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The Path to Pearl Harbor: Japan, the United States, and the Economic Origins of War

Senior Project

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Abstract

The primary focus of this essay is to both observe and explain why the Japanese Empire attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and force the United States to enter into the Second World War. This essay focuses on the period between the 1930s and pre- December 1941. The methodology used in this essay is a combination of both primary and secondary sources to provide context into understanding of Japanese decision making in relation to its relationship with the United States, the geopolitics of war, and the interservice rivalry between the Imperial Japanese Army and the Imperial Japanese Navy. This essay seeks to answer both how and why Japan, a country that was insufficient in both manpower and resources, went to war against the United States, a country that was the exact opposite of Japan in terms of its resources and manpower.

**The Path to Pearl Harbor: Japan, the United States, and the Economic Origins of War**

Japan believed that war with the United States would be a last resort, but economic scarcity and insecurity influenced Japan’s decision-making process and made war a rational tool for seeking self-sufficiency. This project would add to the broader literature of both world history and military history by understanding both how and why Japan, a country that was insufficient in both manpower and resources, went to war against the United States, a country that was the exact opposite of Japan in terms of its resources and manpower. The scope of this project will focus on the tensions between the United States and Japan between the 1930s and pre- December 1941 over the two countries’ different visions for maintaining the status quo within the Indo-Pacific region The literature used in this project will provide context by underscoring particular aspects of international relations between the United States and Japan, the geopolitics of war, and Japanese military planning and strategy.

Differing and exclusive economic interests in Asia thrust the United States and the Empire of Japan into conflict in December 1941.. The Franklin D. Roosevelt administration considered Japan’s aspirations in the Pacific as a threat to the economic status quo in the region generated by the Open Door Policy. On the other hand, Japan viewed the Open Door Policy as a threat because it allowed the United States to punish any country who it deemed as a threat to free trade and capitalism in the Pacific. Japan believed the United States threatened both its physical and economic security, and it pursued empire building as a safeguard. Conflicting economic interests represented one factor between the United States and Japan in East Asia, while the climate of war also contributed to the looming crisis.

The climate of war also played a key motivating factor in Japanese decision making, the geopolitics of war between European powers not only affected the political lines in Europe but also in Asia itself with major dominions held by the British, the French, and the Dutch that were seemingly up for grabs. Japan watched the developments in Europe with glee because they knew that these historical imperial powers could not allocate forces, in significant numbers, to reinforce their colonies. With the defeat of France and the Netherlands by the German Wehrmacht, and Great Britain on the verge of defeat, it allowed Japan to intimidate and coerce their neighbors into political misfortunes that were favorable to the Japanese. While the climate of war presented the Japanese government with the opportunity for territorial expansion, military planners could not agree on where to expand.

The intrinsic interservice rivalry between the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) and the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) also played a key factor in Japanese military strategy and planning. The IJA and the IJN were not on one accord over overall Japanese empire-building policy. Although both sides agreed that Japan must expand to ensure its survival, both disagreed strongly over whom to attack and where to allocate precious resources and manpower. The IJA wanted to attack north, further into China and into the Soviet Union; the IJN, however, wanted to attack south into Southeast Asia because they understood that war had weakened the European imperial powers. Each factor contributed to the crisis, highlighting key components that would influence the Japanese and American decisions to go to war in December 1941.

Competing Economic Interests

The Japanese pursued empire-building policies aimed at self-sufficiency through the acquisition of raw materials. The Japanese government understood that dependency on foreign nations for raw materials threatened Japanese sovereignty. Additionally, Japan’s economic and political philosophy emerged from observing how the German Empire lost the Great War. Historian Grant T. Weller said, “Japanese analysts traced the defeat of Imperial Germany… to her inability to obtain vital war materials to supply forces… and keep the civilian economy producing.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Japan’s overarching goal of achieving Great Power status necessitated an independent source of raw materials raw materials for its expanding military, and Japan’s mutual attempt at securing these raw materials at the expense of China.

