

Power Distribution and Policy Shift: How the Japanese Military Accelerated the Invasion of China by Further Suppressing the Civilian Government After the February 26 Incident

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Abstract. This study aims to investigate how the shift in the balance of power between the Japanese military and the civilian government (independent variable) following the 1936 February 26 Incident influenced the radicalization of Japan's policy toward China (dependent variable). The February 26 Incident marked a pivotal turning point in the power struggle between the military and the civilian government. In its aftermath, the military gradually secured dominance over national decision-making by reinstating the active-duty officer system and taking control of key government positions. This shift in the power dynamic directly led to the radicalization of Japan's foreign policy, transitioning from a strategy of incremental encroachment to one of full-scale invasion and expansion. By applying Graham Allison's governmental politics model, this research analyzes how changes in the domestic power structure facilitated the radicalization of Japan's policy toward China through decision-making mechanisms. By examining the evolution of domestic power struggles following the February 26 Incident, this paper elucidates the close relationship between power struggles and the degree of policy radicalization, providing a deeper understanding of Japan's policy shift toward China.

Keywords: The February 26 Incident; Active Duty Officer System for Military Ministers; Foreign Policy; Changes in Domestic Power Structure; External Expansion.

1. Introduction

In the 1930s, Japan's political landscape underwent significant upheaval. The power struggle between the military and the civilian government intensified, with the 1936 February 26 Incident marking a critical turning point in this conflict [1]. This event was not only one of the most significant coups in modern Japanese political history but also profoundly influenced the direction of Japan's foreign policy. Following the incident, the military successfully pressured the Hirota Kōki cabinet into reinstating the active-duty officer system, further weakening the civilian government's influence over national decision-making [2].

Although existing literature has extensively discussed the historical background of the February 26 Incident and its impact on Japan's domestic power dynamics, most research has focused on narrating the event itself, with limited exploration of how the shift in the balance of power between the military and the civilian government (independent variable) influenced the radicalization of Japan's policy toward China (dependent variable). Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the changes in the power balance between the military and the civilian government following the February 26 Incident, and how these shifts contributed to the radicalization of Japan's policy toward China.

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, incorporating Graham Allison's governmental politics model to explore how changes in domestic power structures propelled the radicalization of Japan's policy toward China through decision-making mechanisms. Through this analysis, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the domestic power struggles following the February 26 Incident and the evolution of Japan's foreign expansionist policies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Historical Studies on the February 26 Incident

The February 26 Incident is one of the most influential political events in modern Japanese history, symbolizing the shift in the balance of power between the military and the civilian government. The incident ultimately resulted in the defeat of the Kōdōha faction and the rise of the Tōseiha faction, profoundly affecting Japan's domestic power structure. In *Revolt in Japan: Young Officers and the February 26, 1936 Incident*, Ben-Ami Shillony provides a detailed account of the background, events, and political ramifications of the February 26 Incident, particularly the military's suppression of the civilian government and how it facilitated Japan's expansionist policies. Shillony notes that the Tōseiha military faction, by controlling key government positions, shifted Japan's policy toward China from gradual encroachment to a full-scale invasion [3].

Ohnuki-Tierney's research further reveals how the military reinstated the active-duty officer system to gradually weaken the civilian government's influence in policy-making, thus consolidating its dominance in national decision-making. She emphasizes that the restoration of the active-duty officer system was a critical step in suppressing civilian power and ensuring military control over the state's policy decisions [4].

Meanwhile, Hiroshi Ōuchi examines how, after the February 26 Incident, the civilian government gradually lost control over the appointment of army and navy ministers, leading to the military's complete dominance over Japan's foreign policy [5]. Ōuchi's study illustrates that the erosion of civilian influence laid the foundation for the military's push toward a more aggressive foreign policy.

Additionally, historian John Dower, in *Embracing Defeat*, further analyzes how the military, through institutional means, consolidated its control over national policy-making after the February 26 Incident, particularly in the realm of foreign expansion [6].

