

1

Case Study

Japanese Expansion in East Asia, 1931–41

2

Causes of Japanese Expansion

TIMELINE


- 1853 **Jul:** US Commodore Perry arrives in Japan
- 1854 **Mar:** Treaty of Kanagawa with the US
- 1868 **Jan:** Meiji Restoration  
**Apr:** Five Articles
- 1894 **Aug:** First Sino-Japanese War begins
- 1895 **Apr:** Treaty of Shimonoseki with China; Triple Intervention
- 1902 **Jan:** Anglo-Japanese Alliance
- 1904 **Feb:** start of Russo-Japanese War
- 1905 **Aug:** Treaty of Portsmouth (USA)
- 1911 **Oct:** ‘Double Tenth’ Revolution in China
- 1915 **Jan:** ‘Twenty-One Demands’ presented to China
- 1916 **Jun:** death of Yuan Shikai in China
- 1919 **May:** May Fourth Movement protests in China
- 1921 **Nov:** start of the Washington Conference
- 1926 **Jul:** start of the Northern Campaign in China
- 1927 **Apr:** Shanghai Massacre ends First United Front in China
- 1929 **Oct:** Wall Street Crash in the US begins the Great Depression
- 1930 **Nov:** assassination attempt on prime minister Hamaguchi
- 1931 **Sep:** Japan starts invasion of Manchuria
- 1932 **May:** assassination of prime minister Inukai
- 1933 **Feb:** Japan leaves League of Nations
- 1936 **Dec:** Second United Front in China
- 1937 **Jul:** Japan invades China

Introduction

This chapter is the first of seven which examine the various factors involved on the road towards the Second World War which, on all levels, was far more destructive than even the First World War – which, it had been hoped, was the ‘war to end all wars’. This chapter, and Chapters 3 and 4, will focus on the main developments in Asia and the Pacific, during the period 1931–41, which contributed to the outbreak of war in this region.

For these first three chapters, the focus will be on Japan and its role in the events leading up to the truly global Second World War. At times, though, there will be references to European developments – in particular, those involving Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy – which impacted on the decisions taken by Japan. These European aspects will be examined in more detail in Chapters 5, 6 and 7; Chapter 8 will then deal with the final steps which turned the growing aggression and expansionism of the 1930s into what is generally referred to as the Second World War.

From 1931, Japan launched a series of military campaigns across East Asia and the Pacific which, initially, were highly successful. Sometimes referred to as either the ‘Fifteen-Year War’ or ‘The Greater Asia War’, this Pacific War is more often seen as a part – though an important part – of the general Second World War. In some ways, it can be argued that the Second World War actually began in 1931 in Asia, rather than in 1939 in Europe.



KEY QUESTIONS

- How significant was the impact of nationalism and militarism on Japan’s foreign policy?
- What impact did Japan’s main domestic issues have on foreign policy?
- How significant was China’s political instability?

---

## Overview

- In 1854 and 1858, the US had forced Japanese rulers to sign treaties which ended Japan's policy of seclusion, which had lasted for 200 years. These treaties were mainly designed to open up Japan to US trade.
- From the mid-19th century, nationalism became an increasingly significant force in Japanese politics. In large part, it was directed against Western powers (such as Britain, France and the Netherlands) which had already-existing colonies in Asia.
- In particular, during the late 19th century, tensions with both Tsarist Russia and the US developed as a result – especially as both states wished to expand their influence and control in Asia, thus coming into conflict with Japan's own ambitions.
- Such ambitions were revealed as early as 1876, when Japan forced Korea to sign the Japan-Korea Treaty, forcing Korea to open up to Japanese products.
- This was a first attempt to counter growing Russian aims on Korea. Later, in 1905, Japan declared Korea to be a Japanese 'protectorate'; then, in 1910, Japan formally annexed Korea, making it a part of the Japanese Empire. By occupying Korea, Japan was in a much better position to push its interests as regards mainland China.
- From the late 19th century, many nationalist groups were formed in Japan, which pushed for Japanese expansion in Asia. At the same time, the samurai tradition was increasingly stressed and, as a result, militarism grew. Military leaders increasingly pressed Japanese civilian governments to support an aggressive foreign policy.
- These pressures increased as a result of the impact of the Great Depression on Japan, which greatly increased Japan's long-term problems of limited raw materials and a rising population.
- As China experienced significant political instability for much of the 1920s and 1930s, Japanese expansionists saw this as offering an easy way of solving Japan's problems.

