

Foreign Influence and the Transformation of Early Modern Japan

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The Meiji Restoration of 1868 is known as one of the great turning points in Japanese history. An event unique to Japan, it was the Meiji Restoration that set Japan apart developmentally from its Asian neighbors. However, to fully understand the nature of the Restoration and how it occurred, examination of the preceding years is necessary. We can thus say the nineteenth century, or more specifically, the years from 1853 to 1868, identified as the *bakumatsu*, were a watershed in the history of Japan. The *bakumatsu*, whose characters give it the literal meaning “end of the *bakufu*,” was the transition period from the Edo period to the new Meiji era. It was during this time that Japanese political thought changed radically, shaking up the entire nation. After two hundred years of seclusion, the Japanese finally made the decision to end its *sakoku* foreign policy. Central authority in Japan underwent a huge transition as the power of the Tokugawa *bakufu*, the governing body of the Edo period, slowly deteriorated, and the foundation for the new Meiji government emerged. While other Eastern nations fell further behind Western powers in the changing world, Japan strode forward, maintaining its sovereignty and quickly catching up to the other major foreign powers.

Over the years, historians have studied and analyzed the complexities of these years and their implications repeatedly. Interpretational differences regarding the significance of the Meiji Restoration, as well as differences of emphasis, or even fact, have given rise to many scholarly debates. The biggest controversy, however, surrounds the causes of the Restoration. As one historian states, “it is primarily in the assigning of causes and motives that the most obvious weaknesses of the various approaches to the Restoration history have been revealed.”

I address several questions in this essay that such historians have approached: understanding that Japan’s seclusion policy proved successful for two hundred years, why did the nation suddenly feel the need to change its policies? How did Japanese political ideology make its transition from isolation and “expelling the barbarians” to opening its ports to foreigners? Were the Japanese driven by internal factors, such as their political structure and ailing economy? Or were they driven by external forces and foreign influence? And even further, to what extent did foreign powers influence the Japanese?

Early narrative historians attribute various causes – ranging from weakness of the Tokugawa *bakufu* to the overbearing strength of Western nations to rivalry between feudal lords within Japan – to the Restoration and Japan’s transformation. However, their approach is often criticized for being too fragmented, and fraught with unexplained causes. Recent historians have taken a more general approach, attempting to find broader causes for the Restoration. These include economic historians, who view the Restoration as a result of the deterioration of the

feudal economy and the rise of Japanese capitalism, and political historians, who study the motives of political leaders during the period.¹

In this essay, I take on more of a world historian approach, and seek to identify the causation of Japan's transformation from a closed, feudal society to a modern state during the *bakumatsu* period. I examine the interesting nature of foreign relations within Japan not just during the *bakumatsu* period, but also during its two hundred years of seclusion. I argue that even during the Tokugawa hegemony, during which Japan was thought to be secluded from the rest of the world, the Japanese did maintain contact with other foreign nations, and that such communication with other nations did have a role in Japan's reason for change. Having analyzed the relationships between Japan and other nations, I argue that increasing foreign presence and foreign persistence to open Japanese ports were the underlying factor in Japan's rapid change during the nineteenth century. Though foreign nations approached Japan in an attempt to open its ports for various trade and naval purposes, these pressures had other implications for the Japanese. The foreign nations not only had direct influence in opening Japanese ports, but also instilled fear on the Japanese that spurred their modernization. During the Edo period, Japan was unified under the Tokugawa *bakufu* and its desire to preserve its sovereignty after years of civil wars during the Sengoku period. However, as contact with foreign nations increased, the Japanese grew divided regarding how to best maintain national sovereignty. Such political and ideological divide challenged and thus weakened Tokugawa rule, setting up the foundation for the new Meiji government. Though it is undeniable that Japan also faced significant domestic issues, I argue that the growing foreign presence was ultimately responsible for pushing Japan to its transformation. As foreign nations began to approach Eastern shores more frequently, the Japanese grew increasingly aware of their lagging position in the changing world. Foreign, and I do not only mean Western, pressure challenging Japanese national sovereignty and independence pushed Japan to pursue intense modernization and industrialization, and thus led to Japan becoming the leading nation of the East during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Following the Portuguese discovery of Japan in 1543, under Japan's first great unifier, Oda Nobunaga, trade with Western nations initially flourished in Japan. Contact with foreign powers also led to the introduction of Christianity into Japanese society. However, hostility towards foreigners grew as Oda's successor, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, came to power. The arrival of Spanish Franciscan and Dominican monks introduced an element of national rivalry between factions, and Japanese leaders began to feel that it could lead to eventual military conquest by Spain or Portugal, pushing Toyotomi to pursue a persecution of all Catholics until his death. After Toyotomi's rule came the third great unifier of Japan, Tokugawa Ieyasu, also the first leader and founder of the Tokugawa shogunate of Japan that ruled from 1600 until the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Tokugawa rulers, like Toyotomi, grew skeptical of Portuguese and Spanish intentions for Japan, and felt that the entry of Christianity brought corruption to their nation. In the early 1600's, Tokugawa leaders decided to implement a restrictive policy on Japanese presence abroad and foreign presence in Japan known as the *sakoku* foreign policy, which essentially sealed Japan off from the rest of the world. No Japanese could travel abroad or return to Japan, and apart from the

