

# Japan at the Paris Peace Conference: Focusing on the Proposal to Abolish Racial Discrimination\*

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## Abstract

The Japanese proposal to abolish the racial discrimination at the Paris Peace Conference must be put into wider historical context. As Japan saw itself first becoming the leading country of Asia and matching the world's first-class countries such as Britain and the United States, the Hara administration's position at the time was to take this opportunity to remove one of the thorns, the immigrant issue, to enhance cooperation with Britain and the United States. For those against the idea of an international order led by Britain and the United States, on the other hand, the issue of the abolition of racial discrimination was a sort of litmus test, which would prove if the Anglo-US order embraces Japan as fully legitimate partner. The proposal surfaced as a point of domestic compromise, which did not materialize in the diplomatic negotiations. Taking a broader view, the failure of the proposal was not solely the matter of Japan. Japan's racial equality proposal, like the various concepts of the world order presented in the Paris Peace Conference, was the extension of Wilson's Fourteen Points, radical application of the ideology of liberalism. Its failure shows the divergence of liberal ideal from reality. Despite the failure, however, Japan's 1919 proposal was historically significant. Just as the concept of "cunning of reason" by Kant and Hegel's philosophy on history suggests, an idea is realized after following a twisting and turning trajectory of history. Racial equality was later realized through the Second World War and the postwar international relations. In that sense, I believe the Proposal to Abolish Racial Discrimination at the Paris Peace Conference had permanent mark and significance in world history.

**T**hank you for honoring me with the opportunity to give the keynote speech at this symposium. I intend to introduce one interpretation of the significance of the debate over Japan's diplomacy. In particular, I will focus on the proposal to abolish racial discrimination—often referred to as the "racial equality proposal"—amidst the changes taking place in the international world order during the First World War and the Paris Peace Conference that followed.

There have been only a limited number of individual studies of this theme. As far as I know, the only single-author work on the subject to date is Shimazu Naoko's *Japan, Race and Equality: The racial equality proposal of 1919*, published in 1998, based on her doctoral thesis. Centered primarily on British documents, this book provides a detailed analysis mainly based on the British sources and is a valuable work as an academic diplomatic history.

The study by Paul Gordon Lauren, *Power And Prejudice: The Politics And Diplomacy Of*

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*Racial Discrimination* published in 1988, is well-known, partly through the Japanese translation, which deals with changes in international political approaches to racial discrimination from the perspective of diplomatic history.

Professor Takahara Shūsuke of Kyoto Sangyo University, in his book on Wilson diplomacy and Japan published in 2006, examines the influence on Japan in the context of Wilsonian diplomacy and discuss the raised equality proposal in that context. But otherwise there is actually very little research into this theme.

Taking those research results into account, my primary intention today is to present one approach to viewing the First World War and explore whether we can understand these pieces of research with a certain degree of consistency.

## 1. The Nature of the First World War

Several years ago, we witnessed a new tide of historical research, including review works, centered around the centenary of the start of the First World War in 1914. The three-volume collection of the essays in *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, published from 2014 to 2016, provides us a convenient overview. Most of the research carried out after the Second World War and through into the 1950s and 1960s tended to view the First World War from the standpoint of military history. This was subsequently replaced by a gradual shift in perspective to the extent that most research today on the First World War takes more of a socioeconomic and cultural history approach. I also believe the focus of research has moved away from a Eurocentric to a more global approach.

As I read these pieces of research and thought about the theme of today's lecture amidst these trends, I sensed certain uneasiness about the expression "First World War." The ordinal number "First" naturally came after the Second World War happened. The expression "world war" or "Great War" already existed during the time when the war was ongoing. But I began to think that the word "war," implying that there is a neat beginning and end, may cause some misunderstanding of the situation that arose from 1914 onwards.

Very briefly, in August 1914, the main belligerents, Germany, France, Russia, Britain and Austria-Hungary came to be engaged in a major war in Europe for the first time since the Napoleonic Wars of around a century earlier. The fiercest battles between these great powers took place between 1914 and 1916, although the war itself continued for some time thereafter.

This phase of the war in Europe tended to be another round of large-scale wars in the classical sense. At the same time, they had a global impact through alliances and imperial ties. One typical case of this was the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, Japan engaged in military activities against German rights and interests in East Asia, specifically in China and at the Pacific Islands.

