

The Anglo-Japanese Alliance, 1902-1922

Edited by
Phillips Payson O'Brien



Routledge Studies in the Modern History of Asia

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First published 2004
by RoutledgeCurzon
This edition published 2013
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, OX14 4RN
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

© 2004 Editorial matter and selection, Phillips Payson O'Brien;
individual chapters, the contributors

Typeset in Times by Taylor & Francis Books Ltd

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record for this title has been requested

ISBN 0-415-32611-7

The Anglo-Japanese Alliance, 1902–1922

The Anglo-Japanese Alliance was the first formal agreement of its type reached by a Western 'great' power with a non-Caucasian nation in the modern era. As such, it represented an important milestone diplomatically, strategically and culturally. This book brings together many leading experts who examine the different aspects of the Alliance in its different stages before, during and after the First World War, who explore the reasons for its success and for its end, and who reach a number of interesting and innovative conclusions on the agreement's ultimate importance.

Phillips Payson O'Brien is the Director of the Scottish Centre for War Studies and a Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Glasgow. His previous publications include *British and American Naval Power: Politics and Policy 1900–1936*, *Technology and Naval Combat in the Twentieth Century and Beyond* and articles in *Past and Present* and the *Journal of Strategic Studies*.

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Acknowledgements

The chapters of this book emerged from papers given at the Anglo-Japanese Alliance 1902 Centenary Conference held at Glasgow University in September 2002. This conference was made possible because of the extremely generous support of four organizations, the Toshiba International Foundation, the Japan Foundation, the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation and the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation. The vital support that they provided allowed scholars from four continents to gather in Scotland for three days to discuss all aspects of the history of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Without their support it is impossible to see how this book would have been compiled.

I would also like to thank the University of Glasgow for providing such an accommodating and hospitable venue for the conference and for its continuing support for the Scottish Centre for War Studies. Finally, particular thanks must be given to Miss Leigh Martin. Her work as the secretary of the centre not only made her instrumental in the planning and organization of the conference, she has been invaluable in the process of assembling this volume.

Scottish Centre for War Studies
University of Glasgow
May 2003

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Introduction

Phillips Payson O'Brien

International relations in the twentieth century were defined by alliances. The groupings of various nations into different alliances determined the outcomes of the three great crises that framed the century. The Entente and Central Powers battled for the control of Europe in the First World War, while the Axis and Allies brutalized each other in their attempts to establish global dominance. The fact that the Cold War did not result in a cataclysmic conflict was in many ways because one of its two main alliances, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, proved far more resilient and committed than the other, the Warsaw Pact. By the standards of NATO or the Axis Powers, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902–1922 seems rather small beer. Yet, while it did not decide the result of a global confrontation, it did play an important role in shaping the behaviour of its two signatories during an extremely fraught period.

The Anglo-Japanese Alliance was important both for reasons of style and substance. For both signatories, the single fact that they agreed to act as allies seemed to mark public shifts in their global position. For most of the nineteenth century the British had openly espoused a policy that, while perhaps not as grand as the phrase ‘Splendid Isolation’ would imply, indicated that the British Empire would provide for its security without a formal reliance on any other significant power. Now, however, the British government was admitting that the cost of maintaining forces, particularly naval, around the globe capable of protecting every element of the empire was no longer feasible. For the Japanese the public recognition of their strategic importance that the Alliance seemed to bestow can be seen as an important watershed in their growth as world power. Less than a half century before the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, Japan was a land closed to the outside world, with no ‘modern’ armed forces to speak of. Even twenty years before the Alliance was signed the Japanese Navy was an irrelevance on the world’s oceans. Now, Japan was being asked by the world’s most important power to provide security for some of its most important imperial components. While we must be careful not to overstate the importance of these symbolic changes – Britain was certainly not in dramatic decline as a world force, and Japan was not the equal of a fully industrialized and modern world power – the psychological impact of the agreement was real.

