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Old Title of Research:
From Cooperative to “Scorched Earth” Diplomacy: Uchida Kōsai and Japanese Foreign Policy, 1918-1933

New Title of Research:
Defending Japan: Uchida Kōsai and Japanese Foreign Policy, 1865-1936

Purpose of Research:
My research traces developments in Japan’s relations with the world by examining the experience of Foreign Minister Uchida Yasuya. During his time in the Foreign Ministry, Uchida played an important role in each of the major trends listed above. In fact, during his three tenures as foreign minister—1911-12, 1918-23 and 1932-33—not only did he preside over Japan’s participation in the Paris Peace Conference (1919) and the Washington Conference (1921-22), he also, in stark contrast, led Japan’s withdrawal from the League of Nations. Indeed, it was under Uchida’s watch that Japan formulated and realized both the cooperative, multilateral policies of the 1920s and the isolated, unilateral policies of the 1930s. No other foreign minister can lay claim to so dubious an honor.

In a novel approach to Japan’s path to war, my research examines Japanese foreign policy and policy-makers from 1888 (the year Uchida entered the foreign ministry) until 1933 (the year he resigned from the Saitō Makoto cabinet). Because earlier studies confine their focus to diplomacy within specific decades (e.g. 1920s, 1930s), scholars often attribute the policy shifts to the presence of “new” actors on the policy-making scene. By focusing on the only major government official present (and indeed responsible) for policies in three decades, my dissertation provides a clearer understanding of the motives and rationale behind Japan’s decision to abandon cooperative international relations.

In addition, my dissertation addresses a number of other important themes at the intersection of domestic politics and foreign policy, including the (perhaps false) dichotomy of nationalism and internationalism and the legacy of the first generation of Meiji Japan.

Content/Methodology of Research:
My research first focuses on Uchida as part of the first generation of Meiji Japan. His education is typical of many of this generation’s elites, encompassing both the new Japanese system of primary education and Westernized missionary schools. Due to his educational upbringing, Uchida, like many of his generation, experienced an identity crisis.
He straddled two worlds, one in which he proclaimed and defended his Japanese and Asianness and the other in which he was Westernized and cast his lot with those seeking Japan’s inclusion in the Western world of international relations. He exhibited both *Ajiashugi* and *datsu-a* tendencies. Uchida held a “Western” job in the Foreign Ministry by day and exercised the spirit of his Asian identity by night.

Another theme in this first part of my research is Uchida’s indoctrination during this time period into Mutsu’s, and later Komura’s, brand of diplomacy, one based on imperialist calculations, pragmatism, and realism. Uchida began to understand both the weakness of Japan vis-à-vis the Western powers and the constant need for Japanese engagement with the West. Uchida came to learn and embrace the hallmarks of pre-war Japanese diplomacy: an imperialist policy in Manchuria and Korea and cooperation with the powers. In this sense, during Uchida’s early career he begins to display both the compatibility and inherent opposition between nationalism and internationalism in this period of growing Japanese imperialism.

The focus then moves to Uchida’s career in the early 1900s. It is during this period that Manchuria took on vital importance for the Japanese empire for Uchida. With Manchuria now incorporated (unofficially) into the empire, Uchida, as a good imperialist, set out to separate Manchurian policy from Chinese policy. His goal, and that of his predecessors and successors, was to create and maintain a Japanese sphere of interest in the region. Other pillars of his policy were cooperation with the powers in China and respect for Chinese territorial integrity. However, Uchida resisted greater military participation in foreign policy and opposed intervention on the continent. Judicious and restrained use of the military was the cornerstone of his military policy. Uchida’s efforts to exclude the military from foreign policy-making and unify the process under the Foreign Ministry foreshadowed Uchida’s later opposition to meddling in foreign affairs by the political parties. As a strong technocrat, Uchida believed foreign affairs were strictly limited to the purview of the Foreign Ministry.

The 1920s are the subject of the next part of my research. Uchida followed a “Japanese” internationalism during the decade. This is another way of saying cooperative diplomacy with the powers, which dated back to the Meiji era and early Japanese diplomacy. The context changed in the 1920s with the League of Nations but the intention did not: avoiding isolation due to Japan’s relative weakness. With the Anglo-Japanese alliance coming to an end, Japan was forced to participate in the League and the Washington Conference to avoid isolation. Throughout the 1920s, Japan succeeded in its policy of international cooperation, and Uchida was in part responsible for this success just as he had been in the 1910s when he pursued the same traditional Japanese foreign policies.

