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Japan's Prewar Security Strategy

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The "security strategy" in the title of this lecture refers to a national strategy related to security. In spite of this, I do not intend to take account of all the changes in Japan's national strategy before the Pacific War, but want to select the striking parts of them from the perspective of the change of modern Japanese national strategy and try to grasp their characteristics.

1. Security strategy during the first half of the Meiji period

Let us first examine Japan's security strategy from the Meiji Restoration to the Russo-Japanese War. Interestingly, in fact, until the end of the Russo-Japanese War, Japan had no defense policy or anything like that. Japan's first defense policy was made in 1907. During the period when there was no defense policy, did Japan have no national strategy on security at all? That was not necessarily so. On the contrary, it is better to think that the security strategy is obvious, so there is no need to form written policies.

To understand Japan's security strategy during this period, it is important to note that Japan attached particular importance to the Korean Peninsula. For example, in 1903, that is, two years before the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese

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War, a cabinet resolution read that: "the Korean Empire, or the Korean Peninsula, is like a knife sticking out from the Asian continent, which is about to stab into Japan's main part. It is too close to the Tsushima Island. Therefore, once the Korean Peninsula is under control of a power or a big country, Japan's security will be frequently threatened and won't be at peace."

The cabinet resolution clearly stated the importance of the Korean Peninsula for Japan's security. It can be seen that avoiding the hostile relationship between the Korean Peninsula and Japan and avoiding the dominance of the Korean Peninsula by Japan's hostile countries are fundamental to Japan's security strategy. In this regard, Professor Oka Yoshitake, who taught the history of international politics at University of Tokyo, pointed out that Japan's relationship with the Korean Peninsula is similar to that of Britain and the Low Countries. Since the age of sail, Britain has set its basic principles of security as never letting the continental region that is closest to it, namely, the Low Countries like Belgium and the Netherlands, fall under the control of its hostile forces. Based on this, it is not difficult to understand why Britain fought desperately against Napoleon and Hitler.

In fact, as early as 30 years before proposing the above cabinet resolution, that is, at the time of the emergence of the "Seikanron" (literally "advocacy of a punitive expedition to Korea"), Okubo Toshimichi, a leader of the Meiji Government, had proposed that not letting the Korean Peninsula fall under the control of Japan's hostile powers is the basic principle of Japan's security strategy.

After the group against the "Seikanron" won the debate of the "Seikanron", someone asked Okubo Toshimichi, the representative of the group against the "Seikanron": "how do you look at the Korean Peninsula?" He replied: "I have own views on the relationship between Japan and Korea. The Korea at present is like a dam for Japan. In fact, it's better to have something like a dam outside one's own territory. Although the dam is not in his territory, he can still repair it according to the situation. It's enough as long as it can protect his territory. The Korea at present is exactly something like the dam. But the situation in Korea also depends on changes in the world situation. Once the situation changes, Japan must take appropriate action."

Okubo compared Korea to a dam that protects the field, that is, Japan, and he thought it is necessary to repair the dam in a timely manner. Yet, it is alright for the dam to stay outside the field, and there is no need to take it into the territory. However, it should be noted that Okubo also said that once the world situation changes, Japan must consider other countermeasures.

Fifteen years later, when the Imperial Diet was held for the first time, the then Prime Minister Yamagata Aritomo used the same logic as Okubo did, which

is the famous concept of the "line of sovereign" and the "line of interest". Yamagata held that the line of sovereign refers to the territory, the line of interest refers to the region closely related to the safety of the line of sovereign. To maintain national independence, it is not enough to guard only the line of sovereign. The line of interest must also be protected. In Yamagata's opinion, the protection of the line of interest means that when the power of other countries comes into the line of interest and puts Japan at a disadvantage, Japan must drive the power out even though it needs to resort to force.

In this context, Yamagata proposed that "the focus of the line of interest" is Korea. Yamagata said that currently, the Trans-Siberian Railway is under construction by the Russian Empire. After the completion of the railway a few years later, the Russian army can reach Amur River a dozen days later after setting off from Petersburg, Russian Empire's capital (translator's note: the Russians refer Heilong Jiang as Amur River). Therefore, he speculated that Korea will be in a grim situation at that time, and once there are tensions on the peninsula, big changes will take place in the region around Japan as a whole. In this case, how should Japan maintain the independence of Korea, which is its line of interest? This is the important issue on security raised by Yamagata.