It is also important to note that Britain was involved in the war as the British Empire from the start. While countries like Australia, Canada and colonies like India took part as semi-independent actors, they did so as part of the British Empire. The war therefore had a global impact even though most of the fighting took place in Europe.

From around 1916 to 1917, however, the Great War's deeper impact began to spread beyond Europe to the rest of the world, although it was felt not so much in the form of a military war but of revolutionary changes arising from social and political upheaval.

The revolutions of February and October 1917 ushered in a socialist system in Russia, but that was not all. In the United States, the Wilson administration put the country on a wartime footing the same year, despite its efforts to remain neutral until then. China, then known as the Republic of China, entered the war in August 1917.

At the same time, as Erez Manela's perceptive work, *The Wilsonian Moment* of 2007, demonstrates, nationalist movements that had been quietly growing from before the First World War evolved into campaigns and struggles with revolutionary, political overtones. These political

movements gained momentum in places that were caught up in the war, such as India, the Ottoman Empire and Egypt.

Naturally, the situations in all these countries varied, and it is impossible to categorize them tidily into their history or period demarcations. However, all these developments from around 1917 onwards meant that the First World War did not have the neat ending as a war but it ended in a messy way, not in the least by the revolutions of the belligerents, especially Germany and its allies. That is the fundamental difference between the First World War and other wars, notably the Second World War.

With the armistice and peace between Russia and Germany at Brest-Litovsk, and the revolutions and systemic changes in Austria, Hungary and the Ottoman Empire a little later, the First World War basically ended with political changes. While the hostilities ceased in 1918, especially for Germany, there are various reasons to say that these political changes did not settle down until sometime later, in the 1920s onwards. In my view, the fact that the Paris Peace Conference took place in the midst of this process is important when interpreting its history from a contemporary perspective.

## **2. Japanese Diplomacy and its Domestic Background**

In Japan, there were three administrations during the First World War. The first was the Ōkuma Shigenobu administration and it was an anti-Rikken Seiyūkai (Constitutional Association of Political Friendship) coalition cabinet. As you probably know, it faced the start of First World War hostilities and joined the war to play the part of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance.

The Ōkuma administration remained in office through to October 1916 which, as we have already seen, was right in the middle of the war of alliances among the countries of Europe. Japan, alongside Britain, engaged in military diplomacy against Germany.

At the time, Japan focused firmly on establishing its status as a first-class power in East Asia, issuing the famous Twenty-One Demands to the government of the Republic of China. The United States and Britain were involved to some extent in the negotiations that ensued, but as they were in the midst of a war, they applied little pressure on Japan. In the end, China accepted most of Japan's key demands.

However, domestic criticism of the Ōkuma administration, including accusation against its handling of the Twenty-One Demands, increased and, in October 1916, the new administration was formed under Terauchi Masatake who had a military background. As I mentioned earlier, this was the time when the First World War mutated dramatically from a great war among European countries into a period of global revolutionary moments. The Terauchi administration moved ahead with adjustments to its relationships with its allies, Britain, France and Russia. To eliminate the mistrust that had arisen to some extent during the Ōkuma administration, the talks focused on postwar peace terms with Japan, including secret treaties.

At the same time, amidst the revolutionary changes taking place in China around this time, Japan attempted to revive Japan-China relations by supporting the Duàn Qírui administration, which took over in Beijing after the Yuán Shikǎi administration fell. When the Wilson administration moved to enter the First World War, it was somewhat suspicious towards Japan's policies vis-a-vis China and Asia. Japan sent Ishii Kikujirō as a special envoy to the United States with a view to reaching an understanding with Secretary of State Robert Lansing over Japan-China relations and the China issue. I think we can interpret this as an attempt to restructure Japanese diplomacy amidst the changing international situation.

The Siberian intervention by Japanese forces was the final act of the Terauchi administration. Britain and France had demanded Japan intervening in Siberia since the time of the Russian revolution. Japan was cautious because of the possible damage on relations with the United States, but when the United States ultimately decided to act along with Japan, Japan dispatched

troops to Siberia.

Around the same time, the Terauchi administration collapsed in the face of the Rice Riots which started July of 1918 and other growing socioeconomic problems. In September 1918, the reins were handed over to the Hara Takashi administration, a party government rooted in the Rikken Seiyūkai. Almost immediately the Hara administration found itself having to deal with the Paris Peace Conference starting in January 1919, just after the suspension of First World War hostilities.

