Takeshi Sugawara. 2025. Chapter 5: Britain and the Difficulty of Anglo-Japanese Military Collaboration, 1902–1928. In Kazutaka Sogo (ed.), *The Dynamics of East Asian Politics and Diplomacy in the 1920s: The Intersection of International Cooperation and Imperial Expansion*. Osaka: Asia-Japan Research Institute, Ritsumeikan University. ISBN 978-4-910550-55-8

Chapter 5
Britain and the Difficulty of Anglo-Japanese Military Collaboration, 1902–1928

Takeshi SUGAWARA

1. Introduction

The 1920s is generally referred to as the Era of International Cooperation. Given the catastrophes in the 1930s and the 1940s, it is not surprising that the 1920s is regarded as a stable decade. However, if Anglo-Japanese relations in the 1920s were investigated from the military point of view, it would be necessary to revise this historical image.

While both Britain and Japan realized the importance of collaborating militarily because they had both faced common threats since before the First World War, it was not easy for them to cooperate in Asia. In the historiography, many scholars such as Harumi Gotō-Shibata, Ian Nish, and Antony Best have investigated Anglo-Japanese relations from the 1900s to the 1920s, but there is a gap in the literature on Anglo-Japanese military collaboration during this period (Gotō 2006; Gotō-Shibata 1995; Nish 1972, 1966; Best 2021).

This chapter discusses the difficulties of Anglo-Japanese military collaboration not only after but also before and during the First World War, mainly analyzing the ideas and policies of British policymakers. This chapter discusses how the perspective of imperial defense, namely the defense of the British Empire, is important to understanding Britain's difficulties in its military cooperation with Japan.

2. Before the First World War: 1902–1907

Before the First World War, both Britain and Japan faced Russia's expansion into Asia. Russia was seeking to strengthen its influence not only in East Asia but also in India, which brought about the signing of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in January 1902. Although they saw Russia's expansion into East Asia as a threat, many British policymakers prioritized Britain's interests in India over those in East Asia. The defense of India and the countries on its northwest border, namely Afghanistan and Persia, was the main theme of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) established by the Conservative Prime Minister Arthur Balfour in 1902.[1]

The Russo-Japanese War of 1904 changed the geopolitical situation in Asia. Russia's defeat by Japan in the war encouraged the Amir, the ruler of Afghanistan, to defy not only Russia but also Britain. This caused relations between Britain and Afghanistan to deteriorate, increasing concern about Britain's defense of India (Wyatt 2011, 114–139). Japan's victory increased its reputation as a great power and demonstrated the efficiency of its army. Britain's Conservative government decided to revise the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and utilize Japanese soldiers in India against the Russian threat. Anglo-Japanese military collaboration was regarded as an important solution to the defense of the British Empire. Nevertheless, the tough negotiations over the revision of the Alliance showed that Japan was reluctant to send forces to India.

The British Liberal government established in December 1905 reviewed the defense of India and cast doubt on the practicality of Japanese military assistance. The General Staff insisted that supply

1 For the establishment of the CID, see. Johnson (1960), d'Ombrain (1973).

and transportation difficulties would make it impossible to deploy large numbers of Japanese soldiers to India's northwest frontier and that enlisting help from Japan would risk damaging Britain's prestige in Asia.[2] The Government of India agreed. In February 1906, the CID concluded that Britain should not ask Japan to send troops to India.[3]

However, not all CID members shared this negative view of Anglo-Japanese military collaboration. A conference between British and Japanese military representatives was to be held to discuss their potential military cooperation. In April 1907, the CID again discussed enlisting Japan's military assistance in India. Foreign Secretary Edward Grey argued that Britain might employ Japanese troops on India's border with Persia. The CID decided that the possibility of utilizing Japanese military assistance there should be discussed at the forthcoming conference.[4] However, the British military representatives did not discuss this matter at the conference because they strongly doubted the utility of Japanese military assistance. Moreover, the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 improved Anglo-Russian relations, reducing Russia's threat to India and its neighbors, and in 1907, Britain discarded the idea of Japanese troops in India.