¹ Yoshio Sakata and John Whitney Hall, "The Motivation of Political Leadership in the Meiji Restoration," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 16.1 (1956): 31-50.

Dutch trading post on the small island of Deshima off of Nagasaki, Japan had no official trade relations with any Western nation.²³

Sakoku, which literally means “closed country,” thus implies the idea of total isolation from foreign contact and was used to justify Japan’s rejection of the West. Driven by the Tokugawa shogunate’s desire for sovereignty, political stability, and most of all national unity, foreign influences thought to endanger Japan’s peace were expelled. However, it is important to note that ties were not severed with all nations, as the term would seem to suggest. Japan maintained friendly diplomatic relations with Korea throughout their centuries of seclusion, as well as commercial relations with both China and the Ryukyus.⁴ Furthermore, not only did contact with other Asian nations continue, but Japan also communicated with the likes of Russia and the Netherlands during this time.⁵ While contact was limited, it had significant impact on Japan’s modernization and added to later pressures from other foreign nations seeking to open Japan’s ports.

The Dutch approach to maintaining a relationship with Japan differed from that of every other European nation, and resulted in their trade monopoly with the Japanese. The Dutch complied with all Japanese orders, and were thus officially allowed to reside in Japan, though under close monitoring. The Dutch, furthermore, were able to escape the anti-Christian sentiment of the *bakufu* by displaying their loyalty by means of attacking a Christian rebels’ castle. Dutch relations with Japan during a majority of Tokugawa rule were strictly commercial. The Dutch in Japan were simply agents of the Dutch United East India Company, and did not exchange official diplomatic correspondence with the shogunate. Though the Dutch followed strict Japanese orders to maintain friendly trade relations, even they eventually forecasted Japan’s necessity to end its isolationist foreign policy. The Dutch realized quickly after Great Britain’s victory over Imperial China that it was inevitable that some other Western power would eventually open Japan’s ports. Seeing that they could benefit from being part of the process, in 1844, the Dutch made their first attempt to go beyond trade relations and establish friendly relations of diplomatic nature with Japan by sending a warship with a personal letter from the king along with various gifts to the shogun. Though the *bakufu* denied the request, as the Japanese felt that establishing such relations would weaken Tokugawa authority, the expedition made apparent to the Japanese that the influence of foreign expansion was slowly, but undeniably making its way to Japan.⁶

The Dutch, as the only European nation to maintain consistent official relations with Japan during its period of isolation, also supported other foreign powers in their quest to open Japan by providing the United States with the maps necessary for their expedition to Japan. However, the Dutch were not overly enthusiastic about the American expedition. They feared that

² Marcia Yonemoto, "Maps and Metaphors of the "Small Eastern Sea" in Tokugawa Japan (1603-1868)," *Geographical Review* 89, no. 2 (1999): 169-87.

³ William McOmie, *The Opening of Japan, 1853-1855: a Comparative Study of the American, British, Dutch and Russian Naval Expeditions to Compel the Tokugawa Shogunate to Conclude Treaties and Open Ports to Their Ships* (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2006).

⁴ Tashiro Kazui and Susan Downing Videen, "Foreign Relations during the Edo Period: Sakoku Reexamined," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 8, no. 2 (1982): 283-306.

