

Japan at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919: A Centennial Reflection*

Naoko Shimazu**

Abstract

The military engagements during the First World War earned Japan a seat as a victor at the Paris Peace Conference, as the fifth great power, after the United States (as the first superpower), Britain, France, and Italy. At the peace conference, Japan made three peace demands. The first two were territorial in nature. The racial equality proposal—the third Japanese peace term—became the most hotly debated peace topic in Japanese public debate during the peace conference in 1919. What is important to remember is that racial politics played a significant part in some of the politico-military calculations made by the Allied powers. The Japanese sensitivity to what they regarded as discriminatory treatment of Japan and Japanese nationals surfaced as a formal peace term at the Paris Peace Conference, and became known as the racial equality proposal. In reflecting on the issues raised by the Japanese at the Paris Peace Conference on its centenary, one is struck by the continuity in terms of the issues that matter—such as racial politics and immigration—in international relations today. Moreover, the continued relevance also of the nation-state as the basic unit of international relations in the early twenty-first century global affairs remains strong, in spite of the rapid increase in many non-state actors. No doubt, we continue to deepen our historical understanding of the Paris Peace Conference, hopefully, in ways which may not have been imaginable hitherto.

This year marks the centenary of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, and this symposium is one of the events to commemorate the occasion in France. This short piece revisits the Japanese peace conference policy in the light of its involvement in the First world War.

During the First World War, Japan was engaged in three main military expeditions. First, Japan declared war on Germany on 23 August 1914, which resulted in the joint expedition with the local British force to occupy the German concessions on the Shandong Peninsula, to capture Qingdao where the German East Asiatic Squadron, the largest concentration of German navy outside of Europe, was based.¹ The Jiaozhou (Kiaochow) Bay by 1909 had become the second largest commercial port in China after Tianjin. In this battle, Japan mobilised nearly 52,000 troops,

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** Naoko Shimazu DPhil (Oxon), FRHist.S, is Professor of Humanities (History) and Associate Dean of Faculty at Yale-NUS College, and Professor at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore.

¹ Hew Strachan, *The First World War, Vol.I: To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 447.

Britain 870 troops, in addition to about 450 Indian troops.² Although it may have appeared like a neat little manoeuvring to gain a foothold in China on the peninsula in proximity to Tianjin and Beijing, the Japanese move backfired later at the peace conference when Japan's successful claim to have the German rights in Shandong transferred to Japan, caused a diplomatic furore with the United States and China. This came as a complete surprise to the Japanese who expected the transfer to be conferred without a question based on the secret agreements signed with Britain, France, Italy and Russia before the Chinese entered war in August 1917. Ultimately China refused to sign the treaty, and this whole episode ignites the May Fourth Movement in China. In the end, Japan had agreed to return Shandong to China at the Washington Conferences of 1921–1922.³

The second military expedition pertained to the Japanese occupation of the German islands in Micronesia (Marshalls, Carolines, and Marianas) the north of the equator, which the Japanese Second South Seas Squadron had managed to complete by 14 October 1914. The outbreak of the war had set off a mini-scramble for German territories in the Pacific—and in this New Zealand had led the way by occupying Samoa by 30 August, followed by the Australian occupation of German New Guinea and the Solomon Islands by 15 September. On the surface, the Japanese conquest of the Micronesian Islands might have come across as a costly enterprise, which primarily helped to boost Japan's fragile ego as the newest great power, a belated Japanese bid for the late nineteenth-century Western scramble for the Pacific of the late 1890s. Nevertheless, from the geopolitical point of view, the success of this naval expedition could be considered as the most significant gain by Japan during the war, because it helped to substantiate the geopolitical imaginations of Japan's future as a significant Pacific power, in the way that Japan's previous imperial wars had not been able to do. The occupation of the Micronesian Islands, given as class "C" mandates at the Paris Peace Conference, had turned the Japanese presence in the Central Pacific as a semi-permanent geopolitical reality. If one looks at the map of the Asia-Pacific, one can see the "Arc" of the Japanese empire coming substantially down into the Central Pacific, stopping just at the equator, above Papua New Guinea. It does not require a great leap of imagination to see that the perimeter defence of Japan's wartime empire in the first one hundred days after the Pearl Harbor, followed that same "Arc" except that it was expanded by being pushed landwards into the Southeast Asian territories of the British, French and Dutch colonial empires.