The Japanese ventured into China, with the hopes of seizing and extracting Chinese resources. Following Japan’s conquest of Manchuria in 1932, Japan sought to subdue the rest of China and to control China’s resources. As historian W.G. Beasley notes: “Both [the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) and the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN)] believed that the resources of north China and Manchukuo were essential to Japan’s defense and must be developed under Japanese supervision.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Hawkish elements within both the IJA and the IJN understood that war with China represented an impetus towards their ultimate goal of Japanese self-sufficiency. Leaders in the military and civilian government understood that war with China will not be cheap, but they had hoped that the war would not degenerate into a protracted war that could expend more time, material, and manpower than originally estimated. The preliminary estimated cost of the Japanese war in China was 5.5 billion yen.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, this campaign degenerated into a quagmire and heightened tensions between Japan and the United States.

Growing tensions between Japan and the United States mirrored increasing Japanese intervention in China. Both Japan’s economic stability and its campaigns in China demanded raw materials and the United States had proven to be Japan’s most import commercial trading partner between 1925 and 1939. Over twenty-five percent of Japanese imports came from the United States.[[4]](#footnote-4) To further highlight this dependency, Japan imported roughly fifty-five per cent of oil from the United States in 1932.[[5]](#footnote-5) Japanese leaders understood well that they could not continue to rely on Western countries, especially the United States, because if a conflict occurred between them [directly or indirectly], then the flow of goods could be terminated at the stroke of a pen. Japan continued to be backed into a corner from its belligerent policies by the United States, as the United States furthered its political reach in the region through what the Japanese considered economic coercion. Both Japan and America understood the precariousness of Japan’s reliance on raw materials from America.

While the United States pursued policies that facilitated free trade and fostered economic liberalism to help integrate countries into the capitalist system, the United States used economic liberalism as a cover to pursue its own political objectives and used its abundance of resources to control countries that lacked a real resource base. The United States understood Japan’s limitations and tried to curb its ambitions. For example, Stanley Hornbeck, who was the head of the United States Far Eastern Division within the State Department, emphatically stated: “So great was its [Japan’s] independence [sic – dependence] on the West, particularly America, that Japan would become reasonable the instant the powers [Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, and the United States] announced their intent to commence an embargo.” Hornbeck continued “[T]he immediate cost and the ultimate futility of such an effort would be evident to Japan’s statesmen from the beginning.”[[6]](#footnote-6) People within the United States State Department understood the power of the “carrot and the stick.” If Japan behaved, then the United States would not pursue punitive measures; however, if Japan sought to dismantle the status quo, then the United States would exhaust its powers to maintain the status quo of the Indo-Pacific region. Despite this, some State Department and United States Government officials did not want to utilize these tactics. These individuals feared that it would have the opposite effect and that Japan, feeling backed into a corner, would see war with the United States as the best alternative to maintain its ultimate objective of empire.

While the Department of State in Washington, D.C, operated on a carrot and stick mentality, American ambassadors in Japan offered alternative solutions for dealing with Japanese aggression. The outgoing ambassador to Japan, W. Cameron Forbes, warned of the possibility of an aggressive Japanese response to State Department actions by saying, “[T]hough any pressure from outside would have unfavorable consequences, a policy of restraint would reveal a Japanese military embarrassed by the high cost of operations and the chimera of long-term economic benefits [Japan’s military operations in China].”[[7]](#footnote-7) Forbes cautioned some of his more hawkish colleagues by implying that their hubris in believing that Japan would simply back down due to the economic might of the United States was foolhardy. However, Forbes suggested that Japanese leaders would be rational actors, by selecting the option that would provide them with a net positive – continued good relations with the United States – rather than go with the option with a net negative – increasing mutual hostility that would only put greater strain on their economy. Forbes’s successor, Ambassador Joseph Grew, seconded his opinion but went further by illustrating in his correspondences to officials within the United States government that seeking war with Japan would be harmful to the United States as well. In a December 1940 letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Grew warned the president: “Only insuperable obstacles will now prevent the Japanese from digging in permanently in China and from pushing the southward advance with economic control as preliminary to political domination in the areas marked down…”[[8]](#footnote-8) Grew’s warning was a double edged sword of sorts, on the one hand, Grew might have believed that any action that the United States took (military warfare or economic warfare) to curb Japanese expansion and ambitions could inevitably result in Japan doubling down even further in pursuit of its national interest. On the other hand, Grew’s warning could have meant that the high toll that Japan’s war against China took upon its economy and society could lead to civil unrest in Japan that could possibly lead to the masses pressuring Japanese leaders into either limiting the war in China or leave China itself and withdraw back to Manchukuo (Japan’s puppet regime in northeast China). In the former interpretation, Grew’s dispatch to President Roosevelt revealed Japanese “tit-for-tat” style of international politics. If Washington continued to styme Tokyo’s acquisition of an empire of self-sufficiency, then there would be diplomatic warfare. Both the United States and Japan played a game of economic chess over the Indo-Pacific region, there tensions that brewed in Europe shaped how both countries would pursue their economic objectives.

