



# Inspecting a Candidate—Changes in Britain’s Attitude towards Japan from the First Anglo-Japanese Agreement to the Second Anglo-Japanese Agreement

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## Abstract

At the end of the 19th century, though the British empire was still a great power, it decayed somehow inevitably. It was confronted by Russia, which had a great appetite for Central Asia and North Asia, especially in Manchuria. Meanwhile, Russia’s expansion into Asia was supported by all European governments on the Continent. Therefore, the policy of ‘splendid isolation’ went bankrupt. In order to confront Russian expansionism, the British ought to find an ally outside of Europe. At that time, Japan, as a rising and ambitious power that also wanted to prevent Russian expansionism, came into Britain’s sight. But at the beginning, the British were not confident in Japan, therefore, when it planned to ally with Japan, it took the British government a long time, from before the signing of the first Anglo-Japanese Agreement until Japan was declared the winner of the Russo-Japanese War, to assess whether Japan was a suitable candidate for the ally.

## Keywords

Anglo-Japanese Agreement, Russo-Japanese War, Change

## 1. Introduction

At the end of the 19th century, though the British empire was still a great power, it decayed somehow inevitably. As Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, asserted, the British Empire was confronted in different parts of the world (Ward & George, 2011). Among those powers, the empire’s main rivals were Germany and Russia. Even though the British Empire had eased its relationship with Germany through a series of negotiations, it still needed to face the threat from Russia, which had a great appetite for Central Asia and North Asia, especially in Manchuria. It was hard for Britain to compete with Russia in all these areas at the same time (van Dijk, 2015; Ward & George, 2011). However, Russia’s expansion into Asia was supported by all European governments on the Continent. The British Empire, thus, was ‘out of step’ (Roberts, 1999). Therefore, the policy of ‘splendid isolation’, which coincided with the British Empire’s choice to place emphasis on economic projects (Cain & Hopkins, 2001; Ferguson, 2004), went bankrupt. In order to confront Russian expansionism, the British ought to find an ally outside of Europe. At that time, Japan, as a rising and ambitious power that also wanted to prevent Russian expansionism, came into Britain’s sight. That is the background of the establishment of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance.

It is widely accepted that Britain and Japan formed an alliance to ‘contain Russian imperialism in Northeast Asia’ (Best, 2010). While Britain was not confident whether Japan was capable of doing so at the very beginning. There-

fore, they did not form an offensive-defensive alliance directly. Between the first Anglo-Japanese Agreement and the second Anglo-Japanese Agreement, it was the Russo-Japanese War that raised Japan's international status significantly. Also in this period, the alliance ultimately changed from a defensive alliance to a typical offensive-defensive alliance, which was definitely a qualitative change. The aim of this essay is to evaluate the changes in Britain's attitude towards Japan in this period.

There is fruitful literature about how the British Empire regarded Japan around the Russo-Japanese War. The orthodox idea was that the British Empire was sympathetic and willing to help Japan. Ian Nish (1966) first came up with this idea, giving examples that the British government beat Russia to purchasing the battleships and sold them to Japan then, which virtually increased Japan's naval power. This idea is favoured by the following scholars around the world, and in their opinion, the cooperation between Japan and Great Britain on purchasing battleships was the fruit of the first Anglo-Japanese alliance (Towle, 2006; Gow, 2003). However, even though the scholars admit that the British showed sympathy to Japan, they argue that the status between the British and Japan was unequal. In their opinion, Britain tried to use the alliance to influence or control Japan, and a 'paternalistic attitude' was common in the British government (Best, 2006; Dunley, 2015).

