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THE MILITARY AND THE FOREIGN POLICY OF PREWAR JAPAN*

By CHIHIRO HOSOYA**

I. Non-Involvement of the Military in Politics

The principle of the non-involvement of the military in politics was established in early Meiji. In the “Admonition to the Military”, issued in 1878 by the Minister of War, professional soldiers were admonished against “questioning Government policies, stating arbitrarily private views on the problem of constitutional law, . . . . expressing grievances about the current political situation, or advocating civil rights.” Further, “the Rescript to the Military” of 1882 warned them “neither to be led astray by current opinions nor intervene in politics, but to devote themselves to fulfill their essential duties.” There were other regulations prohibiting professional soldiers from voting, standing for elections, joining political parties, or even attending political gatherings. The Army and Navy Penal Laws stipulated as criminal offences such actions as petitioning with respect to political matters, making a political speech before a public audience and engaging in political propaganda. In these measures one can observe the considerations that the early Meiji leaders gave to keeping the military from politics, so that they could not by the abuse of the physical power of troops affect the political situation.

It was the custom for the soldiers to read “The Rescript to the Military”, whenever they held a ceremonial meeting. As this demonstrated, the principle of non-intervention in politics was deemed a golden rule for the military, to regulate their behavior. When General Tani Tateki expressed publicly his view against the Government’s policy concerning the revision of the unequal treaties in 1889, he was forced to leave the active list. In prewar Japan, no soldiers on the active list were elected to the Diet or participated in elections at any level.

The strict interpretation of the principle of non-intervention in politics did not, however, correspond to the demands of the military, who eagerly sought to build up a strong, modern army. To attain this goal, they found it essential to raise their voice on the questions of allocating the national budget and organizing the national educational system. Thus, the military had come to undertake limited intervention in domestic politics. It was the Military Affairs Bureau of the War Department which undertook the task of exerting influence on the political process through contacting party leaders and manipulating mass media. The mode of the military’s participation in politics in the early 1910’s is exemplified by the activities of Tanaka Giichi, then head of the Military Affairs Bureau. He was

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actively engaged in the passage of the bill creating two additional infantry divisions. And conscious of recruiting and maintaining soldiers of high calibre, he made successful efforts to establish the Youth Organization on a national level and the Veteran’s Organization. Later, upon the request of the Army, a program of military training was established in the national educational system.

Nevertheless, it was not until in the 1930’s that the military started to make bold intrusion into the domain of domestic politics. The facts of that period are well known. Suffice it to say that the political developments on the continent, as well as the economic situation at home, gave rise to the feeling of crisis among the military, in particular among young officers. The inability of civilian leaders to cope with the critical situation confronting Japan, combined with their cutting down the military budget, aroused a sense of distrust and resentment among the military and prompted them to take political steps. They came to interpret the passage of “The Rescript to the Military” (“Seiji ni kakawarazu”) in their own way; namely, to do what they thought they ought to do regardless of what the actuality of politics was rather than not to intervene in politics.

In the 1930’s a number of coup d’etat were planned by young military officers. Some were merely planned; others were actually attempted. But, all attempts to set up military government by means of violent actions failed. The failure of the violent actions was, however, followed by a substantial increasing in military influence of the military and concessions on the part of the civilians. Civilian leaders who opposed military demands were conscious of the fact that they ran the risk of assassination. A continuous state of war following the Manchurian Incident helped strengthening military control over government machinery. Japan in the late 1930’s had become a “garrison state”, to use the term of Professor H. Lasswell, in that military groups, directly or indirectly, wielded unprecedented amounts of power, still leaving intact the facade of civilian government with a parliamentary system.

II. Intervention of the Military in the Formation of Foreign Policy

According to Professor S. Huntington “the responsibility of the military man to the state are threefold.” First, he has “a representative function to represent the claims of military security within the state machinery.” Second, he has “an advisory function, to analyze and to report on the implications of alternative courses of state action from the military point of view.” Finally, he has “an executive function, to implement state decisions with respect to military security.”