---

## 2.1 How significant was the impact of nationalism and militarism on Japan's foreign policy?

The scope of Imperial Japan's war in Asia and the Pacific was certainly impressive – but, before examining the main events in this war, and how the rest of the world reacted to its actions, it is important to establish the causes which led to Japan's imperial expansion after 1931. Two important factors behind the events from 1931–41 were clearly the often closely-associated emergence and development of Japanese nationalism and militarism.

2

Japanese Expansion in East Asia, 1931–41

SOURCE A

In this truly global conflict, Imperial Japan’s war on Asia and then the Pacific encompassed a larger geographic area and affected a larger population than the war in Europe and Africa. Japan, with limited help from her colonies, Formosa and Korea, would overrun and subjugate a population over one and a half times larger than Germany did with the help of her six Axis partners... Japan’s militarists would cause over half of all Allied civilian casualties.

Gruhl, W. 2007. *Imperial Japan’s World War Two, 1931–1945*. New Brunswick, USA. Transaction Publishers. pp. 25–6.

Japanese nationalism before 1900

There were several important elements within Japanese nationalism, which developed in its modern forms from the middle of the 19th century.

Seclusion and early nationalism

Before 1867, Japan was a strictly-segregated feudal society, with a structure very similar to that which predominated in most European countries during the Middle Ages. In Japan, though, this feudal structure lasted longer than in most European states – partly as a result of seclusion from the rest of the world.

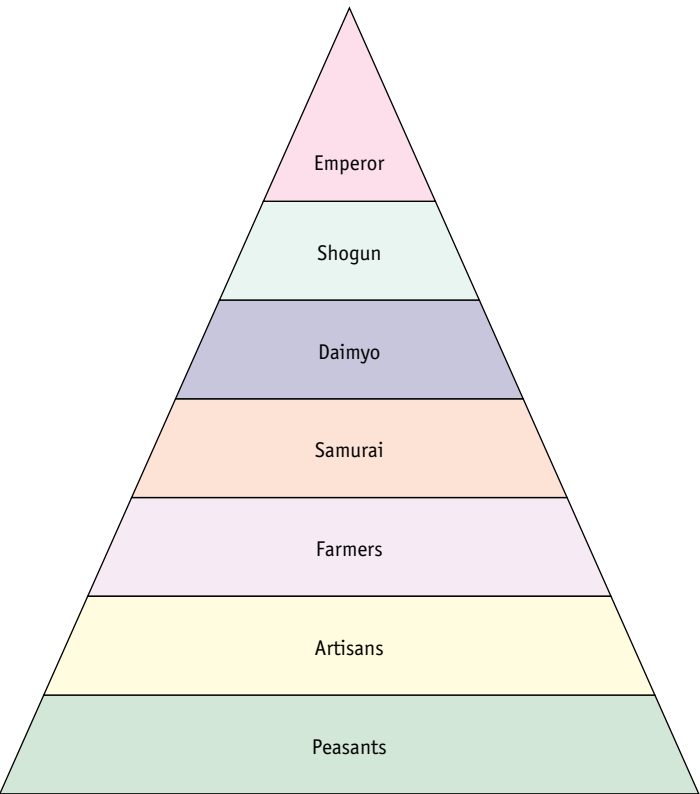


Figure 2.1 Diagram showing the social structure and castes during the Tokugawa shogunate

## Causes of Japanese Expansion

Real power in Japan before 1867 increasingly rested with the largest of Japan's feudal landowning clans. Before 1600, various clans had come to dominate, only to be replaced – following military struggles – by another clan. From 1600 to 1867, Japan was ruled by the Tokugawa clan, which had become the largest and most powerful of Japan's various feudal **samurai clans**.

