

Observation no: 51

Country-year: 1938 Japan

1. Did the current regime come to power in a military coup?

No, the current civilian regime of Emperor Hirohito and any of the 3 PMs in the year under consideration did not come to power in a military coup, but the military was increasingly involved in politics following several coup attempts in the 1930s. As of 1938, the civilian government had very little control over the military's actions, such as its foreign policy in China, for example.

2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?

No. Modern Japan never experienced a *successful* military coup that completely overthrew the civilian government, though there were many attempts to do so.¹ For example, in February 1936, a group of young officers in the Japanese Imperial Army attempted a coup against the government but failed to assassinate then Prime Minister Keisuke Okada and gain total control. There were also failed coup attempts in October and March 1931, May 1932, and November 1934. Despite the coup failures, the military was the dominant actor on Japanese politics after 1931, and party rule was effectively suspended from 1932 through 1936.²

3. Is the country's top leader a former military officer?

Yes.

I first describe the military history of the Emperor, who had more power than civilian Prime Ministers in Japan. Several PMs in the 1930s had very little political power, and do not really qualify as "top leaders" of the country. That said, some PMs were former military officers with extensive experience. I have therefore included information about whether the relevant PMs were civilians or military in the answer to this question.

¹ Using the definitions of Powell and Clayton, Japan clearly fits the definition for having experienced a coup *attempt*, or "illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive" (252). At the same time, it does not meet the definition for coup d'etat *success*, which only occurs "if the perpetrators seize and hold power for at least seven days" (252). For more information, see, Jonathan M. Powell & Clayton L. Thyne, "Global instances of coups from 1950 to 2010: A new dataset," *Journal of Peace Research*, 2011, 252.

² Prime Minister Tsuyoshi was assassinated by 11 naval officers in the 1932 coup, also known as the May 15th Incident. While the military did not fully come to power following the coup attempt, the incident resulted in an increase in the power of the Japanese military and popular militarism.

Emperor Hirohito,³ who reigned from 1926 through 1989, had various commissions in the Japanese Imperial Army beginning with his commission as Second Lieutenant in 1912.⁴ Hirohito's final commission prior to his ascent to the throne in 1926 was as a Colonel in the Imperial Japanese Army and Captain in Imperial Japanese Navy. As Emperor of Japan in 1940, he was also the Grand Marshal and Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the country.

Both Prime Ministers (PMs) during the period in question were civilians. Fumimara Konoe, who served as PM from June 1937 – January 1939 (and later from July 22, 1940 through October 18, 1941) was a civilian and a career politician. Konoe was succeeded by Baron Hiranuma Kiichirō, a lawyer and civil servant, who served as PM from 5 January 1939 to 30 August 1939. The Nomohan incident occurred during his tenure that summer.

4. Is the military officer corps largely closed to those who do not share the leader's ethnic or sectarian background?

No. However, there is a history of military staffing with descendants of the Choshu and Satsuma feudal domains. After the Restoration period, Choshu dominated the Army and Satsuma dominated the Navy until the mid 1920s.⁵ Eleven of Thirty-one officers who rose to full general during the Meiji era (1868 – 1912) were from the former Choshu domain and nine were Satsuma. There was pro-Choshu bias during the nine-year tenure of war minister Terauchi, which led to Choshu men receiving critical war ministry and staff posts.⁶ The pro-Choshu bias was mostly eliminated by an intentional policy to use the educational system to block Choshu officers entrance to the staff college and eliminate the bias.⁷

There was little class-based component to officer selection. While in the 1870s and 1880s, officers were largely from the former samurai warrior class, as Japan's business and industry expanded, recruitment for officers expanded to include the growing middle class.⁸ Technically, commission was open to qualified graduates of military institutes. NCOs were selected from among re-enlisters and volunteers for active duty who were not yet drafted. In the 1930s, the majority of NCOs were, however from rural Japan.

³ There is some debate over the importance of Hirohito as the Emperor. Drea writes that Hirohito's role in operational deliberations and in policy formulation remains controversial, some claiming he rubber-stamped military policy, others that he initiated it." See, Edward J. Drea. *Japan's Imperial Army: It's Rise and Fall, 1853-1945*, (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 193. Due to this controversy, I mention the four Prime Ministers in office at the time as well.

⁴ Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2000).

⁵ Huntington, *Soldier and the State*, pg. 135.

⁶ Drea, 153.

⁷ Drea, 155.

⁸ Drea, 159.

