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Wars and Peace, 1904–5

Although its victory in the war with Russia may be seen as the turning point in Japan’s history between 1868 and 1941, in reality, it was only a partial military success; the Russians were fighting a war of retreat 6000 miles from their capital and still managed to evade Japan’s attempt to destroy them. However, the impact of Japan’s battlefield triumph in terms of its post-war territorial position and, equally important, the way the world viewed Japan, was immense. Whereas the earlier war with China had been in truth a local conflict and, with Taiwan, Japan became only a nominal imperialist, after 1905, it was to become a continental force, the Asian victor over a Western power, and, to its discomfort, feared both in East Asia and by many in the West.

In terms of the present study, the importance of the Russo-Japanese war includes the fact that the unprecedented need for men, material, and money, was to unbalance the infant system of military–party co-operation established in the late 1890s. This was to become even clearer after the war as Japan’s imperial responsibilities expanded and a party cabinet took power. In 1904–5, however, Katsura’s own problems with the army, and his improving relations with a new generation of party leaders, illustrate ongoing changes in the personnel and character of Japanese politics. The war also marks an enormous shift in the geographic direction of Japan’s empire: it caused the abandonment of the policy of holding in the north and with surprising ease gave Japan de facto control of Korea. Simultaneously, however, Korea declined in terms of strategic or economic value as precedence went to Japan’s new bridgehead in south Manchuria. Consequently, Japan no longer viewed Korea as the frontline in any renewed struggle with Russia and this allowed for a more measured approach to expanding its imperial authority in the peninsula.
To understand the wartime actions of Katsura and Japan's military and political leadership, it is important to remember how little confident they were of victory; they were certainly under no illusion they could ever extract an indemnity from Russia at the war's conclusion. Pushing Russia back from the Korean border and assuming informal control of Seoul were the essential goals. Consequently, success for Japan was defined more by a short war, but with enough military victories to bring Russia into fruitful negotiations, and by a smooth takeover of Korean affairs. The inescapable costs of the war and the impossibility of threatening the Russian heartland made it essential for Katsura, far more than for Ito in 1894-95, to assert control over the Japanese military, ensure cooperation at home from the parties, and maintain Western goodwill for Japan. The area he might have expected to be least problematic was control of the army. In practice, however, some in the army were to prove very troublesome; this was particularly so over the chain of command and the treatment of foreign observers.

A difficult army

For Japan, hostilities began well. On 8 February 1904, omitting any declaration of war, its navy attacked Russian vessels at Port Arthur. What at a different time and in a different context was to be seen as infamy was in 1904 applauded as practical by Japan's friends; The Times of London insisted the surprise attack, 'so far from being an international solecism, is in accordance with the prevailing practice of most wars in modern times'. The next day, two battalions under Katsura's former subordinate and future army minister, Major-General Kigoshi Yasutsuna, entered Seoul and took command of the city. In the face of these developments, the Korean government accepted an agreement allowing Japanese troops virtual free rein in Korea. On 1 May 1904, as Japanese troops crossed the Yalu river, the basic objective of establishing a dominant influence in Korea had been achieved.

By this point, however, there had already been several disagreements between the cabinet and army general staff. A decade earlier, the Emperor Meiji had described what was nominally his army as being 'difficult to lead'. Katsura knew as well as anyone the truth of this statement and, as prime minister, he was determined to avoid the strategic confusion and diplomatic embarrassments of 1894–95. This meant keeping a tight rein over command decisions.