The Myth of the Lost Shidehara Pacifism: Growing Japanese Militarism and Chinese Nationalism?

Introduction

This paper attempts to give historical analysis to discuss to what extent did the war in China and the wider pacific theatre (1937-45) become unavoidable once the liberal-pacifist experiment that was ‘Shidehara diplomacy’ was swept aside by the atavistic impulses of Showa Japan’s reconstituted warrior elite. By briefly depicting historical background of the Shidehara diplomacy, his liberal-pacifist experiment and Showa Japan’s reconstituted warrior elites, some causal links applying historical analysis would be given for exploring the relations among (1) growing power of military in Showa Japan, (2) Shidehara diplomacy’s being swept aside, and (3) the war in China and the wider pacific theatre. Besides, as an auxiliary argument, some other necessary factors apart from growing power of warrior elites would be probed to explain why the pacifists’ policies failed and then war finally broke out.

Admittedly, warrior elites’ impulses was an necessary and key force to sweep Shidehara’s pacifism aside, which directly frustrated Shidehara’s fulfilment of his liberal diplomacy for Japan, however, in addition to Japanese warrior elites’ subjective initiatives, some other external factors, such as the Japanese public and political elites’ concerns over foreign policy, international political and economic
context could also contribute to Shidehara diplomacy’s failure. Besides, occasional historical events in China and the world also provide objective opportunities for military taking harder lines on supporting expansionism.

The Animosity between Frustrated Shidehara and Growing Militarism

Actually, since 1923, the Great Tokyo Earthquake had been “capitalized” and created a “chance to arrest the perceived moral and ideological regress of Japan”.1 During and after the process of reconstructing Tokyo, the prevalent calling for a pureness of Japanese spirit, patriotic education, and national renovation had been undermining and even demonizing pro-Western liberalists’ position, which was the main ideal of Shidehara diplomacy.2

The term “Shidehara Diplomacy” mainly refers to Shidehara’s thoughts3 and practice with regards to Japan’s foreign policy during his earlier service as the Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1924 to 1927, during which the Taisho Democracy was on its climax. Because of the de facto disgraced plight of pacifists in Showa Japan after he

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3 Shidehara’s political thought was largely influenced by western liberal political culture of parliamentary democracy, pacifism and free markets, and his wife, Iwasaki Masako, was a Christian, who was among the family that controlled Mitsubishi Corporation and associated with the Kenseikai Party, which was the primary force promoting pacifism and pushing for greater rights for labor union in Taisho Japan and early Showa Japan.
resigned in 1927, even he was appointed as Foreign Minister again in 1929 and shortly transited to serve as interim prime minister in 1931, his determination and persistence of implementing non-interventionism on China and the liberal foreign policies highlighting economic intercourse would hardly took effect, while in the struggle with civilian government, military usually enjoyed relative advantages largely because of the military’s independent status in the political arrangement regulated by the Meiji Constitution.

The “atavistic impulses of Showa Japan’s reconstituted warrior elite” could be understood as the rising mighty power of military in Showa Japan with the orthodoxy of martial honor and wide sociocultural basis, in which the Shintoism and the spirit of Bushido or Samurai reinforced the social basis of ultranationalism and militarism, hence public opinion was relatively much easier to support expansionism and virtually enlarge imperial glory than to endorse Shidehara’s non-interventionism. Besides, Showa emperor was supposed to be relatively weaker and more politically apathetic than Taisho who had been actively passionate on participating pro-Western and democratic reform, and Showa’s succession led to a latent but fierce contest among various political forces where military often took the wind out of the liberals.

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5 This could partly explain why Emperor Showa was not prosecuted for war crimes after the World War II. Debating on Hirohito’s responsibility for war crimes could be seen in Charles D Sheldon. “Scapegoat or Instigator of Japanese Aggression?; Inoue Kiyoshi’s Case Against the Emperor.” Modern Asian Studies 12.01 (1978): 1-35.
Apart from the military’s resentment over Shidehara’s China policies, because of the Showa financial crisis in 1927, the Prime Minister Wakatsuki Reijiro, who was the leader of the liberal party Kenseikai promoting pacifism, and his cabinet failed to tackle the crunch and was forced to resign. Meanwhile, Shidehara, who had long been flayed by military regarding his conciliated China policies and refusing to send troops to China after Chinese provocations against Japanese residents, also had to quit.⁶

With their inherent ideological connections, the convergence of warlike forces in Japan from right-wing terrorism, ultranationalism and militarism, etc., had become prevalent since the late Taisho period. In the late 1920s, domestic elites began to increasingly focus on containing radical leftists and communism encouraged by the Russian Revolution, in which military and right-wing gained great opportunities to conduct secret surveillances, or even assassinations in the name of defending social security. Besides, Shidehara’s pro-Western thoughts was also criticized by Asianists as being too biased toward the West and not helping the Asia.⁷

