Old Friends, New Enemies is the title of a classic study on Anglo-Japanese naval relations by renowned historian Arthur J. Marder.¹ The subtitle of the text further read ‘Strategic Illusions 1936-1941’. Indeed, whilst the book focused on the interwar period, this subtitle accurately captures some core features of Anglo-Japanese political and military relations in the period stretching from the Anglo-Satsuma War of 1863 to the termination of the Third Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1923. This chapter’s main aim is to examine how at the regional level, sea power – intended as the ability to project military power and exert political influence across East Asian waters – was key to Anglo-Japanese relations. In the initial years of Japan’s modernization, the relationship with Britain started as one between ‘client and patron’. It subsequently evolved into a partnership between equals with the overlap of strategic goals in East Asia favouring a military alignment that lasted over two decades.

A second contention of the chapter is that throughout this period, Japan’s importance in British strategic calculations grew alongside its ability to exert command of the sea within Asian waters. Initially, a fast-modernizing Japan with the ability to offset the military presence of other European powers in East Asia offered relief to British forces in the region. Yet, the differences pertaining to Britain’s requirements as a global power and Japan’s more regionally-focused interests slowly drove the two countries apart. Japanese sea power remained an essential feature in both the making and the demise of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance; it enabled the partnership to develop and, eventually, set the two island nations on their collision course.

Britain as a ‘Naval Model’

Since the outset of Japanese modernization which began as early as the late 1850s, Great Britain had been seen by many Japanese as a model for Japan. Many Japanese intellectuals and reformers of the Bakumatsu period (or ‘late Tokugawa Shogunate’, 1853-67) were quick to recognize that industrialization and naval power were the foundation upon which Britain had built up national wealth and international prestige. The rapid reconciliation and strong political ties pursued by the clans of Satsuma and Chōshū with Britain after the military skirmishes of 1863 reflected this recognition.2 British military presence was also visible and impressive to the Japanese eyes through the stationing of British troops (alongside its French counterpart) in Yokohama for twelve years between 1863 and 1875.3

Britain began to occupy a pivotal position in the Japanese political and diplomatic debates after the 1870s when the newly established Meiji Government decided to pursue a new national policy. First of all, it aimed at a revision of the unequal treaties concluded between the Western Powers and the Tokugawa Bakufu in the 1850s.4 Second, Japanese national security could be guaranteed only if the country were to acquire a degree of naval power.5 The first aspect required a general modernization (=Westernization) of the political, economic, legal and social systems. In this respect, Britain was regarded as one of the major

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3 For the British military presence in Bakumatsu Japan and Japanese perception of British military and naval force at that time, see Yokohama taigai kankeishi kenkyūkyōkai & Yokohama kaikō shiryōkan (Foreign Relations Study Society of Yokohama & Yokohama Archive of Opening of the Port) ed., *Yokohama eifutsu chūtongun to gaikokujin kyoryūchi* (British and French garrison and foreign compound in Yokohama, Tokyo: Tokydō shuppan, 1999).


5 For arguments concerning which service should be the mainstay of national security (‘riukushu-kaijū=army first, navy second’ versus kaishū-rikujū=navy first, army second) see Taeru Kurono, *Dainippon teikoku no seizon senryaku* (Survival strategy of the Japanese Empire, Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2004), 21-8.