Japan’s War with China: Context and Stakes

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The context in which Japan was drawn into war with China, and what they had at stake going in, are flip sides of the same coin. The contexts and stakes are: democratic government, will of the people, international status, foreign trade, the Emperor, and racial superiority. In the 1920’s and 30’s, Japan was losing the ideal of democracy, the desire to have democracy, and the will of the people. They were drawn into the war with China in order to reunite the citizenry and because of a failed democratic leadership being supplanted by right wing militarists. International status and foreign trade are inextricably linked, and for Japan the world depression limited trade, China limited trade, and America imposed tariffs. Japan’s goal to become a first rate country was hindered by their inability to practice in the international marketplace, and thus they entered war with China to corner a share and to impose themselves as an imperial model like all the other first rate countries they had to emulate. The Emperor and racial superiority were both things that forced Japan into war in order to uphold and protect these ideals, but they were also incredibly fragile institutions which would be easily crushed by a rousing defeat of Japanese forces. This paper will show by examples how these six issues were of paramount importance in the Japanese entrance into war with China as well as their driving need for success out of fear of losing any one of them.

The rise of democracy during the Taisho emperor’s reign (1912-1926) ultimately fell apart because of two factors. One was that the “national consensus which had supported [the] efforts” of the Meiji oligarchs was missing, (Murphey, 307). Some part
of the population would rather have stayed in the past, while another was more adamantly pro-Westernization and democratic reforms. Unfortunately, from the standpoint of freedom of speech and the activism of the people, “Japan’s brief and tentative steps toward a more legitimate democratic system were…not allowed to get very far. The weight of Japanese tradition was against it,” (Murphey, 357). Democracy as a consensus movement did not encompass the will of all Japanese people and this was a decisive factor in the military’s ability to take control. Due in part to the rising distrust of democratic leadership during the world recession, (357), Japan backslid into an increasingly militaristic form of control, “where authority rested on force,” (Murphey, 307). Force, though perhaps not something all people agreed with as a tactic, became a consensus tool because of its very inherent nature in forcing people to come under the umbrella shade.

The second downfall of democracy was in how the military took over the foreign policy in the field, thus eliminating the home government’s role in the decision making process. This can be seen most prominently in the “Mukden Incident” where military officials in the field decided to take action before they could be ordered down by the Japanese government, (Murphey, 360). The military thus “committed Japan to policies of aggression which would not have been freely chosen by those in charge of policy,” (Murphey, 361). Murphey in fact related the ascendance of the military to their impatience “with pettifogging bureaucrats at home or with those who urged caution,” (361). Ultimately, the world recession contributed to the fall of democracy in Japan, along with the continuous role of the militarists throughout who were not prepared to accept the will of the people or the democratically elected representatives in power.
Quickly “Official Japan succumbed to at least a degree of paranoia, accompanied by a need to show the extremists that they too were tough on leftists,” (Murphey, 362). At this point, Japan spiraled out of control. Japan was forced into war with China because they needed to act aggressively according to those in power, they needed to unite the citizenry under one umbrella, and they needed to cement their power base. The failure of democracy and the will of the people was a factor in the Japanese road to war with China, but they were also matters at stake in the war. If Japan had won and continued to win, military control would have been made complete and democracy in Japan would have ceased to exist. The will of the people would have disappeared under the cruel weight of imperialistic aggression by a military race.

Imperialism as a Western model also had a lot to do with Japan’s reasons for going to war with China. After World War II, MacArthur called Japan a “fourth rate nation” and they went all to pieces:

From the moment Commodore Perry had forced Japan open, its leaders had been obsessed with becoming an ittō koku, a country of the first rank. Indeed, fear that such status was being denied Japan was commonly evoked with great emotion as the ultimate reason for going to war against the West. (Dower, 44)

Not only against the West, but also going to war against China created a chance for Japan to prove its military might and imperialist agenda along the lines of the Western models. Beginning with the modernization of Japan itself, the country desired “to be acceptable to Westerners and to be acknowledged as ‘civilized’,” (Murphey, 297). The Anglo-Japanese alliance signed in 1902 went a long way towards acknowledging the Japanese as equal in the eyes of the British. However, the drive for equal status world wide drove Japan to join with the Allies in World War I, and it was when they were accorded a seat a
the table during the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, that they felt they had finally, truly entered into the international sphere.