The head of the dominant samurai clan acted as the 'shogun', the commanding general of Japan's armies.

The Tokugawa clan used their domination to establish national unity; and, under the Tokugawa shogunate, Japan had followed a policy of seclusion from the outside world – including from China. This was partly based on an underlying nationalist belief in the superiority of Japanese culture – with a particular desire to assert Japanese culture against the earlier reliance on Chinese culture (for instance, Japan's writing system had been based on the Chinese system). However, it was also based on serious concerns regarding the growing influence and control of Western powers in Asia in the 19th century. The last shogun was **Tokugawa Yoshinobu**.

His attempts to modernise and strengthen Japan's government, and his failure to keep foreign states from increasing their contacts with Japan, led to the rise of opposition from amongst the Satsuma, Choshu and Tosa samurai clans. These feared that his reforms would transfer the emperor's powers to himself and his government. So they raised forces to oppose him, under the slogan: '*sonno joi*' ('revere the emperor, expel the barbarian'). The Tosa clan then suggested that Yoshinobu should resign as shogun and, instead, head a new national council made up of the leading daimyo.

However, although he did resign as shogun and returned all power to the emperor, a brief internal power struggle – the Boshin War – broke out in 1867, as the Satsuma and Choshu were opposed to the Tosa suggestion that Yoshinobu become the head of any new governing council, as they did not want him to have any political power at all in case he was able to dominate it.

### Japan and the US

Apart from Britain (which sent a mission to Japan in 1818), one of the main Western powers increasingly interested in extending its interests in Japan was the USA. Its first attempts, in 1837 and 1846, at securing trading relations with Japan were beaten off by Japanese ships – despite the US sending, in a form of '**gun-boat diplomacy**', two warships in the latter year. However, on 8 July 1853, Commodore Perry arrived – with four warships – to repeat US requests for various commercial agreements, and 'promising' to return (with more warships) the following year to receive Japan's response.

Although some of Japan's political leaders – and the emperor's court – favoured national resistance, the Tokugawa shogunate, who were fully aware of China's humiliation in the Opium War of 1839–42, finally agreed to the Treaty of Kanagawa in March 1854, which opened up two of Japan's ports to US trade, and granted the US the position of 'most-favoured-nation'. Thus Japan's policy of seclusion, which had lasted for over 200 years, was finally ended. This was an important turning point in Japan's history: in particular, it led to the rapid emergence of Japan as an important regional and even international power.

The US followed up the 1854 treaty with other treaties further opening up Japan to US trade. In 1858, Japan's government signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce with

**samurai clans:** Though Japan had an emperor as the nominal head of the political system, *samurai* clans had dominated Japan for centuries. The *samurai* were a special and privileged warrior caste – rather like knights in medieval Europe – who fought for feudal lords, known as *daimyu*. Their code of conduct did not permit surrender and did not respect those who did – these values were revived by nationalists and expansionists in 20th century Japan.

#### Tokugawa Yoshinobu (1837–1913)

Sometimes referred to as 'Keiki', he became the fifteenth – and last – shogun in 1866. The first Tokugawa shogun had been Tokugawa Ieyasu, who was appointed in 1600. Yoshinobu attempted to modernise various aspects of the Japanese system of government and its military forces. However, many other clans resented his reforms, and growing opposition forced him to resign in 1867. After his resignation, he retreated from the public eye; although, in 1902, the Meiji emperor gave him the rank of prince, for services to Japan – this was the highest rank in the peerage.