Differently, there are also many scholars argue that the British Empire did not intend to ally with Japan. As far as they are concerned, Japan was not the initial choice of alliance of Great Britain. Great Britain wanted to ally with Germany first. However, since Germany and Great Britain were at odds on colonial interests, and unlike Great Britain, Germany cared less about its interests in Far East, Germany finally turned down Great Britain's request of alliance. Therefore, in order to restrict Russia's expansionism in Far East, Great Britain had no choice but to ally with Japan (Li, 2000; Zhu, 2007; Wang, 1995). Besides, Hiraku Yabuki (2009) even challenges the orthodox idea that the British held a sympathetic attitude to Japan's conflict with Russia. According to him, the British government did not want to be associated with the war in any way. As a result, its attitude toward Japan before the Russo-Japanese war was apathetic.

After reading these works, especially the ones that examine the British's arrogant attitude towards the alliance and the British's indifferent attitude towards the Russo-Japanese War, I form my own argument: When the British empire planned to ally with Japan, it took the British government a long time, from before the signing of the first Anglo-Japanese Agreement until Japan was declared the winner of the Russo-Japanese War, to assess whether Japan was a suitable candidate for the ally. That is also the reason why the alliance did not change into a completely offensive-defensive alliance until 1905. That is the significance of my essay in a sense of historiography.

To support my argument, this essay will use different kinds of primary sources. Besides the original documents of the agreements and notification, this essay is also going to use the Foreign Office documents, attachés' reports, and different kinds of British local newspapers to depict changes in British's attitudes towards Japan and the alliance. The process of negotiation is significant, but limited by the length of this essay, I could only emphasise key points of it with a British bent. Then, combining with the secondary resources, this essay will go through the following steps: First, it will briefly explain why the British Empire chose Japan as an ally candidate. Then, it will try to demonstrate why and how the British Empire inspected Japan since 1902. Finally, it will illustrate how the British recognised Japan's strength and, therefore, renewed the agreement.

## 2. Historical Discussion

Admittedly, Japan was a good choice for the British Empire as an ally. Initially, as mentioned before, Japan also had direct interests in conflicts with Russia and wanted to contain Russia's imperialism in the Northeast Asia. As a rising power in Northeast Asia, Japan was ambitious to establish its own sphere of interests in Korea and Manchuria. While Russia practically dominated Manchuria after the box rebellion and Korea seemed to lean towards Russia as well, Japan's contest with Russia was heating up. However, Japan was not strong enough to compete with Russia solely, so it turned to seeking an ally. Moreover, the British Empire and Japan share many similar characteristics, and they are in a good relationship, which provides the basis for collaboration. As Alessio Patalano is concerned, since the British Empire and Japan are both insular states, they are likely to adopt similar strategies, determined by the nature of the 'threat posed by the neighbouring continent' and by the nature of their 'economic interests beyond national shores' (Patalano, 2012). Since their modes of thinking resemble each other, it provides great convenience for Britain to communicate with Japan. Besides, Japan was a rare country that was in harmony with the British empire in that period. After the Meiji Revolution, the Japanese government started the process of modernising its army. In this process, the British empire helped the Japanese establish the Imperial Japanese Navy by

training young and able leaders for Japan (Tohmatsu, 2012). Furthermore, after the Sino-Japanese war, Britain did not join the Triple Intervention; and during the Boxer Rebellion, the two countries also had pleasant cooperation. Based on the above, their sentiments towards each other were quite favourable (Kajima, 1978). Therefore, the Anglo-Japanese alliance seems to have a solid foundation.

Nevertheless, when the British knew that they would be allied with Japan, most of them disapproved of it. The British people's disapproval opinion towards the potential Anglo-Japanese alliance was recorded by articles in the newspapers in Great Britain. Even though the negotiation with the Japanese government was confidential, the British public had already guessed what the British government was going to do in 1901. The British public disapproved of the Anglo-Japanese alliance because they did not want to be involved in the war. In *The Manchester Guardian* on March 28, 1901, an article asserted that an Anglo-Japanese alliance in the Far East was 'outside the range of practical politics', since it might pull the British into the war with Russia, in which the British empire could not get any interest whether it won or not<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, in an article titled 'The Situation in the Far East', it was also suggested that Britain should not value its interests in the Northeast of China too much and take the risk of a war with Russia to ally with Japan<sup>2</sup>. These articles were a reflection of the British public's worry that an Anglo-Japanese alliance may be pulling them into a war.

