AHR Reflections

Islands for an Anxious Empire: Japan's Pacific Island Mandate

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JAPAN'S MANDATE OVER the Caroline, Marshall, and Northern Mariana Islands in the South Pacific covered a total land area of 2,140 square kilometers and was the League of Nations' second-smallest mandate territory; only Nauru, at 30 square kilometers, was smaller. Perhaps partly because of its size, but possibly also because Japan's administration of the islands was, though exploitative and self-interested, relatively uneventful in comparison to the League's other mandates, Japan does not figure prominently in the broader history of the mandates system.

But the view from Japan of the significance of the South Pacific Mandate is different. Yano Tōru's study of the genealogy of the "discourse of southward expansion" (*Nanshin ron* 南進論) shows that the islands in the mandate were part of a Japanese imagining of expansion from the early Meiji period. In assessing whether Japan fulfilled its mandatory responsibilities, Mark Peattie finds that the Japanese state, through the South Seas Bureau (Nanyō chō 南洋庁), invested heavily in the islands, but he concludes that this was less to help local communities than to benefit Japanese migrants to the islands. Frederick Dickinson argues that acquiring the mandate was key not only to Japan's sense of itself as having transformed from a regional into a world power, but also for encouraging Japan to emphasize its maritime culture.[1] Louise Young's reminder that "in Japan's case it is clear that some imperial projects were more important than others" is well-taken.[2] While these islands may have differed from Japan's other colonies in size, scale, and the character of Japanese rule, they were not insignificant to Japan's imaginings of itself and its place in the world during the prewar period. I suggest that the islands of the South Pacific Mandate were important to Japan in the prewar period in another way, as a cause of anxiety for an already anxious empire.

In January 1919, Japan attended the Paris Peace Conference as one of the "Big Five" Principal Allied and Associated Powers. This was a moment of pride for the Japa-

[1] Yano Torū, *Nanshin no keifu: Nihon no nan'yō shikan* (Tokyo, 2009); Mark R. Peattie, "The Nan'yō: Japan in the South Pacific, 1885–1945," in Ramon H. Myers and Mark R. Peattie, eds., *The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895–1945* (Princeton, N.J., 1984), 172–210, here 198; Frederick R. Dickinson, *World War I and the Triumph of a New Japan, 1919–1930* (Cambridge, 2013), 136–142.

[2] Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999), 14.

nese government, which saw this as a sign of the international community's recognition of Japan's rightful place among the world's powers. But Naoko Shimazu describes Japan on the eve of Paris as "an arrogant, yet insecure power, dismissive of, yet sensitive to international opinion." Japan wanted to present itself as equal to the Western empires, but it "had not gained enough political confidence or military strength to act more independently of the Western imperial powers."[3] This was not only because the Japanese had come late to the imperial game. For Japan, aspiring to be recognized as a world power with all the associated trappings was intertwined with national survival: it had originally sought to join the ranks of European and American imperialists in order to avoid becoming their victim. Japan's desire to be acknowledged as a peer among the great powers was thus, from the beginning, born from national anxiety. However, the humiliation of the Triple Intervention in 1895 following modern Japan's first major international military victory in the First Sino-Japanese War and the "Yellow Peril" racism roiling the world around the turn of the century only exacerbated this anxiety, as the Japanese began to suspect that the Euro-American West would never give them their full due.

Japan's inclusion in the Paris Peace Conference, therefore, seemed like the recognition from the international community that the country had long awaited, but the proceedings at Paris did little to alleviate its insecurities. Japan was unable to gain support from the other powers for its racial-equality proposal despite repeated attempts across several months. When it finally capitulated on the proposal, it tried to cast this humiliating diplomatic failure as a self-sacrificing abandonment of a contentious issue in the interest of comity among the powers. Japan's claims to China's Shandong Peninsula (previously held by the defeated Germans) were also challenged despite its attempts to secure these concessions during the war by pressing the infamous Twenty-One Demands on China. Germany ceded its rights to the peninsula to Japan in Article 156 of the Treaty of Versailles, but China's refusal to sign the treaty deadlocked the issue. This meant that Japan's only tangible achievement at Paris was the South Pacific Mandate. Instead of soothing anxieties about its position as a world power, however, the mandate would exacerbate Japan's sense of the precariousness of its status.

