

The Origin of Marine Defense Concept in Pre-Modern Japan

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The IAFOR International Conference on Education – Hawaii 2017
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The author analyses the main tendencies in the latter part of Pre-Modern Japan (1603–1867), which led to the origin of Marine Defense Concept (*kaiboron*). Since 1639 Japan held national seclusion policy (*sakoku*), limiting its trade contacts to China and the Netherlands.

However, the situation changed in the latter part of the XVIII century, when Russian trade ship arrived to Hokkaido (1778), and a report from a Hungarian adventurer Maurice Benyovszky claiming about possible Russian naval assault against Japan, was published. These events gave an impact to Marine Defense Concept with the idea of protecting Japanese northern borders against foreign ships.

The paper describes two main documents of that period – «The Inquiry into Customs of Red Ezo» (*Akaezo Fusetsuko* 赤蝦夷風説考, 1783) by Kudo Heisuke and «A Discussion of the Military Problems of a Maritime Country» (*Kaikoku Heidan* 海国兵談, 1791) by Hayashi Shihei, analyzing the defense measures by these scholars and their influence on Japanese official policy. Regarding the further development of the Concept, the author also makes a research on Edicts against foreign ships.

Keywords: Marine Defense Concept, seclusion, Russia, Dutch Studies, Ezo, Tokugawa

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Introduction

Marine Defense Concept (*kaiboron* 海防論) was a military concept, which originated in Japan under the rule of Tokugawa Shogunate 徳川幕府 (1603–1867) in order to protect Japanese borders against possible invasion of European ships. Analysis of this Concept includes the study of such fields as economy, politics, ideology and foreign relations, mainly covering the period since the latter part of the XVIIIth until the middle part of the XIXth centuries, which is author's main field of study.

The study of this Concept has been made by Japanese historians Kosaka Masaaki (1958), Kitajima Masamoto (1968), Tsurumi Shunsuke (1975), Hara Takeshi (1988), Sato Shosuke (1993) etc, whereas modern research has been carried out by Tanaka Hiroyuki (2011), Yokoyama Yoshinori (2013) etc. Concerning Western scholars, works by J. Murdoch (1925), H. Gowen (1927), G. Sansom (1963, 1965), M. Jansen (1965, 2002), Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi (1986) etc. can be outlined, where as in Russia the basic research on the Concept was fulfilled by V. Shchepkin (Shchepkin, 2011) and partially by A. Galperin (Galperin, 1958). In many cases the Concept has been studied in context of an ideological struggle between various philosophical groups on the eve of economic and political crisis of Tokugawa Shogunate, with emphasis upon Confucian Learning (*shushigaku* 朱子学) and National Learning (*kokugaku* 国学), thus providing an ideological background.

In this article the author focuses specifically on different backgrounds such as Dutch Studies, foreign relationship concept, the situation at Japanese borders which led to creation of Marine Defense Concept, analyzes the sources by prominent Japanese scholars Kudo Heisuke and Hayashi Shihei and their influence. Besides, issues regarding the development of this Concept in its connection with military science in Japan as well as Edicts against foreign ships are also touched.

Dutch studies

Prior to 1637, Japan maintained intensive contacts with such European countries as Portugal (since 1543), Spain (since 1587), the Netherlands (since 1609) and England (since 1613)¹. However, the Shimabara Rebellion (Kyushu) in 1637–1638 marked the turning point in Japanese attitude towards connections with the West and led to seclusion policy – *sakoku* 鎖国, incorporated in 1637–1641 and resulted in limiting Japanese interactions to China, Korea and the Netherlands².

However, the VIIIth Shogun Tokugawa Yoshimune 徳川吉宗 (1684–1751) gradually relaxed restrictions on cultural contacts with the Netherlands – from 1720 the restriction on the import of European practical books was relaxed and the study of Dutch was highly encouraged (Sansom, 1963, pp. 188–189; Van Sant, 2012, p. 208), thus contributing to a high interest towards Dutch (Western) science and culture – *rangaku* 蘭学, the main purpose of which was to study and spread Western learning, as the information and knowledge was broadly European. During the reign of Tanuma Okitsugu 田沼意次(1719–1788)³, the Councilor of Elders, Dutch Studies developed into an individual scientific field, covering Western anatomy and medicine.