Though the administration had changed, Japan initially appears to have approached the ceasefire and peace negotiations as basically an extension of the cumulative efforts of the Ōkuma and Terauchi administrations. However, the Hara administration decided to take a more proactive approach. At the Paris Peace Conference, it attached great importance to form the cooperative relationship with the United States, not only with Britain, actively supporting the attempt to conclude a peace treaty based on the Fourteen Points that President Wilson originally submitted and tried to make the basis of the peace negotiation at Paris. In my view, this was the primary reason why Japan put forward the racial equality proposal that serves as the theme of today's presentation.

### **3. The Paris Peace Conference and the Racial Equality Proposal**

#### **(1) Background**

President Wilson presented the conditions he proposed as a basis for negotiating the settlement to the war in his Fourteen Points speech to Congress on January 8, 1918. He spoke in terms of well-known fundamental liberal rules based on the general principle “that the world be made fit and safe to live in.” He also talked about freedom of trade and navigation, and while there was no expression of self-determination for peoples, he said that there should be no disposition of colonies without considering the intentions of the populations concerned.

This was basically a unilateral declaration. That said, Point XIV speaks in terms of forming a “general association of nations,” which was tantamount to a proposal that a body like the League of Nations be created.

The implications of fourteen points became important in mid-1918 onwards when the policy was formulated that Germany accept the ceasefire and later peace based on the fourteen points. In the end, the armistice agreement with Germany came into force on November 11, 1918 as Germany agreed to accede to a peace based on the fourteen points. The content of the fourteen points thus became the basis for international treaties and conventions within a very short time.

The newly inaugurated Hara administration was forced to respond very quickly to the likely creation of international organizations such as the League of Nations. As already mentioned, the Hara administration's basic postwar policy was to cooperate with the United States and Britain, more specifically, with President Wilson and the administration of UK Prime Minister David Lloyd George.

The China issue was a particularly big problem between Japan and the United States at the time, but the Ishii-Lansing Agreement and the improvement in Japan-China relations were deemed to have dealt with it, at least provisionally. There was awareness that the anti-Japanese immigrant issue that had arisen since the beginning of the 1900s on the west coast of the United States, especially California was, if anything, an even greater issue. There was much talk about the possibility that the creation of a League of Nations would provide an opportunity to adopt the resolution of the immigrant issue as a fundamental principle.

The Diplomatic Advisory Council was established around the time of the Terauchi administration. In today's parlance, it would be described as being “prime-minister led” ad hoc group. It created a framework that embraced party representatives as well as people from the

Ministry of Foreign Affairs to debate foreign policy. The Hara administration thus needed to ram through this Council with the above-mentioned policy of cooperating with the Britain and the United States.

Conservative politicians and others argued that, though a pro-British or pro-American stance was not a bad thing, it raised concerns that the creation of something like the League would impede Japan's diplomacy towards Asia. Talk of abolishing racial discrimination was picked up as a response to the immigrant issue with the US and the British Empire. The Hara administration put forward its proposals to the Council as a compromise that would give Japan an advantage in its relationships with Britain and the United States. Foreign Minister Uchida Kōsai and Makino Nobuaki, one of the plenipotentiaries to the Conference, made comments to this effect.

On the other hand, the politicians who expressed skepticism about the League were encouraged by public opinion within Japan. While there was generally plenty of positive discussion about Wilsonianism and liberalism at the time, there was also a great deal of skepticism about the sudden emergence of the idea of the League. As the discussion on the League became increasingly linked with the issue of racial discrimination, especially the anti-Japanese immigration issue, there was quite a strong sentiment that support to the League depends on whether it would incorporate measures to prevent racial discrimination.

Once the Paris Peace Conference got underway in 1919, media reports from Paris became frequent, amplifying the racial discrimination issue as a matter of domestic politics in Japan. The League to Abolish Racial Discrimination held several mass public meetings from January 1919 onwards, exposing the Hara administration to pressure from public opinion, especially opinions centered on racial discrimination.

The unspoken background to the escalation in the racial discrimination issue lay to some extent in the changes affecting relations between the British Empire and Japan during the First World War. The independence movement in India grew in strength from the 1910s onwards. Japan was also affected by the struggle between those seeking autonomy and those more radical ultimately aiming at independence.