Economic depression had significant effect on the cabinet and its supportive political forces, which largely provide military relatively stronger power on intervening policy making. The Great Depression killed not only the classical liberalism in the sphere of economic policy, but also the Taisho democracy.⁸

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⁷ See Yoshikawa, Y. JAPAN’S ASIANISM, 1868-1945.
Interventionists’ Opportunity: The Outburst of Chinese Nationalism

As a matter of fact, in comparison with military, Shidehara’s diplomacy had been often suffered from lack of enough mass support from both upper and lower class in Japan since the late Taisho period. As previous arguments in this paper illustrated, some scholars agreed that the criticism of the Shidehara diplomacy mainly from Japanese people’s growing ultranationalism that accused Shidehara’s too compromised foreign policy. But Okazaki Hisahiko, as an historian and experienced diplomat, thought that the criticism mainly came more from the Japanese residents and the business sectors in both China and Japan, who felt that their interest was directly threatened.⁹

With regards to the growing Chinese nationalism threatening Japanese residents in China, issues regarding sending troops to intervene had not only attracted wide public attention in Japan, but also become Japanese government’s and military’s grave concern on China policy, whereas Shidehara’s moderate position largely hindered military’s strong intervention.

In 1919, the May 4th Movement broke out, students condemned Japanese control of Shandong and called for abolishing unequal treaties. Since 1924, The National

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Revolution launched from Guangzhou to Northern China had alarmed Japan and Western powers.\textsuperscript{10} In April 1927, the Republic of China was established in Nanjing, and the National Revolutionary army’s Northern Expedition primarily targeting Beijing severely threatened Japanese residents and huge investments in Northern China. Meanwhile, Japan was aware of the anti-imperialist propaganda in Manchuria spread and supported by the Chinese communists and the Soviet Union, and the revolutionary struggles with labor strikes led by them had infuriated Kwantung Army,\textsuperscript{11} which was putting tremendous pressure on Shidehara’s non-intervention policy.

The riots and incidents targeting Japanese, also Korean residents, in Northeast China provided not only proper reasons for Japanese stiffer punishment, more impelling control and aggressive intervention, but also opportunities for Japanese military conducting domestic propaganda and manipulating public opinion over issues on China. On June 12 in the year of 1931, as a reaction to the two incidents resulted in Japanese residents’ casualties, Shidehara Kijuro, as Foreign Minister, issued an instruction to a Japanese Consul-General at Mukden. In the instruction, he denounced the Chinese local police authorities and warned that “Since public opinion in Japan has been hardened on this issue, if left unsettled, the Japanese government may have

\textsuperscript{10} Argument supporting this point could be seen from Ian Hill Nish. \textit{Japanese foreign policy in the interwar period}. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002. In fact, the revolutionists in China mainly led by Sun Yet-sen were supported partly by some Japanese political elites and businessmen, which was supposed to be related to Sun’s certain revolutionary thoughts corresponding to Japanese Asianism, see Yukie Yoshikawa. \textit{"JAPAN’S ASIANISM, 1868-1945."} p. 35

\textsuperscript{11} See the table of the Labor strikes in Manchuria, 1916-1932 from Chong-Sik Lee. \textit{Revolutionary struggle in Manchuria: Chinese communism and Soviet interest, 1922-1945}. Univ of California Press, 1983, page 45; During the period, Kwantung Army also lost the cooperative relationship with Chang Tso-lin, i.e.an opportunist warlord as the de facto governor of Feng Tian.
no other resources than to dispatch its troops to China as it had done to Shandong previously”.12

**International Political and Economic Context: “Ripe for Rivalry”**13

In addition to the military’s pressure, the global context, after the World War I, also contributed to the unfavorable circumstances for Shidehara diplomacy and the outburst of the war in China and the pacific theatre, and the Versailles–Washington System did not solve the problems of potential strategic competition and arm race among powers. Particularly, the Washington Conference did not fundamentally dispel the resentment over the distribution of colonial interests in Asia-Pacific area, while the latent hostilities had pervaded between Japan and the United States over the issues regarding China,14 Siberian Intervention and reducing naval building.15 From Japanese perspective, those unfavorable international arrangement gradually provoked Japanese domestic discontentment corresponded with rising patriotism to break out the status quo in the Asia-Pacific. For instance, the signing on 22 April 1930 of the London Naval Treaty, which Shidehara had successfully concluded, had led to a wave of nationalistic protests and even “Shidehara’s name stood high on the death list.”16

