The World War I Experience

Problems of peace become at times more serious and perplexing than those of war.
—Shidehara Kijûrô

“HEAVEN’S HELP in the new Taishô era for the fulfillment of Japan’s destiny.” With these words the Ôkuma Shigenobu cabinet welcomed the outbreak of hostilities in Europe in August 1914.¹

The First World War had profound consequences for Japan. It created the unanticipated opportunity for the Empire to assert its claims to regional leadership and international equality. At the postwar peace conference in 1919, Japan for the first time ventured into the global arena of diplomacy. There the nation was forced to deal with questions of world order. The conference gave birth to an association of nations in which Japan took a seat as one of the major powers. The problem of Japan’s place in that order would vex the island Empire for two decades to come.²

The Global Impact of the War

The First World War is widely viewed as a major — if not the foremost — watershed in the diplomatic history of the twentieth century. The epoch that culminated in the signing of the Treaty of Versailles witnessed momentous changes in the way nations related to each other — changes from which Japan could not remain aloof. Unprecedented techniques of mass warfare were implemented, the map of Europe was radically redrawn, major colonial holdings switched hands, and world trade patterns were altered. Long-accepted norms of diplomatic behavior were called into question. New, modern forms of nationalism and revolution rose to challenge the common practices of exploitation by powerful states and rule by privileged classes. Ideals of national self-determination, anticolonialism, collective security, and international socialism came forth to compete for acceptance as formulae for the creation of a new world order of peace and justice. When the fray subsided,
world leaders forged the institutional framework for a new system that they believed would relieve humanity of the threat of war. For Japan the rapid changes in international affairs produced uncertainty concerning future relationships with its Asian neighbors and the victorious powers. “Heaven’s help” indeed was a mixed blessing. As a nation whose interests could be stymied and whose security could be jeopardized by diplomatic isolation, Japan faced the painful necessity of adjusting to world trends.

The Great War permanently laid to rest a Europe-centered power system. Until the turn of the century, a few imperial states had been able to manipulate the balance of power anywhere in the world. Japanese foreign-policy makers were adept at adjusting to the European power system and using it advantageously. Alliance diplomacy, epitomized in the Anglo-Japanese accord of 1901, had provided a tie-in to the system by which Japan was able to prevent the formation of a concert of hostile powers and effectively neutralize any threat by a European imperialist to the expansion of Japanese vital interests in East Asia. But the alliance itself and the concentration of the British Navy in home waters in 1905 that it afforded were symptomatic of the eclipse of British preeminent power and the rise of new competitors in Europe and abroad. Old-style colonialism had passed its apex, and former dependencies were starting to assert their self-interest. During the course of the Great War, the participation of Canadian, South African, Indian, Australian, and Japanese troops as well as Chinese laborers made it inevitable that the demands of non-Europeans would be voiced in the postwar settlement. America’s financial and military bailout of the beleaguered French and British in 1917–1918, coupled with President Woodrow Wilson’s determination to assert American leadership in the peace, brought the full resources of the Western Hemisphere onto the world political stage. Kurt Riezler, an insightful German political philosopher, had pondered these matters upon his return from a visit to China on the eve of Sarajevo:

That which differentiates most obviously modern politics from that of every other age is that modern politics is world politics. That means that the world has become a unified political arena, that any political event anywhere in the world affects, or at least can affect, everything else. It means that it is no longer possible to view any territorial area and special question as fully isolated.3

Visionary statesmen came to believe that a permanent structure of peace would have to be global, not regional, in nature. The principles and goals enunciated by Wilson made it clear that he regarded his mission as more than the exorcising of the demon of militarism in Europe: he was determined to regenerate the system of international relations on a world scale.

The demise of a Europe-centered power system was accompanied by a de-
centralization of the world economy. Far-reaching structural changes took place in world production and trade as a consequence of the Great War's dislocation of European economies and concomitant stimulation of non-European competitors. According to figures compiled by the League of Nations in the 1920s, the shift was not a temporary phenomenon of the immediate war years. Europe's share of world production stood at 43 percent in 1913 but measured only 34 percent a decade later in 1923. The European portion of world trade, at 59 percent in 1913, was down to 50 percent in 1924. At the same time, Europe—Britain in particular—ceased to be the world's major creditor, as New York capital ventured abroad.4 During the war, Japan was a major beneficiary of these trends. With commercial relations between Europe and the Orient suddenly disrupted, Japanese enterprise stepped in to supply manufactured goods and investment capital to China and new markets like India and Southeast Asia. The war accelerated the long-term shift in the composition of Japan's exports from textiles to heavy industrial goods. Shipbuilding rose rapidly, to become Japan's fourth-largest export item by 1917, and the demand for Japanese steamship services accelerated sharply. Industrial employment soared, wages climbed, and a class of nouveaux riches reaped enormous profits. The wartime boom after 1914 ushered in creditor status with a trade surplus of over three billion yen for the years 1914–1919. Japanese loans were extended to China and Imperial Russia as well as to France and Britain.5

Despite substantial material growth for Japan as a nation, not all Japanese reaped prosperity. The war boom brought into sharp focus shortcomings in Japan's financial institutions and distribution of wealth. Runaway inflation led to a fall in real wages for workers after 1917. Before the end of the war, rice riots rocked prefectural capitals and contributed to the resignation of the Terauchi cabinet. This domestic unrest distracted the nation from important issues of the approaching peace conference. Instead of building reserves, Japan expended wartime profits in inadequately secured loans to China, unredeemed bonds and outstanding munitions accounts to the czarist government amounting to $129 million, and the fruitless Siberian Intervention. Japan was reminded of the fragility of its economic base and the vulnerability of the nation to unpredictable circumstances overseas.6 In this context the implications of the postwar order loomed all the more consequential for Japan. The public pronouncements of the American president gave scant indication of the concrete economic features of his program. The Fourteen Points, unveiled on 8 January 1918, vaguely referred to free navigation and the removal of economic barriers and seemed to threaten trade discrimination against nations not party to the total peace program. In response, some Japanese observers predicted the emergence of a closely integrated, worldwide economic system. Internationalists began to counsel that Japan assume a cooperative stance toward the postwar order of the powers to avoid exclusion from the global economic community. More
cynical commentators countered that the postwar world would be torn by a war of commerce rooted in white-yellow racial animosity and that any viable international system would itself serve as a tool for Anglo-Saxon exploitation.  

Japan saw the World War as an unprecedented opportunity to advance its standing among the powerful nations. International ranking was exceedingly important to the insecure and self-conscious Japanese, to whom powerhood seemed essential for national survival. Victory in 1905 over Russia accorded Japan titular recognition as a power, eighth among the “eight great powers.” The years since the Russo-Japanese War had witnessed further advances in Japanese armored capability. Whereas in 1905 Japan had depended on European dockyards for its first-class battleships, by 1919 Japan was building oil-fired dreadnoughts superior to those of every country except the United States. Nonetheless, Japan was made conscious in numerous insulting ways that material power did not grant commensurate status and convey admittance to the Euro-American club. In 1914 the mean protocol rank of Japanese ambassadors and ministers in the capitals of the world was fifteenth from the top. By 1920 Japan had ascended only to the twelfth position, still below such weaker states as Belgium, Argentina, Switzerland, and Denmark. Unabated racist opposition to Japanese immigration in Australia, Canada, and the United States signaled the unwillingness of Western peoples and governments to grant full substance to their recognition of Japan’s elevated position in the world.

Japan became a belligerent against Germany in August 1914 on the formal basis of its alliance with Great Britain. Japan’s attention immediately focused on German naval facilities and economic enterprises in China’s Shandong Peninsula. Since 1898, when Germany had leased Jiaozhou Bay and its port of Qingdao under threat of force, the German government had invested over 200 million marks in the development of the protectorate. The main harbor displayed berths, the latest loading equipment, rail facilities, and a sixteen-thousand-ton floating dry dock—one of the best in the world. Using Qingdao as a headquarters, private German investors had fanned out over Shandong Province, establishing banks, mining operations, industries, and a rail line that reached inland to Jinan. The German presence in Shandong was clearly the major foreign impediment to Japanese leadership in trade and investment in North China.