Since the British government chose to keep the alliance secret before it was successfully formed, it was determined to ignore the public's voice. However, inside the government, there were also many officials who disapproved of being allied with Japan, which it could not ignore. In the cabinet, those who disapproved of the alliance outweighed those who advocated it. Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, the Leader of the House of Commons, Arthur Balfour, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Michael Hicks Beach, and Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury; all these 'big guns' were worried about the alliance (Nish, 2002). Unlike the general public, who is concerned about the risk of war after allying with Japan, these officers oppose the alliance because they lack confidence in Japan. As Takeshi Sugawara summarises, Balfour and Salisbury showed a negative attitude towards Japan. Salisbury doubted whether Japan could keep developing sustainably, and they both did not believe that Japan could be capable of assisting the British Empire to prevent Russia's expansion (Sugawara, 2014). Moreover, as they did not have confidence in Japan's capacity, they were likely to regard the alliance as Britain's unilateral aid to Japan, rather than an equal cooperation between the British Empire and Japan (Nish, 2002). In their opinion, they needed to spend some time inspecting whether Japan was qualified enough to be Britain's assistant when defending Russia together. If the 'big guns' in the cabinet were remote from Japan, their thoughts on Japan might be distorted, and thus they could not represent the British's real opinion towards Japan. British diplomats and military attachés who settled in Japan displayed a negative attitude toward Japan as well. In their opinion, Japan was only a 'partly civilized' country, and Japanese were totally different to the British in race and religion, which made the alliance impossible. Worse still, after observing the economic crisis and the turbulent political situation in Japan in 1901, they assumed that Japan had no opportunity to compete with Russia, and it was unwise to cooperate with it, either<sup>3</sup>. These examples above illustrate the widely spreading disapproval towards the Anglo-Japanese alliance in Japan as well.

Moreover, the British government was convinced that Japan was not afraid of fighting with Russia and had prepared for potential battles with Russia (van Dijk, 2015). In such a circumstance, considering that Britain had not completely stopped the colonial war in South Africa, the British government had to treat an offensive-defensive alliance cautiously. Coincidentally, at that time, the Japanese government also stressed that it did not seek an offensive-defensive alliance. After winning the Sino-Japanese war and showing its unignorable military strength in 1895, the Japanese were linked with the notion of 'yellow peril' in the Western world, which alienated them from allying with a European country. Therefore, the Japanese government chose to keep itself low key during the negotiation with the British government (Best, 2010; Best, 2006; Dunley, 2015). After Japan's envoy to the British empire, the then Japanese Ambassador to Great Britain, Hayashi Tadatsu, got the authority from the Japanese government to discuss the questions of the alliance with Britain, he stressed that 'the Japanese Government did not propose that the Alliance should take effect in case either England or Japan found themselves at war with a single Power' and he was content that Britain would observe strict neutrality during the war (Gooch & Temperley, 1927). Even though

<sup>1</sup> *The Manchester Guardian*, 28 March, 1901, 5.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Situation in Far East', *The Edinburgh Review*, July 1901, 153.

<sup>3</sup> The National Archives [hereafter TNA], London, FO 46/547, A.G. Churchill to the Director of Military Intelligence, 23 May, 1901; TNA, FO 46/547, Bertie memorandum, 22 July, 1901.

Japan was still aggressive enough to declare a war on Russia, it was surprisingly tender when negotiating with the British Empire, which was just what the British wanted. Since Japan did not ask for the formation of an offensive and defensive alliance, the British Empire had no reason to do so, either.