⁵ McOmie, *The Opening of Japan*, 1-13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 31-36.

if the Americans were joined by the British and were similarly rejected by the Japanese just the way they had been, the outcome could potentially result in warlike conflict and with it Dutch complicity against their will. The Dutch strove for a foreign policy of neutrality and non-interference to keep their status with Japan.⁷

Dutch influence on Japan extended far beyond trade. To the Japanese, the Dutch were sources of information from the outside world, and provided them with Western knowledge. Dutch studies were of great interest to Japanese scholars, and were superior to those of the Chinese in various fields. Despite its relative isolation, the Japanese were able to keep up with Western nations in terms of technology by consistently studying translations of Dutch books on science, medicine, geography, and armaments. To respond effectively to growing pressures from foreign powers, the Japanese found it necessary to increase and improve their development of weaponry, and had no alternative method but to do so through Dutch learning. Utilizing Dutch instruction and supervision, the Japanese were able to build successful iron, shipbuilding, and armaments industries. Japan, however, suffered from a weak economy at the time and thus lacked the finances necessary to fund such developments. Therefore, the Dutch provided the Japanese with great assistance not only in terms of technology, but financially as well.⁸

Dutch influence also had significant impact on Japanese political ideology at the time. Japanese scholars of Dutch studies, called *rangakusha*, understood the superiority of Western military science and knowledge, and were well aware of the weak position of Japan relative to the rest of the world at the time. These scholars, including the Lord of Satsuma, Shimazu Nariakira, acknowledged Japan's need to change in order to maintain its sovereignty from other nations. Dutch, or Western, studies were most highly developed in two locations in Japan, one of them being the Satsuma region.⁹ The Satsuma Domain, as one of the largest feudal domains during Tokugawa Japan, played a major role in the overthrow of the Tokugawa hegemony and the Meiji Restoration. While the Satsuma clan was a nationalist group, advocating expulsion of foreigners from Japan, they were also huge advocates for, and perhaps could even be considered the leaders of, Japan's modernization.¹⁰

Though Japan was technically secluded from all Western nations besides the Dutch, Russo-Japanese communication did exist during Tokugawa rule. In terms of Japanese foreign policy, Russia was set apart from other Western nations in its geographic proximity to Japan. While many assume that the United States and the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry were the main cause for the opening of Japan, the influence of Russia has become better understood in recent years. According to the National Archives in Tokyo, Russia, and not the Dutch or the Americans, was the first foreign country to request Japan to open its borders to increased trade.¹¹ Russian contact with Japan officially began in 1792 with Russia's first government sponsored naval expedition to Japan to seek potential commercial benefits. The Russians hoped to develop a relationship with

⁷ *Ibid.*, 65-69.

⁸ Thomas C. Smith, "The Introduction of Western Industry to Japan During the Last Years of the Tokugawa Period," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 8, no. 2 (1948): 130-52.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 133-34.

¹⁰ Robert K. Sakai, "Feudal Society and Modern Leadership in Satsuma-han," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 16, no. 3 (1957): 365-76.

¹¹ McOmie, *The Opening of Japan*, 477.

the Japanese for the sake of their remote settlements in Siberia, which they felt could benefit from its close distance to Japan. Despite the purely economic nature of Russia's intentions for Japan, geographic proximity, Russia's military and technological strength had different implications for Japan. Russian military superiority was clearly evident to Japan, and the Japanese felt that they were constantly at risk regarding attacks from the north.¹²

Despite the geographic proximity of the two nations, the strict Japanese isolationist policy and Japanese fear of its giant neighbor made trade relations between Russia and Japan difficult. Though the Russians proposed several trade pacts, the Japanese were unwilling to open their nation to foreign merchants. For example, the Russians suggested utilizing the Kurils, a chain of islands north of Hokkaido, as a gateway to contact and trade with Japan, however, the Japanese declined. The Kuril Islands, furthermore, were a sensitive subject to both sides. The existence of a Russian colony on these islands aroused fear within Japan regarding a potential invasion by the Russians. To legitimize Japanese sovereignty to the Russians and out of fear, the shogunate extended its rule to the Kuril Islands. They declared the area Japanese territory, thus leading to the elimination of all Russians from the area.¹³ Regardless of territorial and commercial disagreements, however, Japan and Russia maintained relatively friendly relations through most of the eighteenth century.

