Securing the Maritime Trade

Triangular Frictions between the Merchant Marines of the US, UK and Japan

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Introduction

From the viewpoint of the history of global sea powers, the 1910s was one of the most fascinating decades because three countries, the UK, US and Japan, competed to strengthen their maritime powers, while at the same time cooperating with each other to promote global trade and commerce, in particular in Pacific Asia. This chapter will clarify the triangular maritime relationships in the 1910s focusing on the merchant marines. I will address in particular the impact of the opening of the Panama Canal on the three countries under review.¹

Revolutionary advances in transport have had a tremendous impact on world traffic routes and international relations, as well as the conduct of wars. The opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 was a long-cherished dream of the United States because it made the US a true oceanic power by virtue of the links between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. It also initiated new changes and opportunities for expanding commerce, trade and merchant marine activity of both Britain, the strongest sea power since the 17th century, and Japan as a developing sea power subsequent to the Russo-Japanese War in 1904–1905. The Panama Canal, which markedly raised the military and economic priority attached to the Pacific Ocean, both complicated and gave a new dimension to the evolving triangular relationships between the US, UK and Japan. Therefore, one cannot analyze the three-way interaction of these countries in the 1910s without touching upon the effects the opening of the Canal had on them. While this chapter seeks to clarify the impacts of the opening of the Canal on these triangular relationships mainly from the viewpoint of merchant marines, it also has seeks a wider objective: the ways in which World War I influenced the structural change in global society in the 1910s.

¹ This chapter represents a major revision of my article in Japanese, “The Opening of the Panama Canal and US-Japan Relations,” (Zaikai Network and Japan-United States Diplomatic History, Tokyo: Yamakawa Shuppansha, 1997), 38–59. In particular, the revision includes detailed presentation of the triangular relationships between the UK, US and Japan.
There are several possible reasons as to why the proposed research, in focus and methodology, has been largely absent before now from the literature. Firstly, the Panama Canal is located in Central America, far away from Britain and Japan, and these two countries were not directly involved with its construction. Secondly, the opening of the Panama Canal coincided with the outbreak of the First World War. On 28 July 1914, just before the opening of the Panama Canal, the First World War started on the Balkan Peninsula. This conflict, the scale of which would far exceed initial expectations, brought about changes to the political, military and economic structure of the world. This makes it genuinely difficult to bring out and keep separate the impact of the opening of the Panama Canal.

**General Circumstances of Merchant Marines in the Pacific-Asia Region before the Opening of the Panama Canal**

1 **Britain**

The so-called British World was created from the 18th century based on global networks associated with overseas migration, markets, consumer cultures, multiple new information channels, and investment, as well as the discriminatory subjugation of indigenous peoples.² One can say that Britain governed the seven seas confident that the sun would always rise on its territory and secure in its belief that the navy and merchant navy could maintain its worldwide empire. Not insignificantly, Britain's Navy had been the strongest in the world since 17th century, reinforced by a highly organized and effective merchant navy. Between 1890 and 1914, Britain's merchant navy carried up to 60 percent of the world's trade, and built two-thirds of its ships. The strength of Britain's merchant navy were twofold: maritime steam technology; and coal resources.³ Steam technology gave Britain powerful economic and naval advantages. Steam ships carried 5,414,000 tons, approximately twice the combined total of 2,293,000 tons for all other leading maritime nations.⁴ Coal resources greatly contributed to Britain's power, underpinning the network of Britain's trade. Thanks to the dominant role of the merchant navy, Britain's exports such as textiles, steel and machinery such as railroad equipment, along

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⁴ Ibid.