

# Chapter 4

## World War I and the Origin of Sino-Japanese Conflict



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**Abstract** This chapter focuses on World War I and the origins on Sino-Japanese conflict, attributing the Twenty-One Demands as the primary source of the latter. Japan's efforts to resolve the Manchuria question underlies its issuance of the Demands, which alienated the West and is viewed by many Chinese as the start of "Japan's invasion of China." Yet, the author suggests that conflict between Japan and China was not necessarily inevitable.

### The Difficulty of Evaluating the War Historically<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the consensus reached in Europe on the causes, timeframe, and historical significance of World War II, historical assessment of that war remains unfinished in East Asia. There are many reasons for this, but one can be found in the remarkable complexity of the sequence of events leading to the outbreak of that war in East Asia, compared to Europe.

The war has many names in Asia. The Pacific War (also known as the Greater East Asian War or Asia-Pacific War) that broke out in December 1941 was fought as part of the world war that had already started in Europe in 1939. Japan had been fighting the Second Sino-Japanese War (which it previously referred to as the China (*Shina*) Incident, then the Japan-China (*Nikka*) Incident, in the absence of a formal declaration of war), which was incorporated into World War II. It meant that after December 1941, Japan was involved in an all-out war with the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands, as well as with China. The causes of, as well as sequence of events leading to, the start of this war, however, are very complicated and leave room

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<sup>1</sup>This chapter revises and expands upon "‘Nitchū tairitsu no genten’ to shite no taika nijūikkajō yōkyū" ("The Twenty-One Demands as the Source of Sino-Japanese Conflict") published in the September 2015 issue of *Chūō Kōron* magazine.

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for many possible views. It may be clear from this brief synopsis, then, that exactly what to call this war remains a topic of debate.

There are multiple views on the starting point and length of the war. This was a war of aggression, part of the war that began in 1928 with the assassination of Zhang Zuolin, according to the judgment reached by the Tokyo Trial (the International Military Tribunal for the Far East) after the war's end. Recently, however, the Manchurian (Mukden) Incident (1931) has received more emphasis in general, and so there is a strong basis in Japan for viewing the period from that incident to the end of the war in 1945 as "the Fifteen Years' War." Meanwhile, the general emphasis in China had been placed on 1937, the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, and so they often used the expression "the Eight Year War of Resistance against Japan." But in 2017, Beijing released a statement noting that the period for the "Anti-Japanese War" would be revised from "Eight Years (1937–1945)" to "Fourteen Years (1931–1945)." Consequently, there exists a diverse set of views even regarding the chronology of the conflict between Japan and China. No matter where one stands, however, the fact remains: antagonism between Japan and China worsened in the 1930s until it morphed into an all-out war.

## **The Twenty-One Demands as the Source of Sino-Japanese Conflict**

How and when did relations between Japan and China become antagonistic? There are a wide range of opinions on this, too. Starting with the oldest, we could look for the causes in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). Japan, the victor, compelled the Qing to promise to pay a huge sum of reparations and hand over Taiwan and the Liaodong Peninsula (Japan returned the latter because of the Triple Intervention). The Allied Nations in World War II had thought to return postwar East Asia to its status quo before the First Sino-Japanese War. In the Cairo Declaration they issued in 1943, the United States, Britain, and China demanded the return of Taiwan and "all the territories Japan has stolen from the Chinese." The San Francisco Peace Treaty, which entered into force in 1952, reaffirmed this line of thought; Japan lost all the colonies it had acquired after the First Sino-Japanese War.

This does not mean, however, that the First Sino-Japanese War caused a decisive rift to open in Japan-China relations. The great wave of Chinese students going to study in Japan is emblematic of the trending thought following the Qing's defeat that, to strengthen the nation, China needed to learn from Japan. In fact, many Chinese visited Japan after the war, including Liang Qichao, Sun Yat-sen, Wang Jingwei (born Changming), and Chiang Kai-shek. It is thought that, since Qing China was not a nation-state, the general populace had a very weak sense of having lost the war. Antagonism between Japan and China gradually increased when Japan sought to enlarge its Manchurian interests after winning its war against Russia (1894–1895), from which Japan acquired the Liaodong Peninsula and South

Manchuria Railway. But a friendly atmosphere and active people-to-people exchanges existed around the time of the Xinhai Revolution (1911). You might characterize this period of Japan-China relations as still full of possibilities and far from unwavering conflict.