3. The First World War: 1914–1918

During the First World War, Germany became a common enemy of both Britain and Japan, and they fought Germany not only in Europe but also in Asia. Immediately following the declaration of war in August 1914, Britain and Japan launched concerted military operations against

2 Memo. by the General Staff, 4 Nov. 1905, CAB 4/1/68B, The National Archives, Kew (hereafter TNA).

3 Minutes of 84th Meeting, 15 Feb. 1906, CAB 2/2/84, TNA.

4 Minutes of 97th Meeting, 25 Apr. 1907, CAB 2/2/97, TNA.

the Germans in China. Although Britain considered Japan's cooperation strategically essential to win the war, it feared that Japan might use the war to expand Japan's sphere of influence in East Asia. However, the Japanese army was unwilling to cooperate because they did not want to be dictated to by British officers. The two armies did not share operational plans and were critical of each other (Nish 1972, 136–137). Although they succeeded in eliminating the German base in China, their military collaboration was not productive.

By December 1916, the war was locked in a stalemate in both Europe and Asia. Britain suffered from a shortage of manpower, increasing Japan's value to the Allied Powers as a potential source of military assistance. While the shortage of transport ships and the poor condition of the railways made sending Japanese troops to Europe unviable, Britain considered the usefulness of Japan's military aid in Asia instead.

Mesopotamia was the most promising theatre for this operation. Britain had to defend Baghdad from an expected German-Turkish attack and judged the use of Japanese forces in Mesopotamia less injurious than losing Baghdad to Turkish occupation, which would severely damage Britain's prestige in Asia. As Arthur Balfour, the then Foreign Secretary, insisted, there was no objection from the Foreign Office to accepting Japan's military assistance in Mesopotamia.[5]

However, the India Office and the Government of India were also important in the question of Mesopotamia, which was regarded as part of India's security. Japan's increased volume of exports to India and espionage activities there had deepened Delhi's distrust of Japan, and the Government of India had strong objections to the idea of Japanese forces in Mesopotamia. When the India Office asked the Government of India about the use of Japanese troops in Mesopotamia, it received an

5 Cf. Foreign Office, 6 Oct. 1917, FO 371/2955/186492, TNA.

unfavorable reply with a wide range of political and military reasons. The India Office concurred.[6]

India's objections discouraged the Anglo-Japanese military collaboration in Mesopotamia. Moreover, Japan unofficially indicated that it had no intention of dispatching soldiers to India, citing a shortage of supplies and public opposition to sending troops abroad.[7] Forcing official negotiations with Japan in the face of India's opposition was not an option, as military assistance from Japan might conflict with India's security, and Britain could not sacrifice its imperial interests.

Even so, Britain did not abandon the idea of using Japanese forces in Asia. Siberia, where the Russian Revolution of 1917 had caused turmoil, emerged as a place where the presence of the Japanese army would be acceptable to the Allied Powers. Indeed, since the Russian Revolution, the situation in the Caucasus and Persia had been so unstable that British policymakers were deeply concerned about the German threat to India's border.[8] Employing Japanese soldiers in Siberia would be useful in stopping the Germans' eastward advance and would protect India.

However, Britain had to consider the United States' attitude toward a Japanese military presence in Siberia. Anglo-American cooperation was essential to winning the war, and the United States did not want Japan to expand its influence in East Asia. Therefore, it was not surprising that the United States did not support a Japanese military intervention in Siberia. Britain had to try to persuade the United States to accept Japanese soldiers in Siberia, while at the same time protecting

6 Cf. Shuckburgh, 13 Dec. 1917, CAB 25/48, TNA; Minute by Islington on Shuckburgh's memo. of 13 Dec. 1917, 18 Dec. 1917, CAB 25/48, TNA.

7 Balfour to Greene, 15 Nov. 1917, FO 371/2955/217082, TNA.

8 Cecil to Balfour, 8 Jan. 1918, Balfour MSS, Add. MSS. 49738, British Library, London; War Cabinet 369, 21 Mar. 1918, CAB 23/5, TNA.

the Anglo-American relationship.

In the end, Britain succeeded in carrying out an Allied military intervention into Siberia. The rescue of Czechoslovakian soldiers who had deserted from the Austrian army and were now stranded in Siberia providing an unexpected pretext, Britain, the United States, and Japan finally moved into Siberia in August 1918. Nevertheless, the First World War abruptly ended in November of that year and with it the Allied intervention in Siberia, which Britain regarded as Japanese military assistance, did not produce an effective result.