This was not all. The Anglo-Japanese Alliance played a crucial role in determining the outcome of one war and shaping the post-war settlement in East Asia and the Pacific after another. While the Russo-Japanese War was ultimately decided by a contest of arms, most prominently the Japanese naval victory at Tsushima in 1905, the fact that Russia's great ally, France, did not intervene in the conflict was undoubtedly the result of the threat implicit in the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. The geopolitical shape of the Pacific region after the First World War was mostly the result of the behaviour of Britain, and more importantly Japan, which was made possible by the Alliance's existence. The Japanese seizure of German possessions in China and the Pacific was made possible by the agreement, and these developments would prove to be of great regional importance until the end of the Second World War. It would be safe to say that in the first two decades of the twentieth century the Anglo-Japanese Alliance had more impact in shaping the political boundaries of East Asia than any other treaty.

The purpose of this volume is to allow a wide range of historians, from four continents, to examine a host of different aspects of the agreement now that we have just passed a century since the Anglo-Japanese Alliance was signed. It is extremely important that the first chapter, on the origins of the Alliance, should come from Ian Nish. He has been, and continues to be, the leading scholar of the Alliance in the English-speaking world. In this chapter a number of themes that appear throughout this volume first arise. The first is the international context of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Other nations played important roles in beginning, maintaining, and ultimately ending the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Here we see how the seemingly successful application of force by three of the most important European powers, France, Germany and Russia, helped drive the Japanese to seek an alliance with Great Britain. After the Japanese triumph over China in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894, these three, known as the Dreibund, intervened to compel Japan to hand back territory to China. The British stood apart from this action, helping Anglophiles within the Japanese establishment, among them a man who appears in many chapters, Kato Takaaki. Further cooperation between Britain and Japan during the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 provided key momentum for each power to complete the Alliance in 1902.

The Boxer rebellion also features prominently in Hamish Ion's chapter on Anglo-Japanese naval relations before 1902. That naval power was, in essence, the glue that held these two powers together is beyond doubt. The British, the world's pre-eminent naval power, usually held very dismissive views of non-European naval forces, to say nothing of those from Europe itself. Between 1854 and 1902, however, a number of important Royal Navy officers, primarily those who served with the China Squadron, acquired a positive opinion of Japanese naval abilities. This was important as the Japanese Navy in these years was developing an Anglophile outlook, while

the Japanese Army was decidedly more pro-German. The British had to believe that the Japanese could be an effective counterweight to Russian ambitions in the Pacific, otherwise an alliance would be pointless.

That Russia was the power most affected by the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, in its early years, is a point that comes out of Keith Neilson's chapter on the agreement's place in British strategic thinking. Anglo-Russian relations were schizophrenic in the fifteen years before the First World War. Fear of the growing naval power of the Franco-Russian Alliance, before 1905, was one of the reasons why the British wanted to concentrate the Royal Navy in European waters – an explicit advantage of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Russia also posed a unique threat to British power in India. Yet the British could not afford to antagonize fully the Russians, especially as the Germans continued their ominous economic and naval growth. When the Russo-Japanese War commenced in 1904, the British were therefore reluctant to wholeheartedly support the Japanese. In fact, the war itself had very mixed results for the British.

This brings up the question of just how useful the Alliance was to the signatories. In the English-speaking world it is often assumed that the Japanese benefited more than the British, hence the former's depression when the Alliance was emasculated in 1922. Chiharu Inaba and John Chapman, in their separate chapters, examine different aspects of the Anglo-Japanese strategic relationship before the First World War. Inaba looks specifically at the Russo-Japanese War and concludes that the British, or at least some British nationals, provided useful support to Japan. This support provided a useful fillip when terms of the Alliance were renegotiated after the war's end.

The picture painted by Chapman is less optimistic, at least as far as Japan's strategic position is concerned. He reiterates the notion that the British were not going to let their agreement with the Japanese lead to a major dispute with Russia. Furthermore he introduces the United States into the narrative. If Russia was the *eminence grise* of the first few years of the Alliance, the United States was the pivotal non-signatory in the post-1905 world. As such, the reality that after 1903 the British would definitely have refused to honour any alliance if Japan ended up going to war with the United States, significantly lessened its strategic value to the Japanese.

The appearance of the United States as a pivotal power in Anglo-Japanese relations is further revealed in Frederick Dickinson's chapter on internal Japanese debates over the renewal of the Alliance. Here the picture is of a Japanese government seriously divided between those, like Kato Takaaki, who had a long-term vested interest in maintaining the agreement, and a very powerful faction that wanted to improve dramatically Russo-Japanese relations. It would be far better for Japan, so this faction argued, to reach a mutually beneficial bilateral agreement with Russia, clearly dividing their respective spheres of influence in East Asia. This would thwart the desires of others, such as the Americans, who were not reconciled to the

inevitable rise of Japanese power in the region. Alas for this faction, untimely deaths, such as the assassination of the Japanese elder statesman Ito Hirobumi by a Korean nationalist, rendered their efforts stillborn. Still, far from being united behind a policy of alliance with Britain, the Japanese government, at the highest levels, was unsure if the agreement was still in Japan's interest – whether British friendship was really that vital.