Thus the understanding of Western practical knowledge became profound, but, as research shows, the basis for that had been created by the work «Things Heard and Seen from the West» (*Seiyo Kibun* 西洋記聞, 1713) written by scholar Arai Hakuseki 新井白石 (1657–1725) after his conversations with Italian missionary Giovanni Sidotti (1668–1714). Hakuseki made a full description of Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe and America and gave a comparative analysis of Catholicism, Christianity and Buddhism, covering religious sphere of the West. The manuscript by Hakuseki was thus an attempt to fix the ideological boundary between Japan and the West (The Cambridge History of Japan, 1991).

Besides, much research on understanding of the attitude towards the Outer World had been done by scholar and astronomer Nishikawa Joken 西川如見 (1648–1724). In his work «Thoughts about Water and Land of Japan» (*Nihon suido ko* 日本水土考, 1720) he put Japan in the center of the World (Middle Kingdom), surrounded by Barbarian Countries. Due to superb geographical position and natural climate, Japan was said to obtain a strong KI 気 energy, which helped to obtain harmony in the country despite not a big territory. It can be seen that geographical determinism became a key factor in geopolitical contacts between Japan and the West (Mescheryakov, 2015).

The same position of Middle Kingdom can be seen in the views of scholar Kumazawa Banzan 熊沢蕃山 (1619–1691). In his «Explanation of Heavens and Earth» (*Kenkon Bensetsu* 乾坤弁説, 1659) he wrote that «Americans [i.e., Indians] are extremely stupid. They must be classed together with the ignorant Ainu of the present day. In general they do not study nor have they etiquette. They are but a step removed from the birds and beasts. Only by studying, finding the way, and knowing the proper forms of social behavior does man become man» (Jansen, 1965, p. 145).

Thus, the views of Nishikawa Joken, Kumazawa Banzan and Arai Hakuseki represented the general understanding of Outer World in Japan, which had strong influence of Chinese Confucian Learning, considered paramount in Pre-Modern Japan: the Middle Kingdom was regarded the center of the Universe, and prior to the end of the XVIIIth century the image of the West together with diffusion of Western science was understood through the prism of Dutch reports (*fusetsugaki* 風説書), sent annually to the Shogunate.

Radicalization of foreign relationship concept

Understanding of the West by scholars in latter part of Pre-Modern Japan is closely related to the official position of Tokugawa Shogunate, oriented to continuing and strengthening seclusion policy, which was considered the «moral state of affairs» (*soho* 祖法). However, the situation around the borders of Japan had changed radically, as more and more foreign trade and military ships, mainly from Russia, America and England entered Japanese ports, seeking for provision and permission to trade with Japan. Thus the whole seclusion policy concept was put under threat, which contributed to creation of Marine Defense Concept (原, 1988).

The number of foreign ships which came to Japan

YEAR	HOLLAND	CHINA	ENGLAND	RUSSIA	THE USA
1770s	2 ships per year	13 ships per year		1 ship (1778)	
1780s	2 ships per year	13 ships per year			1 ship (1787)
1790s	1-2 ship per year	10 ships per year	2 ships (1791, 1797)	1 ship (1793)	1 ship (1790)
1800s	1 ship per year	11 ships per year	1 ship (1808)	3 ships (1804, 1807)	
1810s	1 ship per year	11 ships per year	3 ships (1816–1818)	1 ship (1818)	
1820s	1 ship per year	11 ships per year	2 ships (1822, 1824)		
1830s					1 ship (1837)

As it can be seen, in 1778 there was one Russian ship which came to Japan – it was Russian expedition to Hokkaido (at that time – Ezo land) headed by Dmitry Shabalin and Ivan Antipin with a task to explore the possibility of trade negotiations with Japanese authorities, thus becoming «a starting point of Japanese awareness of Russia's presence to the north» (Shchepkin, 2016). It's necessary to remark that Central Japanese Government wasn't aware of these contacts, so the monopoly was taken by Matsumae Domain (southern part of present Hokkaido), which was licensed to control the northern trade and was autonomous (大石、 pp. 129–130).