Although Yamagata saw Korea as a line of interest, he didn't advocate for the annexation of Korea before the Russian Empire takes any actions. In fact, Yamagata advocated for a permanent neutrality of Korea, just like what Switzerland did. Like Okubo, Yamagata believed that the basis of Japan's security strategy is to avoid the Korean Peninsula fall in the hand of some big country, namely, the Russian Empire, but this doesn't necessarily mean Japan must invade Korea to make it a part of Japan's territory.

However, relevant countries led by Korea did not endorse Yamagata's proposal for permanent neutrality of Korea. The development of history thereafter was also different from Yamagata's expectations. Because that before the Russian Empire taking control of Korea, the Qing Dynasty (China) strengthened its substantive management on Korea, which was a nominal tributary state of the Qing Dynasty, Japan fought with the Qing Dynasty before waging war against the Russian Empire. After the Japan-Qing War (translator's note: China refers the war as the War of Jiawu), the Russian Empire stepped up its expansion in the Far East. In order to protect Korea, the line of interest of Japan, Japan finally waged war against the Russian Empire.

As mentioned above, it can be said that the concept of the line of sovereign and the line of interest clearly defines Japan's security strategy. But it should be noted that taking the opportunity of the Russo-Japanese War, Japan started to use these two concepts to support its expansion outward. Half a year after Japan making war with the Russian Empire, Komura Jutarō, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, proposed an opinion that reflected this point. Komura

claimed: "before the war, Japan has always believed that it is enough to include Korea in Japan's sphere of influence and protect Japan's vested interests in Manchuria. But the Russian Empire didn't accept this moderate demand, and the war finally broke out. Since the war has taken place, Japan has to push its policy forward compared with the prewar policy. In other words, Korea should be included in Japan's sovereignty, that is, within Japan's line of sovereign, and becomes Japan's protectorate; Manchuria should be included in Japan's sphere of interest, that is, within Japan's line of interest."

In addition, it is interesting that this opinion of Komura was written during the war when it was not clear whether Japan would win the war. It is more noteworthy that, as a security strategy, the concept of the line of sovereign and line of interest used by Yamagata is a dedicated defensive concept, while the sphere of sovereign and sphere of interest in Komura's words are expansionary.

2. Defense policy

As mentioned above, Japan's first defense policy was made in 1907, after the Russo-Japanese War. Since then, Japan had revised the defense policy three times. The first revision was in 1918, at the end of World War I, the second revision was in 1923, after the Washington Naval Conference, and the third revision was in 1936, after the Manchurian Incident (translator's note: China refers the Manchurian Incident as the "September 18 Incident"). In the following paragraphs, I will analyze the characteristics of Japan's security strategy from the perspective of changes of Japan's defense policy.

Firstly, the greatest feature of the first defense policy made in 1907 is that it strongly advocates for "taking offensive as to offensive as the basic principle" and adopts the "militarism". This means extending the line of sovereign to the Korean Peninsula and setting the South Manchurian as the line of interest, which is to say, to maintain and expand Japan's interests and forces in the mainland, it is not enough just by defending the Japanese archipelago. In other words, Japan had turned from an island state in the Far East into an empire. The issue security strategy needs to solve is the defense of the empire rather than the defense of territory.

In addition, one result of the Russo-Japanese War was that there was no longer a country that can compete with the Japanese Navy in the Western Pacific region. In short, Japan had no need for the defense of its territory. At the beginning of the Japan-Qing War, Japan still had to prepare for the situation that the Qing Navy could gain sea dominance and think about how to defend the territory under the attack of the Qing Army. During the Russo-Japanese War, Japan also had to prepare to defend the territory in case of the attack of the Russian Navy. Although Japan actually adopted offensive strategy in both of the two wars, it still must prepare for the situations where it had to adopt

defensive strategy. However, after the Russo-Japanese War, Japan fully gained sea dominance of the Western Pacific region and no longer needed to prepare for the situation where Japan's territory is under attack. The result was that people gradually started to believe that war occurs on the mainland, which is outside Japan's territory.