I believe that what destroyed these ties and triggered the rapid intensification of conflict between Japan and China were the “Twenty-one Demands” that Japan handed to China in 1915. The document that Ōkuma Shigenobu’s second cabinet presented to the Yuan Shikai administration in January comprised five groups of demands seeking the enlargement of Japan’s interests:

- Group 1: Japanese assumption of German interests in Shandong Province;
- Group 2: expansion of Japanese interests in South Manchuria and Eastern Inner Mongolia;
- Group 3: joint Japan-China administration of the Hanyeping Iron & Coal Co., Ltd.;
- Group 4: no further Chinese concessions to foreigners along its coastal regions;
- Group 5: placement of Japanese political, financial, and military advisors in the Chinese government; a partial merger of their police forces; Japanese commitment for military supplies to China; etc. (Japan later characterized Group 1–4 items as “demands” or “requests”<sup>2</sup> and Group 5 items as “wishes”).

Although it had protested vigorously, the Chinese side was forced to accept all but a part of these demands in the end. May 9, the date these demands were accepted, is remembered in China as the “Day of National Humiliation.” It might be taken as the origin of anti-Japanese sentiment.

## The Manchuria Question: The Source of the Twenty-One Demands

The Twenty-One Demands, which cover a rather wide range of items, was a Japanese attempt to aggrandize its interests in China at a stroke. Why did the Japanese government put forward such strong demands so suddenly?

The question of Manchuria was in the background. With its win in the Russo-Japanese War, Japan acquired a colony in mainland China for the first time, becoming a continental state. After signing the peace Treaty of Portsmouth with Russia and the Beijing Treaty of 1905 with the Qing, Japan took over the special interests that Russia held in Manchuria, such as the Liaodong Peninsula leaseholds and administration of the South Manchuria Railway. Many Japanese were dissatisfied with their government’s failure to get reparations despite having paid a tremendous cost in lives lost in the war (symbolized by the Hibiya Riots following the signing of the peace treaty), and so their hopes for the Manchurian interests were that much stronger. Until the war, Manchuria was thought of as a dangerous land out of

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<sup>2</sup>The term *yōkyū* encompasses these English meanings.

Japan's reach, in mighty Russia's shadow. That image changed with Japan's victory, and Manchuria became associated more as a place having "special ties"—contiguous to the Korean Peninsula, increasingly incorporated into Japan's sphere of influence—as well as a land for advancing Japanese commerce and industry and for emigration and development.

Japan's advance into Manchuria did proceed rapidly after the war. Japan increased its interests in South Manchuria's rails, mines, and coalfields under the legal basis of the Beijing Treaty of 1905, its related agreement, and secret minutes. Accordingly, the number of Japanese residing in Manchuria grew from fewer than 4000 before the war to over 76,000 in 1910. Manchuria came to be regarded as an object of sentimentality and nostalgia, land won in exchange for 100,000 brave souls and 2 billion yen from the state coffers. The push for further advances in Manchuria grew stronger within Japan after it annexed Korea in 1910. Not without reason did Europe, America, and China show greater concern that, after the Korean annexation, Japan might be trying to make Manchuria a second Korea.

The interests that Japan acquired in mainland China were not secure. The dates were set for returning these Manchurian interests—1923 for the Liaodong Peninsula, 1939 for the South Manchuria Railway—and extending the period of the leaseholds was not guaranteed. After its war with Russia, Japan was constantly aware of its diplomatic task: how to extend the leaseholds for its interests in Manchuria. With the 1911 Xinhai Revolution and the founding of the Republic of China the following year, Chinese nationalism grew stronger, and the focus turned to rights recovery, regaining concessions that China had made to the Great Powers. As its interests in Manchuria were no exception, Japan experienced a growing sense of crisis at home. After the start of the revolution, the Imperial Japanese Army and anti-foreign hardliners insisted on a policy of intervention, with one objective being the retention of interests in Manchuria. Such intervention did not happen, since the second cabinet of Saionji Kinmochi was following policies of non-interference in China's domestic affairs and maintaining the status quo in Manchuria. But it should be apparent that an elevated sense of crisis over maintaining the Manchurian interests already existed during this period.

