From Cooperation to Conflict

Japanese-Russian Relations from the Formation of the Russo-Japanese Entente to the Siberian Intervention

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Gotō Shimpei and the Relationship between Japan and Russia

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Russo-Japanese War broke out between Japan and Russia because of a failure to reconcile the interests of the Korean Peninsula and northeastern China (Manchuria). After the war, Japan and Russia remained wary of each other, and Japan considered Russia its greatest potential enemy. On the other hand, China’s demands that Japan and Russia concede parts of Manchuria caused the two countries to cooperate in some matters of foreign policy because of their shared opposition to Chinese nationalism. Therefore, the first, second, and third Russo-Japanese Ententes ended with the joint participation of the two countries in the First World War. And concluding the fourth Russo-Japanese Entente in July 1916, Japan allied with Russia; however, the following year the Russian Revolution began and Japan waged an intervention war with the other alliance countries, which resulted in renewed conflict between Japan and Russia. Thus, the relationship between Japan and Russia at the beginning of the 20th century would alternate between enmity and cooperation. With this in mind, we will focus on the relationship between Japan and Russia in the 1910s, viewed through the lens of Gotō Shimpei, who first became involved in foreign policy as a colonial government official, not as a diplomat. The colonial governments at this time tended to intervene in the foreign policies of the ministry of foreign affairs, because the colonial governments had international relations with neighboring countries (e.g., China). After he served as the first president of the Manchurian Railway, which was established after the Russo-Japanese War, he became a member of the temporary Foreign Affairs Investigation Committee during the First World War. Then, even though he was not a diplomat, he served as Foreign Minister and was responsible for the Siberian Intervention. Meanwhile, he focused on economic cooperation between Japan and Russia as vice-president from 1911–20, and later as president from 1920–29, of the Russo-Japanese Friendship Association. Why did he insist upon the Siberian Intervention? To understand this, we will analyze the complexity of the relationship between Japan
and Russia in the 1910s by following Gotō’s career, beginning with the events leading up to the Russo-Japanese War and concluding with the end of the First World War.

From the Russo-Japanese War to Russo-Japanese Entente

Gotō Shimpei (1857–1929) was from the Tōhoku District, which was seen as an enemy of the court clans during the Meiji Restoration. He started his career as a government official overseeing public health, which was considered to be in the technical department, while men from Satsuma or Chōsyu Districts held the power because of their districts’ role during the Meiji Restoration. During the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), Gotō enjoyed the favor of Kodama Gentarō from Chōsyu. When Kodama was appointed Governor-General of Taiwan in 1898, Gotō assumed the position of head of the Government Section of the Governor-General (later Civil Governor).

Gotō decided to create a Japanese sphere of influence in the opposite side of Taiwan, Fujian. Then the Boxer Rebellion spreading to Fujian led to the Amoy Incident in 1900. When the Honganji missionary temple in Amoy was destroyed by arson (planned by the Governor-General of Taiwan), Gotō recommended dispatching land troops to the Taiwan Army Chief of Staff of the Governor-General, and he made plans to occupy batteries with the Amoy consul and captains of the navy ships. “All of the related members were outraged” when the government in Tokyo reversed orders to dispatch troops due to the interference of great-power countries, including England. Gotō appealed to Kodama to cancel Tokyo’s reversal but was unsuccessful, and he lamented the deterioration of the situation. Thus he was enthusiastic for a Japanese “advance to the south” through the other side of Taiwan to southern China, and he also thought that Japan should abandon its status in Korea, even if Japan must appease Russia, who had ambitions on Korea, for future security when Japan headed southward.1

After that, however, Gotō’s concern over international affairs turned his attention from southern China to Korea and Manchuria. For example, when Russia failed to honor a second deadline to withdraw from Manchuria in April 1903, relations were strained. Russia instead presented withdrawal conditions from Manchuria to China. During May and June Gotō wanted Japan to have complete access to land and sea transportation, as well as

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