The Climate of War

Both the United States and Japan understood that the war that had erupted in Europe in 1939 influenced their polices in Asia. The big three European imperial powers – Great Britain, the Netherlands, and France – each held vast dominions in the Indo-Pacific region that provided each metropole with vital raw materials and foodstuffs to allow them to sustain their war effort against the Nazis until the summer of 1940. The United States viewed the German Wehrmacht with unease and anxiety. The United States (Franklin Roosevelt especially) understood that if their democratic partner nations in Europe fell to Nazi Germany, then the United States would be under perpetual threat, but the Japanese saw the German Wehrmacht as a potential tool that could be used to help advance Japan’s imperial ambitions (either knowingly or unknowingly). Germany’s gains represented a potential Japanese advantage, and Japan hoped to utilize the Tripartite Pact as a practical tool of advancing Japanese strategic goals and isolating its staunch rival, the United States.

Understanding the Tripartite Pact

Signed in September 1940 between Nazi Germany, Japan, and Italy. The Tripartite Pact was a mutual defense alliance, but for Japan, the Tripartite Pact added another layer of reassurance against its main adversary, the United States. Should the United States dare to join the Allied Powers, Japan believed the Tripartite Pact would deter an American declaration of war against Japan as joining the war would undermine the United States’ ability to protect itself and its overseas interests. Therefore, the Tripartite Pact, to the Japanese represented a deterrence mechanism for American involvement in either Europe or Asia. As Historian David J. Lu asserted, “The primary objective of the [Tripartite] alliance was to eliminate the possibility of American intervention in Europe and Asia.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Japan believed that it could take advantage of America’s strategic dilemma (weakness or hesitancy) regarding open conflict against Japan or with Germany. While the Japanese thought of the Tripartite Pact as a tool of deterrence, the Americans, particularly President Franklin D. Roosevelt, saw the Tripartite Pact as signaling increased aggression from the signatory powers.

The United States viewed the Tripartite Pact as both threatening both its national security and its national interests overseas. President Roosevelt explained the perceived threat that the Tripartite Pact posed to the United States in his December 29, 1940 Fireside Chat (the “Arsenal of Democracy”): “[T]hree powerful nations, two in Europe and one in Asia, joined themselves together in the threat that if the United States of America interfered with or blocked the expansion program of these three nations – a program aimed at world control – they would unite in ultimate action against the United States.” Roosevelt continued, “If Great Britain goes down, the Axis powers will control the continents of Europe, Asia, Africa, Australasia [Australia and Oceania], and the high seas – and they will be in a position to bring enormous military and naval resources against this hemisphere.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Roosevelt knew that if the Axis aligned powers – Germany, Italy, and Japan – defeated American mutual partners in Europe (Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands in particular, America itself would not be safe in a world consumed and subsumed by the Axis threat. The Axis threat would undermine almost a century and three decades of American foreign policy doctrine that dictated American posture in the Western Hemisphere – the Monroe Doctrine. Without any mutual allies, the United States would be alone against the Axis threat and fear a real possibility of invasion by Axis powers. America perceived Germany’s domination of much of Western Europe as an existential threat,. however, Germany’s victories in presented Japanese decision makers with a golden diplomatic opportunity, and they hoped to use Japan’s connection to Nazi Germany as a way to open the door to Japanese domination.