However, as western expansion in the East grew, the Russians grew less complacent, and increased pressure on the Japanese to open their borders. In 1802, the Imperial Russian government made another attempt to enter Japan and convince it to open its borders for commercial purposes. Led by a distinguished envoy named Nikolai Rezanov to represent the Emperor, Russia also hoped to explore the islands and sea between Siberia and Japan. Though the Japanese rejected Russia's proposals, Japanese awareness of changing times was increasing. The Russian mission proved to be the start of a change in Japanese mentality towards foreign relations. While the Japanese denied Russian requests out of fear that the Russians would bring Christianity back into Japan, it was becoming increasingly evident to both sides that the seclusion policy would not last forever.¹⁴

Following the mission, the Russians attacked Japanese settlements in the north with the intention of intimidating the Japanese. Though the raids did not result in an immediate opening of Japanese ports, they certainly caught the *bakufu's* attention and confirmed the Japanese as a weakening state. Understanding the strength of the Russian nation and taking into consideration the distance between the two nations, the need for modernization of Japanese military technology and tactics became even more evident. Despite debates regarding how to deal with the situation, Japanese leaders all agreed that the proximity and military might of Russia could potentially be devastating to Japan, and that contact with the Russians needed to be handled with care to avoid giving them any legitimate reason to attack.¹⁵ Russia's decision to engage in joint efforts with other Western nations in the early 1850s instilled even greater fear on Japan.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4-19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4-19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10-14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14-18.

Pressure exerted on the Japanese to re-assess its foreign policies and modernize rapidly was not only from the West. The decisive British victory over China during the Opium War of 1839 to 1842 served as a symbol of the rapidly rising West and equally rapidly declining East.¹⁶ Such devastating defeat of an Eastern power as large as China implied the worst for other Asian nations in years to come, affirming the infiltration and increasing dominance of Western powers across the world.¹⁷ China, who the Japanese had previously looked up to as the center of the world, had not only lost the war to the British, but had also been forced to sign treaties favorable to foreign powers that opened various Chinese trading ports and gave Britain full sovereignty of the island of Hong Kong, indicating the unequal nature of Eastern and Western powers.¹⁸

Though China and Japan did not have formal diplomatic ties during the Tokugawa hegemony, relations between the two nations differed from those between Japan and any other foreign power. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the Japanese perceived itself to be part of a unique world in which China sat at the center as the world's greatest power. Compared to China, Japan was small and weak, and Japanese leaders looked to the Chinese for their inspiration. Japan's implementation of its *sakoku* foreign policy reflected foreign policy in China at the time – it had been the Chinese who had initially limited contact with foreign nations, and forbade its nationals from travelling abroad. Furthermore, Tokugawa thinkers believed China and Japan to be closely interdependent, utilizing the metaphor “teeth and lips” to describe their relationship.¹⁹ The metaphor implied that in terms of strategy, Western powers would conquer the weaker Japanese nation first, and then move forward to take on the more powerful China. The outcome of the Opium War radically changed such a perception.

Britain's conquest of China sent three distinct messages to the Japanese: the clear superiority of Western military, technological, and tactical strength, the importance of national unity, and the need to rethink Japan's foreign policies. British victory and dominance over China validated the military and technological superiority of the West, highlighting the vulnerability of Japan in its current state. Until the Chinese defeat, the Japanese had not fully comprehended the power of Western nations. Moreover, the interdependence of China and Japan implied that an attack on China could be a threat to Japanese sovereignty as well. The Opium War, to the Japanese, essentially showcased the military and technological superiority of Western nations, further confirming Japan's need to industrialize.

In an account of the First Opium War by Japanese scholar Mineta Fuko, he makes the conclusion that “England did not win the war as much as China lost it.”²⁰ China's defeat during the war can be attributed to the weak state of China's corrupt political regime, which led to a lack of national unity and patriotism. British victory cannot be attributed to military superiority, as China was just as technologically advanced as the Western powers. Furthermore, China had been relatively complacent in its trade with the West. China had not stood up to Western pressures,

¹⁶ Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, "Opium, Expulsion, Sovereignty. China's Lessons for Bakumatsu Japan," *Monumenta Nipponica* 47, no. 1 (1992): 1-25.

¹⁷ Kazui, "Foreign Relations during the Edo Period: Sakoku Reexamined," 285.