**'gun-boat diplomacy':** This was something much-practised by Britain in Asia – and especially in relation to China. Two 'Opium Wars' were fought against China in order to force the Chinese government to accept Britain's 'right' to sell opium in China. It was western acts such as these which contributed to Japan's nationalist policy of seclusion before 1868.

2

Japanese Expansion in East Asia, 1931–41

**Fact :** Following the Treaty of Amity and Commerce, similar treaties were soon signed with Britain, France and Russia. These soon became known as the ‘unequal treaties’ – in particular, as they granted extra-territorial rights to the citizens of the countries signing the treaties. Such western-imposed treaties were not just limited to Japan, but were also made with other Asian countries – and with China in particular. These led to much nationalist resentment in Japan and in other affected countries.



**Figure 2.2** The landing of Commodore Perry and his ‘black ships’ at Yokohama, 8 March 1854

the US. However, this was opposed by the imperial court, which was dominated by nationalists who favoured continuing seclusion and instead advocated ‘repelling the barbarians’. Nonetheless, Japan was gradually pressured into signing similar treaties with other Western nations.

SOURCE B

..., early in the nineteenth century, Sato Nobuhiro (1769–1850) asserted an ultranationalism derived from the dictum “Japan is the foundation of the world.” In *Kondo hisaku (A Secret Strategy for Expansion)*, written in 1823, Sato proposed making the whole world “provinces and districts” of Japan. His grand design began with the conquest of China. The first blow should be at Manchuria, “so easy to attack and hold”; then Japanese forces would occupy all of China. Sato laid out the strategy for conquering China in fine detail. The intellectual links, if any, between this ideology of military aggression shaped in a feudal society and concepts of international relations after the Meiji Restoration have not been fully established. However, there is an eerie similarity between the basic ideas of *A Secret Strategy for Expansion* and the concept of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. The ideology of military conquest was at least latently linked to the advocacy of an attack on Korea and other expansionist ventures in the early 1870s. I suspect it was the wellspring nourishing the aggressive [nationalist] ideologies that flourished in the 1920s.

Ienaga, S. 1978. *The Pacific War 1931–1945*. New York. Pantheon Books. p. 5.

KEY CONCEPTS  
QUESTION

**Significance:** In what ways did the arrival of US naval ships in the mid-1850s have a significant impact on developments within Japan?



## Causes of Japanese Expansion

## The Meiji Restoration, 1868

Because these treaties made important concessions to the Western powers, and were all signed without the emperor's consent, pro-imperial and anti-Western factions were able to stir up anti-government sentiments and movements. The main advocates of resistance were often fanatics who were prepared to kill and die for their cause – they were known as '*shishi*' (men of high purpose). Some of their main inspirations were thinkers such as Aizawa Seishisai and Sakuma Zozan – the latter favoured learning from Western science and technology, but stressed the importance of maintaining traditional moral values: 'Eastern morals and Western science'.

An important early shishi leader was **Yoshida Shoin**, a member of the Choshu clan – he wanted the old feudal system to be transformed in a way which, by establishing greater national unity, would enable Japan to resist the growing power of the western nations. He argued that the existing government was incapable of serving the emperor or expelling the Western 'barbarians'. His anti-government activities, and his involvement in an assassination plot, led to his execution in 1859.

Despite this, such feelings of nationalist resentment at Western interference and control continued to grow, and the Choshu clan leaders were able to persuade the emperor to adopt an anti-Western policy and, initially, to get the government to agree to a new seclusion policy. However, when Western vessels were fired upon from Choshu coastal territories, the Western powers retaliated. Though this persuaded the Choshu of the need to modernise their armies, it also led to political moves by the government against the Choshu and other anti-Western groups. This led to fighting in the 1860s. Eventually, however, the powerful Satsuma clan decided to switch its support to the Choshu against the government.