What is clear from almost all the chapters by this point is that the Alliance as renegotiated in 1911 was significantly different from the one agreed to in 1902. In many ways the agreement had never fully recovered from the traumatic defeat of its intended nemesis, Russia, in 1905. Yet it endured, even if the First World War presented it with a severe test of its health. Japan's participation in the war against Germany, as a loyal ally of Great Britain, has provoked a great deal of controversy. Charles Schencking pays particular attention to the Japanese Navy in the early stages of the war. Here we have an institution with enough confidence to press its claims with little or no deference to the British, to say nothing of its own government. Having honed its public relations skills before the war to secure some of the most powerful warships in the world, members of the Japanese Navy were determined to use the opportunity presented by the outbreak of the war to increase the Japanese empire's strategic reach, most prominently though the seizure of German islands in Micronesia. While the Japanese government was trying to reduce areas of tension with the British, elements of the Japanese Navy chose to deliberately exceed their mandates and seize German territories.

Yoichi Hiramata's picture of the Japanese Navy's role in the Pacific, particularly as regards Australian-Japanese relations, is more optimistic. Despite an almost paranoid fear of Japanese power by many in Australia, from the top of government to the population at large, the Japanese Navy was able to make a sizeable and substantial commitment to the defence of that continent. However, the very success of the Japanese actions sowed the seeds for future discord between the allies. The destruction of German power in the Pacific removed one other possible country for Japan and Britain to combine against. Again, potential enemies for Japan, other than the United States, were disappearing.

If the Japanese seizure of German islands in the Pacific created a problem that would have to be settled after the war, Japan's seizure of German territory and rights on the Chinese mainland, on the Shantung peninsula, posed more immediate problems. Japan's desire to cement quickly her position as the new dominant power in this area resulted in the issuance of the highly controversial, and very heavy handed, 'twenty-one demands' to the Chinese government. As Peter Lowe shows, the British government, led by Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, wanted to both encourage and restrain Japanese power at the same time. While grateful for Japanese aid against Germany, the British did not want to create a new, and potentially even more powerful, threat in the region. They had no more desire to see the Japanese dominate China than they had to see the Germans, or the Russians

years earlier for that matter. The perils of the Alliance were made apparent during this crisis over China. In the short term, however, sensible diplomacy by Grey was able to keep Anglo-Japanese relations on an even keel, but the question remained as to whether the Alliance could endure through a protracted crisis about the new balance of power in China.

While the thrust of this book so far has been entirely in the diplomatic, strategic or political spheres, Anglo-Japanese relations existed on a number of other different levels, including the economic, the artistic and the level of social interaction. Janet Hunter has examined one of the more perplexing questions that beset the economic relationship between these nations in these decades – to put it bluntly, why wasn't there more of one? London was the centre of the world capital in these years, while Japan was a newly industrializing and growing export economy. It seems only natural that the British should have provided a great deal of the financial support for Japanese expansion, yet this was not the case. There were a number of different bodies established to allow Britons to invest in Japan, but they rarely proved fruitful. One of the reasons for this lack of investment was the different views about just how economically risky an investment in Japan would be. The Japanese wanted to receive loans on the terms extended to other great European powers, yet British bankers were reluctant. They saw Japan as a far more risky proposition, with restrictive property laws and a shaky financial situation. Loans were therefore usually offered with the kinds of guarantees that were expected by such debtors as Turkey, China and Egypt. The Japanese were not impressed.