¹⁸ Wakabayashi, "Opium, Expulsion, Sovereignty," 10-12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

and allowed the West to exploit them through unequal treaties. The lack of Chinese trade control allowed opium trafficking by Western nations, which is attributed to China's severe poverty and weakness during this time. The Japanese, in addition to catching up to foreign nations technologically, had to keep China's error of complacency in mind. Understanding China's fate, many Japanese thinkers and leaders became highly aware of their need to strengthen and unify their nation, as well as their need to maintain a strong front against foreign pressures. The Japanese, having learned from China's fate, acknowledged the need to manage and control its contact with foreign nations. The Japanese realized that they would have to establish their own conditions in terms of trade with foreign nations, and control foreigners admitted into Japan. Trade would also need to be supervised very strictly, mainly to prevent opium trafficking. China's lessons for Japan thus strengthened the nation as a whole. Though there was an ideological rivalry between Japanese leaders, all were unified under the desire to preserve national sovereignty and avoid conquest by Western nations, as was the case with China.²¹

China's downfall challenged the isolationist foreign policy that Japan had maintained for so long. Japan, having drawn its seclusion policy from Chinese example, realized that it needed to undergo a revision if it wanted to avoid a fate similar to that of China.²² The Japanese, however, were not in ideological or political agreement when it came to foreign policy. Japanese attitudes toward foreign policy during the *bakumatsu* were divided into a rivalry of two policies – that of *kaikoku*, or “open the country,” and that of *joi*, or “expel the barbarians.”²³ However, the downfall of China made it apparent to even the strongest supporters of the isolationist policy that the development of trade and diplomatic relations with foreign nations was inevitable. The question then became that of how to effectively manage such relations for Japan to maintain its sovereignty and territorial jurisdiction. Both sides saw that if Japan could properly control its foreign relations, it could potentially benefit from foreign trade and maintain its autonomy.

Despite the heavy influence other foreign nations on Japan, no nation went quite as far as the Americans did in changing Japanese history. It was not until the American expeditions to Japan that the Japanese made its first legitimate step towards ending its seclusion policy. Furthermore, American pressure to open Japan's ports affirmed Japan's need to modernize and spurred the *bakumatsu*. The aggressive nature and military superiority of the Americans intimidated Japan into signing their first official treaty with a foreign state since the beginning of Tokugawa rule.

In 1852, Commodore Matthew Perry led an American expedition to Japan carrying a letter from the President that requested negotiation with the Japanese government for the benefit of American ships and their expeditions in the Pacific. At this time, the Americans were in need of ports on a trans-Pacific steamship line, and sought to establish a depot for coal on one of the Japanese islands. Such demands were not unheard of on the Japanese side, as other Western nations had attempted to achieve similar objectives. However, Commodore Perry's expedition differed from that of others in that regardless of the friendly nature of such requests, it utilized a

²¹ *Ibid.*, 16-24.

²² Kazui, “Foreign Relations during the Edo Period: Sakoku Reexamined,” 288.

²³ Conrad Totman, “From Sakoku to Kaikoku. The Transformation of Foreign-Policy Attitudes, 1853-1868,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 35, no.1 (1980): 1-19.

strategy of intimidation. The Americans displayed their military force through steamships and guns, and were open to utilizing force in order to achieve their goals, coining the term “black ships” in Japan to symbolize the threat of Western technological superiority. Important to the American success was also in that they assured the Japanese that they had no religious intent, and that while they were a “Western nation,” that they were separate from the European nations. Moreover, the United States sought to establish commercial relations with the Japanese to advance themselves in their commercial rivalry with the British.²⁴

The American expedition of Commodore Perry shook Japanese history. The Americans took a firm and bold approach, entering Edo bay, which no foreign power had been able to do previously. By challenging Tokugawa rule, the Americans made it clear to the Japanese that the dominance of Western nations and its threat to Japanese sovereignty was growing even larger. Commodore Perry’s visit thus made it clear to the *bakufu* that their foreign policy of over two hundred years could no longer be upheld. Continued refusal to open their ports outside Nagasaki would clearly be impossible, and perhaps even dangerous considering the military superiority of the Americans and their willingness to utilize it in achieving their goals. American might highlighted the weakness of the *bakufu*, and made the lagging nature of Japanese society very evident. Furthermore, the American display of military superiority emphasized the precarious financial condition that Japan was in. Due to Japan’s disorganization political order and dwindling economy, the Japanese lacked the funds and resources necessary to build any sort of defense. In addition, Japanese responses to the American expedition only added fuel to the existing debates regarding Japan’s foreign policy. While many, understanding the potential implications of American willingness to utilize their military and technological strength, felt that Japan needed to honor American demands. Others, however, felt that responding to American requests would only serve to confirm Japan’s relative weakness, and would challenge national prestige and independence.²⁵

