

Briefing Memo

The First Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War from the Viewpoint of a “Maritime Limited War” : From the perspective of Julian Corbett’s Strategy Theory

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Introduction

The establishment of a modern nation during the Meiji era was completed when Japan became completely independent after the victory in the First Sino-Japanese War, and the Russo-Japanese War. There is no question that the victories in these two wars have played a significant role in the formation of the modern state. These victories however were not necessarily to be expected. During the First Sino-Japanese War, and the Russo-Japanese War, Japan was inferior in terms of the power of the Army and Navy and also in terms of the comprehensive national strength. Japan had no good prospect of victory. However the government and the imperial headquarters were able to make the war state advantageous to them by cleverly interweaving military affairs with foreign policies, signed a peace treaty while holding a superior position and managed to win the wars. What enabled Japan to score victories in these two wars and achieve their war objectives? I will address this question from the viewpoint of the theory of the “maritime limited war” outlined by Julian Corbett who was both a British maritime strategist and a naval historian.

1. What Is a “Maritime Limited War”?

Despite the concept of “maritime limited war” as the main concept of Julian Corbett’s strategy theory was greatly affected by Carl von Clausewitz, Corbett did not completely endorse the latter’s theory. In his book *On War*, Clausewitz developed his strategy theory by comparing the ideational “absolute war” with the actual “limited war.” Corbett disapproved of the sections relating to the continent within Clausewitz’s theory of “limited war” and developed this within his maritime ideology. Like Clausewitz, Corbett considered “absolute war” to be wars that are fought until the enemy is completely overthrown, since the political objects are important as vital priorities. Meanwhile, he regarded wars that can be finished at the point of when the limited political object is achieved, as “limited war.”

Clausewitz’s theory of “limited war” anticipates the wars between adjacent continental states, and the limited object which should be obtained is a common frontier. Corbett counter-argues that “such an object is not truly limited.” This is because, as he argues, 1) such a frontier is an important area inasmuch that the enemies will decide to conduct “absolute wars” to maintain them, 2) in order to retain that object there are no strategic obstacles for the enemy to deploy his whole force. Therefore in order to satisfy the conception of a limited object, he thinks the following to be necessary: 1) it must be not merely limited in area, but of really limited political importance, and 2) it must be strategically isolated. Corbett argues that unless such a condition exists the war will become an “absolute war.” He therefore considers that there is no real generic difference between the “limited war” and the “absolute war” fought between the continental states.

In contrast, Corbett points out that once separated by the sea, the difference between the “limited war” and “absolute war” immediately becomes substantive. This is because the area becomes isolated enough to set the

status of a genuine “limited war.” This leads to Corbett’s major proposition of “maritime limited war,” that “limited war” is only possible when the limited object is separated by sea such as islands or peninsulas.

The outcome of the “limited war” is not decided by the armed strength of the belligerents, but the amount of that strength which they are able and willing to bring to bear at the decisive point. Corbett applied this to maritime strategy, constructed his theory that war is limited not only because the importance of the political object is too limited to call forth the whole national force, but also because the sea is made to present an insuperable physical obstacle to the whole national force being brought to bear. Corbett positioned the theory of the command of the sea within the concept of “maritime limited war.” He argued that in the “maritime limited war” maritime operation does not necessarily have to seek the destruction of the enemy fleet, and that what is important is to land the army and seize the limited objects through a limited sea control.

2. The First Sino-Japanese War

On July 25th, 1894 (Meiji 27) the First Sino-Japanese War began when the Battle of Pungdo broke out. Subsequently, Japan won its first battle on land at the Battle of Songwhan. Thereafter the war centered on the efforts of both Japan and the Qing dynasty China to concentrate their respective armies to Pyongyang. Meanwhile, during the first phase of the “Military Strategy” which is considered to have been planned before the commencement of the war, the land operations in the Korean peninsula were considered as the diversionary operation, placing emphasis on the operations to obtain the command of the sea by the navy. In the second phase, three strategy plans were defined depending on the situations of the sea control, and it was decided that if the command of the sea was achieved the main forces of the army were to be transported by sea to Bohai Bay and to have a decisive battle in the Zhili Open field near Beijing. The ultimate goal was to capture the capital city and to seal the fate of the Qing dynasty. Japan had positioned the First Sino-Japanese War as an “absolute war.”