Governor Alfred Meyer-Waldeck, under orders from Berlin to defend Qingdao “to the bitter end,” ignored a Japanese ultimatum to surrender the protectorate to Japan. Japanese troops, aided in token by one British and half an Indian battalion, commenced a full-scale invasion on the north shore of the peninsula on 2 September. After two months of an overland trek and siege of the city, 60,000 invaders overwhelmed 4,000 stubborn German defenders. The total battle deaths for Japan numbered 415. Meanwhile Japanese, British, and Australian warships routed remnants of the Kaiser’s Asiatic fleet from the German Pacific islands. In
accordance with an agreement reached between the Japanese and British navies in October, Japan occupied the Marshalls, Marianas, Carolines, and Palaus—those archipelagoes north of the equator. By December 1914 the war against Germany was effectively over in East Asia and the Pacific. The Qingdao and Pacific actions permanently destroyed German colonial aspirations in East Asia and marked a shift away from British paternalism in the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. For Japan it was a clear case of minimum expenditure and maximum gain.10

In Shandong, Japanese entrepreneurs lost no time taking over existing German ventures and establishing new investments in salt production, rice processing, flour milling, canning, and spinning. By the end of 1918 some fifty Japanese joint-stock companies were established in Qingdao. Over Chinese protests, Japan placed the Qingdao–Jinan Railway under Japanese management, imported employees of the South Manchurian Railway to operate it, and more than doubled service before the war ended. By commanding this critical artery, Japan was able to control the economic pulse of Shandong Province. Japan's share of the total Chinese market rose from 20.4 to 36.3 percent between 1913 and 1919, while that of Britain fell from 16.5 to 9.5 percent, never to regain its prewar standing.11

The British were realistic enough to recognize from the outset that Japan's readiness to declare belligerency signaled more than treaty compliance. With Foreign Minister Katō Takaaki (1860–1926) the most forceful member of the Ōkuma cabinet, Japan would capitalize upon the circumstances of the war to extend territorial control, secure its position in South Manchuria, and elevate its power in China and the Pacific—and in consequence better its competitive position vis-à-vis British commercial interests in China. Indeed Sir Edward Grey, foreign secretary, had limply attempted in mid-August to dissuade Japan from declaring war and acting as a full belligerent; but the need for naval assistance forced London to request Japanese help. The dilemma was poignantly felt by the foreign secretary, who reflected, "To explain to an ally that her help will be welcome, but that you hope it will not be made inconvenient, is a proceeding that is neither agreeable nor gracious."12 Japan judiciously restricted its ground war to East Asia, spurning British requests—urged by the beleaguered Russians and French—that Japanese army divisions be dispatched to Europe. Japan became a party to the London Declaration in October 1915 only when assured that the commitment to a joint peace in no way implied the obligation to sacrifice its men in the European theater.13

The Yuan Shikai government in Beijing was alarmed at the extension of the war to Asia and fearful for China’s territorial integrity. It implored the British to make the Qingdao operation a joint expedition and pressed unsuccessfully for an Anglo-Japanese promise to restore the leasehold to China. China proclaimed its neutrality and formally protested the entry of Japanese troops into areas of the Shandong Peninsula outside specified war zones.14 Meanwhile, the Japanese con-
gratulated themselves for ridding the Orient of the German menace to peace. Writing in the December 1914 issue of Shin Nippon, Premier Okuma declared that

we are engaged in a just war, chastening the outlaw enemy in accordance with our responsibility under the terms of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. We have taken up arms to maintain the peace of the Orient and at the same time to hasten the coming of peace for the whole world.\textsuperscript{16}

Though militarily triumphant in its theater of war, Japan did not keep abreast of the breathtaking advances in armament implemented in the World War's battlegrounds of Europe. In particular the Empire lagged behind Britain in armed air development and Germany in submarine technology, innovations that could give an enemy the deciding edge over Japan's warships and island defenses. Even before the United States announced its fleet expansion program, Japanese naval attachés returned from European posts alarmed that the relative strength of the Imperial Navy had declined since the opening of hostilities. Japanese arms and military training were known to be pre-1914 vintage.\textsuperscript{16} Meanwhile, Japan's wartime growth in heavy industry, its new overseas territories, and the shift to oil as a naval fuel exposed the Empire to greater strategic liabilities and demanded far-ranging supply systems. In 1918, Japan emerged from the Great War less secure militarily and more acutely sensitive to foreign pressures.

Intensely desiring to permanently secure former German economic rights and enterprises in Shandong and to formally annex the former German islands north of the equator, Japan launched bold diplomatic maneuvers to ensure success at the postwar peace conference. Engraved on the hearts of Foreign Ministry officials were bitter memories of the 1895 Triple Intervention, when a postwar power play by a coalition of European imperialists had forced Japan to retrocede territory seized in the Sino-Japanese War. In early 1917, Japan agreed to convoy allied shipping in the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean in exchange for secret assurances from Britain, France, Russia, and Italy that they would support Tokyo's demands on the disposition of Shandong and the Pacific islands. Promises regarding Shandong were extracted from China itself twice during the war years. The first commitment to support Japan's claim was secured through threat of force in the Twenty-One Demands of 1915. The second, actually a reiteration of the 1915 pledge, was purchased by a twenty-million-yen loan to the warlord regime of Duan Qirui in Beijing in late September 1918. The latter accord, made less than four months before the peace conference and unbeknownst even to the plenipotentiary Wellington Koo before he reached Paris, would earn the Chinese government reproach in the eyes of its own people.\textsuperscript{17}

One new phenomenon of global import that did not escape the attention of
Japan during the war years was the rising power and assertiveness of the United States. Like Japan, America experienced a wartime economic boom. The value of exports increased from $2.8 billion in 1913 to $7.3 billion in 1918. American capital displaced British predominance in investment in Canada and Latin America. The Woodrow Wilson administration in 1916 announced a naval expansion program to include 10 battleships, 6 battle cruisers, and 140 smaller vessels. In the minds of Naval Operations planners this package presupposed an enemy coalition of Germany, Austria, and Japan. The following year, President Wilson led his country out of its isolation and demonstrated America’s capacity to deploy and supply two million troops a continent away. In the last eighteen months of the war, Japan’s Pacific neighbor built up a first-rate fleet and was known to be capable of vastly greater naval development. The specter of American power caused no small stir in Japan. In 1918 such American schemes for East Asian stability as the joint Siberian Intervention and the new Four-Power Consortium introduced multilateral approaches to co-opt unilateral Japanese initiatives. In the latter scheme, Wilson revived a program initiated in the Taft administration by which banks from a group of nations would loan money to China to stabilize the republican regime. Britain, France, and Japan joined with Wall Street financiers in the consortium. Negotiations for the project took three years and were finalized in October 1920, but not before Japan obtained recognition of its “special position” in southern Manchuria. As Wilson looked ahead to the peace settlement, he was determined that America assume a political posture commensurate with its growing military and industrial strength. His multilateral approach to world order in Europe and Asia would achieve its fullest expression in the collective security mechanisms of the League of Nations Covenant.

Japan found its economic fate increasingly tied to American prosperity and goodwill. Trans-Pacific trade prospered, with exports to America multiplying threefold and imports fivefold during the war years. Nearly 40 percent of Japan’s trade traversed sea-lanes patrolled by the United States Navy. Japanese investors seeking capital to invest in Shandong and Manchuria found London banks committed to financing England’s war, and were forced to look increasingly to New York for loans. As Ambassador Roland S. Morris observed in 1918, this dependence created an appetite for improved Japanese-American relations:

There has been a growing feeling among the thinking classes of people, particularly among the business interests, that Japan’s political and economic welfare depends primarily on her relations with the United States.... Since Baron Goto became foreign minister, the Government’s efforts to cultivate the United States have been even more marked than before.
On the other hand, Japanese strategists were rightfully uneasy about American commercial expansion in Asia and economic leverage over Japan. In 1917 the United States actually considered using the threat of an import quota on Japanese silk to secure the release of additional Japanese shipping for the Allies.21 Of particular concern to Japan was the free marketplace ideal, a reassertion of the Open Door doctrine by the Wilson administration. In Wilson’s scheme a League of Nations would assure the elimination of trade barriers and spheres of exclusive economic interest. In an open, stable world the United States, by virtue of its economic power and moral leadership, would rise automatically to the top. The Japanese, hardly so sanguine concerning their own nation’s capacity to survive in free competition with the Western powers, sought to reserve special privileges in neighboring regions of perceived vital interest.22