Southeast Asia and Japanese Ambitions

Southeast Asia had been in the periphery of Japanese decision making in achieving self-sufficiency during the 1930s, however Japanese decision makers shifted their focus after the German conquest of Western Europe. Japan hoped to both expel historical imperial powers – Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands – and to become the dominant power in the Greater East Asia region. Japan’s pursuit of hegemony over Southeast Asia emerged from the belief that they had a divine right both to conqueror and control with their pursuit of raw materials for its war effort. For the Japanese to expand their empire and subdue the Chinese properly, Japan needed to have control over this important region. Japan’s conquest of Southeast Asia also had the added benefit of cutting off aid and supplies to China. Japanese decision makers saw both the tactical and strategic benefit of seizing Southeast Asia as a possible base of acquiring raw materials for the war effort.

Southeast Asia held a sizable portion of raw materials that the Japanese needed. For example, British Malaya was rich with tin and rubber and the Dutch East Indies was rich with oil, the latter being a vital commodity if Japan hoped to sustain a potential naval conflict with the US.[[11]](#footnote-11) In 1939, Malaya was the resource of forty percent of the world's rubber and sixty percent of the world's tin.[[12]](#footnote-12) The Dutch East Indies, by contrast, held over thirty-five percent of the world’s rubber supply and a significant supply of the world’s oil in 1941; the United States supplied Japan with roughly eighty percent of its oil demand and imported the other twenty percent from the Dutch East Indies.[[13]](#footnote-13) French Indochina (a Japanese target), China, the Philippines (an American colonial holding) Malaya and Burma (British colonial possessions) and the Dutch East Indies (a Dutch holding) offered Japan a local base of operations to deal a crippling blow against several colonial powers. All of these colonial territories held a significant base of raw materials that the Japan hoped to seize to help expand its empire and economic imperative of seeking self-sufficiency. The German Wehrmacht victory over the French and the Dutch in 1940 signaled to the Japanese that Southeast Asia was fair game for their imperial ambitions. With the French and the Dutch under German occupation ,the Japanese hoped to pressure both the French and the Dutch to gain access to their colonial possessions to gain a foothold in Southeast Asia. However, Japanese leadership was split over how to take control of French Indochina.

The Japanese Foreign Ministry and the Japanese military establishment both had different methodologies over how best to seize control over French Indochina. The Japanese Foreign Ministry, fearing that any Japanese action could be perceived as offensive by the United States, believed that diplomacy was the best way to gain control of French Indochina. The Foreign Ministry attempted to play a delicate game of political chess with the United States through its utilization of intimidation and pressure tactics to coerce Vichy France to acquiesce Japan’s domination of Indochina. Almost as soon after the French Government surrendered to the Germans in June 1940, the Japanese coerced the Vichy Regime for access to its airfields in northern Indochina and to send troops through Indochinese territory as well.[[14]](#footnote-14) French Indochina and Japanese officials created a mutual defense pact that “respected” the sovereignty of French Indochina while of Japan stationed troops in the region. Despite this diplomatic victory the Foreign Ministry achieved, the Japanese military establishment believed that diplomacy did not go far enough towards achieving Japan’s national ambitions. Japanese military leaders had goals of their own that mostly focused on both subduing China and how to allocate scarce resources between the Imperial Japanese Army and the Imperial Japanese Navy.

Some Japanese military leaders believed that diplomacy was a hinderance to achieving their military goals and objectives, and some wanted to seize French Indochina by force regardless of the American backlash. Some Japanese military leaders deemed the political consequences of actions worth the risk of their actions accomplished their operational objectives, and at the July 2, 1941, Imperial Conference, they outlined Japan’s national goals and interests in relation to the volatile international situation. General Hajime Sugiyama - who became Japanese Army Chief of Staff in 1940 – surmised that the only way to end the China Incident (a Japanese euphemism for the war with China) with the least cost upon the Japanese Army, the Japanese military needed full control of French Indochina to cripple Chinese morale and military operations.[[15]](#footnote-15) General Sugiyama sought a more forceful approach to Japanese foreign policy to help achieve Japanese goals and did not care about the possible repercussions by the United States. Although other top officials in the Japanese military shared General Sugiyama’s sentiments, they themselves were not on one accord in overall military strategy.

