

# *The Internal and External Factors Responsible for the Collapse of the Tokugawa bakufu*

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In the discourse on modernization of the Far East, the case of Japan serves as a particularly important example. Historians of Japan and modernity agree to a great extent that the history of modern Japan begins with the *crise de regime* of the Tokugawa Shogunate, the military rulers of Japan from the year 1600. It is therefore pertinent to explore the relevant themes of political instability, foreign contact and inner contradictions that eventually led to the decline and subsequent collapse of this regime, while at the same time giving these factors a closer look in order to understand whether the *bakufu* system could have been preserved had the Tokugawa leaders followed an alternate policy.

A survey of Japanese society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century reveals a complex feudal society which was held together in a very precarious manner by the military regime of the Tokugawas. Japan still maintained the institution of monarchy in these years. However, the Emperor was restricted to his imperial city of Kyoto and served a symbolic role rather than a practical one. The administration of Japan was a task which legitimately lay in the hands of the Emperor, but in 1600 was given by the Imperial court to the Tokugawa family. The Tokugawas were in-charge of a feudal regime made up of a number of *daimyo* or feudal lords who governed their own *han* or territories/provinces with a certain degree of autonomy and sovereignty, providing in return military service and loyalty to the Shogun. Whereas the *daimyo* exercised power specifically at a local level, the Tokugawa Shogunate would not only govern their own vast lands and vassals, but also make decisions related to foreign policy and national peacekeeping. This control that the shoguns had on the *daimyo* found expression in the system of *sankin kotai* or the alternate attendance system, whereby the *daimyo* were required to maintain a permanent residence in Edo and be present there every other year. In addition to this, the family of the *daimyo* would be permanently residing at Edo, thereby creating a sort of hostage system. An important side-effect of the *sankin kotai* system was that it riddled the fragmented country with transport routes and trading possibilities. The yearly processions of *daimyo* and their retainers threaded together the economies of the domains through which they passed, resulting in the rapid growth of market towns and trading stations as well as the development of one of the most impressive road networks in the world. What resulted, as Richard Storry wrote, was the creation of a national market in the 17<sup>th</sup> century which would clear the path for eventual economic modernization programmes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Andrew Gordon stated that Tokugawa rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was scraping through year after year, pointing to an inherent instability in the regime. This was compounded by the increasing Western presence in Japanese waters in this period. In his words, 'they were powerful emissaries of the capitalist and nationalist revolutions that were just then transforming Euro-American societies and reaching beyond to transform the world.' Hence, the appearance of these foreigners amplified the shortcomings and flaws of the Tokugawa regime. According to W.G. Beasley, the immediate background to the threat Japan faced from the Western powers was the latter's trade with China. The isolationist policy of the Tokugawa regime with regard to foreign trade was envisaged in the policy of *sakoku* which aimed to show hostility and aggression to any foreigner in Japanese waters. However, as Beasley's remark clearly shows, the aftermath of the Opium Wars brought to light the view the Western powers had – that the structure they had devised to deal with trade in China was

adequate to deal with other 'orientals'. In 1844, the Dutch king William II submitted a polite entreaty to the *bakufu* explaining that the world had changed, and Japan could no longer remain safely disengaged from the commercial networks and diplomatic order that the West was spreading throughout the globe. With the conclusion of the Opium Wars, the *bakufu* seemed to realise that this warning was a sign of things to come and initiated certain changes – relaxation of the 1825 policy of shoot first, ask questions later; allow Westerners to collect fuel and provisions when in Japanese waters and then be sent on their way; gradual build-up of coastal defences in the Tokugawa heartland as well as in other domains. Andrew Gordon concluded that these measures led to the strengthening of an emergent national consciousness among a growing body of political actors, and the Opium wars had definitely confirmed the fears of those who viewed Westerners as insatiable predators intent on conquest as well as profit, giving the stance of seclusion a more powerful rationale than ever. This was not entirely false, as the tenets of free trade and diplomatic protocol gave the west the feeling of being perched on a moral high ground which did not make for a flattering picture of the Japanese.

Commodore Matthew Perry's voyages to Japan were indeed a decisive moment in the narrative of the downfall of the Tokugawas. It signalled the beginning of the end of the *bakufu* in a number of respects. Perry's 1853 visit and subsequent departure was marked with a request and a warning – to agree to trade in peace, or to suffer the consequences in war. This sparked off a wave of panic in Japan, particularly in the *bakufu* administration where a clear course of action was not at hand. Such was the lack of clarity that with the intent of trying to garner consensus on the issue of granting concessions, the *bakufu* actually requested the *daimyo* to submit their advice in writing on how best to deal with the situation. With no other course of action in sight, the *bakufu* granted certain rights to the Americans when Perry returned. The Treaty of Kanagawa gave the United States of America, and later France, Britain, Holland and Russia as well, the right to stop over and re-fuel and re-stock provisions at two remote ports - Shimoda and Hakodate. The Americans were also allowed to establish a permanent consul in Shimoda, and were given the right to extraterritoriality. By 1858, the *bakufu* negotiators signed yet another treaty, which Andrew Gordon insisted 'very nearly replicated the Opium War settlement with China without a shot having been fired.' Abe Masahiro, the chief councillor to the *bakufu* and the initial policy-maker with regard to Western powers, had died in 1857, leaving the position to Ii Naosuke to continue. Naosuke, in the name of the shogun, authorized Japanese signatures to treaties with the United States, Britain, Russia and France, followed by acceptance of similar treaties with eighteen other countries. These treaties had three main conditions: Yedo and certain other important ports were now open to foreigners; a very low scale of import duties was imposed upon Japan; and the condition of extraterritoriality was extended to other nations as well.