It was Commodore Perry’s second visit, however, that affirmed the rapidly approaching end of Japan’s seclusion policy. In 1854, the Americans bore increased pressure for the Japanese to open its ports and develop friendly relations with them. In addition, they brought gifts for the emperor, such as a miniature locomotive that served as the foundation for the development of Japanese trains in later years, and a telegraph system. Such gifts would later play a key role in Japan’s industrialization and modernization during the Meiji period. Most importantly, however, was the American desire for an official treaty between the two nations. The expedition resulted in the development of the Treaty of Peace and Amity between the two nations, which opened the ports of Hakodate and Shimoda to the United States for trade purposes, officially established friendly relations, and specified that the Japanese would assist shipwrecked American vessels. The treaty also included a “most favored nation” clause, in which the United States would be granted any of the same privileges that Japan may grant to other foreign nations. Despite the unequal nature of the conditions, the Japanese agreed to it out of fear of conflict. American intimidation played the main role in Japan’s cooperation with the United States.²⁶

²⁴ McOmie, *The Opening of Japan*, 55-131.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 55-131.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 229-275.

However, the treaty was highly controversial, contributing the growing conflict between Japanese political ideologies. Those opposed to the treaty argued that Japan had been too passive in its agreement with the treaty. Many argued that the treaty's conditions, which clearly favored the United States, confirmed Japan's relative weakness, and challenged Japanese sovereignty. Such a treaty, they stated, could open the gates for other unequal treaties. Others, however, countered the argument, stating that had they rejected the treaty, the Americans would wage a war on Japan, a war which the Japanese had little to no chance of winning. They argued that Japanese defeat by the Americans would have worse implications, and would ultimately strip Japan of its autonomy and independence.²⁷

Regardless of the controversy surrounding the American treaty, however, Tokugawa *bakufu*'s agreement to it symbolized Japan's willingness to move towards an open country policy and the beginning of the establishment of relations between Japan and other foreign nations. The treaty was only the first of many to follow with various nations. Upon hearing of the American success in its entry to Japan and the development of a relationship with Japan, other foreign nations followed suit, demanding that Japan open its ports. However, compliance with the American treaty also had negative implications for the *bakufu*. The general population perceived the shogunate's compromise to unequal treaties as a sign that the shogunate could no longer effectively guard national interest. Resentment for the Tokugawa hegemony grew throughout Japan, further weakening the existing political structure. Japan's move towards a more open policy, therefore, asserted the need for a new political order to maintain control over the nation.²⁸

Foreign pressures exerted on Japan from various nations only heightened the Japanese need to undergo political, social, and economic transformation. Western powers scrambled to establish ties with the Japanese in order to gain trade and naval advantage over rival states, increasing the frequency and intensity of foreign visits to Japan. Foreign powers refused to give up – they approached the likes of the Ryukyu islands and Okinawa in an attempt to intimidate the Japanese.²⁹ In an act of fear and self-defense, and out of necessity, Japan began to prepare itself militarily in the case of conflict with foreign nations. The race to open Japan, therefore, spurred Japan's industrialization and modernization. In addition, as foreign pressures on Japan increased, so did the perceived threat to Japanese sovereignty. The Japanese needed to revisit not only its *sakoku* foreign policy, but its fundamental political structure as well. Japan, in order to preserve its autonomy and independence, needed to grow stronger, and thus undergo significant restructuring and change.

As mentioned previously, Japanese political thought was divided into two separate factions regarding foreign policy and the future of the nation. Those who advocated *kaikoku* felt the need to embrace and learn from foreign powers, arguing that refusal of foreign demands was impossible and that such relations could be a benefit for Japan. *Joi* advocates initially argued otherwise, stating that succumbing to foreign pressures would have a negative effect on Japan in terms of sovereignty, society, and the economy. They felt that opening the country to other nations would provide

²⁷ Wakabayashi, "Opium, Expulsion, Sovereignty," 17-24.