Rash Behari Bose was a well-known Indian activist who fled to Japan during the war. The British, who were cracking down on such people, pressed Japan for his extradition. There was considerable opposition to this from traditional Pan-Asianists, typified by Tōyama Mitsuru, who supported the Indian independence movement from the perspectives of anti-colonialism and anti-racial discrimination. Bose sought shelter among various groups in Japan and was helped by Tōyama and others. He eventually married the daughter of the owners of Nakamura, the bakery that still exists in Shinjuku, Tokyo, and became a Japanese citizen and lived for the rest of his life in Japan.

Until that time, the Asianists' interests were basically concentrated to the places close to Japan, such as China and the Korean Peninsula. However, as a result of the First World War, their view was enlarged by "Greater Asianism" or "Pan-Asianism," which includes colonial Southeast Asia and India, among other things, and adopted a more critical attitude towards Britain as a colonial empire. Together with a certain wariness caused by anti-immigration sentiments in the United States and Britain, the Pan-Asianists used strong demands for the abolition of racial discrimination as a means of putting pressure on the Hara administration.

One reflection of this was the famous article entitled *Reject the Anglo-American-Centered Peace* written by Konoe Fumimaro, who was still a young aristocrat at the time but later became Japan's prime minister. Given the domestic changes taking place in Japan, especially at a time of dramatic global transformation, we can assume that he was critical of the idea that Japan should simply accept a world order based on cooperation with the United States and Britain.

## (2) Sequence of Events

Japan's delegation of plenipotentiaries was headed by Saionji Kinmochi, an elder statesman and major political figure who also had studied in France in his young days. Several others handled actual conference matters, led by Makino Nobuaki, with the assistance of Chinda Sutemi and Ijūin Hikokichi, both from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. When they first contacted with the American delegates in Paris, the American response to the idea of inserting racial equality clause into the treaty of the League did not seem too negative. The Japanese side did not feel that the Wilson administration was against Japanese ideas on abolishing racial discrimination from the outset. Wilson's special advisor Colonel House especially seemed to take a favorable position.

It may be that the Japanese side was misled by this initial American attitude, but they were encouraged by it and initially proposed ideas that, with the immigrant issue basically in mind, called for an end to discrimination against Japanese immigrants, immigrants from other countries, and minority immigrants.

The situation subsequently changed, however. Because Britain fought under the banner of the British Empire, as mentioned earlier, it could not make decisions on its own as it had to be sensitive to the views of dominions such as Australia and South Africa. One member of the British delegation, Australian Prime Minister William Morris Hughes, was vehemently opposed to the idea.

Australia's well-known "White Australia" policy came into existence only around the beginning of the twentieth century. Basically, it was a Labour Party idea, and was more of a welfare policy than a racist policy with the idea that immigrants should not be let into the country to work for lower wages. Hughes, as a Labour Prime Minister, opposed accepting immigrants for domestic reasons, but he was also wary of Japan. With the combination of those factors resulted in hardline opposition, Britain took the view that it could not compromise on the matter for the sake of preserving unity within the Empire.

Meanwhile, President Wilson encountered extremely strong domestic criticism when he returned temporarily to the United States in February through to March. The Japanese immigrant issue was part of the criticism, though it was not the center of the matter. By around March, both the United States and Britain had adopted an extremely negative stance towards inserting a racial equality clause to the League Covenant.

The Japanese plenipotentiary delegation was caught in a dilemma. Initially, they had thought that the United States and Britain might be open to some sort of compromise, but that possibility suddenly disappeared around March. Within Japan, meanwhile, the abolition of racial discrimination took an extremely symbolic meaning from the perspective of public opinion. In a sense, many people believed Japan's participation in the League should depend on the adoption of the proposal.

The delegation tried hard to find a compromise from March through to April. In April, the Japanese delegation decided to request that a general consideration of "equality of peoples" be included in the preamble to, not in the main text of, the Covenant of League of Nations. When the League of Nations Commission met on April 11 to determine the content of the Covenant, a majority of 11 members voted in favor of the Japan's proposal, but five voted against. Acting as chairman, Wilson rejected the amendment on the grounds that unanimity was necessary for such an important matter.

This was clearly an extraordinary maneuver because numerous other issues had been decided by majority decisions. Wilson had high-handedly brought the decision to a conclusion by bending the rules because he knew that Britain would not accept Japan's proposal, and that there would be strong opposition at home.

