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LOOKING TO THE OCEANS: JAPAN'S "BLUE-WATER" POLICY OF THE 1890s

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At the heart of Japan's history lies a paradox: a nation which regularly uses the sea has rarely exploited the ocean. To a foreign guest, the relationship between the culture and the sea seems all-pervading: stemming from the root symbol of a bowl of rice with some scraps of fish. Then too, *kojiki* detailed initial maritime deities and exploits before a theocentric line was drawn between the elements of land and salt-water. That line was crossed for food, transport and trade. The sea was a pathway for the people and a barrier against intruders. Poets are neutral towards it: Basho writes of "the sea dark". But the ocean is threatening. One thinks of tsunami (Okubo Toshimichi's "ravage of tidal waves"), of typhoons, of Black Currents, of Black Ships, and (candidly) of bombs and black rain over Hiroshima.

The sea's horizon concealed the world. This frontier established some choices an Japan's posture to other peoples. A simple model delineates the possibilities as:

1. Isolation
2. Passive involvement
3. Active Involvement: Continental
4. Active Involvement: Maritime

While none of these categories is absolute, it is apparent that Japan's posture towards the outside world has varied between different models in previous eras. Degrees of 'isolation' were present in more than the Edo period. 'Passive involvement', characterized by Japan's receiving foreign impulses, persons and trade, but in radiating little energy externally, is characteristic of periods as disparate as Heian and the Allied Occupation 1945-52. Phases of active involvement in the continent of Asia are rare in Japan's relatively peaceful external history, but there are occasions starting in pre-Nara times when Japan projected its power and soldiers into Korea, Manchuria and further afield. Periods of exploiting the ocean, by building offensive naval ships, and projecting power and commerce overseas are also somewhat rare. Perhaps the Taira had that ambition: it was present in the Senkoku with the Nihon Machi, but as a policy, which received the full-backing of the state's resources, it flowered only in the 1890s. This policy was present in the 20th century — *vide* the arms race with the USA 1915-22 and 1934-45. The fact remains that in the 20th century the maritime impulse was equalled by continentalism.

The 1890s are therefore unique in Japan's history. But so far this writer has found no other who shares his views. Perhaps my paper will convince them.

Tokugawa Japan used the ocean to preserve isolation. When Commodore Perry's steamdriven black-ships proved that the "barrier" was actually a pathway, and Japan's security was as fraught as an oyster's on a fishmonger's slab, isolation gave way to other policies. J.C. Crowley emphasises continentalism for hegemony in Asia was "an article of faith for the Imperial Government that was not compromised until the Pacific War" (Crowley, XVI). Perhaps there was less consistency. Did not Japan leave Asia in the 1880s? (Miwa, 164). And during the nineties was not Korea an unsought adventure? Were there not also persistent quests for equality? Was not reversing the unequal treaties also an article of faith? While an alliance with Britain may not have been an objective, once it was achieved it seemed to give meaning to previous decades; it raised "inestimably the status of the country" reported the *Japan Times* (March 1, 1902) and the celebrations or "congratulation meetings" transformed a "joyful and feasting nation" (March 4, 1902). Surely the British commercial treaty and alliance created an opportunity for trade, and industrialization as an engine of growth. After 1895 Japan emphasised trade more than militarism, and looked more to the oceans than the Yalu or Amur rivers.

Let me explain the colour code — "Blue Water" is ocean, "green water" is local seas, and rivers are "brown water".

The idea of expansion may owe something to philosophers whose ideas ingrained late (19 literature, especially reviews and essays. We know Friedrich List had championed government economic intervention to create industrial power and political independence (Morris-Suzuki, 58-61) although the Iwakura mission had drawn similar conclusions from the fate of the Irish, and Polish nations. Perhaps the Japanese did not need Herbert Spencer's social-darwinistic analysis that only the fittest (most modern) survived. Many military men had absorbed Clausewitz's precepts (so close to the *kokutai*) that the state is a living entity; is sovereign; has interests which clash; and resolves conflict by imposing its will. For Clausewitz, war was a *normal* phase in international society.