In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, Japan revised its national defense policy to posit the United States in place of Russia as its number one hypothetical enemy. The navy pressed for adoption of an eight-battleship, eight-battle-cruiser expansion program, which, as American analysts rightly observed, was aimed at countering U.S. naval strength.23 Popular hostility toward America following the World War was described by Ambassador Morris as “surpassing any previous antiforeign agitation in extent and bitterness.” He attributed this negative turn to “the fundamental Japanese jealousy of America’s growing strength and influence in the Far East—which is regarded as jeopardizing Japan’s predominating position—and a lurking suspicion of America’s sinister designs on Japan’s national aspirations.”24 At the same time the Foreign Ministry, the business community, and the cabinets of Terauchi Masatake and Hara Takashi recognized the necessity that Japan maintain a cordial coexistence with the North American giant. The Lansing-Ishii notes of November 1917, negotiated by the American secretary of state and Japanese special ambassador Ishii Kikuiro, represent this impulse to accommodate. The notes recognized Japan’s “special interests” in China.25 Understanding with the United States was to Japanese leaders a matter of top diplomatic priority, determined in large part by economic realities.

The global trends surrounding the Great War are clear in historical hindsight. But not many Japanese at the time were conscious of the integration of Japan into world affairs. Government leaders were slow to realize the likelihood that any new power structure to emerge in the postwar settlement would assume global proportions and make demands upon Japan, Asia’s foremost power. Like the public, which spoke of the “European War” (Oshū sensō) and not a world war, Japanese elites tended to assume that the decisions to be made at the peace conference—except for the disposal of Germany’s former territories in the East—would deal almost exclusively with European matters and not vitally affect Asia.
Idealism and Ideology

"In no previous war in the history of mankind has the world resounded with such humanitarian proclamations." These words by a Ōji shinpō correspondent in San Francisco describe the chorus of popular aspirations for peace and social justice heard during the First World War. This phenomenon may be partially attributed to widespread revulsion against the shocking scenario of unrestricted submarine attacks, dirigible bombings, and gas warfare that spread their pall over the European front. Voices the world over called for the establishment of national and global systems reflecting the high principles of humanism and democracy. Peace societies and liberal associations sprang up during the war and demanded popular government and a "new diplomacy" shorn of imperialism, secrecy, and power politics. In the West such movements involved a large number of politically influential persons and typically urged the creation of a society of nations to prevent the recurrence of war.

Moral expectations affected both the vocabulary and the content of World War I diplomacy. American president Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) was particularly adept at expressing the subjective interests of the United States in terms of the universal hopes of humankind. The presence of such issues as child labor standards and women's rights on the agenda of the Paris Peace Conference reflected the extent to which human aspirations, as opposed to national demands, received attention at the highest levels of international deliberation. Chinese and Korean nationalists seized upon the mood of the hour to appeal for world sympathy in their struggles against Japanese imperialism. Ideology did not eradicate power as a factor in diplomacy, but it required new justifications for the use of force and successfully challenged a Machiavellian approach to relations between peoples.

The war-inspired longing for just and harmonious international relations provided fertile soil for such ideological diplomacies as Wilsonianism and Leninism to flourish and become the major competitors for fashioning a new world order. Both asserted their validity on the basis of abstract, universal values. Both claimed for their political and social orders universal applicability and, given the passage of time, universal practicability. The movements alike contended that they were propelled by an evolutionary momentum of history.

The Wilsonian world program was an attempt to inject the principles of American democracy into international relations. Woodrow Wilson's goal was an open, rational, liberal-capitalist, status-quo order in which the United States would exercise moral leadership for the peace and prosperity of peoples everywhere. As his ideas crystallized during the years of his academic and political careers, Wilson came to espouse several concepts fundamentally contrary to Japan's national polity
and diplomatic practice. He embraced the Benthamite view that the modern state exists for the sake of the individual and the protection of the individual's rights. He pictured a universal social evolution from the prehistoric clan to the modern state in which popular sovereignty marked the maturation stage. Monarchy and aristocracy all over the world were gradually being displaced by democracy, he believed. In wartime pronouncements after 1917 the president called for open diplomacy, territorial sovereignty for all states, and national self-determination for all civilized peoples. Such practices in diplomacy as "private international understandings," military alliances, and the annexation of conquered territory were to be discontinued in the world order he envisioned. On 4 July 1918 at Mount Vernon, he insisted on

the settlement of every question, whether of territory, or sovereignty, of economic arrangement, or of political relationship, upon the basis of the free acceptance of that settlement by the people immediately concerned, and not upon the basis of the material interest or advantage of any other nation or people which may desire a different settlement for the sake of its own exterior influence or mastery.

Moreover, multilateral approaches to stability and the settlement of disputes were to replace bilateral understandings and unilateral initiatives. The crude and anachronistic principle of balance of power would be retired, and in its place collective security, institutionalized in an organization of nations, would be established. Wilson's optimism was undergirded by his conviction, as a liberal Christian intellectual, that God was working out His will in human history. Even those of his generation who were not religiously inclined shared his hope that people everywhere could lay aside selfish interests, deal rationally with disagreements, and coexist without war. The international attention accorded Wilson's ideology can be attributed to its coincidence with both human sentiment and the emergence of the United States as a formidable world power.

Wilson's ideals were not readily applauded in monarchist Japan. There, 98 percent of the population was disfranchised and elites in society regarded political parties and labor unions as destructive to the harmony and collective good of the nation. The balance of power was a mainstay of Japanese security and the raison d'être of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. As measures of wartime policy, Japan relied upon alliances, secret treaties, and territorial aggrandizement to further its national destiny. Bilateral diplomacy had brought valuable concessions from China during the war. To some Japanese, Wilsonianism seemed designed to circumscribe Japan's legitimate national development and perpetuate the nation's secondary status.

Meanwhile, a political exile in Switzerland and revolutionary in his native
Russia was promoting a radical socialist program for a new international order. Bolshevik theorist Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870–1924) emphasized the social and economic rather than the political causes of war and asserted that advanced capitalist states inevitably resort to imperialism to acquire outlets for their surplus products. He scorned the current conflict in Europe as a struggle between equally predatory capitalist powers for the division of the underdeveloped areas of the world. Any liberal attempt to rectify international relations that left prevailing socioeconomic structures intact would merely paper over the war-breeding “contradictions” within capitalist societies. Only socialist revolution could end imperialism, and Lenin believed that the world was on the verge of revolutionary upheaval.

Lenin’s challenge to the basic rationale of the Allied cause brought him into sharp conflict with Wilson’s ideology. The Bolshevik leader harbored contempt for democratic socialism and republican government, which he saw as benefiting the petty bourgeoisie and a small elite of privileged workers. His concept of revolution covered all colonized peoples as well as all workers in capitalist states — not merely those peoples subjugated by the central powers. He ridiculed Wilson’s proposals for disarmament, arbitration, and free trade as mere reformist palliatives. As for the League of Nations scheme, the Russian revolutionary saw the organization playing two possible roles, both reactionary. It could serve as an alliance against one or two other capitalist states (the central powers), or it could comprise a plot of major capitalist nations to strangle a newborn socialist state. Lenin advised socialists to back neither side in the war and to oppose Wilson’s peace program.30

Japanese party politicians and Foreign Ministry officials, careful not to offend the United States or dissociate themselves from the entente, paid lip service abroad to Wilson’s principles. Uchida Yasuya, on his elevation to the office of foreign minister on 1 October 1918, cabled Secretary of State Robert Lansing to assure the United States of Japan’s commitment to “the work of securing an Allied victory which shall finally rid the world of menace and aggression.”31 However, a chary skepticism marked the reactions of Japanese political elites to both Wilsonian liberalism and Leninist anti-imperialism. Two factors conditioned this reaction: a cultural indifference to Western-style ideologies, and a cynical realism developed through historical experience. Most Japanese were satisfied to rationalize wartime policy in terms of tangible political, economic, and territorial goals. With a heritage of what one prominent international historian has labeled an “ideal-less” (mushi-so) approach to foreign affairs,32 the nation evidenced little of the compulsiveness, so pervasive in America, to promote transcendent moral absolutes. The ideological content of Wilsonianism and Leninism appeared to most Japanese as irrelevant at best and hypocritical at worst. Stuck in the craw of Japan’s recent historical memory were unequal commercial treaties and the Triple Intervention, cases in which
the offending imperialist powers had professed altruistic motives. Japan's rugged experience in dealing with the West had taught the Japanese that power, not moral values or international law, dominated the contest of diplomacy. A nonideological orientation equipped Japan to detect the element of national self-interest that lurked within the pompous rhetoric of World War I statesmen and revolutionaries. At the same time, it incapacitated Japan from apprehending the intensity of the sentiments that swept the world in the wake of the Great War.