I do not go into detail today, but there was considerable wrangling between Japan and China over how to deal with the Shandong Problem, which was no doubt related to the handling

of the racial non-discrimination issue. Basically, Japan's demands on the Shandong Problem were narrowly accepted in the end, and things moved on towards the signing of the Treaty of Versailles.

At the plenary session of the Paris Peace Conference, Makino concluded with a speech to the effect that he would continue working towards the acceptance of racial equality and the abolition of racial discrimination as international principles.

#### **4. Assessment**

##### **(1) The Racial Equality Proposal as a Matter of Domestic Compromise**

In summary, my assessment of these events is that we cannot really say the Japanese government tried to realize abolishment of racial discrimination as the basic principle at the Paris Peace Conference based on Japan's national consensus. It surfaced as a point of political compromise, and did not materialize in the diplomatic negotiations.

If we take a broader view, however, as portrayed in Shiba Ryōtarō's novel *Clouds above the Hill*, after Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War and the revision of the so-called unequal treaties, the issue in the 1910s was to redefine the strategic objectives of Japanese diplomacy. In my view, Japan saw itself first becoming the leading country of Asia, then ranking itself among the world's first-class countries such as Britain and the United States and cooperating with them. I think such perception had been established during the First World War.

The Hara administration's position of cooperating with Britain and the United States at the time was to take this opportunity to remove one of the thorns in its side, the immigrant issue. From the perspective of anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism and "Greater Asianism," on the other hand, people who were unhappy with the idea of an international order led by Britain and the United States stressed that the issue of the abolition of racial discrimination would be a sort of litmus test of the Anglo-US order, which would prove if that order embraces Japan as fully legitimate partner. I therefore believe the proposal was submitted to the Paris Peace Conference as a compromise.

In the end, Japan's proposal was not at all accepted but ultimately denied. The famous Immigration Act of 1924, including the Asian Exclusion Act, was established in the US, which doubled down disillusionment and discontent among Japanese people towards the Anglo-American order. In that sense, there is dark side of reality in the high-minded proposal.

##### **(2) The Immature Liberal International Order**

Taking a more general view of today's theme, however, the instability of international order in the interwar period was not just Japan's problem. It was a problem commonly shared in the various concepts of the world order presented in the Paris Peace Conference, including Wilson's Fourteen Points.

While there is no doubt that the Fourteen Points was a liberal concept of international order, this ideal was betrayed by reality on several different levels. Whether it was a deficiency of collective security, German reparations or the treatment of ethnic self-determination, it triggered many illusions during or immediately after the Paris Peace Conference.

In one aspect, the Fourteen Points was excessively radical, in another, it was insufficient. Japan's racial equality proposal was the same. As an idea, it embraced the ideology of liberalism, but it also diverged from reality too much.

##### **(3) Impact on Posterity: The Second World War and Article 1 Paragraph 3 of the Charter of the United Nations**

Despite the various facets, however, we cannot deny that Japan's 1919 proposal was historically

significant. In Kant and Hegel's philosophy on history, there is a concept of "cunning of reason." There are cases where an ideology is realized after following a twisting and turning trajectory and going through various conflicts.

For example, since the Twenty-One Demands, the Paris Peace Conference gave rise to the May Fourth Movement triggered by the handling of the Shandong Problem at Paris. This led to the confrontation between Japan and China that, with admittedly long and winding stretch, resulted in the Sino-Japanese War in 1937. There existed an indirect link, when the Charter of the United Nations was prepared in San Francisco in 1945, Wellington Koo and others representing Republic of China, a member of the United Nations, proposed Article 1 Paragraph 3 against racial discrimination.

Another twist was that, although the mainstream in the diplomacy of Japanese government was opposed to Pan-Asianism, the message of the movement, because of the rejection of the racial equality clause at Paris, increased its influence on Japanese policy and later had influence on the political movement against the colonial system. Thus, one of the intellectual backdrops was formed at Paris for Japan entering into the rivalry with Britain and the United States in the Asia-Pacific.

While Japan waged war against the post-First World War order led by Britain and the United States, the resulting consequence was transformation of the colonial system and the start of a more liberal order after the Second World War. In that sense, I believe the Proposal to Abolish Racial Discrimination at the Paris Peace Conference had permanent mark and significance in world history.