In 1866, the emperor died, and was replaced by emperor Meiji, who was only fifteen years old. He soon came under the influence of those opposed to the government; and the threat of a civil war finally persuaded the shogun, in 1867, to formally restore political authority to the emperor, in order to avoid a national crisis. After some limited fighting, the Satsuma-Choshu clans were victorious and, in January 1868, the emperor established the imperial court in Edo, which was renamed Tokyo. After 1868, the imperial system continued without interruptions in Japan, and one of the main aims of the new imperial government was to prevent Japan from suffering the fate of several other Asian nations: that is, coming even further under the control of Western powers. The policy which was followed was that of 'Enrich the country, strengthen the military' (*fukoku kyohei*). This idea – that, if Japan wanted to prosper, it needed to have strong military forces – would become increasingly influential in the 1920s and 1930s (see section 2.1, Japanese militarism).

## Cultural nationalism

From the end of the 17th century, education in Japan was increasingly based on strong nationalistic and pro-imperial principles. In part, this new National Learning involved a rejection of the philosophical and political ideas of Chinese Confucianism, and a turn to Japan's own Shinto religion and philosophy. The influence of such thinkers as Motoori Norinaga extended well into the 20th century. It stressed how Japan had been created by the **Sun Goddess** – and how Japan's imperial families were descended from the Sun Goddess, and that the emperor was the 'living god'. This belief became an official state belief after the Meiji Restoration in 1868; was an essential part of the pro-emperor nationalism which was pushed by the political new system; and was taught to all Japanese students until the end of the Second World War.



**Figure 2.3 Yoshida Shoin (1830–59)**

He set up a private school in order to train those who would be capable of leading the new Japan. Several of the students who attended this school later went on to be important future leaders of Japan in the Meiji period. His execution did not weaken the '*sono-joi*' ('revere the emperor, repel the barbarians') movement and, in fact, he became a martyr and hero of Japanese nationalists in the 1920s and 1930s.

**Sun Goddess:** Many Japanese before and after 1868 believed that Ameratsu O-mi kami, the Sun Goddess, had had sexual intercourse with Japan's first emperor, Jimmu – thus all subsequent emperors could claim divine origins. As a result, the rising sun became the symbol of Japan.

2

Japanese Expansion in East Asia, 1931–41

SOURCE C

Our country is known as the land of the gods, and of all the nations in the world, none is superior to our nation in morals and customs ... [People] must be grateful for having been born in the land of the gods, and repay the national obligation ... Now finally imperial rule has been restored,... If we repay even a smidgen of the honourable benevolence we will be doing our duty as the subject of the land of the gods.

Shigeki, T. 1991. *Meiji Ishin to Tenno*. Tokyo. Iwanami. pp. 91–5.

EMPEROR/ IMPERIAL PERIOD	DATES
Meiji	1868–1912
Taisho	1912–26
Showa	1926–89

Table 2.1 A table showing the imperial periods in Japan, from 1868–1989



Figure 2.4 Photo of Japanese troops with the rising sun flag

**QUESTION**

Why was the rising sun an important symbol in Imperial Japan?

In the early years of the Meiji Restoration, there were many areas of Japanese life and society which were modernised, in order to allow Japan to resist growing Western influence – and to enable Japan itself to become a more powerful nation. From the 1880s,

## Causes of Japanese Expansion

there was a resurgence of cultural nationalism against many of these ‘Westernization’ developments. Much of this was directed against the more liberal principles – such as democracy and parliamentary government – which had begun to influence Japanese education since the early 1870s. Many saw these attempts to ‘civilize and enlighten’ the country as undermining traditional Japanese values. Increasingly, the government took control of the approval and printing of school textbooks, to ensure they stressed patriotism, loyalty and obedience to the emperor, and a national history. One of these traditionalists, Motoda Eifu (1818–91), was one of the new emperor’s tutors. His influence played a major role in the Imperial Rescript on Education in 1890, which was a determined attempt to foster a **state nationalism**, which stressed the incompatibility between Eastern and Western values. Many were convinced that Western influences were corrupting, and even destroying, traditional Japanese culture and the very essence of Japan itself.