As Iriye confirms, "Given an image of a world dominated by expanding populations, economics and armaments, the question was not whether to expand but how" (Iriye 238). Exponents of *laissez-faire* expansion were in a minority. Most talked of a peacetime war (*heiwa no senso*) and favoured a neo-mercantilistic empire secured by a strong army and navy. Iriye considers "the essence of Meiji expansionism was the policy of military preparedness. . . . under the guise of non-military activities" (*ibid*). But I think Iriye overlooked the congenial doctrine of Alfred Thayer Mahan.

Mahan argued that Britain's dominance derived from three interlocking rings of seapower: the possession of trade, colonies, and command of the sea, guaranteed by a blue-water battle fleet. Influencing the policy of most nations in the period 1890-1914, Mahan perceived commerce as fundamental to national power. Yet in the struggle for markets, a merchant marine was essential for otherwise nation's survival depended upon competitors carrying it's trade. The marine required secure destinations (ideally colonies) and reliable naval protection. Colonies would also provide essential bases for the navy. Nations, like the

US, which lacked a powerful navy, merchant marine and overseas bases, could not guarantee the export of their produce to neutral markets. Moreover, a hostile, superior power could blockade their ports. A blockade could not be destroyed by a green-water coast-protection fleet, but might be broken by a blue-water capitalship fleet. Only battleships could keep the ports open, whether to receive neutral ships or one's own commerce-raiding cruisers. Mahan relished emphasising that war ("honest collisions") and expansion were the hallmark of a healthy nation, for contentment with existing frontiers was a sign of decay.

Mahan's influence upon the materiel and doctrine of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) was tangible. In 1894, the IJN had been equipped with lightly-armoured cruisers operating a "guerre de course" strategy. By 1896 the IJN entirely changed its profile by ordering a battleship squadron from Great Britain, a development which changed the strategic balance of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. It was the first time that capital ships had been permanently based there. The cost for Japan was formidable. While the Chinese indemnity helped, additional expenditure was required for personnel, protected harbours, docks, cranes, wharfs and reserves of stores, fuel and ammunition.

Why did Japan make the Navy the priority? Historians have stressed that Yamagata perceived a threat to Japan's sovereignty but also the need for readiness to exploit any "line of advantage". In 1893, he stated "our nation's adversary is not China nor Korea but England, France and Russia" (Hackett, 159). Yamagata appeared to want a fleet capable of operating a great distance from home waters (Jansen, 68). The real reason is neglected. Japan needed to defend Taiwan and after 1898 mask the Russian fleet. So the 1894 fleet of 28 light vessels, aggregating 57,000 tons, had become in less than a decade, five times larger in tonnage and qualitatively infinitely superior, deploying 6 battleships, 8 armoured cruisers, 44 cruisers and 19 destroyers. One likes to think the Japanese leaders had absorbed Mahan's favourite Nelsonian dictum: "a fleet of British ships of war are the best negotiators in Europe" (Puleston, 178). And Japan needed skilled diplomats after the wretched humiliation of the Triple Intervention.

True to Mahan's philosophy, Japan made a huge parallel investment in a merchant fleet and a shipbuilding industry. During 1896 laws were implemented to subsidize wholly-owned Japanese ships in construction and operation (Stead, Ch. IX). In consequence, Japan's capacity to wage war increased. Moreover industrialization was dramatically stimulated by the quantum leap in technological sophistication necessary to build state-of-the-art vessels at a time of an international arms race. Japan was able to build fine vessels (Westney: *passim*) and actually pioneered the battle cruiser (Porter. 320).

The acquisition of a fleet of fast merchant ships transformed Japan's global situation. It broke the shackles of 'dependency', 'backwardness', or 'inertness', and consciously placed the nation on a course, advocated by Mahan, Seeley and other publicists, which promised to reap the rewards that England enjoyed. The British model including mercantilism, [some features of which Japan adopted- navigation laws] opened up significant opportunities. Ship construction and operations were import-substituting activities which quite soon had a

positive balance of payment effect (Lockwood, 347-51) and had a spin-off stimulus upon insurance, warehousing, broking, financial services and communications. The trade advantage was no chimera. Japanese ships carried only 8% of their country's trade in 1893, but 39% in 1903 and 50% in 1913. The tonnage of Japanese vessels in Chinese ports was only 2% of the total in 1896, but 16% in 1902. Shipping made Japan a player in China and Korea. The cost was substantial, of course, for ship construction and operation received 75% of *all* government subsidies, 1896-1913 (Wray, 291) but Japan was by 1907 the world's fifth largest ship-owner.