4. After the First World War: 1923–1928

After the First World War, both Britain and Japan sought to tackle the rise of Chinese nationalism. The Kuomintang, led by Sun Yat-sen, played a significant role in intensifying China's nationalist movement. Cooperating with the Soviet Union, the Kuomintang aimed to revise unequal treaties with Western powers and Japan, and to that end, supported the Chinese workers' strikes and boycotts. At first, Britain was the Chinese nationalists' main target (Gotō 2006, 55). On May 30, 1925, Chinese workers and students holding a demonstration calling for boycotts were killed by the Shanghai Municipal Police Force under British command. This May Thirtieth Incident caused general strikes and anti-British boycotts that damaged British economic activities in Shanghai.

Britain needed international cooperation, especially collaboration with Japan, to deal with the anti-British movement in China. Moreover, Britain considered Japanese military assistance essential to protect British interests there. After the First World War, Britain curtailed its military spending due to financial stringency and the British public's inclination toward pacificism, which weakened its military capability in

Asia. As the nearest power to China, Britain expected Japan's military support with restoring order and stability in China. The Anglo-Japanese Alliance had terminated in 1923, but British policymakers considered that the spirit of the alliance between Britain and Japan remained (Hosoya 1982, 10–11).

Although willing to cooperate with Britain, Japan objected to intervening militarily in China, where it had various interests and was not sympathetic to the Chinese nationalist movement. Foreign Minister Kijūrō Shidehara declined to collaborate with Britain militarily, emphasizing the importance of Japan's non-intervention in China and the promotion of Japan's economy through trade with China. Eventually, Japan unilaterally reached a settlement with Chinese workers to avoid damage to Japanese enterprises in China. Britain was surprised by Japan's separate settlement and finally realized the difficulty of the Anglo-Japanese military collaboration.

Britain had to request Japan to cooperate militarily in China again. After seizing the power of the Kuomintang, Chiang Kai-shek started the Northern Expedition to unite China in 1926. Although Britain's December Memorandum insisted that it was ready to negotiate with the Nationalists, this newly declared policy did not immediately improve Anglo-Chinese relations (Gotō 2006, 94–98). When the Kuomintang army attacked Hankow and Nanking in 1927, the CID discussed how to defend Shanghai by force. The lack of Britain's military capability in Asia was so clear that a joint military action with other powers, in particular Japan, was essential. To achieve military collaboration with Japan, the CID even proposed that British soldiers should be under Japanese command.[9]

However, Japan's reaction was again half-hearted. Shidehara

9 Cf. Beatty, Milne and Trenchard, 11 Jan. 1927, CAB 4/16/756B, TNA.

refused to send Japanese forces to Shanghai, repeating the importance of Japan's non-intervention in China and Sino-Japanese economic cooperation. The Japanese Foreign Ministry feared that dispatching Japanese troops might provoke Chinese hostility towards Japan. Prime Minister Reijirō Wakatsuki agreed with Shidehara, criticizing Britain for treating Japan as "a watchdog in the East." "If the Anglo-Japanese Alliance had existed, we must have done our duty by sending troops," he insisted, "but since it was not the case, we could not accept such a self-seeking plan (Wakatsuki 1950, 327–328; Gotō-Shibata 1995, 52)." In the end, Britain was compelled to give up the idea of Anglo-Japanese military collaboration.

When Britain and Japan tackled the rise of Chinese nationalism, they could not ignore the influence of the Soviet Union. Some British policymakers considered that Britain and Japan could and should cooperate militarily because both were affected by the Soviet threat, which was not confined to China but extended to India and its adjacent regions. In the 1920s, the War Office was the most sympathetic of the British ministries to this view (Best 2002, 90). Indeed, in February 1928, the War Office issued a memorandum insisting that a revived Anglo-Japanese alliance would assist Britain's defense of India against Soviet aggression. Moreover, it would make Anglo-Japanese military collaboration in China easier and make the defense of British interests there more efficient and economical.[10]

However, Britain's enthusiasm for Anglo-Japanese military collaboration faded due to geopolitical changes after 1928. The Northern Expedition was almost complete, and the domestic situation in China was stabilizing. This improved Anglo-Chinese relations, reducing the value of Britain cooperating with Japan. Once the anti-British

10 "Memorandum on the desirability, from a military point of view, of reviving the Alliance with Japan," Feb. 1928, WO 106/129, TNA.

movement in China appeared to be waning, Britain's concern about the Soviet threat also subsided.