As well as these state-sponsored attempts to create a sense of Japanese nationalism, there were also various important individuals and groups which stressed cultural pride in all things Japanese as a reaction against Western influences and values. In an attempt to halt and even reverse these trends, Japanese nationalists began to revive aspects of Japan’s traditional culture – such as Shintoism (Japan’s ancient religion) and emperor worship. In addition, there was renewed interest in, and revival of aspects to do with, the samurai tradition and the bushido code.

Not all of those supporting cultural nationalism – for instance, in praising the achievements of Japanese art and poetry – rejected all Western aspects: several thought it would be sensible to adopt the best aspects of Western culture and technology. Such cultural nationalists – for example, Tokutomi Soho (1863–1957) – opposed political nationalism, and wanted Japan to follow peaceful foreign policies.

However, some eventually did become strong nationalists – Soho included. He adopted a much more militant nationalism following the Triple Intervention of April 1895 which saw Western powers force Japan to give up some of the concessions it had forced China to grant it after the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 (see below). From then on, Soho was a strong supporter of Japanese militarism and imperialist conquest. Under emperor Taisho, 1912–26, there was a brief turn towards more liberal Western culture and values – at least, in the urban areas of Japan. But this largely came to an end during the more militaristic and nationalistic 1930s.

### Nationalism and modernisation

Although there had been economic difficulties and social unrest before 1868, which had indicated problems within Japanese feudalism and which had created difficulties for the last shogun, it was undoubtedly the arrival of Western powers which finally led to the end of the shogunate. This increasing Western influence had led to a rise of Japanese nationalism which, after 1868, was expressed in several ways. After 1868, Japan’s new rulers were determined to adopt Western science and technology, in order to make Japan strong. As early as April 1868, they introduced the Charter Oath of Five Articles: Article Five explicitly stated how the new Japan was going to seek knowledge throughout the world. In addition, the creation of a modern army and navy was a top priority. For the new army, conscription was introduced in 1873, to supplement the use of elements of the more important samurai sections; its training was to be based on the Prussian army which had just defeated France in the Franco-Prussian War, 1870–71.

---

**state nationalism:** When Japanese governments indoctrinated school children with nationalistic sentiments, many came to be extremely proud of Japan, and to believe that they were superior to other races. In particular, despite the enormous cultural debt Japan owed China, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 led many to hold a very low view of Chinese people. Such feelings go some of the way in explaining – though not excusing – the behaviour of many Japanese troops in China after 1937.

---

### Theory of knowledge

#### History, emotion and perception:

According to the philosopher David Hume (1711–76), ‘*Reason is always and everywhere the slave of the passions.*’ Is ‘nationalism’ an essentially emotional, non-rational, political ideology? When reading and writing history, is it possible for people from different cultures, who have different cultural values, to study such aspects relating to another country?



2

Japanese Expansion in East Asia, 1931–41

Before 1868, Japan had no navy and, at first, the new government lacked the capacity to build naval ships. So, in 1875, three warships were purchased from Britain, and the new Japanese navy was based on the British navy.

Nationalism and imperialist expansion 1894 – 1914

Although the Meiji Restoration had largely been the result of nationalist resentment of Western influence and the ‘unequal treaties’ they had imposed on Japan, it soon became clear that the new Japan had imperialist designs of its own as regards its neighbours in Asia and the Far East. Its first designs were on Korea.