Based on the “Military Strategy” the combined fleet was cautious about the attack of the Chinese Northern Squadron in the south of the Chemulpho (Inchon) offing, and prepared themselves for a decisive encounter with full force. Therefore the safety of the shipping route to Chemulpho could not be guaranteed and the recommendations were made to the Chief of General Staff to consider Busan as the place of army landing. Before the war, the first and second transport of the Fifth Division was made to Chemulpho. However, due to this development, the place of troop landing from the third transport was changed to Busan, which necessitated the army to move northward by land, and had an adverse effect on the concentration of the military power in Pyongyang.

On August 9th, changes were made to the “Military Strategy” due to the lack of sea control owing to the delay in the decisive encounter between fleets, and lack of transport vessels; it was one of the big turning points in the early phase of the war. With this the land operations in the Korean peninsula changed from a diversionary operation to the main operation, and in addition to the Fifth Division already carrying out the operation, the Third Division, which was originally planned to be used at the decisive battle in the Zhili Open field, was also deployed. Focus was put on eliminating the Qing force from the Korean peninsula as the strategic object. This marked the switch from an “absolute war” to a “limited war.” Due to this the Combined Fleet was not tied up to the duty of conducting decisive encounter between fleets, and was able to discontinue the search for the Qing fleet and concentrate on providing escort for the army convoy.

Instructions were given for the fourth transport of the Fifth Division to land at Busan and then head north via land route, however the Imperial Headquarters ordered them to land at Chemulpho under the convoy of the Combined Fleet. By limiting its efforts to secure the Korean peninsula, Japan was able to direct the Combined Fleet to focus on the convoy and was able to safely assist the army troop to land on Chemulpho. This led to the prompt concentration of the military power in Pyongyang, and the tide of war turned in Japan’s favour. After

landing the Fifth Division took control of Pyongyang on September 16th. Subsequently, the Combined Fleet which had finished providing maritime escort won the Naval Battle at the mouth of Yalu River on September 17th. Moreover, after capturing Pyongyang, the First Army (the Third Division, the Fifth Division) advanced the Korean peninsula northwards until they reached the Yalu. Once they reached this point, the Japanese army completely brought the Korean peninsula under control. Thereafter, the First Army advanced against South Manchuria and captured the important places. As regards the operation in Liaodong Peninsula, the Second Army landed and progressed smoothly, and on November 22nd Port Arthur (Lushun) fell.

However, following this smooth progress in operations, the Imperial Headquarters yet again started looking into the decisive battle in Zhili during the winter months. They planned the landing operation at the north coast of Bohai Sea, and ordered the Combined Fleet to investigate the suitable landing spot. This indicates that the Imperial Headquarters has started to consider swiftly carrying out the decisive battle in Zhili during the winter months, which meant the war has been reverted to an “absolute war.”

Immediately after this change, on December 4th, Prime Minister Hirobumi Ito submitted to the Imperial Headquarters the “Strategy for attacking Weihaiwei and occupation of Taiwan.” By proposing to capture Weihaiwei and destroy the Northern Squadron of Qing, and occupy Taiwan as a step towards the cession of territory, he opposed the plan to conduct a decisive battle in Zhili during the winter months. What he was concerned about was that even if the Qing troop was crushed in a decisive battle, there would be no Qing government to sign the peace treaty and hence there was a fear of losing the opportunity to bring the war to an end. This was a denial of “absolute war.” Ito’s proposal was accepted, and the decision was made to employ the strategy in line with “limited war” that involved the delaying of the decisive battle and attack of Weihaiwei.

If at this point a decisive battle in Zhili was pushed through then that would have meant that the war would be changed yet again from a “limited war” to an “absolute war.” Japan would then have lost the opportunity to end the war, and it would have run into difficulties as in the latter years. It was due to his keen insight that Prime Minister Ito was able to advocate the continuity of a “limited war.” Thereafter Japan fought in accordance with the strategy of “maritime limited war” which resulted in the Treaty of Shimonoseki.