This shift in the power structure provided the groundwork for the radicalization of Japan's policy toward China. Although existing research has thoroughly examined the background and consequences of the February 26 Incident, most studies focus primarily on the narrative of the event itself and lack an in-depth analysis of the causal mechanisms linking the shift in the balance of power with the radicalization of Japan's foreign policy. This study seeks to fill that gap by investigating how the shift in the power balance between the Japanese military and the civilian government (independent variable) following the February 26 Incident led to the radicalization of Japan's policy toward China (dependent variable). This provides a new perspective on how changes in domestic power structures influence foreign policy decisions.

2.2. Power Distribution and Policy Formulation

In the realm of international relations theory, the ways in which the distribution of domestic power structures shape a nation's foreign policy has been a long-standing topic of inquiry. Existing studies indicate that a nation's foreign behavior is not solely the result of external security environments but also the outcome of domestic political dynamics. Power struggles within a state often lead to the radicalization of foreign policy, particularly when one faction seizes dominance [7].

In *Useful Adversaries*, Christensen argues that internal power struggles among elite groups play a critical role when a nation is responding to external threats. He posits that when one elite group secures a dominant position in domestic political conflicts, it often pursues more aggressive foreign policies to solidify its internal power base [8]. This argument offers theoretical support for analyzing how, following the February 26 Incident, the Japanese military gradually assumed decision-making control and pushed for the radicalization of policy toward China.

In *Myths of Empire*, Snyder further explores the relationship between domestic elite power competition and expansionist policies. He contends that the victors of domestic power struggles tend to adopt expansionist foreign policies to reinforce their dominant position within the domestic power hierarchy [9]. This perspective provides a robust theoretical framework for explaining Japan's post-

February 26 shift toward expansionism, particularly after the military undermined the influence of the civilian government.

Through these theoretical frameworks, scholars can gain a more comprehensive understanding of how domestic politics shape the formulation of a nation's foreign policy, especially in terms of the interaction between power structure shifts and policy choices. While these theories have not been widely applied to the analysis of post-February 26 Japan, they offer valuable theoretical insights for understanding the complex relationship between domestic power shifts and the radicalization of foreign policy during this period.

3. Theoretical Framework

In analyzing the radicalization of Japan's foreign policy following the February 26 Incident in 1936, it is crucial to understand the power struggle between the military and the civilian government. To this end, this paper adopts Graham Allison's Governmental Politics Model as the theoretical framework for examining Japan's policy-making process.

In his seminal work *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Graham Allison introduces the Governmental Politics Model, which serves as an important theory for analyzing decision-making processes within governments. According to Allison's theory, government decisions are not made by a single rational leader but rather emerge from complex power struggles and negotiations among different factions and organizations within the government [10]. In other words, policy-making is often the product of compromises and competition among various institutions and individuals advancing their respective interests and goals. Thus, government decisions do not always reflect a unified strategy, but rather the interaction of divergent forces within the state apparatus.

Under this model, different factions within the government (such as the military and the civilian government) engage in power contests and manipulation of policy-making procedures, directly influencing the final policy outcomes. Specifically, decision-making processes result from multi-faceted bargaining, where different groups employ institutional mechanisms and control decision-making structures to achieve their political or organizational objectives.

In the context of Japan, following the February 26 Incident, the military gradually gained control over key decision-making powers, particularly in foreign policy, thereby displacing the civilian government's dominance. Prior to the February 26 Incident, the balance of power between the military and the civilian government was relatively favorable to the military, and foreign policy followed a more gradual, incremental approach, with a strategy of encroachment. However, after the incident, the military, through the reinstatement of the active-duty officer system and its control over key positions, increasingly weakened the influence of the civilian government in both foreign and military policies, gradually achieving absolute dominance. This shift in power ultimately led to the radicalization of Japan's foreign policy toward China. Allison's Governmental Politics Model helps to explain that this radicalization was the result of the military's gradual control of decision-making processes through complex power struggles and institutional mechanisms over time.