Each step of the process by which Japan was allocated the mandate was fraught and shrouded in uncertainty, and necessitated, from the country's own perspective, compromises on its part. The Supreme Council agreed in principle in January 1919 that the former German colonies would be administered by "advanced nations," but details of that arrangement, including which powers would rule which of those territories, were not formally decided until May of that year. This period of uncertainty was especially frustrating for Japan, since it had gone to Paris confident that it had done all it could beforehand to secure its claims to Germany's South Pacific colonies. After ejecting German forces from the islands in the fall of 1914 and establishing an active occupation, Japan entered into a series of secret treaties with other Allied powers, most notably Great Britain, which supported Japan's claims to the islands, in return for Japanese naval assistance against German submarines in the Mediterranean. Despite these efforts, Japanese officials remained, as Thomas Burkman shows, concerned that Japan would gain none

[3] Naoko Shimazu, *Japan, Race and Equality: The Racial Equality Proposal of 1919* (1998; repr., London, 2009), 2.

of the islands.[4] Indeed, in hindsight, how the question of Shandong was handled during the conference gave Japan reason to worry.

Even after the powers agreed that Japan would receive the mandate for the Pacific islands, another problem emerged. Australia protested strongly against Japan's control of the islands for strategic reasons.[5] This question was eventually resolved by splitting the German territories in the Pacific: Japan would have the mandate for islands north of the equator, and Australia and New Zealand would administer territories to the south. Yet even at this juncture, Japan still could not secure its priorities without compromise. The Japanese wanted an open-door clause to apply to all class C mandates, but the Australians opposed this vehemently because they perceived Japan's demand for equal access to markets in Australian-controlled territories as a challenge to the principle of racial exclusion inherent in the White Australia policy.[6] Japan eventually withdrew its call for the open-door clause in "the spirit of conciliation and cooperation and [its] reluctance to see the question unsettled any longer," but it could not have been lost on anyone, least of all the Japanese delegation, how this mirrored what had happened with its earlier racial-equality proposal.[7] The documentary record captures the deflated nature of Japan's achievement. The mandate materials that Japan deposited with the League contain a statement of protest, including a refusal to acquiesce to "the submission of Japanese subjects to a discriminatory and disadvantageous treatment in the mandated territories."[8] Unfortunately, the statement had little impact on the mandate arrangement, leaving the Japanese press to excoriate their government for "adding [another] failure to Japanese diplomacy."[9]

The islands continued to raise concerns for the Japanese government after their allocation when Japan's right to administer the mandate was challenged on several occasions. A mere six months after the mandates were distributed, the United States objected to the inclusion of the island of Yap in Japan's mandate. The Wilson administration called for the administration of Yap to be internationalized because the island was "the crux of Pacific cable communications," a crossroads for cable lines connecting San Francisco, Shanghai, New Guinea, and the East Indies.[10] The Japanese government complained that Washington should have protested immediately, not six months after the decision was made. It also reminded the United States that the rejection of Japan's open-door proposal for class C mandates meant that Japan by right exclusively determined access to Yap. Some in the Japanese press explicitly called out America's discriminatory attitude toward Japan; one newspaper article wondered why the U.S. seemed to have no problem when Germany controlled Yap.[11]

The issue of Yap triggered anxiety for Japan in a different register, creating a

[4] Thomas W. Burkman, *Japan and the League of Nations: Empire and World Order, 1914–1938* (Honolulu, 2008), 70.

[5] "Doitsu Ryō Shokuminchi Mondai," *Yomiuri*, January 30, 1919.

[6] E. L. Piesse, "Japan and Australia," *Foreign Affairs* 4, no. 3 (1926): 475–488, here 487.

[7] League of Nations, "The Mandates Question," *Official Journal—League of Nations* 2, no. 1 (January–February 1921): 84–95, here 95.

[8] Ibid.

[9] "Nihon no Nanyō tōchi wa sekidō ihoku," *Mainichi shinbun*, December 20, 1920.

[10] Charles Noble Gregory, "The Mandate over Yap," *American Journal of International Law* 15, no. 3 (1921): 419–427, here 419.

[11] "American Naval Concentration," *Yomiuri shinbun*, March 28, 1921, in K. K. Kawakami, *What Japan Thinks* (New York, 1921), 235–237, here 237.

heightened wariness of American naval ambitions in the Pacific as inimical to Japanese interests. Some Japanese newspapers responded with saber-rattling. The *Yomiuri* newspaper, for example, warned the United States not to allow its fleet "to take up such an arrogant and insolent attitude as the Pacific squadron of Russia at Port Arthur took toward Japan in the former years," a thinly veiled reference to Japan's drubbing of the Russian navy in the Russo-Japanese War.[12] Yet, despite this posturing, the Japanese government did not resist American demands; Washington received a cable from Tokyo in May 1921 in which "Japan is understood not to have taken a definitive position."[13] The question of Yap was resolved a year later at the Washington Naval Conference (1922), when Japan gave the U.S. access to Yap to lay cables, along with rights to residence and ownership of property.