The negotiations between the British Empire and Japan were quite smooth because they had reached a consensus on the character of the alliance. Even so, there were still tiny obstacles disturbing the negotiation. The main obstacle came from Japan's former Prime Minister, Ito Hirobumi. Even though Ito was an outgoing Prime Minister, he still played an important role in Japan's diplomatic strategy, and he was still regarded as Japan's representative abroad. That was why his travels to St. Peterburg triggered misgivings from the British government. However, very soon, the British government's doubt disappeared after they got confidential information that it was impossible for Japan and Russia to reach an agreement (Gooch & Temperley, 1927). Additionally, Britain also successfully persuaded Japan not to involve Germany in their alliance, and Japan promised that it had not reached any military or political agreement with Russia (Gooch & Temperley, 1927). After explaining these questions clearly, the obstacles in the Anglo-Japanese alliance were moved. Then, on January 30, 1902, the first Anglo-Japanese agreement was published to the public.

The core of the first Anglo-Japanese agreement is Article 2 and Article 3. The basis of these two articles is that both signatories wanted to keep Korea and China independent in order to protect their own interests there, and the content of the articles is as follows:

Article 2: If either Great Britain or Japan, in the defence of their respective interests as above (Article 1), should become involved in war with another Power, the other high contracting party will maintain a strict neutrality and use its efforts to prevent other Powers from joining in hostilities against its ally.

Article 3: If the above event, any other Power or Powers should join in hostilities against their ally, the other high contracting party will come to its assistance, and will conduct the war in common, and make peace in mutual agreement with it<sup>4</sup>.

In this way, the British's reluctance to intervene in a war between Japan and Russia was announced as an open official document. Obviously, the British Empire wanted to make Japan help it maintain its interests in the Far East without giving too much help. It rather observed what Japan could do to the maximum extent by itself.

Despite the fact that the first Anglo-Japanese agreement established the Anglo-Japanese alliance as a simple defensive alliance, it arouses the voice of disagreement. Undoubtedly, Russia would not welcome this alliance, but inside Britain, the public's attitude towards it was at odds as well. The public's opinion was naturally divided into two camps: one that advocated the alliance, while the other did not. As the supporters of the alliance regarded it, even though Japan was an oriental country, the Japanese were very European. Therefore, Japan could offer helpful assistance to Great Britain. Moreover, as far as they were concerned, after cooperating with Japan, Great Britain could take advantage of Japanese Navy and Japanese bases, which could not only recoup its losses even though it was ready to give up the fortification of Wei-hai-Wei, but also maintain the British Empire's naval supremacy in West Pacific. In this way, they believed, this alliance would let the British Empire gain much more than they could possibly lose<sup>5</sup>. By contrast, the others held totally different opinions. In 'The Anglo-Japanese Alliance—and After', the writer explained that this alliance could not fulfil its aim to defend Russia, and it made it impossible for Great Britain to amend its relationship with Russia, which its real enemy, Germany, was happy to see<sup>6</sup>. Further, they still thought the alliance was unnecessary since their interests in China did not face too many threats, and they insisted that the British empire could not gain much from the alliance, but only increase the dangers to itself<sup>7</sup>. Considering these negative comments inside and outside Great Britain, the British government wisely kept inspecting Japan's capacity as well as adjusting its policy towards Russia.

Before and after the Russo-Japanese War broke out, the British government tried its best to keep a balance between Russia and Japan. In 1903, the British government turned down Japan's request to reinforce the British China squadron, which was its signal to improve its relationship with Russia. Meanwhile, as Russia accelerated evacuating from Manchuria and the possibility of war grew, the British government undertook the obligation of an ally

<sup>4</sup> TNA, FO 93/49/19, January 30, 1902.

<sup>5</sup> 'The Outlook of Foreign Affairs', *The Sphere*, February 22, 1902, 194; 'The Anglo-Japanese Treaty', *Saturday review of politics, literature, science and art*, February 15, 1902, 196-197.

<sup>6</sup> "The Anglo-Japanese Alliance—and After", *Fortnightly Review*, March 1902, 365-379.