One of the most capable Japanese diplomats at the time keenly aware of the need to resolve the Manchuria question was Katō Takaaki. While serving as the Ambassador to the United Kingdom in January 1913, Katō met with Foreign Secretary Edward Grey and gained his understanding regarding the extension of the Manchurian leasehold period that was looming in 10 years. Taking up the foreign minister position in the second Ōkuma Shigenobu cabinet the following year, Katō aimed to resolve the Manchuria question. It was undoubtedly what he emphasized most when putting forward the Twenty-One Demands; the Group 2 demands addressed the Manchuria question. In short, resolving the Manchuria question, one of the biggest pending matters that Japanese diplomacy faced after the Russo-Japanese War, was the trigger for the Twenty-One Demands.

## Outbreak of World War I and the Twenty-One Demands

The extension of the Manchurian leasehold periods was unilaterally advantageous for Japan and held absolutely no merits for China, so getting China to accede to it was rather challenging. Chinese acceptance would require something valuable in return, something that World War I suddenly offered to Japan.

World War I was a major conflict fought by nearly all the world's leading countries, divided into the Allied Powers (Britain, France, Russia) and the Central Powers (Germany, Austro-Hungary). It was sparked by the Austro-Hungarian declaration of war against Serbia on July 28, 1914, and by August 4, Germany, Russia, France, Belgium, then Britain had joined the fight. Under Foreign Minister Katō's powerful leadership, Japan entered the war on August 23 on the side of the Allied Powers, citing the Anglo-Japanese Alliance as the rationale. Japan forced Germany to surrender its South Sea islands in October and occupied its leasehold territory on China's Shandong Peninsula around Jiaozhou Bay. Along with purging German influence in the Asia-Pacific region, Japan acquired the right to ask to take over German interests after the war, thus achieving its expected aim in joining the war.

These, however, were not Katō's primary purposes for entering the war. His foremost objective was to use the return of the newly acquired German interests on the Shandong Peninsula as a bargaining chip to gain larger interests from China—resolution of the Manchuria question. Had Japan not seized it, Germany could have leased the territory for 99 years (i.e., through 1997) under the terms of the convention respecting the lease of Jiaozhou signed in 1898. By engendering goodwill through the conditional return of this area, Katō thought to pressure the Chinese side to extend the period for returning the leases in Japan's Manchurian interests. In other words, what prompted the offer to resolve the Manchuria question in exchange for resolving the Shandong question was the Twenty-One Demands.

Reaching a compromise on the Twenty-One Demands may not have been that difficult if Katō had negotiated with China after paring down the discussion to just the Manchuria question (Group 2) and the Shandong question (Group 1). The Western Great Powers had not shown any objection to the substance of Groups 1–4 when Japan informally briefed them after the Twenty-One Demands had been presented to China. China's negative reaction and refusal were perhaps inevitable. But in the end, China acceded to Japan's ultimatum, a reduced set of demands that included the key parts of Groups 1–4 but omitted the Group 5 items. And barring any unforeseen circumstances, it was believed that resolving the Manchuria question through diplomatic negotiation was not outside the realm of the possible.

The actual diplomatic negotiations over the Twenty-One Demands were very disorderly. There are three reasons why they were so disorderly: the agitated state of Japanese public sentiment, Katō's clumsy diplomatic leadership, and the Chinese side's skillful resistance.

Around the outbreak of World War I, Japanese public opinion became excited, believing a good opportunity had arrived for Japan to expand its interests in China, the perfect time since the European powers had no spare capacity to be involved with

China matters. So, the Ōkuma cabinet was under pressure to act. Unable to restrain this “expansion fever” coming from every corner of the country, Katō and his Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not limit the demands to just the Manchuria and Shandong questions, and instead piled on every issue pending at the time, and ultimately wound up with the bloated Twenty-One Demands. One gets a sense that the Twenty-One Demands was, in effect, just an exhaustive list of issues in the Japan-China relationship after the Russo-Japan War. That Japan foisted such a large list of demands upon China is the fundamental cause of the disorder in the diplomatic talks.

