

# Exploring the Roots of Ideology of Japanese Expansionism

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this paper is to explore the roots of Japanese expansionism. Japan sought to become a world power against the backdrop of rapid modernization. We analyze in detail how this process shaped Japan's ideology of expansion and invasion, particularly its interaction with social, cultural, and political factors. Our research further explores the formation and development of Japan's militaristic ideology, which was an important component of Japan's expansionism. The paper examines the profound reverence for military might and the expansionist tendencies inherent in Japanese society and culture, highlighting the influence of these ideologies on Japan's invading actions. It then delves into the ideological transformation within Japan's foreign policy and its impact on the nation's current international standing. The conclusion underscores the significance of examining the ideological underpinnings of expansion for a comprehensive understanding of Japan's historical and contemporary context, as well as its global political role.

**Keywords:** Japan; Development of the Expansionism; The Ideology of Expansion.

## 1. Introduction

The natural geographical characteristics of the Japanese archipelago, the Korean Peninsula and the China's mainland forms the basement of the relations among three countries and has caused a significant impact on them. Starts from the Middle age, the idea of expansion and invasion in Japan has been inherited by modern innovators with a new connotation. Furthermore, it helps with constituting the Three Great Visions after the Meiji Restoration, which are also the roots of Japan's imperialism.

## 2. Historical Relations among Three Countries from Geographic Perspectives

Geographically, the Korean Peninsula and the China's mainland are considered a contiguous whole. The Japanese archipelago is isolated offshore, with the vast Pacific Ocean to the east, and the closest landmasses are the Korean Peninsula and the China's mainland in the west. This geographical configuration has shaped the historical and ongoing dynamic between China, Japan, and the Korean Peninsula.

Japan, as an island nation, has historically sought to expand westward, leveraging the Korean Peninsula as a strategic buffer zone between its islands and the China's mainland. During this period, China played a pivotal role in facilitating trade and cultural exchange between Korean Peninsula and its neighboring regions, including Japan. Historically, whenever Japan provoked tensions on the Korean Peninsula or along the Chinese coast, China countered and pacified them with great strength.

Starting from B.C.E, the surrounding countries formed a regional international social relationship centered on the Han Dynasty, under the influence of its developed economy and culture, which was also known as the East Asian International Order. The monarchs of neighboring countries and regions had to accept the enthronement of the Han emperors. China's foreign policy was characterized by a commitment to good neighborliness, fostering long-term friendly, peaceful, and developing relations with neighboring countries. In the 400 - 500 AD, Japan began to unify, and in the early 600 AD, the Japanese regent Prince Shotoku first proclaimed himself "Emperor of the East," seeking equality with the current Chinese regime. In 630 AD, a coalition army from the Tang Dynasty and Silla defeated the Baekje Kingdom on the Korean Peninsula, leading to the fall of the Baekje regime. To maintain the division of the Korean Peninsula and support the restoration of Baekje, Japan sent 1,000 warships and approximately 27,000 soldiers to invade Silla in 663 AD. This joint effort by the Tang Dynasty

and Silla led to the defeat of Goguryeo in 668 AD, marking the end of its 705-year reign. The Korean Peninsula transitioned into a unified regime, marking a significant turning point in its history.

In the year following the fall of Goguryeo, Japan dispatched an envoy to the Tang Dynasty to commemorate its victory and announced its intention to adopt the name "Japan." In 1578, following the unification of the Japan, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a renowned feudal lord, proposed a historic plan to cross the sea to the west and conquer Korea and China. In 1592, Toyotomi Hideyoshi commanded an army of 148,000 men and more than 700 warships and marched into Korea on three separate routes. In 1597, Toyotomi Hideyoshi invaded Korea for the second time with additional naval forces, and was defeated by the combined forces of the Ming Dynasty and Korea. Following Japan's failed attempt at expansion and invasion, East Asia experienced a period of peace and stability that lasted 300 years, known as the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty. It was not until the end of the Edo Shogunate that Japan opened its doors to the Western with the arrival of their gunboats. In 1868, Japan initiated a rapid transformation toward capitalism through the Meiji Restoration, driven by concerns over Western colonization. This shift led to the emergence of a militarized feudal imperialist state, significantly disrupting the established order in East Asia. Concurrently, China underwent substantial changes following the Opium Wars, leading to the transformation of its Qing Dynasty from a centralized empire to a semi-colonial state under the Western colonization.

Both China and Japan sought to find a way out of this challenging period, driven by the aggression of the Western. The Japan's expansion and invasion wars in its ancient period were driven more by objective factors such as geography and environment, while in modern times, especially during the Sino-Japanese War, the motives and purposes of invasion changed in at least three directions. Firstly, Japan put an end to its thousands of years of history, where Japan adopted China as a model of development, particularly after the Tang Dynasty. Secondly, Japan promoted the development of its capitalism economy through invasion and economic plundering of the Korean Peninsula and China. The goal was to realize the policy of *Datsu-A Ron*. Thirdly, Japan followed the Western powers to become the hegemon of the East.