The effect of these 'unequal treaties' was significant both in terms of the foreign policy of Tokugawa Japan as well as the internal repercussions which would intensify in the years following 1858. In fact, most historians of modern Japan find the causes for the downfall of the Tokugawa *bakufu* within these two rubrics. The first, the effect of the opening of the closed door of Japan to Western traders leading to a near colonisation of the region which was close to emulation of China after the Opium Wars. The second, a factor which is increasingly the subject of more studies on the Tokugawa collapse, emphasized the slow but irresistible pressure of internal economic change, notably the growth of a merchant capitalist class that was eroding the foundations of the *bakufu*. This second view therefore ventured to point out that Western aggression, exemplified by Perry's voyages, merely provide the final impetus towards a collapse that was inevitable in any case. Richard Storry, a proponent of the idea that Western aggression was the main cause of the downfall of the Tokugawas, critiqued the second view on the grounds that it tended to underrate the impact of successful Western pressure on Japan in the 1850s, for in his opinion the sense of shock induced by

the advent of foreigners was catastrophic. He wrote, 'it is inconceivable that the Shogunate would have collapsed had it been able to resist the demands made by the United States, Russia, Great Britain, and other nations of the West.' That being said, even historians like Storry agree that the internal factors were significant, though not as decisive as the external.

Economically speaking, the treaties with the Western powers led to internal financial instability. The discovery of Western merchants that gold in Japan could be bought with silver coins for about 1/3 the going global rate led them to purchase massive quantities of specie to be sold in China for triple the price. To combat this 'financial haemorrhage', the *bakufu* in 1860 debased gold coins to bring them in line with global standards, thereby expanding money supply and causing sharp inflation. Foreign demand caused silk prices to triple by the early 1860s for both domestic and foreign purchasers. Imports increased of lightly taxed, inexpensive foreign goods, especially finished cotton, helping consumers but conversely driving Japanese producers to ruin. As a result, protests erupted amongst producers and consumers alike, and had to be subdued through *bakufu* intervention. This amounted to a sharp rise in the number of anti-Tokugawa activists in the country who blamed the *bakufu* for impoverishing the people and dishonouring the Emperor.

A salient feature of the internal causes of decline was the *daimyo-ronin-chonin* alliance which formed as a result of the prevailing conditions in Japan. With the emergence of a money economy, the traditional method of exchange through rice was being rapidly replaced by specie and the merchant classes (*chonin*) capitalized on this change. This led the *daimyo* to fall into heavy debt to urban merchants, which in turn translated into social mobility for the *chonin*. As for the samurai, the warrior group was facing harder times than the *daimyo*, being reduced from a respected warrior clan to a parasitic class who, in the face of economic distress, gave up their allegiance to the *daimyo* and became *ronin*, or masterless warriors. Many settled in urban areas, turning their attention to the study of western languages and science, leading to an intellectual opening of Japan to the West. However, above all they were devoted to the imperial cause, which they referred to as the highest loyalty of all. It is clear, however, that the dependence on the *chonin* came not only from the *daimyo*, who established these ties very often through marriage, but also the samurai. The importance this group had acquired within the functioning of the Tokugawa system, even the Shogunate became dependent on the mercantile class for their special knowledge in conducting the financial affairs of the system. Thus, the rise of a *daimyo-ronin-chonin* alliance with a distinct anti-*bakuhau* character and a common cause to end the Tokugawa regime, according to Barrington Moore Jr., represented a breakdown of the rigid social hierarchies that was part of the system of what John K. Fairbank called 'centralized feudalism'. Nathaniel Peffer claimed that the nice balance of the Tokugawa clan, the lesser feudal lords and their attendant samurai, the peasants, artisans and merchants could be kept steady only as long as all the weights in the scale were even. However, according to Peffer, the emergence of the Japanese version of the European bourgeoisie from amongst the merchant classes was the real deal-breaker in the entire precariously balanced equation.

The *tozama* clans now had enough fodder to incite rebellion in the nation. Under the guise of representing groups who wanted the restoration of the powers of the Emperor, these clans (specifically the Satsuma and Choshu clans) called for the deposition of the Tokugawa *bakufu*. In 1866, the Satsuma-Choshu alliance and the victory of the Choshu in military conflict led to the most immediate cause of the downfall of the Tokugawas. The strength of these domains lay in their high productive capacity, financial solvency and an unusually large number of samurai. Another significant advantage, though incomprehensible at first glance, was the relatively stunted commercial development of these regions. From a purely psychological standpoint, this meant that class unrest had been less erosive of morale than in places close to the major urban centres. With such confidence in the ranks, the alliance moved on towards Kyoto by the end of 1867, and in 1868,

warriors from the Satsuma clan demanded an imperial 'restoration'. On January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1868, a new Emperor Mutsuhito ascended the Japanese throne and took the title of 'Meiji' or 'The Enlightened One', and by May 1868, the Tokugawa navy had finally surrendered, signalling the formal end of the Tokugawa Shogunate's rule in Japan.

The *bakuhan* system was wrought with flaws from the outset, and the precarious position that the Tokugawa's enjoyed was bound to collapse at some point. Compounding these were various other factors – financial instability, the arrival of Western powers, the unequal treaties, feudal nature of society, the *daimyo-ronin-chonin* alliance, the *samkin-kotai* system and the opposition of certain *daimyo* to Tokugawa rule – led to a situation where it was only a matter of time for the Tokugawa to fall. It is unsure whether or not the Tokugawas would have survived had events in the two decades prior to the deposition been handled differently. However, it does not seem likely that such a significant difference would have been made, as the Tokugawa Shogunate dug its own grave as events continued on course. Hence, the fall of the Tokugawa *bakuhan* system was the result of a variety of internal and external factors, at some points working together while at others being especially distinct in themselves, and paved the way for the eventual 'Meiji' Restoration.

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