3. The Russo-Japanese War

After the First Sino-Japanese War, Russia expanded into Manchuria during the Boxer Rebellion, thereafter set their eyes on the Korean peninsula, in February 1904 (Meiji 37) Japan finally started war against Russia. When the start of the war was decided, the Combined Fleet accompanied the transporting ships carrying the army’s emergency expeditionary troops to Korea and departed Sasebo. Since the Combined Fleet did not carry out a thorough attack during the Port Arthur attack at the beginning of the war, they did not completely destroy the Port Arthur Squadron of Russia, but they severely damaged 2 new battleships and 1 cruiser, and made them incapable of military action for the time being. On the other hand, the army transport ships and the convoy vessels succeeded in landing the army expeditionary troops safely. The expeditionary troops immediately proceeded to Seoul. Moreover, they also won the Naval Battle of Chemulpho Bay that occurred during this time.

The initial operation plan was to land the Twelfth Division in Masan inlet after the war began, however based on the judgment after the naval battle and gauging the situation, the point of disembarkation was changed to Chemulpho. Although the Blocking Operation and the two attacks on Port Arthur in February did not produce significant results, the Twelfth Division completed their landing on Chemulpho and secured Seoul. It can be said that the series of operations by the Combined Fleet greatly contributed to the achievement of the strategic objective to secure Seoul. During this period and backed by military force the Japan-Korea Protocol was concluded with Korea, and it became clear that Korea was going to side with Japan. Based on this, Japan guaranteed itself a degree of freedom of military action in Korea.

In March the landing of the main force of the First Army to Chinampo close to Pyongyang was accomplished. Although the repeated attacks on Port Arthur and the Port Arthur Blocking Operation carried out concurrently by the Combined Fleet did not achieve great results, this activity bottled up the Port Arthur Squadron in the port, and enabled the safe landing of the main force of the First Army. Together with the Twelfth Division who came up north from Seoul, they swiftly seized Pyongyang. Subsequently the First Army headed north towards Wiju, and clashed with the Russian army at Yalu. The determining element that led to the overwhelming victory of Japan in this battle was the maritime transport support of heavy artilleries by the navy. Japan at this point has more or less secured the Korean peninsula. The process of war up to here was a form of “maritime limited war” which involved obtaining the limited war objects using the sea.

During mid-August, the Combined Fleet won the Battle of the Yellow Sea and the Battle off Utsushima, and held a dominant position in terms of naval strength in the Far East sea area. In reality, the Combined Fleet failed to destroy the Port Arthur Squadron and had to continue with the blockade of Port Arthur. The Japanese Army were also unsuccessful in the General Assault on the Port Arthur Fortress. On September 4th they won in the Battle of Liaoyang, which was seen as a key to strategic control, and captured Liaoyang, however they failed to annihilate Russia’s main force. The army were forced to conduct military deployment on two fronts: an operation against the Russian main force from the north and the operation for the capture of Port Arthur. The departure of the Baltic Fleet to the Far East was approaching, and if they came and joined forces with the remaining Port Arthur Squadron, then Japan would lose sea control and their sea lines of communications to the continent would be lost. It was then expected that the army would become isolated in Manchuria, and be annihilated by the Russian army that was reinforced by the Trans-Siberian Railway. The key to a favorable course of war was to capture Port Arthur at the earliest opportunity.

As the strategic object after the Battle of Liaoyang, the continuation of northward advance was discussed within the General Headquarters of the Japanese Army in Manchuria. However it was confirmed between Aritomo Yamagata who took command in the war as the Chief of the General Staff and Gentaro Kodama who was the Chief of the General staff of Manchuria that until the Japanese Army in Manchuria was strengthened the following spring they would not proceed to the north, but that for the time being priority would be placed on the capturing of Port Arthur. Hence the strategy to hold off on advancing north and put the effort into capturing Port Arthur was formulated. The following October the Battle of Saka was fought, the Japanese Army in Manchuria warded off the Russian army. Engaging in a pursuit battle was suspended, and therefore the strategy to maintain a defensive stance on Saka and placing an importance on Port Arthur was firmly held.

