

The Impact of the February 26 Incident on Japanese Intelligence—An Analytical Study of Japanese Army-Navy Rivalry

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ABSTRACT

Since the modern period, Japan has launched multiple aggressive campaigns abroad, with intelligence operations serving as a linchpin in its military strategy. Shaped by its historical trajectory and geographic endowments, Japan inherited a divisive dual-domain structure. Following the Meiji Restoration, as the nation embraced militarism, the reform of its military intelligence apparatus remained hampered by the deeply entrenched "army-navy rivalry." This paper examines the "February 26 Incident" of 26 February 1936 as a critical juncture to analyze its profound implications for Japan's wartime intelligence system.

KEYWORDS

February 26 Incident; Intelligence; Japan; Army-Navy Rivalry

How did Japan's intelligence infrastructure operate in its entirety prior to the July 7 Incident of 1937, the opening salvo of its large-scale war of aggression against China? Japanese aggressors were acutely aware that "intelligence is the sinew of war," and the evolution of intelligence capabilities was inextricably intertwined with the architecture of Japan's military institutions. Consequently, this inquiry begins with the February 26 Incident, the most significant military episode preceding the July 7 Incident. Occurring on 26 February 1936, this event saw the "Imperial Way Faction"—composed of middle and lower-echelon young officers—attempt to assassinate members of the upper-level "Control Faction," culminating in failure. The mutiny exerted far-reaching effects on Japan's military framework and, by extension, precipitated transformations in its wartime intelligence apparatus. This paper uses the February 26 Incident as a focal point to interrogate its relationship with Japanese army and navy intelligence.

Before dissecting the February 26 Incident, an understanding of Japan's domestic political landscape at the time is imperative, necessitating a retrospective analysis of its historical and geographic conditions since antiquity. Only through this lens can the origins of changes in Japan's intelligence system be comprehensively apprehended. The paper is structured into three thematic sections: I. The Historical and Geographic Characteristics of Japan; II. The Significance of the February 26 Incident; III. The Trajectory of Japanese Army and Navy Intelligence Before and After the February 26 Incident.

1 Japan's Historical and Geographic Characteristics

Japan, a neighboring nation separated by a narrow maritime expanse, has been profoundly molded by its geographic "Kyushu barrier" since ancient times, a factor that significantly influenced the course of its historical development. "Nations traverse divergent historical paths owing to environmental disparities, not biological distinctions among their peoples"—a proposition vividly exemplified by Japan's case. As an archipelagic nation situated on the eastern periphery of the Asian continent and the northwestern Pacific Ocean, comprising Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, Kyushu, and other islands, its mountainous topography, extensive coastline, scarce natural resources, and monsoon-influenced temperate climate have forged a unique geographic milieu and national character. In Halford Mackinder's 1902 "World Island" thesis, the Eurasian-African core ("heartland") and isolated continents such as the United States, Britain, Australia, and Japan constitute two distinct global spheres. The former resists domination by any single hegemon, while the latter, particularly Japan, faced existential risks of resource scarcity and geopolitical isolation. Consequently, resources assumed paramount significance for Japan, while geographic isolation temporarily obfuscated its ambitions to plunder resources through expansion.

This avidity for resources and expansionist impetus first manifested in Japan's repeated military campaigns against Silla during the Asuka period. The occupation of the Korean Peninsula was perceived as the inaugural step to address resource exigencies. Concurrently, in ancient Japan, the absence of a centralized sovereign authority gave rise to protracted local fragmentation and interclan rivalries, a pattern persisting from the Yayoi period (3rd century BCE) to the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1876). To surmount this fragmentation, Japan adopted political institutions from the Tang Dynasty during the Ritsuryō era, modeling its legal code on the *Tanglū Shuyi* (Tang Code Explanations). This transitioned Japan from a slave society to a feudal polity, establishing imperial authority for the first time. However, the *Banteng* system (land redistribution system) proved incongruent with Japan's rugged topography, while volcanic

eruptions and tsunamis disrupted land-based tax revenues, undermining imperial stability. This instability persisted through the Heian period and successive shogunates—the Kamakura (1185-1333), Muromachi (1336-1477), and finally the Tokugawa—underscoring a centuries-long pattern of domestic division. This historical fracturing profoundly influenced the subsequent development of intelligence networks. Simultaneously, Japan's resource scarcity fueled expansionist tendencies, while maritime isolation created a false semblance of security amid the fragmentation of the Korean Peninsula and China, enabling Japan to clandestinely develop a nascent navy and diversify its military structure. The modernization of this fleet marked the prelude to East Asia's wartime afflictions.

2 The Significance of the February 26 Incident

What impelled Japan to construct steel-hulled warships and cultivate a modern army and navy? The answer resides in the Meiji Restoration, the defining political upheaval of modern Japan. The Restoration ushered in profound transformations: capitalist industrialization spurred steel production, the "Shokusan Kogyo" (industrial promotion) and sericulture revolution amassed primitive capital, and the "Fukoku Kyohei" (rich country, strong army) policy overhauled the military, modeling the army on German training protocols and the navy on the British naval system. "Enriching the country and strengthening the military" involved reforms in the military structure, with the army modeled after Germany's training system and the navy based on the British naval structure. As mentioned earlier, Japan's historical division has been the norm. At this time, the army and navy were derived from the Choshu Domain (army) and the Satsuma Domain (navy), respectively. The two domains had long-standing feuds, which laid the foundation for mutual constraints in both military and intelligence matters: institutionally, this dual system led to a lack of subordination, creating an awkward situation of mutual exclusion; ideologically, there were constant differences, making it difficult to reach consensus between the "northward advance" and "southward expansion" strategies. This division sowed the seeds of future conflicts in intelligence, where truths and falsehoods were hard to distinguish.