From the opening volley, Japan viewed the war from the standpoint of pragmatic self-interest. Neither the Anglo-Japanese Alliance nor the London Declaration prevented Japan from secretly discussing with Germany and Austria offers to recognize Japan's paramount position in East Asia in exchange for a separate German-Austrian peace with Russia and Japan. In parliamentary interpellations in the Diet, demands that the cabinet clearly associate itself with the goals proclaimed by entente statesmen met with evasive replies. Japanese leaders shrewdly recognized that to promote the war as a contest of good and evil would rigidify domestic opinion — a truth that Woodrow Wilson never learned. National weakness required that Japan act prudently and dispassionately and keep all options open.

Privately dismissing the publicized ideas of Wilson and Lenin as the rhetoric of war and revolution, Japanese decision makers tended to probe below the level of ideology for the camouflaged power play. Caustic analysts portrayed the U.S. president's program as a purposeful guise for such base designs as economic imperialism and the imposition of the status quo on less developed nations. To Privy Councilor Itô Miyöji, Wilson's new battleships — not his orations on peace and justice — were the most reliable gauge of American intentions. The October Revolution was seen as the work of a handful of professional agitators. Army vice-chief of staff and war minister Tanaka Giichi (1863–1929) construed the Bolsheviks' subsequent repudiation of wartime Russo-Japanese agreements as the cunning handiwork of disguised German agents. Revolutionaries, he believed, should be treated as power competitors, not ideologues. Ideology, whether it issued from Washington or Moscow, was thus perceived as just another technique in the unremitting contest of power.

Party Politics and Foreign Policy

The practice of government under the Meiji Constitution was characterized by unspecified channels of authority and an absence of unitary leadership. The process of policy making tended to change whenever the locus of political power shifted. The World War I period witnessed far-reaching political change as the aging genrō (senior statesmen) declined in vigor and a genuine party cabinet came to power for the first time in September 1918. The altered shape of political authority would
influence the style and content of Japanese diplomacy in the aftermath of the Great War. Party cabinets would oversee Japan’s entry into the League of Nations and the nation’s activity as a member of the League until the eve of its withdrawal in 1933. Even with the appearance of new actors on the political stage, foreign-policy decision making remained a pluralistic, cumbersome procedure involving intense rivalry between departments and factions.

The first structural move to give political parties a voice in foreign affairs came in June 1917, when the senior statesmen, backed by an Imperial decree, orchestrated the formation of the Gaikō Chōsakai (Advisory Council on Foreign Relations). The council was envisioned as a review board representing elite elements with a heavy stake in foreign affairs, with representation from the cabinet, the Foreign Ministry, the Privy Council, the services, and the political parties. Selyukai president Hara Takashi (1856–1921) and Kokumintō chief Inukai Tsuyoshi were accorded seats. While they were given the title of minister of state in order to dissociate their council appointments from their party identification, the intent of the *gerō* to bring the parties into the consensus formation process was clear. The council did succeed in enlarging elite input in foreign policy particularly during the Terauchi government’s deliberation of the Siberian Intervention. After the Hara ministry replaced the Terauchi cabinet, the council declined in prestige and influence and was used by the cabinet mostly as a device to co-opt potential opposition.6 During the months following the armistice, the Gaikō Chōsakai met every two weeks or so to evaluate Foreign Ministry proposals and monitor the progress of the peace conference. Its deliberations, chronicled in detail by Privy Councilor Itō Miyoji, portray steep hurdles in the laborious process of consensus formation on such issues as disarmament, the mandate system, and the League of Nations. Rivalry between the Foreign Ministry and the council is evident as well.7 In its five years of existence the Gaikō Chōsakai succeeded in bending a few policies but initiated none. However, anticipated intransigence from the council may have had a subtle impact on the style and spirit of policy. The Foreign Ministry appears to have toned down its memoranda and couched its proposals in vague wording in order to gain the council’s imprimatur.

Pragmatism as a mode of operation was particularly well suited to the party politicians of the Taishō period. The Hara cabinet’s foreign minister, Uchida Yasuya (1865–1936), was known as Gomuninyō (Rubber Doll) because he could bend in any direction. When world trends appeared conciliatory, Uchida pursued cooperation with the powers. In a new study of Uchida, Rustin Gates describes him as a Mēiji diplomat in the pragmatic mold of Mutsu Munemitsu and Komura Jutarō. His China policy was moderate, favoring deference to the interests of the powers and promotion of the Open Door. But he was more assertive when it came to Manchuria. When an unusual opportunity presented itself—as it had in the Russo-
Japanese War, when Uchida’s mentors were at the helm of foreign policy — Japan should be bold to extend its imperial interests, by force if necessary. When Uchida again took up the foreign minister’s portfolio in the midst of the Guandong Army’s advances in Manchuria, he would press a hard line supporting the creation of Manchuko. Prime Minister Hara likewise held no hard-and-fast conception of world order or Japan’s role in international affairs. Rather, he was interested in ending up on the winning side of any conflict. Having risen to power through adroit application of the “politics of compromise,” Hara displayed flexibility in building consensus at home and in adjusting to changing realities abroad. He was noticeably sensitive to public opinion. Desirous of the backing of the services and concerned that Japan secure the leading position in Asia, Hara favored increased army and navy strength. He cultivated a generally cordial relationship with his war minister, Tanaka Giichi. Eager to satisfy business interests, he sought to end international economic discrimination, which threatened, in his words, “to compel nations to commit national suicide.” At the same time, he was conscious of the capacity of the United States and Great Britain to frustrate the elevation of Japan’s international status. Pragmatic, Meiji-bred officials like Hara and Uchida were careful not to antagonize the great powers. The Seiyukai government courted the Ei-Bei Ha (Anglo-American faction), a Foreign Ministry clique whose promotion of cordial relations with the powers coincided with the commercial interests of the Seiyukai’s corporate backers. Hara posited a policy of understanding with the first-class powers as the only sane way to achieve Japan’s advancement and security.38

Only a few genrō, the senior statesmen who had led Japan through reform and industrialization following the Meiji Restoration, lived to see the First World War. But no astute politician ignored the surviving elders. Foreign Minister Kato, of Twenty-One Demands notoriety, paid the price of removal from office for sidestepping their counsel. By the time the war ended, only two first-generation genrō — Yamagata Aritomo (1838–1922), age eighty, and Matsukata Masayoshi (1835–1924), age eighty-three — remained. From time to time they applied pressures to influence decisions and smooth the process of consensus formation. They were kept informed on key policy developments and diplomatic correspondence, and they generally advised political restraint and military preparedness. Their influence operated effectively through allies on the Gaiikō Chōsakai and the Privy Council, of which Yamagata was president. The field marshal in particular maintained an active interest in foreign affairs. Throughout his long career Yamagata had accumulated a store of bitter experience with imperialist powers at a time when Japan was weak and at their mercy. What he feared most was isolation and the horrifying specter of a coalition of white nations poised against a yellow people. Prime Minister Hara’s care to consult with Yamagata is evident in the selection of the peace conference delegation.39
The possibility of pressure by the military upon foreign policy making was a constant factor in Japanese politics. The military’s interest in China diplomacy was particularly marked. Since the Russo-Japanese War the Imperial Army had competed with civilian agencies by sending its own agents to Beijing and Manchuria and interfering in the administration of the South Manchurian Railway. The army trained bright officers in Chinese language and affairs and set up information-gathering posts in China in parallel with the web of consulates under Foreign Ministry jurisdiction. Often the army’s China experts were more able than those of the ministry. In 1916 the army took charge of a Japanese government-sponsored operation to thwart Yuan Shikai’s scheme to become emperor. As warlords seized provincial authority after Yuan’s timely death, contact with China’s leaders became more and more the prerogative of the Japanese Army. By 1918 the army maintained attaches in Beijing, resident officers in major cities, and military advisers to principal warlords, each unit having its own intelligence-gathering apparatus. The Foreign Ministry was irritated by these inroads into its authority and resented intrigues by army and navy officers in support of dubious adventures in China and Siberia. Foreign policy in the main issued from the ministry. But on certain key issues — the retention of Qingdao and the Pacific islands, the anticonscription and disarmament clauses of the League of Nations Covenant — the services made their desires felt. The knowledge that to provoke the army and navy could ignite a political crisis was continually present in the minds of policy makers.