The above definition of the proper function the military man is supposed to perform is considered applicable to the domain of foreign policy. It is, however, more difficult for the military man to stay within the limits of the proper functions in the area of foreign policy, even in a country where the tradition of civilian supremacy is maintained. They tend to overstep their proper functions, because both foreign policy and military policy are so “closely interrelated that they may be thought of as inseparable aspects of particular problems and situations,” and it is hard to draw a dividing line between them.

In prewar Japan the interrelationship between foreign policy and military policy was particularly marked with respect to the Continent. This close interrelationship, in addition
to the absence of the tradition of civilian supremacy, made the military look at foreign policy differently from domestic policy in the application of the principle of non-intervention in politics. When General Tani was criticized for his participation in political activities, he retorted that he had not get involved in politics and that the question of the revision of treaties was not a political matter in that it was relevant to national security.

Thereafter, the logic that matters pertaining to national security should be excluded from the application of the principle of non-intervention in politics was used by the military to justify their intrusion in making foreign policy. They tended to enlarge the scope of matters pertaining to national security; and then, as these matters were taken up in the decision-making process, they had not only wanted to have their views reflected, but also attempted to press them and take the lead in the decision-making process. Let me cite several cases.

Unquestionably, the employment of armed forces is the problem about which professional soldiers are most concerned. They are supposed to be asked about their assessment of the military strength, preparedness of a target country before going to war. On the other hand, the final decision for war must rest with top leaders of the government. Japan waged two fateful, total wars; the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-05 and the Pacific War, 1941-45. While in both cases the final decisions for war were formally made by the top decision-makers, the military had played a decisive role in the decision-making process, first crystallizing the determination of going to war and then exerting heavy pressure on the government leaders.

The decisions on how to respond to the revolution which occurred on the Continent had significant meaning for Japan. When the revolutions took place in China in 1911 and in Russia 1917, the Army took the lead in taking advantage of the turmoil to expand Japanese influence on the Continent. They drew up plans to send troops to attain this purpose, and pressed their views on the civilian leaders. In the case of the Russian Revolution, armed intervention in Siberia was finally realized.

In the 1930's the military virtually dominated Japan's China policy. In addition, the drafts of most important documents laying down the basic national policy originated with the military. They advocated the policies of Southern Advance and the military alliance with Nazi Germany, and exerted consistent pressure on civilian leaders to secure their adoption.

III. The Execution of Foreign Policy

It is the primary function of the military to implement foreign policy following a decision by the leaders of the Government to employ military means to attain national purpose. To use the words of Professor Huntington again, the military are supposed to “implement state decisions . . . . . . . even if it is a decision which runs violently counter to his military judgment.” In prewar Japan the military often took independent external actions on their own military or political judgment, despite the absence of state decisions or sometimes in disregard of them.

The first symptom of this tendency appeared as early as May 1874 in the behavior of General Saigō Tsugumichi, commander-in-chief of the Formosan Expeditionary Force,
who dared to issue an order for the force to go to Formosa in disregard of the Government’s instruction to abandon the military adventure. Independent actions by the military on the Continent increased after the victory in the Russo-Japanese War. It must be related to the fact that the Army had been able to keep troops in Manchuria and Korea, and further to appoint a general as the governor general of the newly acquired colony.

In the 1910’s there were two outstanding independent movements led by the Army to expand Japanese influence on the Continent. Taking advantage of the turmoil resulting from the Chinese Revolution, the army officers in the field made an attempt in 1912 to set up an autonomous government in Manchuria and in Inner Mongolia without a previous decision of the government. This was followed by a similar attempt in 1916. Both of these ended in failure. The Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, which created a political vacuum in north-eastern Asia, gave another impetus to the Army to secure Japan’s position on the Continent and to expand the Japanese sphere of interest. Immediately after the Revolution broke out, the Army Staff secretly drew up the plan to send troops into Siberia and attempted to bolster anti-Bolshevik leaders, such as Horvat and Semenov, providing money and military equipment and military advisors, without giving much information about their activities to the Government.