By the second half of the XVIIIth century Russian merchants had already moved to the Far East, exploring the lands near Pacific Ocean, the Sea of Okhotsk and the environs of Kamchatka land. Much emphasis was put on Russian penetration to Kuril Islands and Sakhalin. The first settlements appeared there in the XVIIth, and by the middle part of the XVIII century Russian merchants had already formed their bases close to Japan. Three main expeditions can be mentioned:

- 1) Semyon Dezhnev (1605–1673) expedition to the Bering Strait in 1648,
- 2) Yerofey Khabarov (1603–1671) exploration of the Amur River region,
- 3) Expeditions by Vitus Bering (1681–1741) in 1728 and 1741 resulted in exploration of Alyaska.

The visit of Russian ship in 1778 became a turning point in creation of «Russian threat» idea, especially after translation and research made on letters written by adventurer Maurice Benyovszky (1746–1786) in 1771. In one of his letters, addressed to director of Dutch trade house in Dejima, he said that the Russians construct fortresses in Kamchatka and Kuril Islands in order to attack northern borders of Japan. Benyovszky advertised Japanese Government to take defensive measures against Russian menace (Pozdneev, 1909). These letters also initiated Marine Defense Concept, marked with discussions by such prominent scholars as Kudo Heisuke 工藤平助 (1734–1800), Honda Toshiaki 本多利明 (1744–1822) etc. who promoted the idea of trade negotiations with Russian merchants in the north.

The ideas by Kudo Heisuke

Kudo Heisuke was a physician from Sendai Domain and famous for his manuscript «The Inquiry into Customs of Red Ezo» (*Akaezo Fusetsuko* 赤蝦夷風説考, 1783)⁴. The main information for his work was taken from Nagasaki translators as well as from Dutch books about Russian history and geography.

Kudo understood Russian power, but still regarded impossible Russian aggression against Japan and was skeptical to Dutch official reports. In his manuscript economic background is emphasized: «When I asked the Dutch about Red Hair Ezo, I heard many stories, heard about their aggressive plans against Japan. However, I don't regard these stories seriously, because Dutch interpreters, who worked in Nagasaki, could exaggerate these facts ... The Red Ezo just want to trade with us, as they know our country has much precious metals ... In fact, the products, which the Netherlands merchants import to Japan, are expensive because of high transportation fees, where as in Russia there are many rivers, so Japan can acquire more products. Russian has much experience in trade with China, so if this country starts trade with us, Japan-Dutch trade would be threatened because of low prices. That's why the Dutch do their best to prevent Japan from having trade with Russia» (工藤, pp. 216–217, 1943).

Much attention is given to Russian history and geography – it was first mentioned that Russia is a neighbor of Japan. So the movement of the Russians towards Japan is inevitable but it can be stopped if Japan reclaims Ezo mines with precious metals, which can be used to get Russian medical as well as industrial goods (工藤, pp. 219–220, 1943).

Thus, the manuscript by Kudo contained perspective economic aspects, emphasizing Ezo land reclamation, which could provide additional rice paddies and attract population from other parts of Japan. Moreover, Ezo could provide wealth to Japan due to mine reclamation. These products could be used in official trade with Russia and bring prosperity to Japan without illegal trade: «It is very hard to prevent such an illegal trade, but if we start official trade relations, then we can take different measures. First is the building of fortresses. Second is the prohibition of illegal trade. If we leave everything as it is, the illegal trade will become trickier, and the number of merchants will increase. If we consider it, then there is no way but to make this trade legal. If we would have legal trade relations, we could know the manners of those people and the natural features of their lands, and work out appropriate measures» (Shchepkin, 2016).