An elitist concept of government and the delicacy of the consensus formation process led to a near obsession with secrecy. Insofar as possible, both the Diet and the general public were deprived of information while diplomatic policies were formulated. Since 1909 the foreign minister had delivered an annual address on foreign affairs to both houses of the Diet, and a significant part of the premier’s address was devoted to foreign policy. On the potentially controversial diplomatic issues of the war years, however, the leaders’ speeches were vague and noncommittal, giving rise in the press to charges of “clandestine and silent politics.” The customary Diet interpellation that followed such addresses could, if skillfully orchestrated, stir public sentiment and cause cleavages within the government. The Diet had no formal function in approving treaties, which were deliberated by the Privy Council and ratified by the Emperor. Even though the defined role of the public in foreign-policy making was marginal, the memory of the 1905 riots that greeted the Portsmouth Peace Treaty prompted policy makers to be prudent and formulate programs in which the public could at least acquiesce.

The bureaucrats who rose to leadership in the Foreign Ministry near the close of the war were men of able pedigree. Viscount Uchida had previous experience as foreign minister in the second Saionji cabinet (1911–1912) and had served as minister to China and ambassador to the United States. His wife had studied at Bryn
Mawr College. Recently posted as special ambassador to Petrograd, Uchida was said to possess a firsthand understanding of the revolutionary situation in Russia.⁴⁴ Vice-minister since 1915 was Shidehara Kijūrō (1872–1951), who had been serving as minister to the Netherlands when the war broke out. Shidehara would become ambassador to the United States in 1919, foreign minister after 1924, and premier for seven months during the post-Pacific War occupation. So comfortable was he in the English language that he prepared the initial drafts of his speeches and cables in the foreign tongue. The Shidehara name came to symbolize the conciliatory foreign policy of the 1920s. The chief of the influential Political Affairs Bureau (Seimu kyoku), Hanihara Shokan, had served as ambassador to Washington in 1910–1911 and would again take up the post in 1923–1924, the time when Congress legislated Oriental exclusion. The leadership of these officials is evidence of the ascendancy of the Ei-Bei Ha. In 1918–1919, the Anglo-American faction also claimed within its ranks Chinda Sutemi, ambassador to London, and leading Paris Peace Conference spokesman Makino Nobuaki. This clique dominated Japanese foreign policy between World War I and the Manchurian Incident, a period in which the domestic and international environment was supportive of accommodation with the West. As a group, ministry officials were persons of extensive experience abroad. Mainstream Kasumigaseki diplomacy was capable of grasping world trends and conceiving a role for Japan outside the regional confines of East Asia.⁴⁶

Once a policy proposal emerged from the Foreign Ministry, it was subjected to a lengthy consensus-formation process to accommodate political elements outside the ranks of professional diplomacy. The genrō, the ministers of war and the navy, and high officials in potentially affected ministries had to be consulted. The service ministries’ approval or acquiescence was important because of the “right of supreme command,” the special access to the Emperor that the army and the navy enjoyed by virtue of the Meiji Constitution’s designation of the sovereign as supreme commander. Political opposition was preempted by soliciting potential critics’ advice and allowing predictable opponents to let off steam. At this point the sanction of some deliberative body — the Gaikō Chōsakai in the World War I era — was sought. Nondiplomats usually restricted their comments to the area of their expertise, and rarely did freel-wheeling debate or substantial policy alterations take place at this stage. Important documents, such as initial instructions to conference plenipotentiaries, acquired final authority by cabinet approval and Imperial sanction. In the case of a treaty, a final round of consensus formation and sanction took place when the signed accord was brought home. Following deliberation and approval by the Privy Council, the cabinet petitioned the Emperor for ratification.⁴⁶

The priority on consensus and the reliance on informal procedures had several important consequences for the style and effectiveness of Japanese diplomacy. The
necessity of forming a broad domestic coalition tended to produce policy documents and diplomatic instructions that were lowest-common-denominator statements. Chief conference delegates were chosen primarily for their political ability to carry the outcome at home and secondarily for their diplomatic expertise. The cumbersomeness of the process prevented rapid decisions and sudden shifts in policy, while the system's delicacy required thoroughgoing secrecy. The predominance of informal processes over prescribed channels led to a heavy reliance on behind-the-scenes maneuvering.

All these circumstances were at work as the nation approached the end of the Great War. Fortunately for Japan, the inertia of the policy-making system was somewhat offset by the savvy of leading political and diplomatic actors. Effective adjustment to the postwar order required a masterful politician, Hara Takashi, at home and a resourceful diplomat, Makino Nobuaki, in Paris.

**Diplomatic Isolation from the Powers**

Japan's right to economic penetration and political influence on the continent of Asia had been a major tenet of Japanese diplomatic orthodoxy ever since the middle of the Meiji period. In an 1890 document Japan's first prime minister under the Meiji Constitution, Yamagata Aritomo, had counseled that a strategic "line of advantage" must extend beyond the perimeter of the nation's boundaries of sovereignty. The vastness of Manchuria and eastern Siberia lured the island empire in search of raw materials and a safety valve for its growing population. All the rationalizations of social Darwinism and Manifest Destiny that had operated in American expansionism had their counterparts among the Japanese, who sought to impose the blessings of the Meiji experience upon unenlightened, politically chaotic societies on the continent. The uplifting of Asia was also linked in Japanese minds to the challenge of Japan's survival in the face of non-Asiatic predators. Picturing Japan as "the bell to awaken Asia," *Kokumin shinbun* editor Tokutomi Sohō (1863–1957) admonished his countrymen in the spring of 1918. "Japan is destined to help and to guide the vast population of this large territory. Should Japan shirk this task, ruin may come to Asia — Asia will no longer be Asia for Asiatics. In such an event Japan might remain Japan for Japanese, but its position will become precarious."

Apologists for a positive continental policy pictured Manchuria as a "lifeline" to be secured and China as a partner in a "unique intimacy" based on racial identity, cultural affinity, and territorial propinquity.

Expansionist assumptions were not the exclusive predilection of right-wing journalists and militarists in Japan. Foreign Minister Uchida argued that territorial expansion was not to be mistaken for aggression, and cited America's seizure of the Philippines in vindication of the former. Makino Nobuaki, widely reputed
as an internationalist and a moderate, affirmed territorial expansion as a foreign policy goal when he was pressed for an opinion before the Gaikō Chōsakai. Even social democrat Yoshino Sakuzō, who had taught in Tianjin from 1906 to 1909, defended the Twenty-One Demands, including the notorious Group V, as “measures extremely appropriate” for the future advancement of Japan in China.\(^5\) Justifications of Japanese designs on the mainland were also heard in prominent circles overseas. Viscount Edward Grey, British foreign secretary until 1916 and League of Nations promoter, held the view that if Japanese immigrants were to be excluded from North America, Australia, New Zealand, and the South Pacific islands, Japan could not be forbidden to expand in China.\(^6\) The British ambassador to Beijing, Sir John Jordan, in a secret memorandum to the Foreign Office on the eve of the postwar conference, was likewise willing to acquiesce in the growth of Japanese influence on the continent so long as it conformed to the mores of “respectable” imperialism:

The events of the past four years have added materially to the economic strength and the imperial ambitions of Japan. Owing to a poverty of internal resources those ambitions can only be fulfilled by an expansion of interest in the productive area of China. The desire for such expansion is natural and legitimate and, so long as it is pursued in accordance with an accepted code, it could meet with no opposition. Geographical propinquity, a common written language, and the suitability of her industrial achievements to the needs of China, provide for Japan a favored place in the field of open competition.\(^3\)

Expansionist inclinations placed aspiring middle powers like Japan and Italy in a unique position among the powers in the period of the Great War and the years that followed. Their national hegemonic aspirations could not be realized within the bounds of the territorial status quo and led them to press the limits of diplomatic propriety.