The defense policy revised in 1918 left no original documents, so we will skip it. The next is the defense policy revised in 1923. There are the following statements in the policy: "the basic principle of the defense policy is to avoid international isolation, to keep close watch on countries that are very likely to have conflicts with Japan, to weaken the alliance between enemy countries, and to have closer cooperative relations with friendly countries, so that wars are favorable for our side. After the outbreak of the war, we should carry out offensive operations and defeat the enemy outside our territory country by fighting and winning battles of quick decision. At the same time, we must also ensure the importation of overseas materials to protect the safety of national life, and be prepared for a protracted war."

It is noteworthy that the defense policy made in 1923 carries on the militarism in the previous defense policy, and requires mental preparation for a protracted war, while strongly advocating for fighting quick battles. The sense of protracted war came from the lessons of World War I. But the problem is that fighting quick battles, namely, short-term operations, is juxtaposed with protracted war, but the two are unrelated. The second revision of the defense policy in 1923 wrote: "when analyzing the general trend of the world, we can find that political disputes and crises are often caused by economic problems. At present, the wounds of the world war are healing; meanwhile, East Asia has become the focus of economic war between powers. In East Asia, there are possibilities of conflicts of interest between Japan and other countries, which are even possible to escalate into war, and the target country that is most likely to have conflicts with Japan is the United States."

Thus, in the defense policy made in 1923, the United States was clearly identified as the number one imaginary enemy. In fact, due to the outbreak of the Russian revolution, threats from the north for Japan during this period were significantly reduced. Therefore, the United States became the number one imaginary enemy. However, the economic competition or military conflicts around the Asian continent, namely, China, between Japan and the United States mentioned in the defense policy are very unreasonable and far-fetched. In addition, the political and military tensions between Japan and the United States at that time had just been mitigated by the Washington Naval Treaty signed at the Washington Naval Conference held from 1921 to 1922, which agreed to prevent an arms race by limiting naval construction. In diplomacy, the two countries also strongly advocated for coordination and peace between Japan and the United States. In this respect, the incongruity in politics and

military of the defense policy made in 1923 is very obvious.

There is another noteworthy point in the defense strategy. From the lessons of World War I, Japan had realized that future wars were likely to be the same as World War I, that is, the wars between alliances or united countries. This is reflected in the part of "weakening the alliance between enemy countries and having closer cooperative relations with friendly countries" in the defense policy. Based on the situation of World War I, the Japanese Army proposed to study the possibility of fighting against multiple countries. But the Japanese Navy believed that it was very difficult for Japan to fighting against multiple countries, as Japan didn't have such a combat force. In the end, the study of the military strategic approach that regarded multiple countries as opponent was suspended. It will be slightly exaggerated to say that the defense policy made in 1923 was based on taking what is not expected to happen as something that won't happen.

3. The paradox of Manchuria Incident

It was Ishiwara Kanji, the then Chief of Operations of Imperial Japanese Army General Staff Office, who proposed to revise the defense policy for the third time. Ishiwara held that the Manchurian Incident led to major changes in Japan's security environment, thus the corresponding defense policy should be developed. He also held that the previous defense policy was too focused on military. Japan should first define the national goals and develop national strategy based on the goals, then set up military strategy based on the national strategy. However, because Ishiwara didn't come to an agreement with the Navy on the prioritized order of imaginary enemies, both the national goals and national strategy were ambiguous in the end. On the prioritized order of imaginary enemies, the defense policy juxtaposed the United States and the Soviet Union and didn't clearly point out who came first. In addition, except for the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as China, which had been taken as an imaginary enemy, the United Kingdom was listed as an imaginary enemy for the first time in this defense policy. Besides, the defense policy didn't establish any correlations between the understanding of the short-term operations and the protracted war, but simply juxtaposed them.

Ishiwara, who was strongly opposed by the Navy, tried to persuade the government to formulate an overall national strategy as a basis for military strategy. As a result, the cabinet resolution approved the "Basis for National Policy" in August 1936. Many people interpret the "Basis for National Policy" as Japan's blueprint for the invasion, but it actually reflects few such plans implied by the interpretation. It is rather an "essay" pieced together by the Army and the Navy temporarily in order to obtain their own budgets, than a long-term and solid plan. Therefore, both opinions of the Army and the Navy are written down in many places in the "Basis for National Policy".