Under the influence of Kudo Heisuke conclusions Japanese Government sent an expedition to Ezo in 1785–1786. The main organizer was Matsumoto Hidemochi 松本秀持, holding the position of Financial Superintendent. Expedition to Ezo became the first official expedition to this region, providing information about Kunashir, Iturup, Urup Islands as well as Sakhalin.

Influence of Kudo manuscript

Analyzing «The Inquiry into Customs of Red Ezo», we can state that in the early stage Marine Defense Concept incorporated the idea of trade as a source of national wealth and was further developed in works by prominent scholar Honda Toshiaki:

1) «A Secret Plan of Government» (*Keisei Hisaku* 経世秘策)

Honda claimed that transfer of capital from Edo (present Tokyo) to Ezo would contribute much to development of Japanese economy and Japan could become the leader in Far East like England in the West. Realizing the necessity of Ezo land colonization, Honda claimed that Japan «will get lands with mines, which can provide wealth, will get the reclaimed land with good crops, which will save Japan from famine; will get the forests which can supply wood for ships construction. If we keep Ezo lands uncultivated they will become Russian territory» (*Vsemirnaya istoriya ekonomicheskoy mysli*, pp. 300–301, 1987). The main point of view of the advocates was an idea to establish a national merchant marine that would enhance the national treasury by selling products abroad.

This work was written in 1789–1801, during that time Japanese Government regarded the idea of cultivating all Ezo land and putting it under governmental control. That policy was seen as the only one way to overcome the results of Tenmei Era Famine, one of the most devastating in Japanese history.

2) «Situation on Red Ezo» (*Sekie Dosei* 赤夷動静, 1791), advocating the idea of Russo-Japanese trade benefits:

«Red Ezo are Russian citizens. Every summer they arrive to the eastern part of Ezo to give us our ship wreckers. They are moving to the south and hold secret trade with ainu ... Russia is not an enemy to us, and trade partnership would be beneficial to both of us ... The products we shall give to the Russians will be taken to their capital - Moscovia ... Its necessary to designate places of trade on Etorofu [Iturup] and Kunashiri [Kunashir] islands, where our sea products will be exchanged to Russian goods. It would contribute to cultural contacts, too» (本多, pp. 113, 125–126, 1978).

Honda criticizes Japanese attitude towards Ainu, indigenous population of northern islands – if much attention had been given to their enlightenment and education, Kuril Islands wouldn't have become Russian land, so Ainu enlightenment was considered crucial for strengthening Japanese positions on Kuril Isles. To achieve this goal, Honda recommended to transfer Japanese prisoners to Ezo so that they could become farmers (本多, pp. 128–129, 1978). Thus, Honda attitude shows that Japan began to realize its northern borders and took efforts to cultivate Hokkaido, though previously it was regarded as barbarian, not Japanese land.

The ideas by Hayashi Shihei

As we have seen, Kudo proposed the idea of trade with Russia as a measure to protect northern borders of Japan. However, different point of view was presented in manuscript «A Discussion of the Military Problems of a Maritime Country» (*Kaikoku Heidan* 海国兵談, 1791) written by Hayashi Shihei 林子平 (1738–1793), another scholar of Pre-Modern Japan.

His concept was more radical, as he pushed for Japan to adopt Western military science and the re-education of the samurai. He complained of the lack of organized drill exercises, and stressed the importance of teamwork drill, rather than mere individual martial training. In his work he gave a lot of technical descriptions about shipbuilding, cannons and other military designs. The first 15 chapters were on military tactics on land and sea, while the last one described what is necessary to make nation rich and strong (Shchepkin, 2011).