If the Anglo-Japanese business relationship was not a great success in these years, there were more grounds to be optimistic on the cultural front. Noboru Koyama shows that there was an important cohort of Japanese students who came to Britain to be educated and who brought back a number of British practices. Japanese treatment of blind patients was greatly improved by the techniques brought back from Britain by Yoshimatsu Tadasu, among others. A significant number of Britons also decided to try and improve the possibility for the study of their country in Japan. The successful *Books for Japan* campaign launched in 1905 was but one step towards the establishment of a sizeable library of English books in Tokyo. It should be remembered, however, that the transmission of ideas was far from one-sided. Maggie Tartarkowski shows how a number of important artists working in Britain were strongly influenced by Japanese themes. Artists as diverse as James M. Whistler, Aubrey Beardsley and Charles Rennie Mackintosh became interested in a wide range of Japanese styles that were making their way to Europe for the first time. Areas as varied as Japanese fashions (particularly kimonos), sword-making, craftsmanship and architecture influenced the way that these artists worked. Some of their best-known creations show signs of this Japanese influence.

There was one element of cultural difference that was not easy to overcome, and that was the racial question. Akira Iikura examines this question

with particular attention being paid to the 'Yellow Peril' idea. While this specific notion originally appeared in Germany, the Japanese believed they saw a similar reflex in British popular and political reactions to Japan's somewhat surprising victory over a European power in the Russo-Japanese War. Racial questions would return to bedevil Anglo-Japanese relations during the Paris Peace Conference, when the British would side with the Americans to thwart Japanese attempts to include a racial equality clause in the text of the Treaty of Versailles.

It is hardly surprising that Britain, the leader of a multi-ethnic empire ruled from London, should be reluctant to accept publicly the notion of racial equality. Certainly it would have posed problems to the whole rationale of British rule over many parts of the empire, in particular India. India was always a potential problem for the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Even though the protection of India was supposedly one of the main justifications of the Alliance, as Anthony Best shows, the rise of Japanese power, and the corresponding rise of pan-Asianism, was unnerving to a number of Britons. During the First World War there was extreme sensitivity among the British foreign policy-making elite to any signs of Japanese unreliability on this question. The British were baffled as to why the Japanese seemed happily to tolerate the presence of Indian nationalists on their territories, among them Rash Behari Bose. In 1911 Bose had led an assassination plot against Lord Hardinge, the Viceroy of India. While disputes over India did not lead to an immediate crisis in Anglo-Japanese relations, British suspicions of Japanese intentions on the subcontinent lingered for years and, once the war had ended, played a significant role in shaping the internal British debate over the Alliance's future.

John Ferris also delves into British perceptions of Japanese intentions and power. There were undoubtedly those who believed that the Japanese were taking advantage of the Alliance to enrich themselves during the First World War. Yet, on balance, the Japanese, and the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, were more of a help than a hindrance to the British in these years. They certainly did not betray the British during the war, and after the war Japan was not immediately seen as a great threat to British interests. In fact, by the time the war was over, the British, in particular the Royal Navy, had achieved a position of great strength. They were still significantly superior technologically to the Japanese, one of whose greatest benefits from the Alliance was access to British naval technology.

The question might be asked that if the Alliance was of benefit to both Britain and Japan, why did it come to an end so abruptly during the Washington Conference of 1921–1922. One of the most common assumptions on this point is that the British shelved the treaty, ever so reluctantly, because of extreme pressure being applied by the United States of America. In the last chapter, I discuss how until almost the summer of 1921, there was no concerted American campaign to force the British to act against their own wishes. Actually, the British government itself had decided to pull back

from signing a new 'alliance', in the commonly accepted meaning of the word. The British did not want to end up having to support Japanese policy in China, and they certainly saw no reason to fight on Japan's behalf if her most likely foe was America. What the British were actually angling for was a non-aggression pact in the Pacific, with the entirely misleading title of 'alliance'. At the Washington Conference the Americans offered them almost exactly what they wanted, and the British accepted eagerly.

That the Anglo-Japanese Alliance ended after twenty years should not be a surprise. Both Japanese and British statesmen of the time would have felt comfortable with the notion voiced by Lord Palmerston that a nation has no eternal allies, only eternal interests. The strategic balance had changed markedly in East Asia between 1902 and 1922. Instead of a large number of great powers dueling for control there were now three – Japan, Great Britain and the United States. That being said the loss of the Alliance, while not surprising, did not bring stability to the region. While it is difficult to see how the Alliance could have been used to curb Japanese ambitions, its loss certainly freed the Japanese to pursue a policy in East Asia that was decidedly not in British interests. While it was in existence, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance had played a key role in determining the course of international politics in the Pacific; now all bets were off.