Post-Restoration, the decline of the samurai class catalyzed discontent, culminating in the 1877 Satsuma Rebellion and early manifestations of army-navy rivalry among lower-ranking soldiers. Although the Meiji government established a Ministry of War to centralize military authority, it perpetuated a dual system separating administrative organs (Army/Naval Ministries) from command structures (General Staffs), with the latter answerable directly to the Emperor. This institutionalized the army-navy schism at the highest echelons. Intelligence operations fragmented into three tiers: military spies under the purview of the General Staffs, government-affiliated diplomatic espionage networks, and right-wing civilian spy rings, with the first two comprising the core of Japan's intelligence apparatus.

The focal point of this paper—the February 26 Incident—can be seen as a continuation of the lower-class fragmentation from the Satsuma Rebellion, a residual consequence of the Meiji Restoration, with internal strife reemerging to influence the upper echelons of the political landscape.** The Meiji Restoration accelerated Japan's modernization and sparked an unprecedented surge in nationalism, which was indeed a step forward. However, internal contradictions were not fully resolved; instead, they intensified. Low-ranking samurai fell into complete destitution, while farmers gained modest benefits. Yet, nationalism necessitated massive resource centralization, leading to a cycle of "state advancement and private sector retreat," which worsened the living conditions of the middle and lower classes. The victories in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) elevated Japan to the rank of a first-tier power but also increased tax burdens on the populace. Concurrently, nationalism and the samurai spirit spread among middle and lower-ranking soldiers, forming the backdrop of the February 26 Incident.

The global economic crisis of 1929 intensified domestic contradictions, prompting the "Imperial Way Faction" to stage a coup on 26 February 1936, aimed at overthrowing the "corrupt" ruling elite. Swiftly suppressed by the Emperor and Prime Minister Keisuke Okada, the incident deepened political polarization, propelling Japan toward war with China as a means of diverting domestic unrest. The army-navy rivalry now permeated intelligence operations, with vertical inconsistencies and corporate interests further complicating information dissemination. The incident thus emerged as a pivotal moment in solidifying the structural vulnerabilities of Japan's intelligence system.

3 The Trajectory of Japanese Army and Navy Intelligence Before and After the February 26 Incident

In terms of intelligence mission allocation, the Army and Navy were responsible for different fields. The Army mainly handled intelligence and espionage work in Europe, America, and Asia. In addition to dispatching military spies, in 1937, the Japanese Army established a central spy school—the Rear Service Officer Training Institute—in Tokyo, which was renamed the Army Central School in 1939. The school maintained strict confidentiality both internally and externally, and particularly focused on evaluating students' foreign language skills and intelligence work capabilities during admissions. For the Navy, especially the Second Department of the Naval General Staff, the primary tasks were intercepting radio

signals and decrypting secret codes, with a focus on deciphering American and British codes. In 1933, the Navy established the Shanghai Japanese Naval Special Service, commanded by Lieutenant Commander Katsura. At the same time, the Navy was also mainly responsible for reviewing military spies and collecting military intelligence. Finally, secret intelligence agencies in Japan proliferated in the 1920s and 1930s, "ultimately becoming the foundation of an all-encompassing Japanese intelligence apparatus," making "immeasurable contributions to Japan's global intelligence network." These agencies, apart from the early Genyosha, included the Kurokami-kai, Kinenkai, Rampo-kai, Shuho-kai, Kokoro-kokai, and Sakurakai, "all members of which pledged to gather intelligence for the honor of Japan."

In addition, as the war progressed, Japan established various intelligence agencies across China. The relevant intelligence personnel not only came from military staff but also included those disguised as Chinese and foreign journalists, overseas immigrants, Red Cross workers, and more. Most of these individuals were affiliated with the Navy and the Army. While both sides were gathering intelligence on China, they also engaged in mutual intelligence competition and overt and covert attacks. One of the most famous examples was Japan's defeat at the Battle of Midway:

In June 1942, after the Battle of Midway, Japan suffered the loss of four aircraft carriers and ended in a crushing defeat. The Navy, having cracked the code ahead of time, chose not to inform the Army of the news of their defeat. As Prime Minister and concurrently Army Minister, Hideki Tojo later lamented helplessly: "I was only informed of the Midway defeat a month after it happened, and the details remain unknown to this day."

In August 1942, the U.S. forces captured Guadalcanal from the Japanese Navy. Unable to resist, the Japanese Navy was forced to seek assistance from the Japanese Army. It was only at this point that the Army learned of the previous occupation of Guadalcanal and the secret construction of a military airfield on the island. The Navy had consistently concealed this information. Such incidents were numerous. This clearly shows that the various failures in Japan's later stages of the war of aggression were undoubtedly greatly influenced by intelligence from both the Army and Navy. This influence had been sown during the Meiji Restoration and reached its peak with the February 26 Incident, leading to inevitable failure. Ultimately, Japan suffered the punishment and destruction it deserved. On September 2, 1945, Lieutenant General Mei Jinmeijilang, Chief of Staff of the Japanese Army, signed the instrument of surrender, marking Japan's formal capitulation. The related intelligence work of the Army and Navy during the invasion of China gradually came to an end.

4 Conclusion

This study traces Japan's historical fragmentation and resource scarcity to their role in shaping expansionist ambitions and institutional rivalries. The Meiji Restoration's dual military structure and the February 26 Incident's consolidation of army-navy division begot an intelligence system riddled with disunity. This fragmentation eroded strategic coherence, from debates over expansionist priorities to catastrophic failures such as the Battle of Midway. By examining these historical dynamics, the paper underscores how institutional rivalries, rooted in geographic and historical contingencies, ultimately dictated the trajectory of Japan's intelligence operations and its imperial downfall.

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