Hypothesis: Before the February 26 Incident, when the military held a relatively favorable balance of power over the civilian government, the radicalization of Japan's policy toward China remained relatively restrained. After the February 26 Incident, as the military gained absolute dominance, the degree of policy radicalization significantly intensified.

Through this hypothesis, we can theoretically understand how the military, by controlling decision-making procedures, gradually seized leadership over Japan's foreign policy and used this advantage to promote expansionist policies. This framework offers a robust tool for analyzing the process of policy radicalization in Japan following the February 26 Incident.

3.1. Application of the theoretical framework

3.1.1 Concentration of power

After the February 26 Incident, the military gradually took control of key positions in the government, particularly in the domains of foreign and military policy. The military effectively marginalized the civilian government through institutional mechanisms and power struggles, diminishing its influence over policy decisions. This concentration of power gave the military the foundation necessary to push for more aggressive policies toward China.

3.1.2 Control of the decision-making process

According to the Governmental Politics Model, policy is not shaped by the will of a single leader but by power contests between different factions. After the February 26 Incident, the military solidified its control over policy-making procedures, further diminishing the civilian government's influence, especially in foreign and military policy areas. By controlling these key decision-making mechanisms, the military gradually established dominance over national policy, accelerating the radicalization of its foreign policy.

3.1.3 Radicalization of policy outcomes

As the military progressively gained control over national decision-making, Japan's policy toward China shifted from a strategy of incremental encroachment to full-scale military aggression. The radicalization of policy was not the result of a single rational decision, but rather the inevitable outcome of prolonged power struggles. As the military's power continued to grow, the level of foreign policy radicalization also increased, culminating in comprehensive aggression toward China.

4. The Power Struggle Between the Japanese Military and the Civilian Government

4.1. Power struggles before the February 26 Incident

In 1930s Japan, the power struggle between the military and the civilian government became the central issue in national politics. Prior to the February 26 Incident, the two factions within the military--the Kōdōha and Tōseiha--were deeply divided over national strategy, foreign policy, and the distribution of power. The Kōdōha advocated for domestic reform to strengthen the nation, while the Tōseiha supported national mobilization and industrialization, favoring a more aggressive policy of external expansion [11]. This internal split exacerbated the power struggle between the civilian government and the military, particularly in matters of military and foreign affairs, where the civilian government gradually lost control [12].

Since the Meiji Restoration, Japan's system of separation between military command and civil administration has allowed the military to obtain command authority that is gradually independent of the civilian government. In particular, through the active-duty officer system, the military could effectively stymie the civilian government by refusing to appoint officers, thereby gradually gaining control over military and foreign policy [13, 14]. This system, created by Meiji-era politician Yamagata Aritomo, stipulated that only active-duty military officers selected by the military could serve as army and navy ministers. This gave the military the ability to destabilize or bring down the cabinet by refusing to appoint officers [15-17].

As early as 1912, the "Army Expansion Issue" during the Saionji Kinmochi Cabinet already demonstrated how the military used the active-duty officer system to pressure the civilian government. At the time, the army demanded the addition of two divisions to address military needs in Manchuria and Korea, but the Saionji Cabinet rejected this request. In response, the army refused to appoint a minister of the army, eventually forcing the Saionji Cabinet to resign [18]. This incident clearly showcased the military's ability to exert pressure on the civilian government through the active-duty officer system. Although this system was briefly abolished in 1927, the military's influence over the civilian government was not significantly weakened.

As Lu Wei pointed out: “The unique political system in Japan--characterized by a multipolar structure under a unitary system, a system of decentralized responsibilities, and a lack of centralized governance--played a significant role in leading prewar Japan down the path of extreme expansion. These factors exerted their influence through Japan’s organizational structure, decision-making mechanisms, and operational processes [19].”

