

Japanese ships in the Mediterranean. An unlikely ally escorting 70.000 troops for the Entente

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The Anglo–Japanese Alliance

The rapid modernization of Japan, in the latter half of the 19th century, greatly upset the delicate balance of power in East Asia. After successfully defeating China in 1895, it came into direct conflict with the colonizing powers of France, Russia and Germany. Great Britain wanting to consolidate power in the Far East, decided to enter into an alliance with Japan officially in 1902. Consequently, this alliance forced Russia to face Japan without the help of France in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) which eventually resulted in the colossal defeat of the Russian fleet at Tsushima. The Anglo-Japanese alliance was renewed in 1911, and a mutual defense pact was incorporated to the agreement.¹

The First World War began on 28 July 1914, and the British ultimatum to Germany expired at midnight on August 4. At the beginning, Japan's entrance to the war was not welcomed, and by the nature of the Anglo-Japanese alliance, there was no obligation for Japan to automatically join in hostilities even if Britain declared war. On 3rd August 1914, British Ambassador Sir Conyngham Greene² visited Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kato Takaaki,³ and showed him the telegraph which said:

“Sir Edward Grey⁴ did not think that the Anglo-Japanese Alliance would be involved, nor did he think it likely that His Majesty's Government would have to apply to the Imperial Japanese Government under the terms of that Alliance.”⁵

The British position quickly and often changed in the next few days. Still on 3 August Grey said that if hostilities spread to the Far East then the British would rely on Japanese support to protect their interest in China. On 4 August Grey told Inoue Katunosue, Japanese Ambassador to Great Britain, that Britain should avoid, if it could, to draw Japan into any trouble. However, on 7 August, Grey reversed his first proposal and brought a most urgent message to Minister Kato, which said, “It is most important that the Japanese fleet should,

¹ O'Brien, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, 161-165.

² Ambassador to Japan from december 1912.

³ Foreign minister of Japan at the outbreak of the war, later he will be the 14th Prime Minister of of the country. (Japanese names are written according to Japanese custom so family name then given name.)

⁴ British Secretary of State, later Ambassador to the United States.

⁵ Trotter, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, 1.

if possible, hunt out and destroy the armed German merchant cruisers who are now attacking our commerce.”⁶

In the beginning Britain tried to limit Japanese involvement both geographically and politically. However, the changing tides of war and the increasing success of the German raiders and U-boats forced Britain to ask for more and more help from Japan. This changed the strategic area of Japanese assistance from the Far East to the Pacific Ocean, Indian Ocean, Atlantic Ocean and eventually to the Mediterranean.

Extending help

The first official request to send Japanese ships to the Mediterranean came on 13 August. The British Navy asked the Japanese assistant naval attaché, Captain Abo Kiyotane, to deploy the cruiser *Izumo* which had been dispatched to Mexico, to head for Esquimalt⁷ to protect the coast of North America. Then, on 2 September, Grey sounded out Ambassador Inoue as to whether the Japanese Government would be disposed to send a division of their Navy in order to cooperate with the Allies Navy primarily in the Mediterranean and ultimately in the decisive theatres to cope with the German cruiser *Goeben* and the light cruiser *Breslau* in the Mediterranean.⁸ Minister Kato declined the request citing that they cannot split the Japanese Navy any further.

Subsequently, there was no request from Britain for over a year. However, as German naval effort had been concentrating on commercial raiders, on 2 February 1916, the British Admiralty communicated to its Foreign Office:

“The presence of a flotilla of Japanese destroyers in those waters would be of the greatest value in view of the present demand for Allied vessels of this type. Tentative enquiry has, from time to time, been made of the Japanese naval attaché as to whether his Government would be likely to accede to a request for a flotilla of destroyers to be sent to the West, but no indication has been given that the Japanese Government are considering the matter. It would not be necessary to specify the Mediterranean as their destination, since they could, if preferred, be employed in home waters, thus releasing others for the Mediterranean. My Lords quite appreciate that it may, on political grounds, be thought inadvisable to solicit the Japanese government for naval assistance in the West, but the practical necessities of the naval situation make it necessary to ask, that the suggestion should be seriously considered.”⁹

Britain changed the designated target from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, Atlantic Ocean, Home Waters, North Atlantic and Far East several times so there was no real movement from the Japanese. For a year, Britain stopped all requests coinciding with the end of unrestricted submarine warfare.