The “respectable” imperialism, urged by Ambassador Jordan above, was understood in Japan to mean the pursuit of hegemonic goals by means that avoided open confrontation among the powers. It was a posture fraught with contradictions and hypocrisy. It presumed that the interests of the powers superseded those of weaker and subjected peoples. Mainstream political elites envisioned a slow, incremental extension of concrete Japanese interests. Overt political or military offensives should be pursued only when an extremely compelling opportunity presented itself: Japan should support the forces of order in China, refrain from outright interference in that country’s domestic politics, and give evidence of respect for Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity. The model of the Wilson administration’s recent dealing with its underdeveloped neighbor, Mexico, appealed to
Japanese leaders. Gotô Shinpei, an admirer of Theodore Roosevelt's who served briefly as foreign minister in 1918, cited America's Mexico policy as

the only way to handle China. . . . The Wilson policy of helping the Mexicans to help themselves by picking out the strongest men in that country and supporting them liberally is now amply vindicated. The latest agreement between the United States and Carranza is evidence of this. Japan must pursue the same tactics with China.23

Since Japanese prosperity depended increasingly on trade with the United States, Japan should avoid arousing the suspicions of its Pacific neighbor regarding its aims in China. In short, there should be no Japanese-Western confrontation over China.

The unforeseen and unusually advantageous circumstances presented by the European war and the Russian Revolution lured the Okuma and Terauchi cabinets into opportunistic adventurism on the continent in defiance of diplomatic propriety and conventional restraints. The heaviest penalty Japan incurred was the attitude of distrust among the Chinese populace and the powers. When the war ended, the Chinese took to the streets in defense of China's national self-determination. Among foreign diplomats the Americans were particularly bitter in their condemnation of Japan. Forgetful of recent history in the Philippines and contemporary affairs in Mexico, Roland S. Morris, ambassador to Tokyo, fumed that “the Japanese are so egotistic that they do not regard their policies aggressive or their national aspirations incompatible with the interests of other nations.” Paul S. Reinsch, ambassador to China, depicted Japanese behavior in China as “sinister,” “unconscionably ruthless and underhanded,” and bereft of “every idea of fair play.”25

The episode most deleterious to Japan's relationship to the powers was the often-described Twenty-One Demands of 1915. After receiving a Japanese ultimatum, China acquiesced in the majority of Japanese demands for expanded economic and strategic privileges on the mainland. The notorious Group V, which provided for the appointment of Japanese political, financial, and military advisers and the establishment of a joint police force, was dropped by Japan in deference to adverse opinion at home and abroad. Chinese acquiescence in Group V would have seriously compromised China's sovereignty and reduced the republic to virtual semicolonial status. Japanese publicists exonerated the demands as bitter medicine proffered by a virtuous mother to a sick, protesting child, and pointed out that the 245 Japanese advisers then serving the Yuan Shikai government were dwarfed by the 1,105 English and 1,003 French employees in similar positions.24

Indeed, Frederick R. Dickinson in his work on Japan and the Great War views the demands as commensurate with conventional foreign pressures on China by Japan
and Britain in the past. But the Asia of the World War I years was in transition. Nationalistic self-esteem and antiforeignism were spreading rapidly and erupted during the peace conference on 1 March 1919 in anticolonial demonstrations in Seoul. In China the Twenty-One Demands were one cause célèbre that evoked the mass movements of May Fourth. European powers, seeing their interests placed in jeopardy by Japanese aggressiveness, were uneasy and resentful. Ambassador Jordan summed up the international consequences of Japan’s wartime continental adventurism: “Her ends have been accomplished by such vigorous and unusual methods that the torpid polity of China has been stirred from its traditional inertia, and the political and commercial interests of other nations have reflected a growing sense of insecurity.”

Painfully aware that the Twenty-One Demands had alienated the Chinese public and evoked suspicions among the powers, the genrō tried to repair the damage done by the Ōkuma government. A new cabinet headed by General Terauchi Masatake, a Yamagata protégé, forsook the frontal assault when it took office in October 1916. Tokyo shifted its offensive to yen diplomacy and extended secret loans amounting to 145 million yen on generous terms to the Beijing regime of Duan Qirui in 1917 and 1918. Foreign Minister Motono Ichirō surprised the powers in February 1917 by dropping his government’s previous opposition to Chinese belligerency and urging China to declare war on the central powers. Policy discussions in the Terauchi and Hara governments show a self-conscious abandonment of the positive China policy of the early war years. Hara sought to diminish Japan’s diplomatic isolation over China by cooperating in the Four-Power Consortium. By restoring China’s trust, Japan planned to ease the postwar settlement. The desired course was a bilateral resolution of the Shandong question through quiet negotiations, economic inducements, and secret agreements. With Sino-Japanese neighborliness in good repair, Japan would march hand in hand with China to the peace conference to press the common causes of racial equality and relief from Western penetration in Asia. Sino-Japanese tranquillity would help convince the Western powers that Japan’s claim to regional leadership was appropriate.

With strong American backing, China declared war on Germany on 14 August 1917. The European Allies had stayed off Chinese entry since 1915, not wanting to alienate Japan. Chinese laborers, hired and transported under private contract, had been a significant presence on the French and Russian fronts since 1916, but soldiers from China saw no action in the war even after the declaration. The Chinese aim was to secure representation at the postwar peace conference and there to seek full restoration of Shandong to China and abrogation of Japanese gains in the Twenty-One Demands. Rather than acting in common cause with Japan as Japanese policy makers had hoped, China presented independent demands at the negotiating table in Paris. Xu Guoqi, historian of China and the Great War, sees
the war and its aftermath as a defining moment in the twentieth-century history of the young republic. China stood up, claimed equal membership among the nations of the world, and asserted a new national and international identity. The leading Chinese intellectual of the time, Liang Qichao, saw joining in the war as a once-in-a-thousand-years opportunity to recover international sovereignty and gain entrée into a restructured world community. China’s diplomacy failed in the short run, as it was granted only minor-nation status at the conference. Japan’s net of secret treaties kept Qingdao under Japanese lease for the time being, and the Twenty-One Demands were not overturned. But Japanese opportunistic actions toward China during the Great War contributed significantly in the congealing of Chinese national consciousness, and in implanting an anti-Japanese element in Chinese national identity—an element that persists into the twenty-first century. China at Paris would embrace the League of Nations scheme and a decade later would seek League protection from Japanese incursion.

The revolutions in Russia in 1917 undid some of the most important achievements of Japan’s World War I diplomacy. Among the casualties were 255 million yen in unredeemed czarist bonds and the Russo-Japanese secret agreements of 1916 and 1917. Treaties exposed and abrogated by the Bolsheviks included a Russo-Japanese Alliance and a pledge, extracted from a czar in desperate need of munitions, to support Japan’s territorial demands at the peace conference. Also lost was a 1912 secret convention delineating Japanese and Russian spheres in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia. The sudden collapse of understanding with Russia was a severe blow to Yamagata Aritomo, who had been the major advocate of entente with Russia. Japanese elites also shuddered at the specter of another venerated monarchy brought low. The success of the Bolshevik cause gave rise to widespread fear of German hegemony in Siberia, for Japanese shared with Britons and Americans the widespread misperception of the Russian revolutionaries as disguised German agents. Popular journals in Japan painted a lurid picture of the menace of German submarines moored at Vladivostok and zeppelins based at Harbin. The army engineered the May 1918 signing of secret Sino-Japanese military and naval agreements for joint defense against “the gradual extension of enemy influence toward the east.” These accords gave the Japanese Army freedom to operate in any Chinese territory adjacent to Russia and paved the way for the Siberian expedition.

