Japan’s long campaign to take control of its own news and to manage its own image was hampered by the negative consequences of its earlier forays in that campaign, as outlined above. From the idealized ally of the war with Russia and the new arrival at the top table in Paris, Japan suffered a growing sense of isolation in the 1920s. One consequence of this isolation was the building of the Foreign Ministry English-language media network under whose auspices a number of British-, Chinese- and American-owned newspapers in Japan and China were gradually bought out, suborned or closed down and replaced with new pro-Japanese organs.1

Japan’s methods of dealing with the representatives of the Western press and the English-language newspapers of East Asia went through five overlapping stages that mixed persuasion and negotiation with tight, well-financed organization, an aggressive ‘cold war’, and finally, in the run-up to all-out war in China and the Pacific, a no-holds-barred ‘endgame’. In the ‘endgame’ most Western newspaper correspondents and all critical voices on the English-language newspapers of East Asia were silenced and the foreign-owned English-language press networks of East Asia closed, suborned or bought out and effectively nationalized by the Foreign Ministry press network.

In the first stage, Japan started its own English-language newspapers in Japan and China and tried to persuade Western newspaper correspondents and journalists on the English-language newspapers to take a more friendly line towards Japan and Japanese policies. After 1913, Japan’s representatives negotiated with Western news agencies in an effort to limit and render more positive the reporting of Japanese news and to filter foreign news coming into Japan.

In the second stage, following embarrassing public relations defeats at the Peace of Paris, Japan took a more considered and organized approach to the problem of making Japan’s intentions more favourably understood. In 1920–21, it institutionalized its external propaganda effort in an Information Bureau (Gaimushō jōhōbu) established within the Foreign Ministry,2 which it followed up with generous and consistent investment in the Bureau’s construction of the Foreign Ministry network which focused on East Asia, the United States and Britain, but with branch offices in other parts of Asia, Europe, Africa and South America, fifteen in all.3
In the third stage, the Foreign Ministry network enlarged its share of the news market in East Asia by selling its bulletins at prices none of the Western agencies could match. In 1926, it refined its news agency system with the creation of Rengō, and began fighting a ‘cold war’ or a ‘thought war’ (Shisōsen) against the independent, foreign-owned Japan Advertiser and Japan Chronicle and their press networks in East Asia. In this stage, the Foreign Ministry network combined persuasion through subsidies and other inducements with takeovers of critical media in China, usually through a front man or shell company. The Foreign Ministry network also extended its network in the USA, Europe and Britain.

In the fourth stage, following Japan’s withdrawal from the League of Nations, Japan’s media campaigns heated up as it embarked on the fifteen-year war that would leave Asia in ruins. The Foreign Ministry network abandoned the persuasive tactics of the Shidehara era and adopted a more confrontational tone at its press conferences and in the editorials published in its network. This became more evident after 1936 with the inauguration of Dōmei, when the Foreign Ministry network became more proactive, increasingly arguing Japan’s case within Japanese terms of reference and continuing to undercut other news agencies in a heavily-subsidized price war.

Finally, during a period of national consolidation, the Foreign Ministry ceded some of its power over the management of news to a series of Cabinet organizations set up in 1936, 1937 and 1940. Working in concert with the Foreign Ministry, these organizations set about amalgamating or simply closing down both the vernacular and the English-language newspapers in Japan, as well as using any means possible to silence critical media in a hard-fought ‘endgame’ in East Asia. In this final stage before all-out war, Japan served the West with some of its own medicine, establishing its own ‘news colonies’ in China, Korea and Taiwan.4

Given these later efforts to control and eventually close them down, how did the English-language newspapers of East Asia come to be seen as such a threat to Japanese interests? Between c.1890–1941, three contiguous, interconnected developments raised the status and profile of the independent English-language press of Japan and China both among settlers in East Asia and, indirectly, among readers in the West. These developments in turn sharpened and highlighted the challenge the independent English-language newspapers of East Asia presented to Japan’s interests there. The first development was a long-term shift in the popularity of writings on East Asia by readers in the West. The second development was a related growth in Western demand for English-language news from and about Japan, especially Japan in East Asia. The third development was an accumulation of mutual interests and affiliations resulting in the formation of three broad networks among the English-language newspapers, magazines and news agencies operating in East Asia.