Intrinsic Interservice Rivalry Between the Imperial Japanese Army & the Imperial Japanese Navy

The Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) and the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) each had their own self-interests and goals for aiding in Japan’s empire building policies. Jeffery Record mentions, “Japan lacked a civil authority able and willing to impose a coherent strategy on an army and navy... that regarded one another with almost as much suspicion as any foreign enemy.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The goals for both service branches dealt with the issue of scarcity of resources to help both service branches achieve their tactical and strategic goals. Although their dysfunction fell more upon trying to one up the other service in prestige and honor, it played nonetheless a significant role for two factors; (1) which service can get adequate resources to build up their capacity and (2) the role of each service into planning and implementing strategy and allow both services to wage war. Determining who was the biggest threat to Japan’s imperial ambitions heavily influenced which region the service branches focused their energies on. For the IJA, they wanted to focus their energy on attacking the Russian Far East; for the IJN, they wanted to focus their energy on attacking Southeast Asia.

***IJA Goals and Rationale***

The IJA saw it as their imperative to achieve two strategic goals: pacify China and neutralize the Communist threat, the Soviet Union. Although the Japanese and the Soviets had signed a nonaggression pact in April 1941, the German invasion of the Soviet Union threw Japanese planners in a tailspin. Despite this development, there were a few prominent Japanese leaders who favored war against the Soviet Union alongside the IJA. Japanese Foreign Minister Matsuoka was one of the most fervent supporters of this imitative; he believed that it was Japan’s obligation to support Germany in a war against the Soviets. During the June 25, 1941, Liaison Conference, Matsuoka stated that, “If I had known that they [the Germans] would go to war, I would have preferred to take a more friendly position toward Germany, and I would not have concluded the Neutrality Pact [with the Soviets].”[[17]](#footnote-17)Despite this reluctance of concluding a nonaggression pact with the Soviets, Japanese military leaders were not in total open arms in supporting Germany. Again, the Japanese felt betrayed by the Germans concluding a nonaggression Pact with the Soviets in 1939 and then invade the Soviet Union in 1941, both without informing Japan about German plans and actions. Paul Schroeder states, “In signing the [Tripartite] Pact, the Japanese had assumed... that Russia would either be drawn into the Axis camp or else be neutralized between the Axis powers.” [[18]](#footnote-18)

How could Japan feel secure and respected when the Germans took a gamble on attacking the Soviets, understanding that they were not fully prepared for war against the Soviets. In the June 25, 1941, Liaison Conference, Japanese War Minister Tojo Hideki stated, “We shouldn’t put our complete faith in Germany.”[[19]](#footnote-19) This doubt was not just limited to IJA leaders, members of the IJN agreed also. Navy Minister Oikawa Koshiro posited, "The Navy is not confident about a war against both the United States and the Soviet Union... The Navy does not want the Soviet Union stirred up.”[[20]](#footnote-20) The Navy clearly understood that the Japanese could not afford to divide its scarce military resources against war between both the United States and the Soviet Union; a two-front war was out of the option for the IJN. Japanese Akira Fujiwara affirmed this,” it was clearly irrational even to consider a policy based on waging war against a great land power, Russia [i.e., the Soviet Union], and a great naval power, the United States.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Japan understood how foolhardy it would be if they waged war against both great military powers. However, this did not discourage the Japanese from encroaching into Indochina. Although the Japanese took a diplomatic approach towards achieving de facto control over Indochina, they still weighed the calculated risk of American entry into war. Matsuoka stated, in the July 2, 1941, Imperial Conference, “If something goes wrong with German calculations [in war against the Soviets] the war will be prolonged, and the probability of American entry into the war will be increased.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Control of French Indochina served two key purposes, to cut-off aid and supplies that were shipped to China and a launchpad for future operations into Southeast Asia. The IJA wanted a forceful method of seizing French Indochina to serve their strategic purposes. The IJN wanted a diplomatic course of action to allow bases to be operated in French Indochina as a political cover to maintain that they were not infringing upon French Indochina’s sovereignty and that it was agreed upon in the mutual defense treated signed between Japan and Vichy France.[[23]](#footnote-23) However, this action did not only allow the IJA to gain a foothold in Southeast Asia; it also allowed for the IJN to make its demands known.

