world-wide depression that followed further strained international relations. To spur economic activity at home, nations imposed tariffs to restrict importation of foreign goods that would compete against domestic goods. With exports to the United States severely restricted, Japan increasingly looked to its holdings in China as a means to strengthen its economic situation. Throughout the 1920s, as the government of Japan continued diplomatic cooperation, a group of young military officers were growing increasingly frustrated at what they saw as slights by the West and capitulation by the government to a position of inferiority. This group believed Japan needed to take control of all of Manchuria in order to prepare for an eventual full-scale war with the United States. Through the 1930s, the militarists in Japan gained increasing control over the national government.

In 1931, the Japanese military blew up a portion of the Manchurian railway and claimed it was an attack by the Chinese. Called the **Manchurian Incident**, this operation gave the Japanese military the excuse it needed to launch an invasion and seize control of the entire Manchurian region of China. In response, the League of Nations instructed Japan to withdraw from the organization for violating the international peace-keeping goals of the League's charter. Japan walked out of the proceedings. However, the Japanese military maintained control of Manchuria. In 1932, Japan formally ceded Manchuria from China and re-established the region as the independent state of Manchukuo. Japan claimed that this move insured the self-determination of the Manchurian people.

Suspicious of the claim that the Japanese were assisting the Manchurians in the goal of self-determination and freedom from the Chinese, the League of Nations established the **Lytton**

Commission to investigate. In February 1933, the **Lytton Report** concluded that Manchukuo was not independent. Instead, it was a puppet state of Japan. Japan had thus violated the treaties signed in Washington in 1922. While the United States was not a part of the League of Nations, it supported their findings. In response, Japan withdrew from the League of Nations in March of 1933. By May of 1933, Japan had pressed further into China.

The economic hardships of the 1930s and the British and American public's unwillingness to go back to war forced their governments to continue to maintain peace for as long as possible.

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