From Alliance to Conference

The British Empire, Japan and Pacific Multilateralism, 1911–1921

John D. Meehan

Introduction

For much of the early 1900s, Pacific security loomed large as a concern for Japanese and British decision makers. For Britain's Pacific dominions, namely Canada, Australia and New Zealand, the issue became particularly acute in light of Japan's rising power and Britain's growing focus on Europe. To many, the Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902 indicated London's reliance on Japanese goodwill to defend its Pacific interests. Japan's newfound status as a great power – as demonstrated by its success in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) and Russo-Japanese War (1904–5) – was a source of pride for some but consternation for others in the dominions. In Western Canada, for instance, railway towns in the newly created province of Saskatchewan were named Mikado, Togo and Kuroki to honor Japan's victory over Russia, the first of a non-Western over a European power.¹ In British Columbia, however, xenophobia culminated in an anti-Asian riot in Vancouver in 1907 that troubled officials in London and Tokyo. Attitudes in the Pacific dominions oscillated between, on the one hand, admiration of Japan's military prowess and, on the other, an underlying wariness of its regional ambitions. Hostility toward Japanese and other Asian immigrants ran high, resulting in demands for exclusionary immigration legislation. In the wake of the Vancouver riot, British and Japanese pressure was such that Ottawa dispatched its labor minister Rodolphe Lemieux to Tokyo to negotiate a gentlemen's agreement that limited Japanese immigration to four hundred laborers and domestics per year. In Australia, such immigration was restricted through short-term stays for students and businessmen as well as dictation tests, a more indirect form of exclusion introduced in 1901.²

The First World War marked a major shift in dominion attitudes toward Japan and its role in Pacific affairs. Given the poor state of their Pacific defenses, the dominions were particularly grateful for the protection of Japan's imperial navy. Emboldened by their own substantial wartime sacrifices, the dominions sought a greater role in imperial and international relations, leading to their participation at the Paris peace conference (1919) and its resulting multilateral organization, the League of Nations. Moreover, their rising national consciousness and desire for dominion autonomy resulted in overseas representation and an assertion of “national” interests, albeit within the scope of imperial diplomatic attitudes. In light of such interests, the dominions soon adopted divergent attitudes on Pacific affairs, particularly in response to Japan's rising status. This chapter analyzes the 1910s as a formative period in this regard as the British Empire moved from bilateral arrangements, notably the Anglo-Japanese alliance, to multilateral forums such as the Washington conference. Shaped by an emerging sense of “national” identity, the dominions sought to influence British policies on Pacific security from the renewal of the alliance in 1911 to the Washington talks of 1921–22. As relatively minor players in Pacific affairs, they came to emphasize the importance of multilateralism and Anglo-American harmony in the region.

**Extending an Alliance**

Even prior to the First World War, Britain had begun to consult the dominions on relations with Japan. With the renewal of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1905, the dominions appreciated Japanese goodwill in the Pacific. As Britain’s foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey later opined, Japan was unlikely to go to war against the United States or the British Empire: “her whole arrangements with Canada show it and I find it in every way.” Yet despite the 1908 gentlemen’s agreement, the dominions remained sensitive to the possible impact of the Anglo-Japanese pact on the immigration question. For its part, Britain was anxious to avoid exclusionary legislation in the dominions that might antagonize Japan, whose support and protection were beneficial to its interests in Asia. Such concerns emerged in May 1911 at the imperial conference, which London used not only to mark the coronation of King George V but also to

---
