With the collapse of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1868, a new era in Japanese history was ushered in with the Meiji Restoration. Although this may be an uncontested and objective historical observation and truth, the debate of how the Meiji Restoration came to fruition remains fiercely contentious. Some scholars argue external pressures were more significant to the Tokugawa collapse; on the contrary, some scholars dispute that it was internal tensions that were more important. Both sides certainly contain elements of truth, and certainly it was a combination of external pressures and internal tensions that ultimately led to the Tokugawa collapse, but in the end, external pressures seem to have played a more significant role in bringing down the Tokugawa shogunate and ushering in the Meiji Restoration. In particular, it was external pressures that galvanized an increasing sense of urgency for reform within Japan, in addition to the fact that external pressures clearly highlighted the many weaknesses of the Tokugawa shogunate and fostered the necessary consensus for the type of change that Japan had to undergo in order to become an international and imperial power.

To begin, calls for reform were nothing new in Tokugawa Japan. There were calls for civil service reform based off a system of meritocracy rather than hereditary daimyo or high samurai status, and indeed the resulting economic growth and social change created by alternate attendance “eroded the boundaries between status groups and generated new tensions among the primary status groups of farmer and samurai” (Gordon 2009: 22). Thus, it is quite clear that while not leading to political chaos, “these domestic tensions did foster political reflection,
critiques of the established order, and proposals for political reform,” but alas these intense internal pressures for reform remained impotent and fell on deaf ears at the imperial court until the arrival of the western imperial intrusion (Totman 1983: 72). Indeed, it was Commodore Perry’s arrival in 1853 “which finally made it possible for serious reformers…to convert their theoretical understanding into an urgent public demand for change. When the ‘black ships’ of the American Pacific squadron dropped anchor at Uraga…reformist ideologues no longer had to argue in such vague quantities as social justice. Now they could argue, as many did with compelling eloquence, that unless the realm’s grave internal ills were rectified immediately, Japan would fall precipitously into degrading subservience to the Westerner” (Huber 1983: 68-69). Calls for reform became widespread after Perry’s gunboat diplomacy, and numerous opinions emerged advocating for different types of reform. Some reformers such as Tokugawa Nariaki, believed that in order avenge the greatest disgrace suffered in Japanese history, the bakufu should have issued an immediate expulsion of foreigners and a declaration of war to the western powers who threatened Japanese sovereignty. Other reformers such as Ii Naosuke, believed that Japan should put an end to Japan’s seclusion laws, open itself up, and learn from the west in order to defeat the west. Still other reformers, those of whom had traveled to Europe or the United States on missions sent by their domains or by the bakufu jettisoned their rudimentary plans for immediate expulsion, and developed “a rather sophisticated appreciation of the potential of Western technologies and even political institutions” (Gordon 2009: 59). Clearly then, it was external pressures rather than internal tensions that gave Japanese reformers the necessary shot in the arm that pushed them to discard the Tokugawa shogunate with the Meiji Restoration.
In addition to a heightened sense of urgency, the emergence of external pressures elucidated many of the extant and copious weaknesses of the Tokugawa shogunate vis-à-vis Western imperial powers. First and foremost, the foreign policy crisis after 1853 made it painfully obvious “that the Tokugawa government, entrusted with the duty of protecting emperor and empire from foreign aggression, was unable to do anything of the kind” (Bolitho 1983: 60).

Of course the reason though for the ineffective Tokugawa government, was precisely because the authority of the shogunate focused on its relation with the daimyo, and claimed only limited or indirect influence over the commoner population of the domains. This, in turn, led to a problematic fiscal condition within the bakufu because the shogunate never asserted a right to tax commoners outside its direct land holdings. During times of peace this fiscal situation caused some difficulties, but as long as tax income could meet customary costs, this problem did not render the shogunate an archaic relic. After 1853 however, it caused widespread panic. The Western imperial intrusion brought to light the “schism between rights of the shogunate and its responsibilities: the shogunate claimed sole authority in issues such as foreign affairs, but it had financial authority over less than one-third of Japan” (Ravina 1999: 17-18). To supplement this realization, in the past the shogunate set the precedent of increasing its regulative responsibility, as can be seen from its actions during the Tenma and Kamo rebellions, but not its extractive capability. Thus, the shogunate “did not claim the right to tax the area it policed” and its actions “increased its obligations, but not its power” which in turn created a “mismatch of capability and responsibility [that] proved a decisive factor in its demise” (Ravina 1999: 25). This weakness, without a doubt, showed many foresighted reformers that radical change was required to place Japan on an even playing field with the Western imperial powers. How, for example, could Japan defend itself from imperial forces if it could not even mobilize all the taxes and resources of the
country necessary for its defense? In addition to the fiscal weakness of the shogunate, the other most conspicuous weakness highlighted by the arrival of Perry’s “black ships” was the massive need to strengthen, revamp and reform the military and national defenses. This need to reform the military led to two further insights: first, “merely paying for the new weaponry was beyond the capacity of the polity” which only compounded the inability of the shogunate to collect nationwide taxes, and second, it became increasingly clear that the samurai status system had to be abandoned if Japan ever wanted to match the military strength of the West (Totman 1983: 74). By the mid and late 1860s, more and higher ranking samurai visited Europe or the US on mission trips, and after witnessing first hand western military capabilities even they soon came to the consensus that their hereditary status as samurai had to go if they wanted to act in the best interests of their country. Indeed, by 1865-1867 a significant number of samurai in critical positions within both the bakufu and major domains “shared a conviction that the whole decentralized bakuhan order must be discarded. In its place, they believed, the age required some sort of effective state controlling a unified army and navy committed to some measure of social change and industrial development” (Totman 1983: 77). Furthermore, this movement and new order had to be connected in some form to the imperial institution, and it had to be achieved by force and in the face of spirited and desperate resistance, particularly from reactionary and conservative samurai. All of these manifestations however, owe their culmination to external pressures exerted by Western imperialist intrusion.

In conclusion, external pressures played a more significant role in bringing down the Tokugawa shogunate and ushering in the Meiji Restoration. Internal tensions certainly contributed to the crisis, but these tensions were exasperated to a new level from external pressures, and consequently provided the needed impetus for Japanese reformers “by enhancing
the sense of urgency, by depriving the system of means of delaying its final collapse,” and by pointing out the most salient weaknesses of the system, external pressures also suggested the most important elements of the solution (Totman 1983: 73). Thus, the decisions to dissolve the status system, form a centralized state, form a conscript army and navy, and introduce compulsory education among countless other reforms, all owe the rapidity of their implementation to external pressures by Western imperial powers. It is mere speculation to debate how long the Tokugawa shogunate could have lasted without the Western imperial intrusion of Commodore Perry and his “black ships,” but because it facilitated Japan’s preeminent position in East Asia, and contributed to Japan becoming a player on the world stage, it seems safe to say that Japanese at the time, and even today, are probably happy that events played out as they did.


