WHY DID JAPAN FAIL TO BECOME THE “BRITAIN” OF ASIA?

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The rise and fall of the Imperial Japanese Navy symbolizes both the glory and tragedy of Japanese history from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. The arrival of the modern steam-powered American navy in Edo Bay shocked the Japanese and triggered the complicated process of rapid modernization during the Meiji restoration. Building a modern navy capable of countering Western imperialism, naturally, became one of the most pressing goals for the Japanese leaders of the early Meiji period. By the mid-nineteenth century, technological innovation provided all navies with the capability to transform their wooden sailing ships into modern vessels, which were to be built with iron and propelled by coal and steam. This process of naval transformation was challenging as well as expensive even for the Western countries. It was all the more so for the fledging Japanese regime with no modern technological infrastructure and very limited financial resources.

Therefore, Japan’s victory at the Battle of Tsushima in 1905, a mere fifty years after the Japanese first set eyes on steam ships, justified the cost and sacrifice of Japanese modernization. The decisive duel between the two modern fleets turned out to be an unusually decisive victory in world naval history. It demonstrated that Japan had mastered modern naval warfare at an amazing speed and, as a result of this victory, had emerged as a world power less than fifty years after Commodore Perry made landfall in Japan. The battle also marked the start of a long self-destructive process for Japan. The Japanese sphere of influence on the continent, established in the wake of victory, eventually dragged Japan into endless and fatal confrontations with the Western powers, as well as rising Chinese nationalism. In other words, Japanese military leaders, despite their remarkable success in defending their fragile country up to the Russo-Japanese War, failed to develop an effective and cohesive national strategy after their stunning and magnificent victory against the Russians.
Japan’s failure to adjust to the new international environment after its victory created a sharp contrast with the British success in establishing a “Pax Britannica” after the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. Britain, unlike Japan, then refrained from costly commitments on the European continent despite its victory at Waterloo. Instead, it relied upon the balance of power in Europe for its security and, with the power of its navy, accumulated enormous sums of capital from the development of, and exploitation of the resources from its far-reaching overseas Empire. As Japan and Great Britain were both island nations with strong navies, the British provided the Japanese with a model for development at the beginning of the twentieth century. While some Japanese strategists wished to adopt the British model for Japan’s postwar development, these ideas were rejected as the basis for Japan’s national security strategy. In an effort to understand why this rejection occurred, this paper will examine Japanese strategic thinking after the Russo-Japanese War. After defining Japan’s postwar strategic environment, this study will identify two contrasting schools of strategic thought, and then reveal the actual Japanese strategic posture set by the Meiji leaders. Finally, several hypotheses will be presented to explain why the Japanese behaved so differently after 1905 in comparison with the British, one hundred years earlier, after their major naval victory in 1805.

Strategic consequences of the Russo-Japanese War

With less than forty years between the Meiji Restoration and the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War, the leaders of the Japanese Government regarded its foundation as a modern state as far from safe, let alone robust. Moreover, the Russo-Japanese War was fought at the high tide of Western imperialism with most non-Western states subject to constant threats of colonialisand imperialist pressure. In this context, the war carried dual characteristics. Japan’s victory over Russia represented its rise as a major imperial power competing with the already established Western powers. It also marked the first modern war in which an Asian country scored a major victory over one of the great colonial powers. In any case, strategically, Japan took a huge risk and managed to prevail on the battlefield. While Japanese forces fought skillfully and bravely, their victories owed much to an inept Russian army and a decaying Tsarist regime. The historic naval