The expansion of modern Japan started from the 1970s. Following the Meiji Restoration, the Japanese government considered a proposal by Saigo Takamori to invade the Korean Peninsula in 1873. However, government officials such as Iwakura Tomomi, who had recently returned from an expedition, persuaded the government to abandon the plan. These officials believed that Japan's primary focus should be on addressing its domestic challenges. Consequently, the *slow expeditionists* and the *quick expeditionists* conducted a thorough analysis of the proposal to deploy troops to Korea. Ultimately, the debate culminated in the withdrawal of Saigo Takamori and his members. Due to the controversy and the evolving circumstances, the matter of sending troops to the Korean Peninsula was temporarily set aside. Japan then shifted its focus to Taiwan, sending troops there in 1874 under the pretext of a conflict between Ryukyu fishermen and Taiwanese locals. This incursion met strong resistance from the indigenous Taiwanese. This aggressive action, coupled with favorable circumstances in China, prompted the Qing Dynasty to sign the Peking Senate Treaty with Japan, which included a payment of 500,000 taels of silver and the cessation of hostilities.

The invasion to Taiwan marked the beginning of Japan's expansion after the Meiji Restoration. From the Sino-Japanese War in 1894, the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, the invasion of Beijing by the Eight-Power Allied Forces in 1900, the September 18th Incident in 1931, and up to its defeat and surrender in 1945, Japan's military expansion has been ongoing for half a century. It is noteworthy that Japan, as a small country with extremely limited resources, transformed into a formidable war machine over the course of just half a century. This transformation raises questions about how such a country could develop such rapid military capabilities. Furthermore, it raises questions about how Japan could invade a country that owned the largest population, territory, and the strongest overall national power. What were the underlying reasons for Japan's ambition to conquer the entire world? After the Second World War, historians have made significant contributions to our understanding of Japan's expansion and invasion through their research. However, the ideological underpinnings of Japanese expansionism during that period remain a subject of ongoing research and analysis.

### 3. The Three Great Visions and Modern Japan

Toyotomi Hideyoshi's ambition to establish an empire was thwarted, yet his vision for expansion and invasion was perpetuated among subsequent generations. This legacy was further advanced during the late Edo Shogunate, leading to significant invasion into the Korean Peninsula and China. The expansionist ideology, as embodied by figures such as Mototoshi Toshiaki, Sato Nobuchi, and Yoshida Matsunobu, drew upon the foundations laid by Toyotomi Hideyoshi's *Overseas Expansion* and projected an assertive stance on the global social landscape. These concepts can be outlined as the *Theory of Venturing Overseas*, the *Theory of Datsu A*, and the *Theory of Eastern Allies*, collectively known as the *Three Great Visions* of modern Japan.

The *Theory of Venturing Overseas* encapsulates the successors of Toyotomi Hideyoshi's ideology's perspective on the future of the nation, the order of invasion, and the specific methods at the conclusion of the Edo period. Toshiaki Motomichi, a renowned thinker of the late Edo period, regarded Toyotomi Hideyoshi as a *Heroes of Heaven and Earth*. Motomichi believed that Japan, as an island nation with limited land for development, could only satisfy its population growth demand through military expansion. This expansion, he believed, could only be achieved through military power, trade, or war, and by "attacking and occupying foreign countries" at the right moment.

Nobuyoshi Sato, a thinker after Toshiaki Motome, clearly stated that "in order to open up foreign countries, China must first be annexed" after the publication of his book *Udai Kondo Meisaku* in 1823. Sato also wrote a book on the idea of making northeastern China the main target of aggression. This concept, known as the *Theory of Venturing Overseas*, can be seen as an early form of the *Theory of Eastern Allies*. Following Japan's launch of the Sino-Japanese War, the September 18th Incident, and subsequent wars, this theory gained significant traction. In 1854, the Americans played a pivotal role in opening Japan's doors to the outside world by using gunboats. In response to the perceived aggression of the Western powers, Japanese intellectuals began to formulate a modern version of the *Japan's Superiority* diverging from the principle of considering China as model which has lasted thousands of years. Based on Western civilization, they categorized China, Japan, and Korea into two classes: "civilized Japan and uncivilized China and Korea" and derived the logical formula for who was the "East Asian ally." Fukuzawa Yukichi, a prominent thinker during the Meiji Restoration, is widely regarded as a pivotal figure in Japan's establishment of modern statehood. He articulated the following: "Historically, Asia and Europe were in opposition, yet the Russian and British empires have now assumed control over vast regions of the continent, with Siberia in the north and India in the south falling under their respective jurisdictions. In essence, the eastern half of Asia has now come under the influence of the West. The only countries that have maintained their independence are Persia, Siam, China, Korea, and Japan." In response, the Asian nations "decided to revolt against the West". Who would be their allies was a major question. Persia and Korea were considered powerless, and China, the largest country in Asia, was deemed unable to assume the role. The Japanese people were identified as the key to leading Asia in resisting the Western Powers due to their status as the center of civilization among the Eastern Powers. This concept is known as the *Theory of Eastern Allies*. The *Theory of Overseas Venturing*, which justified Japan's invasion, was the main basis for expansion and invasion. It was also the ideological basis for the later *Theory of Datsu A*.