The First Sino–Japanese War, 1894–95

As early as 1876, Japan had forced Korea to establish diplomatic relations – and to agree to an ‘unequal treaty’ which gave special rights to Japanese people in Korea. When this led to nationalist protests in Korea, both China and Japan took advantage of the turmoil to send troops into the country. Immediate hostilities between China and Japan were avoided by the Li-Ito Convention of 1885, which was an agreement that both countries could station troops in Korea. But unrest continued and, in August 1894, tensions between China and Japan over rivalry in Korea led to the First Sino–Japanese War. The Japanese army and navy – both of which had been modernised since 1868 – inflicted defeats over the less-advanced Chinese forces. This compelled China to seek peace in 1895. The Treaty of Shimonoseki of April 1895 resulted in Chinese recognition of Korean independence, and saw Japan obtaining various territories, including Formosa (now known as Taiwan). China also had to sign a commercial treaty with Japan, as well as granting some manufacturing rights to Japanese firms.



**Figure 2.5** A Japanese print of the Battle of Pyongyang, Korea, 1894. Following the Japanese victory here, Japanese armies then invaded Manchuria

Causes of Japanese Expansion

This war – and Japan’s victory – engendered strong nationalistic sentiments amongst the Japanese; even previously liberal intellectuals began to advocate continued militarism and imperialism.

Such feelings were increased by the reaction of Western powers to Japan’s victory and gains. Tsarist Russia – which also had expansionist plans on both Korea and Manchuria – persuaded France and Germany to join it in forcing Japan to give up some of its mainland gains in China. This Triple Intervention forced Japan to give up the Liaodong (Liaodung) Peninsula, in return for financial compensation. This led to great public anger in Japan, and helped to further arouse support for Japanese militarism and imperialism. From then on, Japanese foreign policy became more nationalistic and aggressive. Initially, the Japanese government began to prepare its military forces for a conflict with Russia.

KEY CONCEPTS  
QUESTION

**Causation:** Why did the Triple Intervention of 1895 lead to increased nationalism in Japan?

The Russo–Japanese War, 1904–05

As both Russia and Japan wanted to increase their influence in Korea, after 1895 Japan had increased its economic interests in Korea, including building railways and developing Korea’s timber industry in the Yalu River region. However, Russia – which also had growing designs on Manchuria – had similar plans and, in 1896, persuaded China to lease the Liaodong Peninsula to it for twenty years. The Japanese government was furious, as this was what it had just been forced by the Triple Intervention to give up. Russia also got the right to build the South Manchurian Railway, in order to link the Chinese Eastern Railway to Port Arthur. Because Russia wished to have a direct link between Valdivostok and Port Arthur, it wanted to have access through Korea and thus opposed growing Japanese influence there.

Then, using the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 (see section 2.3) as an excuse, Russia sent some of its troops into Manchuria. Although they should have been withdrawn following the defeat of the Rebellion, Russian troops remained. As a result, Japan decided to sign the Anglo–Japanese Alliance with Britain in January 1902. A Japanese proposal that Russia acknowledge its special interests in Korea, in return for recognising Russia’s in Manchuria, failed. Consequently, in February 1904 – following a naval skirmish – Japan’s government declared war on Russia. Once again, Japan’s military and naval forces proved superior and, in 1905, Russia accepted the offer of the US – which had its own interests in the region – to mediate a peace.

In August 1905, the Treaty of Portsmouth (USA) saw Japan get Russia to recognise its special interests in Korea. Japan also got the southern half of Sakhalin Island, the Russian leasehold of the Liaodong Peninsula – and the South Manchurian Railway. However, while the war had aroused Japanese nationalist feelings, these gains were far less than the public in Japan were expecting. As a result, there were many protests by extreme nationalists, some of which resulted in violent clashes with the forces of law and order.

Nonetheless, Japan’s victory over Russia made it a major political and military power in the Far East, which was likely to bring it into conflict with other Western powers, such as Britain and the US, which also had interests in the region. Also, as well as confirming its growing control over Korea, it gave Japan a significant interest in Manchuria. In 1905, both Britain and the US also recognised Japan’s paramount interests in Korea – in return, Japan promised not to interfere in the US ‘protectorate’ of the Philippines. These agreements allowed Japan to consolidate its control of

2

Japanese Expansion in East Asia, 1931–41



Figure 2.6 Russo–Japanese War, 1904–05