After that the Japanese Army in Manchuria made efforts to replenish ammunition, and the necessary numbers were accumulated in about a month. The General Headquarters of the Japanese Army in Manchuria then planned the advance to the north for the second time to turn the tide of the war. The staff officers were repeatedly proposing the operation plans for decisive battles against the Russian army in sight. These operation plans were aimed at giving a huge blow to the Russian army in a decisive battle to an extent for a second chance was of no avail. They lacked an overall consideration for the war including peace treaties, and also lacked an understanding of the priority of strategic objectives. These were strategic principles that were closer to an “absolute war” that considers only defeating the enemy, rather than a “limited war.” Nevertheless these proposals were stifled by Kodama.

Meanwhile, the Imperial Headquarters focused on the capture of Port Arthur. After a fierce battle the Third Army on December 5th seized the 203 Hill, and the Port Arthur Squadron was crushed by the open fire from land. On January 1st of the following 1905, the Port Arthur Fortress was seized and the Russo-Japanese War entered a new phase. There was a need to conclude the war while maintaining this advantageous position towards peace negotiation. On March 10th, the Japanese Army in Manchuria was victorious in the Battle of Mukden and as a result occupied the land. However they yet again allowed the main forces of the Russian army to escape and could not destroy it.

After this battle the Imperial Headquarters drafted a strategy to leave the Japanese Army in Manchuria near Tiyeliyen situated north of Mukden, and to abandon advancing northbound to Harbin. However on March 30th, a secret report was made to the Japanese Emperor concerning the “Strategy Subsequent to March 1905,” and the previous strategy was overturned and a plan to proceed to Harbin revived; the expansion of the war was planned. Although this was not strictly an “absolute war” it was a departure from the “limited war.” In particular, the fact that the army was to advance further into the continent was a departure from the “maritime limited war” that was subject to the use of the sea.

Under these circumstances, Chief of the General Staff Kodama who had been in Tokyo since the end of March, held various talks with the elder statesmen, the Imperial Headquarters and heads of governments in cooperation with Vice Chief of Staff Gaishi Nagaoka who was advocating a stop to advancing north, and tried to control the expansion of the strategies and steer back to the notion of a “limited war.” On April 8th, the “Matters concerning to Keep step between the military operation and the diplomacy during the Russo-Japanese War” was approved by the Japanese cabinet, and it was planned to push forward with the war by seeking an advantageous position while being in the defensive, and not by destroying the Russian army. Moreover it was decided that suitable diplomacy measures were to be taken, aiming at peace agreement and this became the national policy. The advancement to the north by the Japanese Army in Manchuria was also limited to “only if it matches the governmental policy,” and directives were issued for Commander in Chief of the Japanese Army in Manchuria Iwao Oyama to act in accordance with the diplomacy. This marked the return to the “marine limited war.” Thereafter, the Japanese Army in Manchuria stood on the defensive and waited to see the development of the situation in naval battles and diplomacy.

Following the decisive victory in the Battle of Tsushima on May 27th and 28th, negotiations commenced towards a peace conference. Japan attended the peace conference while maintaining the defensive stance in Manchuria and seizing limited objects such as Sakhalin at the same time. On September 5th, the Treaty of Portsmouth was signed which ended the Russo-Japanese War, with victory for Japan.

Conclusion

Japan at that time did not have the ability to overthrow major powers such as the Qing dynasty or Russia. Inferior in national strength, the Japanese army and navy cooperated and concentrated their efforts on a limited strategic object within a partial control of the sea. By adhering to the “maritime limited war”, they effectively used military operations and created situations to conduct advantageous diplomatic negotiations. What connected the military operation and diplomacy was the limited object that was isolated by the sea such as the Korean peninsula and the Liaodong peninsula. This is the reason why the First Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War became “maritime limited wars.” Furthermore, the several occasions where there was a danger of deviation was prevented by the skilful political strategies of the leaders of the government and army. These led Japan to achieving the securing of a solid independence, which was a pending issue since the Meiji Restoration, and establish itself as a modern state.

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