⁶ Trotter, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, 102-105.

⁷ Part of British Columbia.

⁸ Trotter, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, 132-133.

⁹ *Ibid.* 153.

Changing tides in the Mediterranean

By the end of 1917, most of the major naval features of World War I had been demonstrated. This was nowhere more evident than in the North Sea, which had been the principal strategic area of the naval war. Here the British and German navies had met in a series of inconclusive actions, culminating in the Battle of Jütland in May 1916. The British Grand Fleet and the German High Seas Fleet met, but despite serious losses, neither side was able to defeat the other decisively. It was this surface stalemate that led to the German decision to undertake unrestricted submarine warfare again against Britain in early 1917.¹⁰

After Germany reinstated the unrestricted submarine warfare, Britain asked Japan to help escort convoys in the Mediterranean to help the war effort. The Japanese opinion about giving assistance changed, because while in the beginning of the war it was in their interest to limit their involvement, later as all major powers engaged each other in naval combat the Japanese missing out on the combat experience concerned the Admiralty.

The Japanese Navy was in great need to gain practical knowledge in modern warfare and naval combat. On 4 February 1917 another request was sent to Japan. This time, however, seeing that the Japanese were much more receptive to help, the British government asked for a whole fleet. Japan was firmly against the possibility of sending capital ships to the Mediterranean, because despite their power they were neither helpful against submarines nor suitable for escort missions.

The Imperial Navy decided to dispatch destroyer squadrons to the Mediterranean and presented the following conditions to Ambassador Greene from Minister Motono¹¹ on 2 February:

1. The *Tsushima* and the *Niitaka* to be sent to the Cape of Good Hope.¹²
2. The *Akashi* and a detachment of destroyers, consisting of two flotillas to be sent to the Mediterranean.¹³
3. Those vessels not to be placed under the command of the Admiral Commander-in-Chief of the British Naval Forces, but to act in co-operation with him or at his request.
4. It is to be understood that any reinforcement of the Japanese ships now to be sent will be impossible under actual conditions of the Japanese Navy, and that the ships are to be based on Malta will not be called upon to extend their operations beyond the Mediterranean.¹⁴

Japan formed and sent the 2nd Special Squadron of the Imperial Japanese Navy under the command of Rear Admiral Sato Kozo to help convoys defend against submarines. The

¹⁰ Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun*, 167.

¹¹ Motono Ichirō foreign minister of Japan from 16th of November 1916.

¹² Both ships were cruisers.

¹³ All together 1 cruiser and 8 destroyers (*Akashi*, *Ume*, *Kusunoki*, *Kaede*, *Katsura*, *Kashiwa*, *Matsu*, *Sugi*, and *Sakaki*)

¹⁴ Trotter, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, 176.

fleet initially consisted of the cruiser *Akashi* and the eight destroyers of the 10th and 11th Destroyer Flotillas. Later, in the beginning of 1918 the squadron was reinforced with the cruisers *Izumo* and *Nisshin* and the 15th Destroyer Flotilla.¹⁵ Altogether, the 2nd Special Squadron was comprised of 3 cruisers and 12 destroyers.

By the end of the war, ships belonging to the squadron had accompanied 788 Allied ships, including transports carrying 70,000 troops. They engaged German and Austro-Hungarian submarines on 34 occasions failing however to sink any of them.¹⁶ Successfully completed 348 escort missions covering over 240,000 nautical miles.¹⁷

Overall Japan lost 72 sailors in the 16 months they were stationed in Malta. The biggest loss they suffered was from the loss of the destroyer *Sakaki* which after being torpedoed lost 59 officers. The ship however still made it back to port successfully.¹⁸ British leaders lavishly praised the Japanese for their performance in the Mediterranean. Winston Churchill, who as First Lord of the Admiralty, was the driving force behind British and Japanese naval cooperation. He “did not think the Japanese [Squadron] had ever done a foolish thing”.