On the contrary, Japan needed Britain's cooperation all the more. After Shidehara and Wakatsuki resigned, the new Prime Minister Giichi Tanaka sent Japanese forces to the Shantung Peninsula to protect Japan's interests there. In May 1928, an armed clash between China and Japan further damaged Sino-Japanese relations. Growing Chinese hostility to Japan shifted the main target of the Chinese boycotts from Britain to Japan (Gotō 2006, 164–166). Japan requested the help of other powers, particularly Britain, to deal with this arduous situation. Nevertheless, Britain no longer needed Japan's military assistance, and the Foreign Office concluded that Britain should not cooperate with Japan to avoid being drawn into a Sino-Japanese confrontation. All in all, Anglo-Japanese military collaboration was not realized after the First World War.

5. Conclusion

Although both countries realized the importance of Anglo-Japanese military collaboration, it was difficult for Britain and Japan to cooperate militarily. Their common threats, namely Russia before, Germany during, and Chinese nationalism after the First World War, did not produce an effective collaboration. This chapter has presented two difficulties in the realization of their military cooperation.

First, British policymakers disagreed about the usefulness of military assistance from Japan. The CID tended to support Anglo-Japanese military collaboration, but the Government of India and India Office continuously opposed it due to the negative effects a Japanese military presence would have in India. While the Foreign Office was ready to accept Japan's military assistance during the First World War,

they changed their attitude after the war. On the other hand, whereas the General Staff was not enthusiastic about such a collaboration before the war, the War Office advocated strengthening the military ties between Britain and Japan after the war. British policymakers had to resolve their policy differences before they could decide their policy on Anglo-Japanese military collaboration.

Second, Britain and Japan had different priorities. Given the indispensability of India to the British Empire, India was a strong factor in Britain's deliberations over Anglo-Japanese military collaboration. Britain attempted to link Japanese military assistance to the defense of India, but this was not acceptable to Japan, whose particular emphasis was on East Asia rather than India. Moreover, after the Russo-Japanese War, Japan tended to seek its interests in East Asia unilaterally. Thus, the two countries' different priorities made Anglo-Japanese military collaboration much more difficult, even though both countries faced common threats.

References

Best, Antony. 2002. *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia, 1914–1941*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

———. 2021. *British Engagement with Japan, 1854-1922: The Origins and Course of an Unlikely Alliance*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Gotō-Shibata, Harumi. 1995. *Japan and Britain in Shanghai, 1925–31*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press.

Gotō, Harumi. 2006. S*hanhai wo meguru Nichiei Kankei 1925–1932 nen: Nichiei Dōmei-go no Kyōchō to Taikō [Partners or Competitors: Anglo-Japanese Relations in Shanghai, 1925–1932]*. Tokyo: Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai. (In Japanese)

Hosoya, Chihiro. 1982. Britain and the United States in Japan's View of the International System, 1919-37. In Ian Nish (ed.), *Anglo-Japanese Alienation 1919–1952: Papers of the Anglo-Japanese Conference on the History of the Second World War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3–26.

Johnson, Franklyn Arthur. 1960. *Defence by Committee: The British Committee of Imperial Defence 1885–1959*. London: Oxford University Press.

Nish, Ian. 1966. *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance: The Diplomacy of Two Island Empires, 1894–1907.* London: The Athlone Press.

———. 1972. *Alliance in Decline: A Study in Anglo-Japanese Relations 1908–23.* London: The Athlone Press.

d'Ombrain, Nicholas. 1973. *War Machinery and High Policy: Defence Administration in Peacetime Britain, 1902–1914.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wakatsuki, Reijirō. 1950. *Kofūan Kaiko Roku [Memoirs of Kofuan]*. Tokyo: Yomiuri Shinbunsha. (In Japanese)

Wyatt, Christopher M. 2011. *Afghanistan and the Defence of Empire: Diplomacy and Strategy during the Great Game.* London: I.B. Tauris.

5. Dr. Takeshi SUGAWARA

Chapter 5. Britain and the Difficulty of Anglo-Japanese Military Collaboration, 1902–1928

Dr. Sugawara is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Law and Letters at Ehime University. He holds an MA in Modern History and a PhD in History from the University of East Anglia. His research is devoted to diplomatic and international history, with a particular focus on the British diplomacy towards the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. He is the author of "Anglo-Japanese Alliance (1902–23)" in Gordon Martel (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Diplomacy* Volume I, A-C (John Wiley & Sons, 2018).