Around the time of Japan’s entry into World War I, there was a groundswell of opinion in China that, naturally, Tokyo would return the Shandong concessions to China. This was the context in which the government of Yuan Shikai approached the diplomatic talks with Japan, and it maintained a firm posture throughout. By skillfully leaking information regarding the talks to the public at home and abroad, the Yuan administration succeeded in fomenting domestic public opinion against Japan and increasing the Western Powers’ wariness toward Tokyo. The term Twenty-One Demands was something the Chinese side began using to stoke this anti-Japanese trend, and the appellation eventually stuck throughout the world.

Meanwhile, because its negotiating plans lacked clarity and consistency, Japan often found itself playing catch-up in the talks and in managing public opinion. Katō was put in a situation where he was unable to make any concessions, because a general election was scheduled for March and the public mood remained agitated. Tokyo’s attempt initially to keep the Group 5 demands secret from the Western Powers played a major role in hardening the attitude of Britain and the United States against it. Japan sent China an ultimatum in early May that omitted the Group 5 “wishes” and successfully got China to accept most of the items from Groups 1–4 of the Twenty-One Demands. While Japan did achieve its expected objectives after great effort, it came at the significant cost of contributing to a vigorous anti-Japanese movement in China and increasing the West’s mistrust of Japan.

The Twenty-One Demands badly tarnished the image that China had of Japan. Britain, France, and Russia all held more special interests in China, but presenting the Twenty-One Demands made Japan the sole enemy that was impeding China’s efforts to build a new nation. There were large-scale boycotts of Japanese goods throughout China, and many Chinese students studying in Japan returned home. It was the first time that such large-scale and organized anti-Japanese protests had happened. The Twenty-One Demands had indeed become the source for later conflict and antagonism between Japan and China. (For details, please refer to Naraoka [2015](#).)

## How to Consider the Twenty-One Demands

Some people do not think the Twenty-One Demands was problematic whatsoever, being the sort of diplomacy often undertaken under imperialism. For instance, Tamogami Toshio, former chief of staff of Japan's Air Self-Defense Force, has written, "Some people say that this [Japan compelling China to accept the Twenty-One Demands] was the start of Japan's invasion of China, but if you compare these demands to the general international norms of colonial administration by the great powers at the time, there was nothing terribly unusual about it" (Tamogami 2008).

Certainly, the Western Great Powers continued to pursue their traditional imperialistic diplomacy during World War I. It is widely acknowledged that the division of the former Ottoman Empire's territories by Britain and France is the source of the problems in the Middle East we have today. To restore *Italia irredenta*, Italy left its Triple Alliance with the Central Powers and entered the war after getting a guarantee from the Allied Powers about acquiring these perceived Italian interests under foreign rule. The United States, too, conducted military interventions in Mexico, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, and made Nicaragua a protectorate. Perhaps Japan's Twenty-One Demands does not even rise to the level of this conduct by the western Great Powers.

When Japan had briefed the Western Great Powers about Groups 1–4 soon after presenting China with the demands, none of them showed any particular concern. They protested vigorously, however, when they later learned of the existence of the Group 5 items. The demands in Group 5, they believed, not only infringed on their own vested interests, they went against the principles regarding China that the Great Powers, including Japan, had affirmed until that point—territorial integrity, equality of opportunity, and the "Open Door"—and included substance that would interfere in China's domestic affairs.

The purpose of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, as revised in 1911, was "[t]he preservation of the common interests of all Powers in China by insuring the independence and the integrity of the Chinese Empire and the principle of equal opportunities for the commerce and industry of all nations in China." So, Britain, which saw Group 5 demands at cross-purposes to this, strongly pressed Japan to reconsider its demands. France also voiced deep concerns about Group 5 items. The attitude of the United States was rather hardline. It viewed the Twenty-One Demands as running counter to the Takahira-Root Agreement (1908) that laid down such concepts as "the principle of equal opportunity for commerce and industry" and "preserv[ing] the common interest of all powers" in China. So, after Japan and China concluded negotiations and reached agreement, the United States released a diplomatic note in the name of Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan that took the position of repudiating the outcome of the talks in its entirety. Even though the US attitude—attempting to advocate for China from the moral high ground by emphasizing universal values (often termed "missionary diplomacy")—is quite exceptional, Britain and the other European Powers considered the Twenty-One Demands as having gone too far. From the point that it instilled in the West a strong

distrust toward Japan, the Twenty-One Demands undoubtedly became a source of future problems.