This moment of success didn’t last long. The Four Power Pact replaced the Anglo-Japanese alliance, and made the three other nations of Britain, America, and France more powerful in the Pacific waters than Japan. America extended the Oriental Exclusion Acts in 1924 to include the Japanese, which was much resented. The League of Nations denounced the Mukden Incident and Japanese annexation of Manchuria, causing the Japanese delegation to walk out of the assembly. Murphey states that “Japan saw itself as still being treated like an inferior by the White imperialists, (364). He goes on to write that, “Japan began to see itself as one of the ‘have-not’ nations victimized by the ‘haves’ with their far greater resources and wealthier economics,” (364). And thus, Japan turned to China as an area in which they could play out their own ‘manifest destiny’—an arena in which they were determined to prove their success to the “white imperialists” as an emerging Asian imperialist. And also, and importantly, an area in which they could take advantage of China’s “rich resources and possible settlement areas,” (Murphey, 359). For indeed, trade with China in coal, iron ore, and cotton\(^1\) ate up a large portion of Japan’s economy, and by gaining control of some of those resources, the Japanese would be able to achieve a closer balance of self-sufficiency.

During World War I, Japan “reaped a golden harvest in trade and its stimulus to domestic industry as well as shipping, with Western competition largely removed,” (Murphey, 304). However, during the world recession the fluctuations in the economic universe created a need for stability in the home markets. One way in which they thought

\(^1\) Murphey, 357.
this could be achieved was through the acquisition of additional colonies, (Murphey, 359). Murphey writes:

As the world economy showed its extreme vulnerability and unreliability, sentiment grew in favor of Japan creating its own dependent sphere in Manchuria and China, to add to what it already controlled in Korea and Taiwan, which could make it independent of the swings in world markets and also free of the need to pander to Western interests. (359)

Going to war with China, provided Japan with an outlet for aggression prior to unleashing their anger at Western dismissal. It was an opportunity for Japan to further their intentions of becoming a first rate country, by acting in their manner that they viewed Western imperialist acting. Hostile actions in China were also entered upon as a spur from economic depression and views towards expanding territorial rights and land mass for population dispersal. At the same time these two things, international status and foreign trades were also at stake in Japan’s military struggles. Ultimately, they lost one and gained the other. Japan may have become a fourth rate nation according to MacArthur, but they also were granted special considerations by America in order to achieve economic reform— as can be seen in Pyle’s essay on “Economic Nationalism”. International status really did suffer though, as did internal pride. Defeat came with a heavy price for Japan and it was a definite stake that they gambled and lost in going to war with China.

Another stake which the Japanese were very afraid of losing in the war, but which was one of the main impetuses urging them forwards at the beginning, was the role of the Emperor and the cultural build-up of racial superiority promoted through Shinto Nationalism. The Emperor was used to display the divinity of Japan as a country by being a descendent of the sun goddess Ameterasu. Indoctrination of this idea in schools
taught children to revere the emperor and the Yamato race above all others, (Murphey, 362). Racial superiority was evidenced each time the Japanese won in battle with another race, particularly against China and Chinese forces in Korea and Manchuria. China had always been viewed as the ultimate power in the East, and Japan as an upstart “cousin” in the “East Asian family” was now proving their own superiority against a former power, (Murphey, 300). A loss, however, would destroy the Japanese conception of themselves as a superior race, and when that loss came it really was destructive. However, the Emperor was retained, though limited in scope and forced to admit his own mortality. The ideals of a divine country led by divine power were utilized to introduce the country into the prospect of war, but they were stakes lost in the battle.

In terms of what was lost and what was retained post World War II, the climactic end of Japan’s beginning hostilities with China, the six stakes/goads involved in Japan’s struggle metamorphosed into variations of their original forms. Democratic government, which was lost prior to the advent of war, is reinstated according to the American model and forced on Japan by American officials. The will of the people which split prior to the war and then was drawn together through military rule, split again after the war. Dower discusses the reactions of various groups to the end of war whether their emphasis was on sorrow, shame, or joy, not all Japanese felt the same about the war and its aftermath, (38). International status fluctuated before the war, but plummeted during and afterwards to low levels until the economy rebounded and Japan was able to take an international position again due to their economic achievements. Foreign trade actually increased after the war due to the United State’s shoring up of the weakened internal market and the Japanese ability to transform pre-war industries and attitudes into post-war successes,
(Pyle, 241). The Emperor as a god became merely a man with his nation wide address on August 15, 1945, but he retained his position as the nominal head of the Japanese government, a sop to Japanese fears of losing one of their most precious institutions. Finally, the Japanese conception of racial superiority, a guiding force in their aims to conquer East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Russia, suffered a serious blow. When entering into war with China, Japan was spurred on by the six contexts I have herein described, while at the same time they were gambling each and every one of those six stakes. Though in the end, they came out with some of them partially intact, they also lost a significant portion in defeat at the hands of China and the Western Allies.
List of Works Cited