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13 The term “Ripe for Rivalry” was initially and well-known used by Aaron L. Friedberg, see Aaron L. Friedberg. "Ripe for rivalry: prospects for peace in a multipolar Asia.” *International security* (1993): 5-33.
14 After the World War I, the United States and Japan had become two major roles competing in controlling the warlords government in China.
As a critical event in the international economic context, the Great Depression started from the United States had quite significant impact on Japan’s political trend. For an expeditious recovery from Great Depression from 1929, the Finance Minister Takahashi Korekiyo’s drastic Keynesian policy with tremendous deficit spending that mainly went into armaments and munitions, which largely strengthened the military’s independent ability. However, when Japanese economy nearly finished the process of recovery and Takahashi began to implement deflationary policy and reduce spending, Takahashi was strongly condemned by military and then assassinated by right-wing (“Japanist”) terrorists opposing his endeavor of returning yen to the gold standard.\(^{17}\)

In the 1930s, the increasingly mighty power of Soviet Russia deployed in the Far East were a greater source of anxiety pervading in Japanese society, which not only forged a direct threat to Manchuria and the Korean peninsula that dominated by Japan’s military clout, but also implied the latent invasion of Bolshevism ideology.

Besides, to some extent, after 1931, Japan occupied Manchuria, which had violated the Washington Conference agreement to “respect the territorial integrity of China”. As oppositions to Japan’s annex of Manchuria and aggressive movements in Northern China, embargo\(^ {18}\) political isolation and sanctions from the United States and the


\(^{18}\) See “Countries that are not self-sufficient must try to assure that the necessary supplies will continue to flow in wartime. This was part of the explanation for Japan’s drive into China and Southeast Asia before World War II.”
Great Britain necessitated the Imperial Japanese Army, which was severely stuck in China at a stalemate, to seek for escalating the war to the pacific theatre for “utilizing a vast southern lands and rich resources”. 19

The Kwantung Army’s military action and the use of force upset Shidehara’s non-intervention and economic diplomacy in China, and much of the international context in the 1930s with the trend of rivalry among powers counted against Shidehara’s thoughts, and some of the trends could hardly be reversed by his diplomatic endeavor. In comparison, meanwhile, military seized the great opportunity to utilize the Chinese riots 20, the threat of red Soviet Russia and hostilities from the United States and the Great Britain to construct an image of the victimized Japan and hence legitimate their expansionism. Being internationally isolated by major powers, Japan was moving closer with Germany after Hitler came into power in 1933.

**Debate in Literature: Japan Was Dragged into the Second World War?**

Although the mainstream still hold that Japan’s militarism should be responsible for the war in China and pacific theatre, there are some literatures asserted that Japan was actually forced to be involved into the war in China and Pacific theatre. In other

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19 Yoshikawa, Y. JAPAN’S ASIANISM, 1868-1945, p.61
20 In Shidehara Kijuro and His Age, Chapter 12, Okazaki Hisahiko wrote, “The Kanto Army was inspired by the incident, interpreting it as ‘the best opportunity to demonstrate the authority of the Japanese military, fulfill the Japanese people’s expectations, and find a clue to the settlement of the Manchuria/Mongolian issue.’”
words, the growing militarism and swept-aside Shidehara diplomacy could not be genuine source explaining the breakout of the war, and there were more decisive and sophisticated domestic and international factors dragging Japan into the Second World War. Furthermore, some scholars were quite reluctant to accept the label of Japanese “fascism” as used in Germany and Italy.21

Some older generation in Japan even perceived that so-called militarism in Japan was defensive, which was only an ultimately inadequate reaction to the more deeply rooted aggressive nature of the west imperialism, in which the world was ruled by cultures of Hobbes and Machiavelli. Besides, the arguments about Japanese militarism’s social basis that supposed to be derived from warrior spirit were criticized as self-serving explanations, while the so-called militarism was actually to legitimate their comparative strength as a nation and its definition of national security for better mobilizing its sociocultural basis.22

Summary and Conclusion

Based on the discussions in this paper, the unavoidability of the war in China and the pacific theatre might not absolutely result from the ending of ‘Shidehara diplomacy’ by the atavistic impulses of Showa Japan’s reconstituted warrior elite. The year of

1931 was a turning point for Shidehara diplomacy, after which the war became increasingly unavoidable with the military clout building up within the empire, the Kwantung Army’s force using in Manchuria and the belligerent climate in the global context.

In fact, how much significantly that militarism functioned in forging the war, and how much constructive and practical that Shidehara’s thought was in terms of its contemporary relevance should be inquired further in detail by detailed historical studies. Above all, after the Second World War, Shidehara was appointed as the Prime Minister to lead the political reform and recollect the lost pacifism in Japan, and the implication of his legacies in current and future Japan could be helpful in sustaining a longer peace in the postwar world order.

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