The power vacuum created in Siberia by the fall of the czarist and provisional governments presented Japan with a golden opportunity to detach the eastern provinces from Muscovite control, create a new sphere of Japanese influence, and displace the Russian presence in northern Manchuria. Japanese moderates succeeded in requiring that the expedition be an allied venture, but Japan’s overzealous troop commitment and reluctance to withdraw at the end of the World War are well documented. Japan’s autonomous adventurism under the guise of a joint
incursion increased the store of suspicion toward Tokyo in the minds of Western leaders. Secretary of State Lansing charged that Japan’s excesses constituted "a definite departure from expressed understanding for cooperation between Japan and the United States, quite unwarranted by any necessity." Just as deleterious to Japan’s postwar diplomacy was the disruption the Siberian crisis created in Japanese domestic politics. An acrid policy debate absorbed an inordinate amount of the time and energy of the cabinet and Foreign Ministry. It brought down Foreign Minister Motono in April 1918 and fouled consensus formation within the Terauchi government on urgent domestic and foreign matters. By the time order returned to the decision-making process under Prime Minister Hara, the armistice was at hand. Japan was caught with homework undone on critical issues of the postwar settlement.

Japan’s diplomatic isolation, attributed to aggressiveness in the Twenty-One Demands and the Siberian Intervention, was exacerbated by pervasive suspicion among the entente that Japanese sympathies lay with the central powers. Japanese media criticism of entente war aims and exonerations of the German cause irritated many foreign residents in Japan. Admiration for German martial spirit and the Prussian fighting machine had been strong among Japanese army officers since the time of the Franco-Prussian War. This esteem would survive Germany’s rout in 1918, a defeat Japanese Germanophiles attributed to political and economic disorder. Esteem for Germany as a model nation-state was not a unique Japanese propensity. Regional and national armies in China had looked up to German organization and tactics. When the war opened in Europe, some Chinese writers predicted a German victory based on Germany’s superior social structure, military skill, and citizen unity.

Entente leaders were aware of secret Japanese-German exploratory talks in Beijing, Stockholm, and Tianjin concerning a bilateral settlement. Germany took the initiative in these probes, Japan made no concessions, and Tokyo carefully kept London informed; but Japan’s willingness to explore independent options appeared to be a violation of the spirit of the London Declaration, in which the Allies disallowed any separate peace. In early 1917, Japan sold gunboats and cannon to the Carranza government in Mexico over the protests of the U.S. State Department. This alleged meddling in Mexican unrest raised apprehensions among American officials that Japanese opportunism extended to the Western Hemisphere. The disclosure of the Zimmermann note in the American press a few weeks later brought Japan under grave suspicion of collusion with Germany in Mexico. Even though Japan issued emphatic denials, the public throughout the world was predisposed to believe the worst about Japan. Indiscreet public statements by Japanese officials stirred entente concerns. In the spring of 1918 Prime Minister Terauchi was quoted in an American magazine as saying, “if the exigencies of the international relation-
ship demand it, Japan... may be induced to seek an ally in Germany." There were indeed some Japanese who lamented that such a course of action had not been followed in 1914. By the end of the war, enough evidence of infidelity in deed and spirit had accumulated to evoke widespread allegations among the Entente that Japan, while a cobelligerent, was an ally in name only.

Suspicion operated in the opposite direction as well. In the minds of many Japanese there was growing uncertainty concerning the dependability of Japan's Euro-American allies. During the war the United States and Britain, without consulting Japan, made important diplomatic moves affecting vital Japanese interests in East Asia. Before Japan had settled the disposition of Shandong with China, the powers had urged China to enter the war against Germany. Chinese belligerency would give China a voice in the matter at the peace table. The Japanese popular press played on fears of Entente betrayal by suggesting that Japan's allies might conclude a negotiated settlement with the Kaiser in which Japan would be stripped of Shandong and the Pacific islands and Germany would be accorded a free hand in Russia and Siberia. Other commentators criticized Britain for unilaterally landing troops at Vladivostok in April 1918. The most unsettling factor in Japan's relationship to the powers was instability in the system of formal bilateral alliances. The victorious Bolsheviks fully abrogated the 1916 Russo-Japanese Alliance. As early as August 1915, Japanese diplomats in London reported British opinion that the Anglo-Japanese Alliance had served its purpose. After the Twenty-One Demands the pact had come to be viewed in the United Kingdom less as an instrument of common cause and more as a leash to restrain Japan's continental policy. Ambassador Sir Conyngham Greene in Tokyo accurately predicted that postwar changes in the system of international relations would make the alliance obsolete and provide a convenient out for his country:

The proposed League of Nations will...create a new situation in regard to the whole question of Alliances, and enable [Britain] to merge the Anglo-Japanese Alliance -- which I venture to think has lived its day and done its great work -- in such a League. This new solution would make it easy for us to give our old friend -- the Alliance -- a decent burial without hurting Japanese susceptibilities.76

Knowledgeable Japanese questioned whether vital Japanese interests should be made subject to decisions by any international body dominated by the self-seeking Western powers.

The instability of Japan's alliance diplomacy was but another symptom of the nation's diplomatic isolation. In the past, Japan had rejected multilateral ententes. Now the powers, led by the United States, were about to impose the concept of
multilateralism as the framework for international security and economic development. This movement would bring about the Four-Power Consortium, the League of Nations, and the Four-Power Treaty of 1922 and lay the Anglo-Japanese Alliance permanently to rest. Conscious of its position as a secondary power and a racial minority, Japan would face this new world order with trepidation.

Internationalist Thought

The dire state of diplomatic isolation made the repair of Japan’s image abroad a matter of vital concern to all thoughtful Japanese. Consciousness of Japan’s predicament gave rise, by the war’s end, to a surge in internationalist thinking. The ascendancy of internationalism was evident in the press and in pronouncements by new liberal societies and was reflected in government policy in the postwar period. Internationalists argued that Japan’s interests could be best secured if the nation expanded its international role beyond the confines of the East Asian subsystem and played an active part in global affairs. As determinants of policy Japan should balance regional concerns with worldwide trends, and national self-interest with the collective benefit of humanity. In short, internationalists promoted a consciousness of “Japan in the world” — a phrase used repeatedly by Saionji Kinmochi. To most Japanese, “internationalism” in the World War I period was undoubtedly mixed with a pragmatic quest for more acceptable and effective means to achieve goals that were nationally self-serving. But there were some whose global and humanitarian impulses were genuine. Among them were such men of exceptionally broad international experience as Saionji, Nitobe Inazo, Shibusawa Eiichi, and Ishibashi Tanzan.

It is important to note the realism component in Japanese internationalism. In her seminal study of the Institute of Pacific Relations, Tomoko Akami deeply probes the content of internationalist thinking in Japan. She notes that internationalists were well aware of the compromises that were made at the Paris Peace Conference in the transition from the League of Nations as an idealistic concept to a workable entity. To distinguish them from Wilsonian idealists, she employs the label “post-League internationalists.” They believed that a healthy internationalism was based on the nation-state, and any analysis that places Japanese nationalists and internationalists in separate camps is artificial. They were not globalists and rarely indulged in cosmopolitanism or the world federation movement. Acutely sensitive to the insecurity of Japan as a late-arriving, non-Western power in a world dominated by Western imperial states, internationalists affirmed measures to establish Japan’s power position in East Asia, including the colonization of Taiwan and Korea and the extension, preferably by nonviolent means, of Japanese economic and political influence in China. Many of them discounted Chinese nationalism and believed that some form of Japanese tutelage of China was required to
enable stability and development on the continent and, in turn, protect the future of the Japanese state.

The liberal intellectuals of the "Taishō democracy" movement were the first to stir public interest in a new world order. This school of thought, which reached its peak in 1919, was stirring popular support for such causes as universal male suffrage, recognition of labor unions, and reduction of arms expenditures. When John Dewey visited the country in 1919, he wrote home that "the cause of liberalism in Japan has taken a mighty forward leap — so mighty as to be almost unbelievable." When Taishō democrats heard the liberal declarations of Allied leaders, they seized upon world trends as a way to prod change in Japan. Kenseikai Dietman Ozaki Yukio (1859–1954), a promoter of universal male suffrage, warned when the peace conference opened that the coming League would admit only democratic governments. Japan, with a minuscule electorate, would certainly be excluded and relegated to "isolation from all the civilized sections of the world."73 The central figure of Taishō democracy was Yoshino Sakuō (1878–1933). A Tokyo University professor of political history and theory, Yoshino was a formidable exponent of social democratic thought, a tireless organizer of liberal societies, and a prolific contributor to leading journals of the day. Apparently repentant of his earlier vindication of the Twenty-One Demands, he called for a redirection of Japan's foreign policy and democratizing reforms at home, which would enable "a special mission for Japan on the world stage" to lead nations to greater freedom and cultural progress. He warned that Japan could not afford to risk isolation from emerging global political and economic systems.74

Despite their enthusiasm, Taishō democracy intellectuals had a limited following, were adverse to political organizing, and had no direct influence on government policy. Political elites' endorsement of internationalism was usually more guarded and qualified. "Internationalism is as inevitable as gravitation," opined Prime Minister Hara, but "the road to a sound internationalism lies through a healthy nationalism."75 But more consequential than Hara's verbal equivocation were his deeds: under his leadership Japan cooperated in the Four-Power Consortium, joined the League of Nations, and prepared for disarmament at the Washington Conference.