Moreover, our understanding of the significance of the Japanese occupation of Micronesia is enhanced through adopting a global historical perspective. In Japanese historiography, the Japanese occupation of the Micronesian islands is generally treated as a minor colonial issue relative to the larger Taiwan, Korea and the Liaodong Peninsula, with the exception of naval history. Recent scholarship has focused on Micronesia as part of Japan's League of Nations diplomacy.⁴ What may have appeared to be a symbolic expansion into the southern Pacific from the Japanese perspective, came to assume much graver practical implications for the British Dominions, and the defence of the British Empire in the post-1919 world.⁵ According to the Australian House of Representatives debate on the peace treaty in September 1919: "Australia has taken its frontiers northward to Rabaul, but the frontiers of Japan has been brought southward

² Yamamuro Shin'ichi, *Fukugosenso to soryokusen no danso: Nihon ni totteno daiichiji sekai taisen* (Kyoto: Jinbun shoin, 2011), 57.

³ Bruce A. Elleman, *Wilson and China: A Revised History of the Shandong Question* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2002) sheds new light on the complex issue of the Shandong Question, which questions the orthodox interpretation of the "wronged China" view.

⁴ Tōmatsu Haruo, *Nihon teikoku to inin tōchi: Nanyō guntō o meguru kokusai seiji, 1914-1947* (Nagoya: Nagoya daigaku shuppankai, 2011).

⁵ For instance, Hew Strachan, *The First World War, Vol. 1: To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 481-483.

3,000 miles to the equator, until their front door and our backdoor almost adjoin.”⁶ Arguably, therefore, the significance of the Japanese naval expansion southward was felt most keenly, not by the Japanese themselves, but Australia and New Zealand whose heightened sense of threat contributed to hardening the perception of Japan’s new role as a Pacific power.⁷ Ultimately, the Japanese expansion into the Pacific during the First World War can be regarded as setting out a preliminary “blueprint” for what later became the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere.

The third military expedition was politically and diplomatically the most fraught, on the question of a joint Allied expedition to Siberia in 1918. Japan had been asked to send 7,000 troops to make up the Allied intervention, and responded to it by mobilizing 73,000 troops. The Japanese decision took place under a hawkish prime minister, General Terauchi, whose government failed due to the Rice Riots of 1918, only to be replaced by the moderate, pro-Western prime minister, Takashi Hara. (The Japanese navy also sent warships to the Mediterranean to defend Allied shipping in 1917.) The Siberian troop deployment, like the Shandong occupation, became a thorn in the Allied camp.

The military engagements above earned Japan a seat as a victor at the Paris Peace Conference, as the fifth great power, after the United States (as the first superpower), Britain, France, and Italy in that order of hierarchy of great powers. The story of Japan’s participation at the peace conference underlines difficulties the Japanese faced in having to operate for the first time as a major power in a multilateral framework of international diplomacy.

At the peace conference, Japan made three peace demands. The first two were territorial in nature, emanating from the military victories made against the former German concessions and territories held in Shandong and the Central Pacific. The Japanese government had signed a series of secret treaties in 1917 with the key states to secure these territories, and hence, was taken aback when the question of the retrocession of Shandong to China was raised at the peace conference. In some sense, the cost to Japan for obtaining Shandong at Paris, albeit temporarily, was the racial equality proposal—the third Japanese peace term, which became the most hotly debated peace topic in Japanese public debate during the peace conference in 1919. The failure of the racial equality proposal became symbolic of the failure or the weakness of Japanese peace diplomacy, and incurred a substantial cost to the Foreign Ministry in terms of its reputation. Strictly speaking, however, foreign policy decision-making was not made in the Foreign Ministry at the time as it had been taken over by a transcendental body called the Diplomatic Advisory Council, in which the Foreign Ministry officials played a relatively minor role.