The options opened by setting up liner traffic can be readily illustrated. NYK in 1893 had challenged an international shipping conference to sail direct to Bombay to obtain a dependable supply of raw cotton, industry's most vital import. Backed by the Cotton Spinners, NYK substantially lowered freight costs and the cotton's price. Mitsui, Mitubishi, the Yokohama Specie Bank, and the Japanese Foreign Office founded establishments in Bombay in 1894. This episode marks a stage in Japan's industrialization, and in Japan's ability to assert "a degree of equality in full-scale international economic competition (Wray, 301). Similar struggles were soon waged to get access to Australian wool, Javanese sugar and so on. By 1896 the NYK initiated liner services to Europe. It and other lines soon established regular traffic across most oceanic routes in a dramatic illustration of the blue-water rationale.

Trade grew phenomenally after 1895. Exports, reflecting a structural change in the economy, quadrupled in a decade. 70% of exports in 1893 were based on domestic materials and traditional industry — silk, tea, ceramics, copper and coal. Thereafter textiles dominated, the product of modern industry and, for cotton, imported raw materials. The assault on foreign markets in cotton textiles was assisted by the abolition of export tax on yarn, and duties on raw cotton — the fruit of the British Commercial Treaty. Japan's import profile changed rapidly as raw materials doubled their share while finished goods diminished. (Allen, 232).

Japan's trade policy was aggressively conducted. The Shimonoseki Treaty secured all the rights enjoyed by western imperialists, under most-favoured-nation (MFN) clauses of the unequal treaties. For good measure Japan opened China's rivers to her navigators, four new treaty-ports, and the right to conduct manufactures in China — a momentous concession, the beginning of a policy of locating production offshore to reap advantages. In the British treaty, Japan extracted a reciprocal right to travel, reside and buy property on a MFN basis — a right which Britain's dominions quickly qualified. Adopting patent and copyright laws (Lockwood, 330) were other signals of a determination to integrate with the world economy.

Southward opportunities proved ephemeral. Once the USA had annexed the Philippines, Japan had to consider the security of Taiwan. Given tension over the 'open door' and migration, Japan was vigilant. In 1907, the IJN designated the USA as "sole imaginary enemy". From that time until 1945, Japan was engaged in the herculean task of maintaining a superiority over the American Navy in the West Pacific. Thus the Mahanite policy led to a deadly rivalry. By 1907, Japan was committed to almost unsustainable armaments programs on land and on sea.

Yet Japan's policy retained mercantilist tendencies. Diminishing the share of foreign

traders controlling Japan's trade was a slow process. Japanese merchants conducted 12% of Japan's trade in 1888 but 35% in 1899 (Brittanica 1911, XV, 202). Moreover Kansai Trading in 1898 and Matsumoto in 1900 invaded Lancashire to buy textile machinery, without benefit of British traders. Relying less upon foreign experts, manufacturing goods under license developed after 1900, when Japan could borrow capital abroad and put that to use in advanced sectors of the economy, especially shipbuilding (Westney, *passim*).

Access to foreign capital markets accelerated Japan's expansion. Early Meiji trade was hindered by lack of a convertible currency. The Yokohama Specie Bank 1880 occupied a key position in Japan's struggle for power (Allen) by making possible an active participation in world trade. It financed the likes of Mitsui Bussan in competition with foreign middlemen. However, Japan's depreciating silver currency impaired integration with the world economy. Capital shortage inflated interest rates to penal levels. To the dangers of foreign borrowing, silver added a prohibitive premium: the 1872 loan of 10.7 million yen incurred costs of 30 million when it was repayed in 1897. In that year Japan adhered to the gold standard, and from 1899 Japan financed its national debt, much increased by expenditure upon armaments, coast protection and harbours, by direct loans from London (£10 million at 4.4%), bonds (£93 million) and debentures. In effect, the West financed much of Japan's armament expenditure 1897-1913 (Lockwood 249-58). British and French capital underlay the advances of the Industrial Bank (which financed the South Manchurian Railway), the Banks of Taiwan, Korea and other institutions which projected Japanese influence overseas.