Shihei claimed: «What is meant by maritime nation? It is a country not connected by land to any other, but which is bordered on all sides by the sea. There are defense preparations which are suited to a maritime nation, and which differ in kind from those prescribed in Chinese military works, as well as those which have traditionally been taught in Japan by the various schools... Military preparation for Japan means a knowledge of the way to repel foreign invaders, a vital consideration at present. The way to do this is by naval warfare, the essential factor in naval warfare is cannons. To be well prepared in these two respects is the true requisite of Japanese defense, unlike the military policies appropriate to such continental countries as China and Tartary. Only when naval warfare has been mastered should land warfare be considered...» (Shchepkin, 2011).

As it was mentioned previously, Japan was under seclusion policy, so the construction of big vessels was strictly prohibited. Military tactics were completely restricted to ground warfare and generally followed ancient Chinese texts, since the main problem of China had been overland invasion.

However, Shihei believed Russia to be an even greater threat to Japan. This was based not only on the increased activity of the Russians in the area of the Kuril Islands, but also on the high regard in which *Shihei* held European military techniques such as the employment of great firepower and of large navies. These military virtues, he believed, were supported by what he thought as the benevolent and well-organized governments of the West and their scientific learning. *Shihei* warned that the Chinese could copy the tactics of the Occidental Powers and send forces to Japan, so he advocated for the fortifications of the coastline with naval batteries and a broad program of reeducation for the samurai in both military and literary subjects in order to cure the warrior class, which was in decline because of peaceful Tokugawa era (林子平、1933).

Further development of Marine Defense Concept

Although Hayashi Shihei was repressed, accused of panic rumors, his ideas were taken into consideration by Japanese Government during the Kansei Era (1789–1801),

when seclusion policy was considered as the «moral state of affairs», so Marine Defense Concept began to be realized on governmental level through special edicts, the first of which was «Edict to Deal With Foreign Vessels» (*Ikokusen Toriatsukaiho* 異国船取扱法, 1791), officially introducing the Concept in its real sense. The text of the Law was quite radical: «One foreign ship has appeared in the vicinity of Chikuzen, Nagato and Iwami Provinces ... In case if foreign ships arrive to Japan, it's necessary to check if it is going to Nagasaki or not ... In such case special measures should be taken for defense, and local statesmen should be sent to the foreign ship. If its crew refuses to leave Japan, the ship can be attacked and burnt down. The use of local artillery and guns is permitted» (御触書天保集成, 1959).

However, the HMS Phaeton incident in Nagasaki Harbor (1808), resulted in taking Dutch hostages⁵, marked the turning point in the attitude towards foreign ships, which were obliged to go away from Japanese waters. Thus «Edict to Drive Away All Foreign Ships» (*Ikokusen Uchibarairei* 異国船打払令, 1825) was passed, contributing much to strengthening of Japanese seclusion policy. According to this Law, local authorities were ordered to arrest or kill “without a second thought” any foreigner who landed Japan without permission (御触書天保集成, 1959). That law was the most radical compared to the previous Act and turned into Morrison incident (1837), when, according to the Law, the American merchant ship «Morrison» was fired and driven away.

Acceptance of Western military science

Despite such a harsh position towards foreign ships, Western practical knowledge was incorporated into the Maritime Defense Concept, and used for strengthening coastal defense, particularly artillery, and organizing military trainings. The main reason for such rapid changes were news about the First Opium War between Britain and China, which lasted from 1840 to 1842, resulting in British victory and the Treaty of Nanking with China (1842). It was the first unequal treaty and the beginning of colonization of China by Britain, which led to further weakening of the Chinese state's power and legitimacy. Japan knew about the results of the War from Dutch reports and, as a result, reexamined its attitude towards Western learning, as traditional feudal ways which relied upon samurai troops were not sufficient. Thus the situation in the Outer World gave impulse to increasing modernization in Japan.