<sup>7</sup> "The New Japanese Alliance and After", *The Review of Reviews*; March 1902, 277.

and assisted Japan to prepare for the coming war (Yabuki, 2009). After the war finally broke out, since Russia's ally, France, acted as a benevolent neutral towards Russia, the British government spontaneously carried out its policy of 'strict neutrality'. Since the Japanese fleet was just waiting for the Russian fleets on the west coast of the Pacific and was unlikely to appear within the British Empire's territory, the policy of 'strict neutrality' indeed aimed at Russia. During the practical execution, the main controversy came from Rule 3. In Rule 3, the British government ordered that:

No ship of war of either belligerent shall hereafter be permitted, while in any port, roadstead or waters, subject to territorial jurisdiction of His Majesty to take in any supplies except provisions and such other things as may be requisite for the subsistence of her crew and except so much coal only as may be sufficient to carry such vessel to the nearest port of her own country or to some nearer named neutral destination;...<sup>8</sup>

Since February 1904, Russia had already proclaimed coal to be contraband of war. However, when the Russian ships, which had not coaled at a British port within the certain time ordered by the British government, asked for coal within the British Empire's territorial jurisdiction, the British government did not refuse their request<sup>9</sup>. Further, the British government never banned supplying coal to neutral merchant ships, even if they knew those coals would be intended for the Russian fleets in the Far East<sup>10</sup>. To some extent, the practical execution 'Rules for the observance of neutrality' showed Britain's benevolence towards Russia. However, the British Empire could not afford the result of Japan's defeat by Russia. In order not to ruin its investment in Japan, it did offer Japan the necessary assistance within the 'Rules for the observance of neutrality'. To some extent, the practical execution 'Rules for the observance of neutrality' showed Britain's benevolence towards Russia. However, the British Empire could not afford the result of Japan's defeat by Russia. In order not to ruin its investment in Japan, it did offer Japan the necessary assistance within the 'Rules for the observance of neutrality'. The British government strictly obeyed the 'Rules for the observance of neutrality', and refused to give coal to the Baltic Fleet on its way to the battle field in the Far East and to colliers attached to Russian squadrons no matter which country's flag they flew<sup>11</sup>. By doing so, the British government disturbed Russia's plan of supply. Knowing the tough budget of Japan, Britain acquiesced in at least four loans to Japan, during the war, keeping Japan's finances sustainable for the war (Steeds, 2002). The Britain did not intervene in the war directly, nevertheless, its will to see Japan being the winner was obvious. In conclusion, during this period, on the one hand, the Britain wanted Japan won; while on the other hand, did not want to arouse Russia's hostility to it. Although Britain did not intervene in the war directly, its desire to see Japan be the winner was obvious. In conclusion, during this period, on the one hand, Britain wanted Japan to win, while on the other hand, it did not want to arouse Russia's hostility towards itself.

Before the war, nobody predicted that Japan would prevail, but in the early part of 1905, Japan began to dominate the war. The British general attitude toward Japan was also drastically altered. Because of the Japanese's valour during the war, British military attachés changed their attitudes toward Japan. They abandoned their past ethnic prejudice to Japanese, thought highly of martial spirit, patriotism and self-sacrifice of the Japanese soldiers, and admired the country's modernization and naval strength (Dunley, 2015). The 'big guns' in the cabinet also began to hold a positive attitude towards the alliance. The Prime Minister, Balfour, who used to think only Japan could benefit from the alliance, has now begun to worry about losing Japan as an alliance and being isolated by Japan and Russia.(Gooch & Temperley, 1929). In March 1905, even though Japan had not totally defeated Russia, Britain accepted Japan's suggestion to renew the Anglo-Japanese alliance (Gooch & Temperley, 1929). Fully recognising Japan's strength that it showed during the war, the British government was not content with restricting the geographic scope of the alliance in the Far East. As it was assumed, Russia would expand towards Central Asia and India after its defeat, and Japan, as a significant power, could efficiently assist it after including India in the agreement. Now, in Britain's opinion, allying with Japan never meant offering more to Japan but gaining less. Otherwise, it considered that Japan was a qualified candidate to help it continue confronting Russian expansionism, since it

<sup>8</sup> The British Library [hereafter BL], London, IOR/R/20/A/1217, Government of India, Foreign Department Notification No. 513-E.B., February 13, 1904.