4.2. The restoration of the active-duty officer system and military control

After the February 26 Incident, Japan’s political structure underwent significant changes. The restoration of the active-duty officer system was not only a key step for the military to regain control of national policy, but it also ensured the military’s independent decision-making power in matters of military and foreign policy. This change allowed the military to break free from the civilian government’s checks and assume control of Japan’s national destiny.

In 1936, under pressure from the military, the Hirota Kōki Cabinet officially reinstated the active-duty officer system. This system enabled the military to control the appointments of the army and navy ministers, giving it complete authority over military and foreign affairs [20]. This was not merely a political power transfer, but more importantly, it institutionalized the military’s authority, which would directly influence Japan’s expansionist policies in the years to come.

In practice, the restoration of the active-duty officer system significantly diminished the civilian government’s role. The military could manipulate the appointment of military ministers to influence the stability of the cabinet, thereby marginalizing the civilian government. Following the February 26 Incident, the military used this mechanism to prevent civilian government involvement in national policy, ensuring the radicalization of Japan’s foreign policy. As Ohnuki-Tierney pointed out, the restoration of the active-duty officer system marked the further concentration of military power and laid a solid institutional foundation for the radicalization of Japan’s policy toward China [4].

At the same time, the restoration of the active-duty officer system allowed the military to directly influence the composition and policy direction of the cabinet by refusing to appoint officers or threatening resignation. This institutionalized control enabled the military to gradually dominate Japan’s political system and adopt a more assertive strategy of external expansion. Through this system, the military not only controlled national policy but also created the conditions for advancing its invasion of China [18].

In summary, the restoration of the active-duty officer system allowed the military to gain comprehensive control over national policy, thereby shifting Japan’s policy toward China from gradual expansion to full-scale invasion. It was through this institutional restoration that the military secured its dominance in policy-making for the years to come.

4.3. Continued conflict between the military and the civilian government

Following the February 26 Incident, Japan’s political landscape remained rife with power struggles. Although the military, through the reinstatement of the active-duty officer system, gained a significant advantage in decision-making, the civilian government did not immediately lose all influence in certain areas. The military had to continue using suppression and political maneuvering to ensure the implementation of its policies, particularly in maintaining the political balance within the cabinet.

During the Hirota Kōki Cabinet, the military exerted pressure on the civilian government by controlling the appointments of the Army and Navy Ministers, ensuring the advancement of its policies toward China. Nevertheless, the civilian government continued to attempt to assert its influence in other areas, leading to a prolonged power struggle. The military sought not only to dominate foreign and military policy but also to ensure that the country’s overall policies aligned with its expansionist objectives [18].

Over time, the military progressively eroded the influence of the civilian government, particularly after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, when the role of the civilian government increasingly diminished. Ohnuki-Tierney notes that, after the February 26 Incident, the military,

through a series of institutional measures, gradually marginalized the civilian government, effectively eliminating its influence in national policy-making [4].

However, even after 1937, the military's dominance was not entirely unchallenged. The civilian government retained a degree of presence in certain domains, particularly in maintaining the political balance within the cabinet, and the military continued to exercise political maneuvering to secure its objectives. This shifting balance of power culminated in 1941 with the rise of the Tōjō Hideki Cabinet, which marked the peak of military dominance. Tōjō Hideki, who simultaneously held the positions of Prime Minister, Army Minister, and Home Minister, symbolized the complete withdrawal of the civilian government from the political arena, signifying the military's absolute control over the state [10].

The establishment of the Tōjō Hideki Cabinet laid the groundwork for Japan's path toward total war, symbolizing the military's ultimate victory in the power struggle against the civilian government [21].

4.4. The Evolution of Domestic Policy and Support for Foreign Expansion

After the February 26 Incident, the military not only gained control over foreign policy decision-making within the political structure but also adjusted domestic policies to strengthen the foundation for foreign expansion. To support its increasingly radical policy toward China, the military implemented a series of measures to ensure that domestic economic and social mobilization aligned with its military objectives [11].