The most prominent scholar who encouraged western military technology in order to better resist the West was engineer Takashima Shuhan 高島秋帆 (1798–1866), who established two companies of infantry equipped with guns, as well as one artillery battery, and in 1841 successfully demonstrated gun training with 125 warriors, using Dutch commands for drilling (Murdoch, 1926, p. 563–564; Sansom, 1965, pp. 249–251). The training was held at Tokumarugahara in Musashi Province (now Takashimadaira in Tokyo) and contributed much to the spread of military experience – «Complete Book of Maritime Gunnery» (*Kaijo hojutsu zensho* 海上砲術全書, 1843–1854) and «Western Manuscript on Maritime Defense» (*Bokai yoron* 防海要論, 1864) were published, containing the explanation for constructing and running coastal gun batteries.

Besides Takashima, gunnery, Maritime Defense problems as well as the idea of casting cannons from copper were studied by scholar and politician Sakuma Shozan 佐久間象山 (1811–64). Having analyzed the reasons for the British victory in the First Opium War, formulated his program «Eight Policies for the Defense of the Sea» (*Kaibo Hassaku* 海防八策), advocating Western methods of coastal defense. It included equipping strategic fortifications with artillery, suspending the export of copper so that it could be used in guns, building large merchant ships, supervising maritime trade, building modern warships and training naval officers, establishing widespread schools for men and women, making governmental rewards and punishments clear, and employing men based on ability (Sansom, 1965, p. 254).

Thus, Western learning became connected with Maritime Defense Concept, and after the Opium War there was no doubt that Japan should undertake measures to protect borders and avoid conflict with the West. As a result, Foreign Ships Expulsion Order (1825) was abolished and in 1842 replaced with the Order for the Provision of Firewood and Water (*Shinsui Kyuyorei* 薪水給与令) (横山, 2013, pp. 343–344).

Conclusion

After the arrival of the fleet of «black ships» by Commodore M. C. Perry (1853) and subsequent conclusion of the Treaties of Peace and Amity with the USA, Russia, Britain, France and the Netherlands, Japan ended its seclusion policy, opened its ports (*kaikoku* 開国) and started to renovate its domestic system. With the *Meiji* Restoration (1868), when political power was transferred from *shogun* to Emperor, Japan started the rapid westernization and modernization under the slogan «Rich Country – Strong Army» (*fukoku kyo:hei* 富国強兵).

Marine Defense Concept can be regarded as a preliminary stage, when Japan started to realize itself as a country surrounded by sea, which nevertheless couldn't protect Japan against foreign countries, so Japan had to take measures to strengthen its position towards the Outer World. Begun as a Concept with main emphasis upon the trade as a source of national income, it accumulated Western military knowledge and resulted in radicalization of foreign intercourse, especially after incident in Nagasaki (1808). As we have seen, the main impulse to the Concept was given by the arrival of Russian ship in 1778, but since the beginning of the XIXth century it touched not only Russia, but all European countries Japan didn't communicate with, thus resulting in Edicts against foreign ships.

¹ Profound analysis of Japanese foreign trade was done by Iwao Seiichi (1976), Toby R. (1984), Yamamoto Hirofumi (1995) etc.

² Besides these countries, Japan held contacts with Ryukyu Kingdom (through Satsuma Domain), so *sakoku* policy didn't mean complete isolation of Japan. Modern Japanese historians turn to reevaluate the use of *sakoku* notion to Pre-Modern Japan, explaining it by the lack of seclusion consciousness in Japanese mentality at that time (川勝, 2012).

³ Prewar Japanese works directly accuse him of taking numerous bribes for personal enrichment, but modern historiography (like «The Period of Tanuma Okitsugu» by Oishi Shinzaburo, 1991) presented a new point of view on his domestic policy – during his time many efforts were made towards land reclamation, coinage of new currency, and increasing of foreign trade volume with the use of dry sea staple food (*tawaramono* 俵物).

⁴ «Red Ezo» means «red-haired» Russians, who came to trade to Kuril Islands and Sakhalin.

⁵ The incident showed the low level of coastal defense in Nagasaki and resulted in Nagasaki Magistrate Matsudaira Yasuhide 松平康秀 (1768–1808) suicide.



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