How should the Demands be viewed in the context of relations with China? Generally, in China the Twenty-One Demands is taken as the “starting point for Japan’s invasion of China.” Therefore, Yuan Shikai is deemed a “collaborator and traitor to his country” and his foreign policies are criticized heavily.

Such criticism is unavoidable perhaps, in light of the fact that he ultimately did accept the majority of the demands. Yet, a detailed examination of the negotiating process reveals how skillfully the Yuan government managed these diplomatic talks. It attempted to prolong them, fanned anti-Japanese opinion by leaking information about them to the press in China and overseas, and got the Powers to rein in Japan. The Yuan administration’s negotiating policy extracted a key Japanese concession, the dropping of Group 5 items. (For an appraisal of Yuan’s diplomacy, please refer to Kawashima 2014.)

Militarily weak, the Yuan government had no choice but to concede, but it had resisted Japan using all the powers it had. The popular dissatisfaction with the extent of concessions made poured over into an upsurge of Chinese nationalism, an energy that exploded in the May Fourth Movement (1919) after the end of World War I. Considering the history up to that point of Japan unilaterally enlarging its interests in Manchuria, it is quite possible to see the Twenty-One Demands as the starting point for China’s counteroffensive. By resolving the Manchuria question and acquiring new special interests besides, Japan gained the advantage in the short term but at the considerable cost of losing the faith and trust of the Chinese people. The Twenty-One Demands did narrow the potential for friendship and cooperation between Japan and China.

## **Could Japan-China Conflict Have Been Avoided?**

This does not mean, however, that Sino-Japanese conflict was inevitable after the Twenty-One Demands. Throughout the 1910s, Japan built a degree of amicable relations with Duan Qirui, Zhang Zuolin, and other regional military leaders and continued to support the path of mutual understanding with Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, and other revolutionaries. (Incidentally, Sun Yat-sen did not regard the Twenty-One Demands in a completely negative light because it did lead to the overthrow of the Yuan government.) After World War I, the Hara Takashi cabinet rebuilt a policy of cooperative diplomacy with the West and attempted to construct a new relationship with China on the basis of non-interference in its domestic affairs and emphasis on commercial ties. Even Katō Takaaki, the man responsible for the Twenty-One Demands, keenly regretted his own failed policies, and so during his time as prime minister (1924–1926) pursued a steady policy of international cooperation (Shidehara Diplomacy). Relations between Japan and China in the 1920s still retained an ability to right itself, and the two countries struggled to find ways to resume friendly ties.



I would like to highlight two factors that led to the failure of these efforts and deepened Japan's conflict with China: a mistaken view, widely held among the Japanese, that China would do everything Japan's way and strong public support for expanding Japanese interests on the Chinese mainland.

As I mentioned above, the Twenty-One Demands grew out of a fever for aggrandizing Japan's special interests, a sentiment found throughout the country. Popular opinion remained extremely hawkish after the demands were presented, with the majority in political circles, the military, the business world, and the media calling on the government to achieve the demands. Just a minority calmly observed the diplomatic negotiations over the Demands; popular sentiment was on the boil. As an illustration of this, one widely used expression of that time was a "Monroe Doctrine for Asia" (the concept that Japan should determine matters in Asia, along the lines of the US Monroe Doctrine in the Americas).

This hardline attitude toward China fell silent for a while after World War I but reemerged energetically in the latter half of the 1920s with the Shandong Expeditions, the assassination of Zhang Zuolin, and the Manchurian Incident. Thereafter, Japan fell into a repetitive pattern: some politicians and members of the army would clamor for expanding interests on the Chinese mainland, with the media and public opinion following in their footsteps, and the government being dragged along behind them. The policy-making process during the Twenty-One Demands reincarnated, you might say. The Twenty-One Demands is an example of the Japanese government, dragged along by popular opinion, advancing headlong into mainland China, an experience from which we should learn very important lessons.

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A publication bringing together dissertations that consider the connections between World War I and East Asia from a global vantage point.

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