5. Are there strict ideological requirements for entry into the senior officer corps?

Yes. While there were no strict ideological requirements for entrance into the senior officer corps, the Japanese military was fervently ideological. Around the turn of the century, Japanese military officers emphasized values of “unrelenting discipline, stoical endurance, and unquestioning obedience” as enabling them to survive in Manchuria.⁹ Revised squad regulations in 1908 emphasized the army as a family “whose goal was to nourish spiritual values, military discipline, and unquestioning obedience to superiors. The company commander adopted the role of the strict father, the NCOS that of the loving mother, and the enlisted troops were the children under their care and tutelage.¹⁰ Officers and enlisted members demonstrated a near-obsession with the Emperor, a commitment to war, and emphasized old school Samurai warrior class values.¹¹

6. Is party membership required for entry into the senior officer corps?

No.

7. Does military training involve extensive political education or ideological indoctrination?

Yes, military training involves ideological indoctrination. As mentioned in question 5, around the turn of the century, Japanese military officers emphasized values of “unrelenting discipline, stoical endurance, and unquestioning obedience” as enabling them to survive in Manchuria.¹² Revised squad regulations in 1908 emphasized the army as a family “ whose goal was to nourish spiritual values, military discipline, and unquestioning obedience to superiors. The company commander adopted the role of the strict father, the NCOs that of the loving mother, and the enlisted troops were the children under their care and tutelage.¹³ The military emphasized the glory of war rather than the necessity to avoid it. As mentioned above (see question 5), these values are consistent with the historical values of Japanese warriors.

8. Has the military been used to repress internal dissent in the last five years?

No. The dissent usually emanated from elements within the military itself, such as in the coup attempts described above.

⁹ Drea, 135.

¹⁰ Drea, 135.

¹¹ See, Samuel J. Huntington, *Soldier and the State*, (Belknap Press, 1957), 129.

¹² Drea, 135.

¹³ Drea, 135.

9. Has the military been used to govern the country in the last five years?

Yes. The military did not *overtly* govern Japan prior to 1938, but it had critical influence over the course of Japanese politics and foreign policy.¹⁴ Due to various assassination attempts in the 1930s, particularly the murder of Prime Minister Tsuyoshi by the Young Officer group in 1932, party rule was suspended from 1932-1936. Although party rule was restored and the Meiji constitutional order technically remained intact after 1936, Japan was largely governed by cabinets made up of bureaucrats and military leaders until the end of World War II.¹⁵

10. Is there a paramilitary organization separate from the regular military, used to provide regime or leader security?

No.

11. Is there an internal intelligence apparatus dedicated to watching the regular military?

No.

12. Has a purge of the officer corps occurred in the last five years?

Yes, the group responsible for the February 26, 1936 incident was largely punished and purged from the military. The ideological leaders of the officers' rebellion were executed, and many officers supporting the Imperial Way Faction (which aimed to establish an expansionist, totalitarian, military government) were transferred into the reserves, leaving a more moderate faction in control of the military.¹⁶

13. Is there an institutionalized forum through which civilian leaders and military officers regularly exchange information?

Yes, starting in 1937/1938 there was an institutionalized forum through which civilian leaders and military officers regularly exchanged information, but the forum was inefficient, and the military remained autonomous and generally disobedient to civilian demands.

The general staff was historically suspicious of politicians and civilian ministers meddling in military affairs and opposed the formation of a joint civil-military body. By the end of 1937, Prime Minister Konoe was concerned enough by unilateral army actions (such as the 1931 invasion of Manchuria) that he attempted to create an imperial headquarters to unify civil-military control over army actions in China. The

¹⁴ Elise K. Tipton, *Modern Japan: A Social and Political History*, (London, Routledge, 2002).

¹⁵ Tipton, 124.

¹⁶ "4-7 The 2.26 Incident of 1936, Modern Japan in archives," National Diet Library, accessed March 30, 2013, <http://www.ndl.go.jp/modern/e/cha4/description07.html>

Imperial General Headquarters (IGHQ) were created on November 27, 1937, but they excluded the PM and his civilian cabinet from military planning, which took place under joint navy-army control instead.¹⁷ Service-leaders would agree on policy and then bring initiatives to the Emperor for his approval at imperial conferences located at IGHQ. There was, however, a liaison conference that included the prime and foreign minister along with other civilian officials who would coordinate with military policy. They would also meet in front of the Emperor. Fifteen such conferences were held between 1938 and 1945 but the IGHQ remained the primary military policy-making body, rather than the liaison conference.¹⁸ Civil-military coordination was difficult and inefficient under such a fragmented coordinating body. The conference system was discontinued in early 1938 and replaced by a four or five minister conference system. The liaison conference format was revived by Konoe in late November 1940 and convened 145 times until February 1944.¹⁹

¹⁷ Drea, 192.

¹⁸ Ibid., 193.

¹⁹ Ibid.