The Army had increasingly become subject to severe criticism by the civilians during Taishō and early Shōwa period for acting independently in this fashion. Charges against “Military Diplomacy” or “Dual Diplomacy” were heard in the Diet, the press and even at the meetings of Gaikō Chōsakai, the Committee for Foreign Affairs, which was set up by the Terauchi Cabinet to hear the opinions of the party leaders. Hostility to “Military Diplomacy” grew in the 1920’s, but was unsuccessful in checking the practice of the military. Rather, it culminated in the Manchurian Incident in 1931. It is widely known that the plot to occupy Manchuria was made in the staff of the Kwangtung Army with little knowledge of civilian leaders at home. After the incident broke out the Kwangtung Army, supported by the General Staff in Tokyo, took an independent line regardless of the Government’s declarations to limit the military actions.

In the 1930’s the military were much bolder in pursuing an independent forward policy based on their own firm convictions. I do not need to cite many cases. It suffices to refer to the activities of General Ōshima Hiroshi in Berlin. Most anxious to establish a strong tie with Nazi Germany, General Ōshima, then military attaché, took an initiative in the conduct of the negotiations leading to the conclusion of the Anti-Comintern Pact in November 1936, having kept the talks secret from his own Government, even from Ambassador Mushakōji for many months. When the question of concluding the military alliance with Germany was taken up by the Japanese government in 1938-39, Ambassador Ōshima often practiced “Military Diplomacy” freely making promises without authority and neglecting the instructions from the Foreign Minister.

IV. The Role of the Middle-Ranking Officers

When one takes up the question of political role of the military in prewar Japan, the significant role played by the middle-ranking officers within the military institution deserves special attention. It must be noted that the First Committee of the Navy, composed
of the key section chiefs of the Naval Ministry and General Staff, played the crucial role in the decision to go to war with the U.S. in 1941, first as early as April 1941 crystallizing its determination to wage war and then exerting pressure on the senior leaders to take the risk. A similar pattern may be detected in the process of Japan's decision to go to war with Russia in 1904. It was the members of 'Kogetsukai', composed of middle-ranking officers of the Army, Navy and the Foreign Office, that decided on war and then were active in persuading and influencing the senior leaders in this direction.

As I have pointed out elsewhere, the characteristic pattern of foreign policy decision-making process in prewar Japan was not one of centralization. In particular, the characteristic pattern stood out in the 1930's due to the lack of political leadership and the dispersion of political authority. The middle-ranking officers had become a driving force in the policy making of the military institution, drafting policy recommendations and pressing for their acceptance by their superiors. The tendency was partly related to a rising sense of impatience on the part of the middle-ranking officers with the vacillation of the senior leaders.

When the question of concluding the military alliance with Germany became a controversial political issue, the middle-ranking groups of both services were most active in realizing the alliance, exerting heavy pressure on their superiors. They often served as initiators of basic national policy, drafting policy documents, and played a substantial part in the foreign policy decision-making of prewar Japan.

V. The Role of the Navy

So far I have been looking mainly at the role played by the Army. As compared with the Army, the Japanese Navy remained rather as a "silent navy", restraining itself from intervening in politics. But the London Naval Conference in 1930 marked the turning point in politicizing. The London Naval Treaty triggered off the movement within the Navy to oppose the stand taken by the government and to denounce the Washington and London Naval Treaties. The formation of factions resulting from different attitudes toward the naval treaties fostered the politicization of the Navy.

The middle-ranking officers within the Navy were very active, in cooperation with those of the Army, in realizing the military alliance with Germany and tried to influence their superiors. Finally, as I have already mentioned, it was the First Committee, composed of the section chiefs of the Naval Ministry and General Staff, that at an early stage determined to go to war with the U.S. and endeavored to steer national policy toward this.

VI. Conclusion

Now, what factors were related to the extensive function that the military performed in prewar Japan? Where did the organizational trait come from? What made it possible for the military to intrude in foreign policy to such a large extent?