Uchida, however, never really embraced the idealistic aspects of Wilsonianism. Few
Japanese did. Their “internationalism” was strictly self-serving. Yet, that Uchida was commonly thought to be on the “liberal” and internationalist side of the spectrum within Japan shows the inherent relativism and fluidity of any definitions of “nationalism” and “internationalism.”

My research concludes with an examination of Uchida’s career in the early 1930s, during which he was first President of the South Manchurian Railway (1931-32) and then Foreign Minister (1932-33) in the Saitō Makoto Cabinet. The main focus is the idea that Uchida applied Meiji era diplomatic tenets to Japanese foreign policy following the Manchurian Incident. After a three-year respite from the world of Japanese diplomacy, Uchida Yasuya in June 1931 was appointed president of the South Manchurian Railway Company (SMR). After the Manchurian Incident in September 1931, Uchida became convinced that military force, with its speed and effectiveness in dealing with Chinese intransigence, was the only viable replacement to diplomacy if Japan wanted to secure its position in the region. Uchida’s newfound support for the military ushered in the next phase of his career in which his goal to achieve cooperation with the powers competed with his desire to maintain Japan’s interests in Manchuria.

When he became Foreign Minister in June 1932, Uchida held fast to two articles of faith that were increasingly difficult to realize. He believed that the establishment of Manchukuo was the only way to resolutely solve the problem of deteriorating Japanese interests in Manchuria. But he also insisted on the importance of maintaining cooperative relations with the Western powers, a belief he developed first-hand during his earlier tenures as Foreign Minister. Despite the fact that these two policies appeared increasingly at odds in the greater political arena, Uchida remained committed to both. His defense of Japan’s Manchurian policy—to the point of withdrawal from the League of Nations—did not lead him to abandon Japanese efforts to maintain positive relations with the West. Uchida sought to keep relations in tact by repositioning the nexus of Japan’s foreign relations from a multilateralist framework based on the League to a bilateralist one consisting of direct relations between Japan and each power.

Conclusion/Observation

Through understanding Uchida’s identity as a Meiji imperialist we can understand his reaction to and policies for Japanese activities in Manchuria in the early 1930s. In diplomatic terms, Uchida approached the Manchurian incident as Komura Jūtarō approached the peace conference of the Russo-Japanese War. The policies of both men incorporated opportunism and a desire to extend and secure the Japanese empire with a healthy realization of the importance of cooperation with the Powers. Adding to the relative
vehemence of Uchida’s belief that Manchukuo was the only means to solve the Manchurian problem was his twenty-five years of efforts at protecting Japanese interests in the region. Uchida believed that, just as a Japan-dominated Korea was critical to the security of Japan in 1904, so too was Manchuria in 1931 crucial to Japan’s larger empire. With a mindset similar to Komura’s, Uchida attempted in the early 1930s to secure the empire, not pave the way for Japanese domination of China. Thus, with one hand Uchida secured the empire through the establishment and recognition of Manchukuo, while with the other hand he pursued Japan’s traditional diplomacy of cooperation with the powers and peaceful economic relations in China. Uchida’s diplomatic style most closely mimicked the realistic and imperialistic approach and policy objectives of his mentor, Komura. In contrast, those who followed Uchida—Hirota Kōki, Arita Hachirō, and Matsuoka Yōsuke—held increasingly hostile attitudes towards Britain and the U.S. and openly supported Japanese aggression in China.

Although my research stresses continuity in Uchida’s diplomacy, he did make a significant shift that cannot be ignored. Uchida’s support of military action to solve the Manchurian problem was a departure from his earlier non-intervention policies of the 1910s and 1920s. Yet this was a shift in means and not ends and was grounded in the opportunism described above. The 25-year long frustration of insecure Japanese interests in Manchuria, coupled with the lack of diplomatic progress, led Uchida to adopt a new strategy to achieve Japanese security in the region.

Thus, I argue that Japan’s shift to militarism in the early Shōwa era (1926-1989) was not an incongruous break with the imperialist goals of the Meiji era (1868-1912) but an escalation of the means used to achieve these goals. My research suggests that Uchida’s policies did not blaze the trail for military aggression, as most scholars claim, but rather were devised only to secure the Japanese empire. The tragic irony lies in the fact that these policies were later co-opted by expansionist elements within Japan to justify a war that ultimately ended in the destruction of the very empire Uchida was attempting to defend.