What is important to remember is that racial politics played a significant part in some of the politico-military calculations made by the Allied powers. Japan as the only non-white great power on the Allied side, was distrusted in particular by the United States. Racial tensions particularly between Japan and the United States reached its peak in 1913 with the passing of the Californian Alien Land Law. In fact, the tension was such that President Wilson had discussed with the cabinet the mobilisation of the fleet in the Pacific in preparation for a possible conflict against Japan.⁸ Although Britain had to contend with anti-Japanese sentiment expressed by its Dominions, especially Australia, it did not overshadow the British military decisions vis-à-vis the Japanese during the First World War. In fact, Britain was often put in an awkward position having to appease the stringent anti-Japanese sentiment held by the Americans which derived not only

⁶ “Between the wars,” Chapter 1, <http://static.awm.gov.au/images/collection/pdf/RCDIG1070314-1-PDF>, accessed 5 January 2014.

⁷ Neville Meaney, *Australia and World Crisis, 1914-1923: A History of Australian Defence and Foreign Policy 1901-23: Volume 2* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2009).

⁸ Naoko Shimazu, *Japan, Race and Equality: The Racial Equality Proposal of 1919* (London: Routledge, 1998), 76. This book still stands as the most comprehensive treatment of Japan’s participation at the Paris Peace Conference, and in particular, the racial equality proposal, to date.

from their distrust of the Japanese, but also from their support of the newly found “Young China.” Moreover, the highly expansionist Twenty-One Demands of 1915 which attempted to turn China into a semi-colony of Japan, had exacerbated the bad will which had already existed between Japan and the United States. Therefore, even with regards to the Siberian intervention, the American opposition to the Japanese troop deployment which had been pressed by both Britain and France, was not only due to geopolitical concerns, namely that the Japanese troops might use this as a pretext to station troops in the region east of Lake Baikal. But, I have argued elsewhere that “the American government was principally concerned about the effects of Japanese troop deployment on American domestic opinion” seeing that it had been deeply sensitised with the anti-Japanese immigration policy as well as by the Twenty-One Demands of 1915 against China.⁹ Sir William Wiseman summed up the underlying American sentiment: “The American hatred of all yellow races is thinly, if at all, disguised. Any thought of the yellows being brought in to redress the balance of the whites is repugnant to them, especially when it may involve the consequent loss of commercial advantages in the new and lucrative mark of East Russia.”¹⁰ In fact, the Japanese sensitivity to what they regarded as discriminatory treatment of Japan and Japanese nationals surfaced as a formal peace term at the Paris Peace Conference, and became known as the racial equality proposal as mentioned above.

In reflecting on the issues raised by the Japanese at the Paris Peace Conference on its centenary, one is struck by the continuity in terms of the issues that matter in international relations today. Particularly, the relevance of issues such as racial politics, and immigration, is striking, to say the least. Moreover, the continued relevance also of the nation-state as the basic unit of international relations in the early twenty-first century global affairs remains strong, in spite of the rapid increase in many non-state actors. In any case, the centennial years have given rise to a swathe of new scholarship and the dominant trend can be defined as the “global turn.” And, in these new globally-led narratives, the Japanese participation as one of the great powers plays a prominent role in anchoring the globality of the war itself. And, with this global turn, we begin to see exciting new historical insights unravelling in the centenary of the peace conference, such as Japan’s involvement in the Catholic network of informal diplomacy.¹¹ No doubt, we continue to deepen our historical understanding of the Paris Peace Conference, hopefully, in ways which may not have been imaginable hitherto.

⁹ There is a notable new research on the topic of the Twenty-One Demands of 1915 by Naraoka Sochi, *Taika niju-ikkajo yokyu to wa nani dattanoka: Daiichiji sekai taisen to nicchu tairitsu no genten* (Nagoya: Nagoya daigaku shuppankai, 2015).

¹⁰ As quoted in Shimazu, *Japan*, 109.

¹¹ Patrick Houlihan’s unpublished paper “The Other Admiral Yamamoto: Catholic Globalism at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919,” presented at an international conference on The Paris Peace Conference and the Challenge of a New World Order, German Historical Institute, Paris, June 2019.