Although the "Basis for National Policy" lacks planning, it still has some noteworthy parts. The first is the "Southern Expansion" was set up as a national policy for the first time. Needless to say, this is obviously advocated by the Navy. But it is important that the "Southern Expansion" at this time is mainly an economic expansion carried out through a "gradual and peaceful" approach.

The second noteworthy part is the reason for the revision of the defense policy and development of the "Basis for National Policy", which is Japan began to assume responsibility of defense for the entire Manchurian area. Before the Manchurian Incident, North Manchuria had been playing the role of a buffer between Japan and the Soviet Union. After the Manchuria Incident, Japan built up "Manchukuo" and put North Manchuria under its military control. In response to this threat from Japan, the Soviet Union strengthened arms in the Far East on a large scale. By 1935, Japan's total military strength in Korea and Manchuria was less than 30% of the Soviet Union's military strength in the Far East. Moreover, the contrast of military strength between Japan and the Soviet Union were increasingly imbalanced. Because of this, the defense policy and the "Basis for National Policy" set a goal of "letting Korea and Manchuria have the fighting strength that can crackdown the Soviet Union at the beginning of the war". Although one of the objectives of the Manchurian Incident was to form a favorable strategic position against the Soviet Union, the actual result was that Japan's strategic position against the Soviet Union was even more unfavorable than before the Manchurian Incident.

The Japanese Army had developed an arms expansion plan to deal with the war between Japan and the Soviet Union, which was scheduled to be completed in 1942. Before completion of the plan, Japan needed to prevent fight with the Soviet Union. Therefore, when the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937, Ishiwara, who was Chief of Operations, held a negative attitude towards sending troops to China because of his fear of the Soviet Union's military intervention.

At that time, Japan's plan of operation against the Soviet Union was to attack the eastern coastal oblasts (translator's note: these are the coast of the Sea of Japan on the southeastern end of Russia's Far East) at the beginning of the war and quickly defeat the Soviet Army in the region, and then concentrated strength in the west to implement the main battle. However, as the Soviet Army maintained an advantage 2 to 3 times than the Japanese Army in all the east, west and north, it's not hard to see the difficulty of implementing the plan. It is doubtful that Japan could quickly beat off the Soviet Union in the east. Moreover, while struggling hard in the coastal oblasts, the Japanese Army had to worry about the possibility of large-scale attack by the Soviet Army from the north and the west. The Battles of Khalkhin Gol in 1939 were enough to let the Japanese Army understand the strength of the Soviet Army, though the battles were only a local war and had not developed into an all-out war.

So, Japan was caught in such a situation: on the one hand, it had to try to avoid the war with the Soviet Union, on the other hand, it couldn't solve the Sino-Japanese war that had developed into a long-term war. At this point, the war broke out in Europe, especially after entering the 1940s, the Netherlands and France surrendered to the Germans, and even the United Kingdom was facing a crisis of life and death. As a result, Japan was gradually attracted to the power vacuum zone in Southeast Asia. But Japan's usual security strategy had never seriously studied the situation of waging wars with the United Kingdom, the Netherlands or the United States for a long time, except that the Japanese Navy had ever envisaged a war against the United States.

I am not qualified to discuss Japan's postwar security strategy. But I would like to end the lecture by analyzing the difference between the prewar and postwar period.

First, the defeat led to the deprivation of all overseas territories of Japan, and Japan was no longer an empire. Therefore, there was no need to consider the defense and security of the empire.

Second, in the area of security, a great difference between the prewar and postwar period is the emergence of nuclear weapons. As we all know, Japan has been dependent on the nuclear forces of the United States after the war. Japan had only discussed once the issue of having nuclear weapons after the war, which was in the 1960s when China carried out nuclear tests. After confirmed that the United States will provide nuclear protection for Japan, Japan shelved the issue of nuclear weapons at that time. What impact will North Korea's nuclear tests bring on Japan in the future? This problem will be left for experts to analyze.

There is another important issue, that is, the Korean Peninsula. The Korean Peninsula had been the fundamentals of Japan's security strategy until Japan built up an empire after the Russo-Japanese War. After World War II, the United States replaced Japan in the Korean Peninsula, and has prevented the emergence of hostile forces against Japan in the Korean Peninsula or at least in the southern peninsula. What will happen in the future? I hope experts will study the question, too.

(Translated into Chinese by Dong Congli, revised by Yu Tiejun)

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