<sup>9</sup> BL, IOR/R/20/A/1217, Admiralty to Foreign Office, March 8, 1904; BL, IOR/R/20/A/1217, Foreign Office to Admiralty, March 8, 1904.

<sup>10</sup> BL, IOR/R/20/A/1217, Admiralty to Foreign Office, March 8, 1904; BL, IOR/R/20/A/1217, Foreign Office to Admiralty, March 14, 1904.

<sup>11</sup> BL, IOR/R/20/A/1217, telegram, Governor Sir H. MaoCallum to Mr. Lyttleton, November 18, 1904; BL, IOR/R/20/A/1217, telegram, Foreign Office to Colonial Office, November 25, 1904.

could fight against Russian armies almost by itself. As the British government agreed to admit Japan's paramount political, military, and economic interests in Korea, about which Japan cared most, the negotiation for the renewal of the agreement ran quite smoothly. Ultimately, on August 12, 1905, they signed the second Anglo-Japanese Agreement.

The most significant change concentrated on Article 1, Article 3 and Article 4:

Article 1: It is agreed that whenever in the opinion of either Japan or Great Britain, and of the rights and interests referred to in the preamble of the Agreement are in jeopardy, the two Governments will communicate with one another fully and frankly, and will consider in common the measures which should be taken to safeguard those menaced rights or interests.

Article 3: Japan processing special political, military, and economic interests in Corea, Great Britain recognizes the right of Japan to take such measures of guidance, control, and protection in Corea as she may deem proper and necessary to safeguard and advance those interests, provided always that such measures do not infringe the Treaty rights of other nations or the principal of equal opportunities for their commerce with industry.

Article 4: Japan recognizes the special interests of Great Britain in the regions in proximity to the Indian frontier and her right to take such measures as she may deem proper and necessary in order to safeguard those interests<sup>12</sup>.

In the first Anglo-Japanese Agreement, Japan and Great Britain only planned to cooperate in Korea Peninsula, but in the renewed agreement, the geographical scope involved in India. Except for the enlargement of the geographical scope, the main changes are as follows: Firstly, in the old agreement, when the signatories' interests were in jeopardy, they would only communicate together, but in the new one, they will act together as well. Also, in the old agreement, one signatory could declare neutrality if the other was at war with only one power, but after 1905, they would be immediately called to join the war once either was involved in the war (Gooch & Temperley, 1929). In this way, the British Empire and Japan can declare a war and defend the enemy together. The alliance thus changes into an offensive-defensive alliance. Only when Britain was confident in Japan, could it do so, because the new agreement indeed increased its risk. This above demonstrates Britain's changing attitude towards Japan at the end of the Russo-Japanese War, and how Japan finally passes Britain's inspection.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Anglo-Japanese alliance experienced a process in which the British Empire became increasingly confident in Japan. At the beginning, even though Japan was a good choice to ally with, Britain disapproved of the alliance since they regarded Japan as an uncivilised country, an encumbrance, and a bomb to involve them in the war. The British Empire, therefore, thought it necessary to inspect what Japan could do by itself. That was why they only formed a defensive alliance in 1902. In 1905, by defeating Russia, Japan demonstrated that it was a qualified candidate. At the same time, Britain recognised Japan's strength and was confident that Japan would help it in India and in the Far East continue confronting Russia and even other powers. Therefore, the second agreement enlarged the alliance's geographic scope and turned it into an offensive-defensive alliance. In this way, Great Britain admitted that Japan had passed inspection.

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<sup>12</sup> TNA, CAB 17/67, Draft Agreement, July 1, 1905.

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