The fishing industry was developed as an integral part of the maritime empire. Again the strongest impulse came after 1895 when legislation encouraged blue-water fishing, in rivalry with the West. Various acts subsidised a spectacular growth in advanced craft for seining, crab, whales and seals. Moreover, the Gaimusho gave vigorous support to pearling and to pelagic sealers: concessions in Russian waters (1907) and rights in Mexico, Chile and Singapore were extracted. In fishing Japan moved quickly from green-water to blue-water status.

Migration was envisaged as an integral component of the maritime policy. The change was sudden; in 1893 Japan assured the United States that its policy was to discourage migration. A year or so later, Japanese rejoiced in their ability to travel world-wide. *The Japan Weekly Mail* rhapsodised that migrants were going to Canada and Australia; 18,000 had gone to Hawaii; Siamese, North Borneo and Guatemalan prospects seemed promising and "Brazil's (sic) will be a great field for emigrants" (JWM, Dec 7, 1895). The policy change indicates the Mahanite dimension. Migrants boosted shipping revenue by fares and freight. Shipping and emigration companies forged links with foreign contractors to supply labour to mine coal, build railways, or grow sugar. Moreover, migration was, the NYK said "the best way to expand a nations trade" (Wray 265). Japanese emigrants stimulated demand for exports and located reliable supplies of raw materials (e.g. Kanematsu Fusajiro and Australian wool). Migrants enriched the state with remittances. Clearly migration could also promote colonization, and the Japanese state did this successfully in Hokkaido, Okinawa, the Kurides,

Korea, Manchuria and Taiwan. In 1895 it perhaps hoped that Japanese communities in the South Seas, Oceania, Australia and the Americas might lead to colonization. In 1895 all was optimism, and bitter was the reaction when migrants were resisted by British and American dominions (Bennett: *passim*).

Mahan's final intersecting component of a maritime strategy was the acquisition of colonies — Japan annexed Taiwan (Formosa) and the Pescadores in 1895, a massive augmentation of the Empire and a potentially useful stepping stone to further advances. Was not the scene set for a policy of *hokushu nanshin* or defence in the North, advance in the South?

The preceding pages have demonstrated that in 1894-5, Japan embarked upon a series of Mahanite policies. These inter-locking policies promoted a blue-water fleet of capital ships, an enormously expanded merchant marine and fishing industry, a financial regime using foreign capital and gold-standard convertible currency, strenuous trade promotion and a vigorous emigration policy. It is submitted that the nature and magnitude of this policy constituted a distinct era. Perhaps future texts and research should take into account this revisionist claim.

The blue water policy as adumbrated here may have slightly over-emphasised state leadership and its clarity of purpose. There was scope for accommodation with business, finance and political interests, as the governments and private interests reconciled national goals with market opportunities and profits (Francks, 51). It was a policy more likely than alternative to attract the attention of intellectuals, business associations, and political circles. The Meiji maritime period, the 1920's and post-war Japan have associations with the relative prominence of business, political parties and an energizing element of freedom.

It is impossible here to analyze why the maritime policy was diluted; the Imperial Navy and the shipping sector remained prominent, expenditure was enormous c1918-1922 and c1935-41 when Japan engaged in an arms-race with the USA. But the maritime policy had to compete with continentalism, the Imperial Army's mission to defend Korea and Manchuria from Russia and China. But that explanation may inhibit consideration of how the USA checked the maritime expansion of Japan by annexing the glittering prizes of Hawaii, Guam and the Philippines. And while the USA "interfered" in Asia, it constrained Japan by refusing migrants and asserting a unilateral Monroe Doctrine.

The implication of this paper is that modern Japan's diplomacy is not unprecedented. The drive for Transocean trade, commercial treaties, peaceful competition are long-standing natural elements of Japan's diplomacy. Moreover, the maritime policy of the 1890's and the Shidehara policy of the 1920's have common elements with post-1945 policy. However, the two earlier episodes were interrupted both by dark clouds over Manchuria, and by US policy. On previous occasions Japan responded to provocations by the USA and Russia. Maintaining amity with those assertive powers is difficult. And the sky is not cloudless now.

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