First, the military adjusted economic policies to ensure the prioritization of military resources. The nation's economic resources were increasingly directed toward military needs, with a particular emphasis on armament production and logistical support. By controlling economic mobilization, the military ensured that large-scale expansionist actions were adequately funded and supplied. As a result, the domestic economic system became more centralized and geared toward a wartime economy. Ben-Ami Shillony noted that following the February 26 Incident, the military's economic mobilization policies directly facilitated Japan's military buildup, further accelerating preparations for total war against China [3].

Second, after the February 26 Incident, the military made significant adjustments to economic policy to ensure that the national economy prioritized war needs. Japan implemented a series of policies that shifted industrial production toward the manufacturing of military supplies, particularly in the areas of armament production and logistical support. The military's dominance over economic policy allowed for a more efficient allocation of resources to support its expansionist agenda [22].

Finally, the military expanded its troop mobilization and increased the size of its forces to ensure sufficient manpower for its invasion plans. The adjustments to domestic policies following the February 26 Incident laid the material and social groundwork for the full-scale invasion of China in 1937 [23].

Overall, after the February 26 Incident, Japan's military, economic, and social policies were systematically adjusted to meet the demands of war. This series of radicalized policies provided robust support for Japan's full-scale invasion of China. Military mobilization enabled the rapid expansion of armed forces, economic policy adjustments ensured the prioritization of resources, and social mobilization solidified domestic support for aggressive expansion. Together, these factors drove Japan's shift from gradual encroachment to full-scale invasion, culminating in the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937.

5. Conclusion

This study employs Graham Allison's Governmental Politics Model framework to analyze how changes in Japan's domestic power structure following the 1936 February 26 Incident influenced the radicalization of its policy toward China. The independent variable is the shift in the balance of power between the military and the civilian government, while the dependent variable is the degree of

radicalization in Japan's policy toward China. The study focuses on how, after the February 26 Incident, the military reinstated the active-duty officer system and gained control of key government positions, gradually excluding the civilian government from the policy-making process, thereby driving the radicalization of Japan's policy toward China.

The study demonstrates that the February 26 Incident was a pivotal moment in which the military institutionalized its suppression of the civilian government. By controlling the policy-making process, the military was able to smoothly implement expansionist strategies, steadily diminishing the civilian government's influence over diplomatic and military decisions. This shift in the power structure directly led to the radicalization of Japan's policy toward China, marking the transition from gradual expansion to full-scale invasion.

Moreover, the study finds that the military utilized domestic policy adjustments, such as economic mobilization, military expansion, and social mobilization, to ensure the successful implementation of its invasion strategy. These policy adjustments provided the material and social support necessary for Japan's foreign expansion and accelerated the process of policy radicalization. Also, the study confirms the initial hypothesis that the power shift following the February 26 Incident directly impacted the degree of radicalization in Japan's policy toward China. By excluding civilian government intervention, the military successfully took control of national policy, ultimately paving the way for the full-scale war against China.

While this study has uncovered the key processes through which the military, by suppressing the civilian government, radicalized Japan's policy toward China after the February 26 Incident, several areas warrant further exploration.

First, the limitation of the timeline. This study focuses primarily on the short-term effects following the February 26 Incident. Future research could explore the long-term impact of the power struggle on Japan's foreign policy. For example, investigating the power dynamics during the Tōjō Hideki Cabinet and the continuity of military dominance in the post-February 26 period could yield deeper insights.

Second, the influence of the international environment. This study primarily analyzes changes in Japan's domestic power structure, but future research could take into greater account the international context of the time, including how the reactions of Western powers affected Japan's policy decisions. By incorporating international factors, scholars could gain a more comprehensive understanding of the background to Japan's policy radicalization.

Lastly, the singularity of the research method. While the Governmental Politics Model provided an effective analytical framework for this study, future research could incorporate other theoretical models, such as neorealism or constructivism, to examine how the power struggle between the military and the civilian government unfolded and its outcomes under different theoretical perspectives. This would contribute to a more holistic theoretical understanding and deepen the interpretation of this historical event.

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