First, there was the external setting in which Japan was placed from early Meiji. It was an arena where the international contest for power was carried on among the Western powers. East Asia was the target for their territorial expansion and economic invasion.
Conscious that their level of military strength was far behind the Western powers, the military found it most urgent to build it up rapidly, not only to safeguard national security, but also to join the contest. Irrespective of nationality, the military are generally inclined to create a powerful nation and to enhance national prestige. It was particularly the case with Japan. The Army found a serious threat to national security coming from Russia and used it to persuade the civilian leaders to strengthen military power to meet the danger.

After victory in the Russo-Japanese War, there grew up among Army officers feeling that political dominance over East Asia should be established. And at the same time, they felt it a national mission to expand domination over Asia, and created a national ideology to spread the Imperial Way to East Asia. Holding such a philosophy, they perceived themselves as the chief agents in the pursuit of the mission, and regarded interference in making continental policy or its execution as a duty and not as exceeding their authority. They came to “identify themselves as standing for impartial, efficient, honest administration of national affairs in the interests of the nation as a whole.” They became the embodiment of the national interest and national ideal. This self-image of the military people was related to the concept they had inherited from the Samurai mind of feudal days. It may be said that the Japanese army from the outset was very political, lacking in military professionalism.

With the rise of Chinese nationalism in the 1920’s, the Army perceived a grave threat to Japan’s position and interests on the Continent, which had been obtained by a vast expenditure of blood and treasure. The Army officers were driven by a feeling of crisis, and found an urgent task in guarding the “life-line” on the Continent. In their view the attitude and policy of the civilian leaders was too weak-kneed to solve the problem. Their lack of confidence in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was viewed as incapable of visualizing national destinies, led them to convince that the army must become the chief agent of conducting a national policy.

There are several factors accounting for the weight of the decision-making power held by the middle-ranking officers and the resulting decentralized pattern of foreign policy decision-making process in prewar Japan, in particular, in the 1930’s: 1) Disappearance of Genro—senior statesmen—in the early 1920’s and the resultant weakening of political leadership, as well as the emergent lack of coordination among military and civilian leaders. 2) In connection with this, the growing desire on the part of middle-ranking officers to criticize the weak-kneed and compromised attitude of the senior leaders. 3) On the other hand, the lenient and tolerant attitude on the part of the superiors toward their subordinates was deemed a virtue in the cultural tradition of the society. 4) As for the cultural heritage, bravery and often arbitrary action had been supposed to be superior to discipline in the value system of samurai. 5) The “Ringi System”, characteristic of Japanese bureaucratic organization, also had its effect.

Next, the legal structure of civil-military relations under the Meiji Constitution of 1889 ought to be mentioned. The Constitution stipulated that the Emperor had “the supreme command” and determined “the organization and peace standing of the armed forces.” An ordinance issued in the same year stipulated that “matters pertaining to military strategy and military command” will be reported directly to the Emperor. In practice, the Emperor’s “supreme command power” meant that virtually all functions of the army were divorced from civil authority. It was called “the principle of the indepen-
dence of the supreme command”; and it was employed by the military to deprive civil officials of a voice in military affairs. Moreover, the principle came to be interpreted in such an expanded way that the General Staff could place increasing limitations on interference by the government in military policy, however close it was interrelated to foreign policy, and further that the military could take independent action in the name of “the independence of the supreme command.”

The military could limit or prevent civil interference in military matters by another practice; the custom that only generals and admirals on the active list could become service ministers in the cabinet. An ordinance to this effect was issued in 1900. This requirement was dropped in 1913, but was reinstated in 1936. Thus until the end of World War II civilian officials and even reserve officers could not hold service portfolios. This requirement was often used as a political weapon by the military when they wanted to cause the downfall of a cabinet or prevent a particular cabinet being formed.

The result was that while civilians were virtually excluded from military policies, the military had played a significant role in the decision-making process of national policies, foreign or domestic.