²⁸ Alistair Swale, *The Meiji Restoration: Monarchism, Mass Communication and Conservative Revolution* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

²⁹ McOmie, *The Opening of Japan*, 73-88

foreigners with the opportunity to corrupt and divide Japan the way that it did with the introduction of Christianity centuries before. However, in reality, the two sides were more similar than they were different because both policies strove for the same end result. Both sides of political and ideological debates at this time were founded on the same ideas: to maintain Japan's sovereignty and reinstate political stability. The rivalry between the two factions stemmed from the ways in which the two felt Japan should reach its goal. W.G. Beasley, a major pioneer in English studies of Japanese history, in his *Select Documents on Japanese Foreign Policy, 1853-1868* views the *kaikoku-joi* rivalry as "a contest between a rational, responsible, progressive attempt to adjust to a new, inevitable, and implicitly preferable world of Western-style state relations and an irrational 'xenophobic' impulse to hold back the tide of historical progress."³⁰

Kaikoku advocates argued that in order for Japan to maintain its autonomy and independence, it would need to look outward and embrace Western ways and teachings. By opening the nation to foreign influence, they maintained, Japan would be able to strengthen their nation and catch up to leading Western states. *Sakoku* advocates, on the other hand, argued that Japan should focus its efforts internally, and strengthen the nation from within. However, supporters of *joi* were not entirely opposed to Japan establishing foreign relations.³¹ Well aware of the changing international environment, *joi* advocates understood that foreign contact was unavoidable. They argued, however, that Japan should dictate the terms of trade and other relations, and that the Japanese should not submit to unequal Western treaties; hence their resentment towards the Tokugawa *bakufu*.

The divide between those for opening Japanese ports and those for expulsion of the barbarians was more concerned with the stability and sovereignty of Japan. It was more or less a divide between advocates of peace and advocates of war, respectively. *Kaikoku* advocates were not necessarily enthusiastic about opening the ports, but felt that in order to maintain peace, responding to foreign demands would be necessary. However, they were not entirely supportive of letting foreigners into Japan. Abe Masahiro, the *bakufu* leader who accepted Commodore Perry's treaty, argued that taking into consideration the increasing pressures from foreign nations to open Japan's ports and Japan's lack of military strength, accommodation to foreign powers would give Japan time to prepare defensively. On the other hand, rejection, he stated, would invite war and, without question, Japanese defeat. *Kaikoku* thinkers agreed with the *joi* party that ideally, Japan should engage in trade abroad, rather than foreigners coming to Japan to trade.³²

Proponents of *joi*, on the other hand, were not opposed to war. They felt that while it would be preferable to avoid war, the Japanese should still stand up to foreign powers and should not fear the use of force. By doing so, the Japanese, *joi* supporters argued, would be able to avoid unequal treaties or conditions set by Western nations, and therefore would be able to maintain its autonomy. *Joi* supporters suggested strengthening the nation internally through economic and military recovery and recognition of the domestic needs of the country by unifying the nation under the emperor. Though Tokugawa Nariaki, leader of the *joi* party, was clearly xenophobic in some aspects, his main concern was not as much expelling barbarians but to preserve Japan's

³⁰ Totman, "From Sakoku to Kaikoku," 1-17.

³¹ "Opium, Expulsion, Sovereignty," 17-23

³² "From Sakoku to Kaikoku," 1-17

sovereignty by making clear to the Americans that “force would be met by force.”³³ Nariaki was in fact quite interested in foreign military technology, expressing curiosity regarding Western guns and cannons and advocating learning from them.

However, over the *bakumatsu* period, the *joi* party grew smaller as the general consensus in Japan moved from that of *joi* to *kaikoku*. Having observed the military superiority of various Western nations, most significant being the Americans and their “black ships,” the risks of war and its outcomes were far too high. Under the conditions of the ailing Japanese economy, the shogunate fell short on resources and financial means and could not build the defenses sufficient for a war with the Western powers. China’s unfortunate fate in its war with Great Britain made it clear that in the case of war with the Americans, in which Japan would not even have a chance at victory. Realistically speaking, conflict with the Americans, or any other Western nation for that matter, would destroy any hope of Japanese sovereignty. In order to avoid war and maintain peace, the Japanese had to make concessions. The move towards a *kaikoku* policy, therefore, was more a tactical move by Japan in their strategy to defend its independence.³⁴

Also contributing to the decline of the *joi* party were the violent outbursts of overzealous advocates. In the early 1860s, radical *joi* advocates of the Satsuma and Choshu clans took matters into their own hands in order to prevent the increasing foreign contact. The Satsuma and Choshu conducted several bombardments on foreigners in Japan, humiliating and discrediting the *bakufu*. The *bakufu*, in response, punished many of these advocates, executing some and forcing the others to withdraw from political participation. The most significant of these bombardments is the Namamugi incident, in which the Satsuma clan attacked several foreign nationals, resulting in a war waged by the British against the Satsuma clan. The British had a decisive victory, and managed to impress the Satsuma party, who strayed from their *joi* ideology to seek trade relations with Great Britain as a result.³⁵