External challenges to Japan's right to administer the South Pacific Mandate continued in the 1930s. After Japan announced in 1933 that it was withdrawing from the League in response to the latter's censuring of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, there were discussions about Japan's right to continue as a mandatory power.[14] There were also suspicions that Japan was breaking its mandate obligations by building military fortifications in the islands, and some observers connected its administration of the islands with a decrease in the local population.[15] In June 1935, a different challenge presented itself. The *Yomiuri* newspaper reported that Germany had indicated to Great Britain its hope for regaining control of the Marshall Islands.[16]

These criticisms did not gain enough traction to threaten Japan's control of the islands, but Japan refuted them nevertheless. To counter charges of illegal fortification, the Japanese government invited selected foreign observers to the islands; their reports dispelled the rumors.[17] Japanese intellectuals rebutted the charge of local demographic contraction by linking its genesis to German rule and demonstrating that Japan was in fact slowing the trend.[18] Accusing Germany of harassment (*iyagarase* イヤがらせ) motivated by vengeful feelings toward Japan for its withdrawal from the League, the Japanese press charged Germany with fomenting conflict over Japan's right to the islands, arguing that it was an issue that had long since been resolved by the League's assignment of the mandate.[19] Japan also put great stock in the League's opinion of its administration of the islands. Japan continued until at least 1937 to submit reports to the Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC) in which it carefully documented its administration of its mandate, and the Japanese press cited the PMC's acceptance of Japan's 1935 report, for example, as evidence of international recognition for Japan's impartial administration of the islands.[20]

[12] Ibid.

[13] Gregory, "The Mandate over Yap," 426.

[14] Quincy Wright, "The Effect of Withdrawal from the League upon a Mandate," *British Year Book of International Law* 16 (1935): 104–113.

[15] Harlow J. Heneman, "The Administration of Japan's Pacific Mandate," *American Political Science Review* 25, no. 4 (1931): 1029–1044, here 1043.

[16] "Nanyō kyūryō fu'katsu," *Yomiuri shinbun*, June 24, 1935.

[17] Paul H. Clyde, *Japan's Pacific Mandate* (New York, 1935).

[18] Yokoyama Matajirō, "Gaijin No Me Ni Eijita Waga Nanyō Shotō," *Chigaku Zasshi*, no. 564 (February 1936): 51–52; Yokoyama Matajirō, "Waga Nanyō Shotō No Domin No Shōrai," *Chigaku Zasshi*, no. 574 (December 1936): 547–551.

[19] "I'nin tōchi mondai doitsu teiki no ori," *Yomiuri shinbun*, July 3, 1935.

[20] "Nihon no nanyō tōchi kōsei taido wo kaku'nin su," *Yomiuri shinbun*, July 12, 1936.

For Japan, countering these allegations and German ambitions was not only about defending its achievements as a mandatory power. That Japan used the League's allocation to it of the mandate to bolster the legitimacy of its position suggests that it regarded these insinuations of its deficiencies as a mandatory power as attacks on its worthiness to administer the mandate. At the same time, Japan's faithful submission of reports to the PMC even after its withdrawal from the League and the value it put on the League's measure of its administrative abilities seem timid in comparison to Matsuoka Yōsuke's thundering declaration in 1933 that his country had "now reached the limit of [its] endeavors to co-operate with the league" regarding Manchuria.[21] The unevenness of Japan's responses is, however, instructive, for they suggest that Japan had not been able to overcome the anxieties that plagued it in 1919. Becoming a mandatory power was a marker of great power status for Japan, but the islands of the mandate also provided opportunities throughout the interwar years for some in the Euro-American West to needle Japan for its anxieties about that status. In a sense then, the very thing that ought to have alleviated Japanese anxieties after Paris became the vehicle that carried those anxieties into the 1930s. Its responses also showed that while seeking to push back against a Euro-American West that it thought was treating it unfairly, Japan in the 1930s was not yet able to break free from wanting their recognition or to overcome its desire for inclusion in their world.

[21] Stewart Brown, "Japan Stuns World, Withdraws from League," United Press International, February 24, 1933, https://www.upi.com/Archives/1933/02/24/Japan-stuns-world-withdraws-from-league/22318401 19817/.

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