The governor of Malta, Lord Methuen, while reviewing Japanese warships in March 1919, lauded the Japanese navy for “its splendid work in European waters” and expressed the hope, that “God grants our alliance, cemented in blood, may long endure”. The Japanese Navy spent 72% of their time at sea compared with 60% by the British and about 45% by the French and Italian Navy.¹⁹

Effects of the 2nd Special Squadron

The Allies felt that Japan was always asking too much compensation for what they regarded as marked contrast to her small assistance, and that the Japanese sea power projected to the Mediterranean was commented as being “only a drop in the bucket” by the British Navy. However, the Second Special Squadron accomplished great success in diplomatically supporting the national interest of Japan. During and after the war, these destroyers visited 53 ports around France, Britain, Italy, Belgium and Greece. In London, they participated in the victory parade and could show that Japan had cooperated with Britain. In Paris, Japanese sailors showed their existence not only to the citizens of Paris, but also to the delegates of the Peace Conference. One of the member to the Paris conference, Ambassador to Italy Hayashi Gonnosuke told Admiral Sato that by the Japanese activities in the Mediterranean, Japan was able to show her loyalty as an Ally and obtain understanding of the Japanese contribution to this war. Hayashi said, “We could show that Japan supported the Allies as an ‘entente’ and thus obtained the position as one of five big powers at the Paris Peace Conference.”²⁰

Another interesting long-term effect of the reluctance of Japan to send ships and especially capital ships to Europe was that both Britain and the United States thought that Japan was keeping most of its navy safe so the ships will be ready for the next war. This led to a

¹⁵ The 4 destroyers of the 15th Flotilla are *Momo*, *Kashi*, *Hinoki*, *Yanagi*.

¹⁶ Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun*, 169.

¹⁷ 1 nautical mile is 1852 meters, 240,000 nautical miles is 444,480 kms, enough to circle the Earth 11 times.

¹⁸ Halpern, *A Naval History of World War I*, 393.

¹⁹ Falls, *The Great War 1914-1918*, 295.

²⁰ Sato, *Oshu Taisenchi Chichukai niokuru Teikoku Kaigun no Sakusen*, 20-21.

deep distrust especially from the United States that directly influenced the U.S. policy towards Japan in general, but more importantly in the upcoming Washington Naval Conference, where the capital ship quota of Japan was limited.

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Bateaux japonais dans la Méditerranée. Un allié improbable escorte 700 000 soldats pour l'Entente

La modernisation rapide du Japon dans la deuxième moitié du 19^e siècle a grandement bouleversé la balance du pouvoir délicate en Asie de l'Est. Après avoir vaincu la Chine en 1895, le Japon est entré en conflit avec les forces colonisateurs de la France, de la Russie et de l'Allemagne. La Grande-Bretagne, voulant consolider son pouvoir en Extrême-Orient, a décidé de faire alliance officiellement avec le Japon en 1902. Cette alliance a forcé la Russie de faire face au Japon sans l'aide de la France qui a causé un défit colossal de la flotte russe à Tsushima. L'alliance a été renforcée en 1911 pour inclure un pacte de défense mutuelle. Ainsi, au moment où la Première Guerre mondiale a éclaté, le Japon a joint le camp de l'Entente.

Quand l'Allemagne a rétabli la guerre sous-marine à outrance au début de 1917, l'Angleterre a demandé au Japon d'aider à escorter des convois dans la Méditerranée pour aider l'effort de la guerre. Le Japon a envoyé le deuxième escadron spécial (2nd Special Squadron) de la Marine Impériale Japonaise pour défendre contre les sous-marins. La flotte se consistait officiellement du croiseur *Akashi* et de huit destroyers du 10^e et du 11^e flottille de destroyer. Jusqu'à la fin de la guerre, des bateaux appartenant à l'escadron ont accompagné 788 bateaux des Alliés, des transporteurs emportant 700 000 soldats compris. Ils ont attaqué 38 fois des sous-marins allemands et austro-hongrois, sans réussir à couler quelconque.

Tout compte fait, le Japon a perdu 72 marins pendant les 16 mois où ils étaient stationnés à Malte. Les Japonais ont été somptueusement glorifiés pour leur performance dans la Méditerranée par les leaders britanniques. Winston Churchill, qui était Premier seigneur de l'Amirauté à l'éclatement de la guerre, était la force motrice de la coopération maritime britannique et japonaise. Il « n'a jamais pensé que les [escadrons] Japonais auraient fait une chose absurde ».

Le gouverneur de la Malte, Lord Methuen, en étudiant les navires de guerre japonais en mars 1919, a glorifié la marine japonaise pour son « travail splendide dans les eaux euro-

péennes » et il a exprimé son espoir en disant les suivants : « Dieu accorde notre alliance, cimentée par le sang, qu'elle dure longtemps. »