The decline of the Tokugawa hegemony and necessity for the implementation of a new order strengthened the *kaikoku* policy. Increased contact with foreigners brought about significant expansion in the amount of information and intelligence available about other nations having successfully pursued such ideas. The Japanese found that the powerful nature of European states and their ability to expand were a result of their political and social structure. New knowledge about the great monarchies of France, Great Britain, and Russia validated the *bakufu*’s idea of imperial rule. By looking outward and learning from Western powers, the Japanese could strengthen their nation and legitimize their role in the world.³⁶

The critical condition of domestic issues in Tokugawa Japan were major factors in Japan’s need to change and hence the cause of the Meiji Restoration. The latter years of the Edo period were characterized by the failing Tokugawa shogunate, a necessity for economic and social reorganization, increasing financial troubles, and domestic conflict between feudal clans. The Tokugawa *baku-han* system, which was meant to maintain a power balance between the shogunate,

³³ McOmie, *The Opening of Japan*, 99.

³⁴ Totman, “From Sakoku to Kaikoku,” 1-17.

³⁵ Gordon Daniels, “The British Role in the Meiji Restoration: A Re-interpretive Note.” *Modern Asian Studies* 2, no. 4 (1968): 291-313.

³⁶ Totman, “From Sakoku to Kaikoku,” 17-18.

the imperial court, and regional domains, broke down over time. Though the Tokugawa shogunate initially solidified control and maintained a political hegemony over its domains by keeping them weak, this later served to be one of its fundamental weaknesses. Financial impoverishment plagued the nation, and as the shogunate continued to implement prohibitive and prejudiced restrictions on the domains to preserve control, domain resentment towards the *bakufu* increased. Lack of financial reserves, furthermore, restricted political and military actions for both the shogunate and the domains.³⁷ Furthermore, emotional distress across the nation was evident, and resulted in a massive outburst directed toward the *bakufu* in the 1860s.³⁸

However, it was the increasing unavoidable contact with foreign countries that truly aggravated the Tokugawa *bakufu* and its weakening condition. The threat of foreign powers only served to further highlight the weaknesses of the Tokugawa hegemony. The growing frequency of foreign warships and vessels approaching Japanese shores confirmed that times were changing and both Japan's sovereignty and independence were being threatened. Advanced western nations expanding rapidly were exercising their power across the globe, and their shadows were looming over Japan. Foreign military superiority accentuated the problem of Japan's weak economic health, as the Japanese lacked the financial means to invest in military technologies and sciences to develop a strong defense. Pressure from various Western nations, namely the Dutch, Russia, and the United States urged the unstable Japan to revisit its foreign and political policies. Additionally, the defeat of the Chinese by Great Britain served as a lesson to Japan, indicating their need to respond quickly to changes in its external environment if it wanted to maintain remain autonomous. As the shogunate attempted to respond to pressure regarding its policy, economy, and military, the political structure grew increasingly fragile compounded with mounting pressure from foreign countries, Japan's need to modernize became progressively obvious.

Had there been no contact and no pressure from foreign nations, the Japanese would not have approached its modernization nearly as rapidly as it did. The rapid transformation of Japanese ideologies during the *bakumatsu* can be attributed not only to the direct pressures exerted on Japan to open its ports, but to the sheer presence of the foreign powers. Contact, even if by force, with foreign states made Japan aware of its declining position in the world. Awareness, in combination with Japan's desire to maintain national sovereignty and jurisdiction, drove Japan to pursue radical modernization. Foreign emphasis on the fundamental weaknesses and issues in the Tokugawa regime and its policies made the necessity for Japanese change clear. Pressures from Western powers to end the seclusion policy radically changed Japanese political ideology, which led to the decline of the *bakufu*, paving the way for a new form of government. Increased knowledge and information of foreign nations, in combination with the need for a new governing body, led to decision to implement a centralized bureaucratic authority, or monarchy, and consequently, the Meiji Restoration.

³⁷ Sakata and Hall, "The Motivation of Political Leadership in the Meiji Restoration," 35-38.

³⁸ George M. Wilson, "Plots and Motives in Japan's Meiji Restoration," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 25, no. 3 (1983): 407-27.