***IJN Goals and Rationale***

Whereas the IJA saw it lucrative to invade the Russian Far East, the IJN saw invading Southeast Asia as the prize. The IJN saw an excellent opportunity of taking advantage of Western weakness in Europe to make plans to take over the Indo-Pacific region. Jeffery Record states, “The [Imperial Japanese] Navy looked south, to the weakly defended oil-rich Dutch East Indies and rubber- and tin-rich British Malaya.” [[24]](#footnote-24) The IJN understood that Japan itself would not be able to defend itself from the seas if the navy lacked the rich resources, it so desperately needed to function.

Despite this realty, the IJN, however, did not want to risk outright war against the United States for two reasons. First, the IJN did not feel as though they were prepared for war and secondly, IJN officials had high praise for their American naval counterparts. This second point is crucial to understanding why the IJN were reluctant to accept the terms of the Tripartite Pact. They understood, as well as the United States, that it equated to the possibility of war. Record states, “half of all IJN officers with the rank of captain or above had served abroad, most of them in Britain or the United States.”[[25]](#footnote-25) It should come as no surprise as to why prominent leaders in the IJN such as Yamamoto Isoroku and Nagano Osami – the orchestrators of the Pearl Harbor attack – were hesitant to risk war against the United States. However, both men understood the gravity of the situation they were thrusted into once the United States placed harsh economic sanctions on Japan in the summer of 1941.

Leaders in the IJN understood clearly that a protracted war against the United States would end in ultimate ruin for Japan’s imperial ambitions. For Japan to have a chance against in naval warfare against the United States, they would have to rely on the art of surprise. Nagano stated bluntly, “If we take the South [Southeast Asia], we will be able to strike a blow against American resources of national defense.”[[26]](#footnote-26) By depriving America of her overseas possessions and military positions, America would then be forced to surrender or settle for a negotiated peace, thus allowing Japan to maintain its empire. Michael Bess posited, ”The Americans can come and fight us to liberate those territories, or they can accept the fact that the map of Asia has been redrawn, and that they must henceforth learn to deal with a Japanese-led Asian bloc”, Bess continues, “Antiwar movements will spread, and in the end, the American government will simply have to accept Japan‘s fait accompli.”[[27]](#footnote-27)  IJN naval strategy was thus predicated on the ”All-out Great Battle” doctrine posited by United States naval revolutionary Alfred Thayer Mahan. To accomplish this task, the Japanese would have to lure the American navy into enemy waters away from their supply lines and slowly whittle away their ship capacity through submarine warfare and once in enemy waters, crush the Americans in one fell swoop. By this strategy, the IJN could destroy the United States Navy far beyond what American industrial capacity could replace.

Conclusion

War between the United States and Japan ultimate resulted in incompatible and divergent interests that both sides could not accommodate. The Americans could not afford for the Japanese to purse empire building because it threatened their interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Likewise, the Japanese did not want to abandon their pursuit of empire because they believed that the United States posed the greatest threat to them do to their influence, both politically and economically. Whereas Japan did not want to be a “puppet” of American policymakers, the United States wanted Japan to be a willing partner to help maintain the status quo in the region under its vision. These competing interests served to put both nations on the path of war to supplement their goals at the expense of the other. The climate of war worldwide increased the possibility of war between Japan and the United States as both pursued polices to protect their own interests and national security. The interservice rivalry between the Imperial Japanese Army and the Imperial Japanese Navy also served to split limited resources that Japan needed to wage war against the United States by striking Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, until the Japanese surrender in September 1945.

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