A term ubiquitous in the rhetoric of Japanese internationalism is taisei jumō (conformity to world trends).76 The concept of international accommodationism had occupied a prominent place in the history of Japanese diplomacy since the Meiji Restoration, but it was particularly conspicuous in diplomatic documents of the World War I settlement. The Japanese envoys to Paris were formally instructed by the Foreign Ministry to act "in unison with the Allies in accordance with general world trends" on such questions as secret diplomacy, freedom of the seas, and disarmament. The delegation defended its acquiescence to the British-proposed mandate system by explaining that America, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa were
disposed to accept the plan. The Privy Council advised ratification of the Versailles Treaty in a formal report to the Emperor that repeatedly stressed the advisability of conformity to world trends. Outside official circles, Professor Yoshino and labor organizer Suzuki Bunji campaigned for Japan to fall in step with global developments. Even one so distrustful of the motives of the Western powers as Ito Miyoshi warned of the risk of standing alone. After Versailles, War and Navy Ministry research reports on arms limitation were replete with the thinking and language of taisei jumō. They advised that Japanese League of Nations representatives, within prudent limits, conform to the trends of League disarmament talks.76 That Japan at this stage of its development should eschew autonomy and acquiesce in the world program of the powers was a shared assumption that set the direction of Japan’s positive adjustment to the post–World War I international order. That nation’s perception of the diplomatic distance between itself and the powers would evoke grave fears concerning the fate of Japanese interests within the League of Nations. But the deeper fear of being left on the periphery would compel Japan to join.

The Specter of the Postwar World

During the latter part of the war, political figures speculated about the shape of the postwar world and the problems it would pose for Japan. The nation’s diplomatic behavior in the postwar settlement was in large part a product of these perceptions. The visions of Kato Takaaki, Yamagata Aritomo, and Gotō Shinpei reflect apprehensions widely held among political elites.

Kato, ambassador to London for many years and four-time foreign minister, was known as a solid Anglophile. Now Kenseikai leader in the Diet, he voiced his thoughts in a June 1917 essay in Chōō kōron (Central review) entitled “The European Hostilities and Japan’s Position in the World.” He acknowledged the war’s benefits to Japan. It had provided the satisfaction of retaliation against one of the culprits of the Triple Intervention and had raised the world standing of Japan to no small degree. However, Japan’s power was overrated in view of the “gulf still existing between its standard of efficiency and that of other nations.” The Japanese had to carry the momentum of their wartime gains over into the postwar period so as to “secure the permanent independence, peace, and prosperity of their country.” Kato predicted that Japan would have several years of advantage before the exhausted European belligerents regained their military and financial strength. However, Japan could expect the powers to pursue economic recovery by renewing their commercial activity in China as soon as the fighting ceased. To maintain its wartime advances, Japan must maintain the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and exert the level of energy that in the Meiji period had brought about treaty revision and victory over China and Russia.77

Genro Yamagata went beyond Kato’s prediction of commercial rivalry to envis-
age racial and even military confrontation with the West. Knowing that Japan was a weak nation that could never stand up militarily to a concert of hostile powers, the Chōshū oligarch throughout his long military and political career had urged prudence in foreign policy. Earlier in the war his memoranda had revealed a man nearly obsessed with fear of a racially motivated, anti-Japanese cabal. He pictured the war in Europe as a final conflict among nations of the white race, to be followed by a racial war between white and yellow coalitions. His dogged effort for a Russo-Japanese alliance was in part motivated by the desire to prevent the formation of a white, anti-yellow bloc.74 By the spring of 1918, when he wrote another memorandum on the world situation, his Russo-Japanese Alliance had been dashed and his prognosis was even more dour. He warned that the scale of the world had shrunk and the avariciousness of the powers regarding Asia was whetted. No matter who won the war, Japan’s position would be precarious. If the entente triumphed, Great Britain would renew its economic thrust toward China from South Asia. If Germany prevailed, its influence would spread down from Siberia. In either case the United States would team up with the winner in the exploitation of China, whose sole protector was Japan. The apostle of realpolitik chided the Japanese public for indulging in the utopian dream of eternal peace and asserted that nations make war to extend their interests and not to promote idealistic principles. He admonished Japanese leaders that “national independence must be defended primarily by power, without which treaties are meaningless.” The greatest danger to the Empire was fraternization among the powers. Japan’s survival rested upon military preparedness and a balance of antagonisms in the West.75

Like Yamagata, Baron Gotō Shinpei (1857–1929) was no idealist. Gotō was a physician-turned-politician who had been active in Manchurian relations and colonial affairs in Taiwan, serving as president of the South Manchurian Railway following the Russo-Japanese War. A person of broad vision and a studied pan-Asianist, he promoted the formation of a Japan-lead “Far Eastern Economic Union” on the model of the powerful Pan-German League. Gotō was an admirer of American expansionists and was known in the Diet as wasei Rüzuberuto — “Roosevelt made in Japan.”50 Gotō shared Yamagata’s bogey of racial isolation. In a June 1916 pamphlet he warned that

the racial prejudice of the white races is so strong that even when they make an offensive and defensive alliance with a yellow race they cannot divest themselves of the prejudice. Regardless of the fact that the two races are fighting shoulder to shoulder in this great war, if you probe their feelings you will find that the white races are displeased at the participation of the yellow races.81

Gotō was home minister and a member of the Gaikō Chōsakai when he addressed a memorandum to Prime Minister Terauchi in March 1918, in which he revealed
his anxiety that sinister designs underlay the international agenda of Woodrow Wilson. America's postwar program, he asserted, "is nothing more than one massive hypocritical monster wed to moralistic aggression and veiled in justice and humanism." American ideology, though it went by the name of democracy, was essentially the same as German militarism and could bring about a genuine world war. He predicted that America's "moralistic aggression" would flood into Asia as soon as the present war terminated and threaten Japan's unique democracy based on Imperial polity. To prepare for the postwar predator, he recommended that Japan improve its image on the continent through vigorous relief efforts and institute press censorship and measures to foster martial spirit at home.82

These visions of the future reveal significant common assumptions. The Great War offered Japan an unprecedented yet temporary opportunity to strengthen itself and secure the friendship of the peoples of Asia. It was not a local European war but one with vast consequences for Japan. It had created circumstances—economic hardship in Europe and an aggressive mentality in America—that would turn East Asia into a field for ruthless exploitation by the Western powers once the fighting in the West stopped. In short, heightened competition and aggression, not peace, would follow in the wake of the war. In the face of this specter, Japan stood in diplomatic and racial isolation with no spiritual ally but China to withstand a potential coalition of white powers.

The years 1914–1918 had given impetus to a growing awareness on the part of Japanese that the world was shrinking. Events and ideological movements a continent away could affect Japan's vital interests. If the powers pursued global solutions to issues of war and peace, Japan would have no choice but to cooperate with them and be a participant in world order. At the same time, there was widespread pessimism over whether the world order taking shape was hospitable to Japan's legitimate national aspirations. Japanese apprehension was compounded by the many imponderables of 1918. Without the advantage of a half century of hindsight, Japan had no assurance that Bolshevism was not German agents and that the British presence in East Asia was in a state of permanent decline. Japanese leaders could not foresee that antiforeign nationalism in China was more than a passing phenomenon. Japan had no way of knowing whether Wilson's diplomatic principles would achieve lasting acceptance and his League of Nations become a reality. Hence Japan approached the peace conference with an eye to securing those tangible assets within its grasp.