In 1885, Fukuzawa Yukichi articulated the notion of Japan's transition from Asia to Europe in his work, *Datsu A Ron*, highlighting the nation's evolution beyond its Asian roots towards Western civilization. This shift in national policy became a fundamental direction for Japan's future development. However, it should be noted that this transition was realized through a series of wars of aggression.

### 4. Three Ideas: The Root of Japan's Aggressive Expansion Policy

The *Theory of Venturing Overseas* focused on northeastern China as a primary target for expansion and invasion, while the *Theory of Eastern Allies* aimed to justify the invasion of China and Korea to the global community, including Japan. The expansion of China and Korea was portrayed as a

righteous endeavor to liberate these regions from barbaric influences. The *Theory of Datsu A* emerged as a natural progression from the invasion of Korea and northeastern China, as well as the subsequent victory over China. The *Three Great Visions* emerged during the Middle Ages, gained prominence 400 years ago, and underwent significant development over the following 200 years. These concepts reached a new level of enlightenment during the Edo period, were fully established in the modern Meiji period, and reached their zenith in the Showa period. Over the centuries, these concepts underwent a gradual dissemination and underwent significant changes. Ultimately, they were formally adopted by the Japanese government, including the Emperor, as part of the controversial *continental policy*.

In 1890, Yamagata Aritomo, in his Speech from the Throne in the name of the Prime Minister, articulated that "There are two ways to establish national independence and self-defense: one is to defend the line of sovereignty, and the other is to defend the line of interest. The line of sovereignty encompasses the national territory, while the line of interest refers to the areas crucial to the security of the line of sovereignty. He further elaborated that if most countries fail to protect their lines of sovereignty and interest, they do not truly regard themselves as nations. Given our current standing as a major global power, it is imperative to not only safeguard the sovereignty line, but also to protect the interests of our nation. The "areas closely related to the security of the line of sovereignty" refer to the Korea and northeastern China. The formulation of Yamagata's "Policy Guidelines" signaled the culmination of Japan's *continental policy*. This policy, characterized by its aggressive nature, was further refined and solidified by subsequent generations, guiding Japan in launching several wars of aggression against foreign countries. During the period of Tanaka Yoshinichi's cabinet formation, the policy statement "To conquer the world, we must first conquer China. To conquer China, we must first conquer Manchuria." With the expansion of Japan's aggressive ambition, on the eve of the 918 Incident, the militarists already regarded Northeast China as Japan's lifeline. Consequently, they proposed the establishment of a new order in East Asia and the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere.

This policy was firmly rooted in the ideology of the *Three Great Visions*, which transformed Japan into a rapid war machine and served as the primary catalyst for the cataclysmic war of aggression unleashed by the Japanese militarists. In less than five years after Yamagata's policy address, Japan launched the Sino-Japanese War. This war can be seen as the inevitable result of the *Theory of Datsu A* which was part of a broader *Theory of Venturing Overseas*, the *continental policy*. In pursuit of its objective of establishing *Theory of Eastern Allies*, Japan engaged in a struggle for dominance in East Asia, leading to the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 and the expansion of its aggression into the northeastern region of China. In every invasion, Japan used the fruits of its aggression to nourish its war machine and accelerate the process. Twenty-one years after the signing of the Plymouth Treaty, Japan committed the world-shaking 918 Incident, which triggered the Second World War and brought unprecedented disasters to human society.

Seventy-six years have passed since the conclusion of the Second World War. It is now essential for Japan to engage in profound reflection on the issue of aggression that transpired during that period. The primary cause of this failure can be attributed to the *Three Great Visions* that have been shaped over the course of centuries of history. An examination of the historical underpinnings of Japanese militarism reveals that the *Theory of Venturing Overseas* serves as the cornerstone of Japan's foreign policy, while the *Theory of Eastern Allies* plays a pivotal role in facilitating the nation's war machine. The concept of *Theory of Datsu A* is a fundamental element behind Japan's justification of expansion and invasion and its reluctance to acknowledge its history of aggression. Japan's ambition to disrupt the global framework of peace remains unresolved, and this objective can only be achieved by addressing and eliminating the three prevailing national concepts. The potential for reviving militarism remains a significant threat. History has demonstrated that in the event of a recurrence of tragic events, the first regions to be impacted will be the Korean peninsula in the northwest, China in the northeast, and Taiwan in the southwest.

## 5. Conclusion

By examining the ideological underpinnings of Japan's expansionism, we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of Japan's historical and current context, as well as its role in global politics. This paper not only uncovers the intricacies of history but also underscores the significance of comprehending a nation's ideological underpinnings in shaping foreign policy. This knowledge facilitates a more nuanced interpretation and anticipation of potential future actions. The paper also analyzes Japan's post-war reflection and transformation, providing important insights on how to transition from a history of conflict and aggression to one of peace and cooperation. This analysis offers valuable historical lessons for world peace and security.

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