

Japan's War with the United States, 1941 - 45

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Less than two hours after Japanese planes first flew over the American naval base of Pearl Harbor on the morning of the 7th of December 1941, 19 ships and 120 aircraft had been destroyed or disabled, and more than 2,400 American lives had been lost (Alan, 1983: 224; Fewster and Gorton, 1989: 68). This surprise attack on the United States marked the beginning of military conflict between two great powers in the Pacific, a war that would lead to the devastating defeat of Japan, and the end of an era for both nations. Even now we struggle to grasp how a nation with the area of California could foresee victory over the United States, a country so much larger, so much more powerful and with so many more resources (Toland, 1970: inside cover). What was driving Japan to attempt such an incredibly ambitious feat? The different aspects that moved Japan to war in 1941 were not new ideas in Japanese thought, but elements that had emerged in other forms before and since modernisation. What was new was the opportunity that arose out of war in Europe, the increased pressure from home, and the threat of economic crisis, all of which called for Japan to act.

Japan had never felt herself to be equally treated by Western nations. Such feelings can be traced back to early encounters in the mid 19th century, when the West introduced the much-hated extraterritorial rights for their citizens (Fewster and Gorton 1989: 4). Further incidents included the rejection of a racial equality clause submitted to the League of Nations in 1919, the closing of all Japanese emigration to Australia and America by the 1930s and Britain and France's protective trade measures, which effectively cut Japan out of the Asian markets (Fewster and Gorton, 1989: 28) (Overy 1988: 32). Despite Japan's fast and prolific modernisation and military might, as shown in her 1905 victory over traditional and modernising power Russia, Japan did not feel as though she were taken seriously (Beasley 1995: 111). This insulting behaviour of the West was difficult for a proud and ambitious nation to accept, and resulted in Japan's recurrent attempts to prove herself as a worthy competitor. Her frustration is evidenced in a memorandum drafted shortly before the Pearl Harbour attack, addressed to the United States Secretary of State:

It is a fact that the countries of East Asia have for the past 200 years or more... been compelled to observe the status quo under the Anglo-American

policy of imperialistic exploitation, and to sacrifice themselves to the prosperity to the[se] two nations ('Japanese Note to the United States December 7, 1941')

In the 1930s Japan's frustration led her to identify with Germany and Italy as relegated ('have-not') nations, that had thus far been barred from the privileges retained by the more influential, wealthier and colonially advantaged ('have') nations, which comprised the rest of the West. All three 'have-not' nations *sought to redress the balance of world affairs in their own favour* (Overy 1988: 33). The signing of the Tripartite Pact in September 1941 formalised this friendship, one that was very important to Japan, which had felt increasingly isolated and rejected from other nations following her League of Nations departure and Western condemnation on continuing aggression in China. Japan had begun to tie herself with the Axis, and further sever relations with the West (Fewster and Gorton 1989: 65).

Since making an appearance on the world scene, Japan had striven for self-sufficiency. She had taken out only two international loans in funding her modernisation, and while modernising, replaced foreign experts in developing systems and industry with trained nationals as quickly as possible (Fewster and Gorton 1991: 8). A resurging desire for independence appeared following the 1929 Wall Street Crash and the associated reverberations in Japan. In becoming more independent, Japan sought to be self-sufficient in raw materials, and although previous action in China had provided Japan with access to coal and iron, other vital materials such as oil, rubber, tin, chrome, tungsten and nickel had thus far been imported (Beasley 1995: 201). The escalating war in Europe was increasing the demand and price of these materials, making them harder for Japan to acquire. This need caused Japan's Cabinet Planning Board to conclude in October 1939 the necessity to gain control of areas on the East Asia mainland and further south (Beasley 1995:201). The testament furthered in July 1941 in communications between the Japanese Foreign Ministry and Washington, stating:

Commercial and economic relations between Japan and third countries, led by England and the United States, are gradually becoming so horribly strained that we cannot endure it much longer. Consequently, our Empire, to save its very life, must take measures to secure the raw materials of the South Seas (Prange, 1982).

In creating an empire, Japan not only felt that she had much to gain economically, but that these areas would provide her with buffer states offering protection and security, and serve as living areas for Japan's ever-increasing population. It was also believed that, *[o]nce achieved, the southern empire would be a basis for negotiating with the [W]est from a position of strength* (Overy 1988: 84) — that is, the acquisition of an empire would in itself allow Japan to become the world power she so desired, and a 'have' rather than a 'have-not' nation.

Relations between the United States and Japan had been deteriorating particularly since the 1931 seizure of Manchuria, and war with China in 1937; further Japanese expansion was only to heighten hostilities (Fewster and Gorton 1989: 65). The United States had been closely monitoring Japanese actions in China for some time, and considered Japan an aggressor, especially after *U.S.S Panay* was sunk in 1937, and Japan begun aligning herself with the Axis powers (Fewster and Gorton 1989: 64). However, when war broke out in Europe in 1939 and Japan took the opportunity to expand southward into Britain and France's undefended Asian territories in 1940, relations dramatically worsened (Fewster and Gorton, 1989: 67). This behaviour was seen as threatening, especially to the United States, which had its own interests in the Pacific (Atlas of 20th Century Warfare 2004: 188). Factions within Japan began to argue over further expansion, aware that it could provoke the United States to war, or whether to stop at that point, without access to the oil of the Dutch East Indies and the rubber of Malaya ('The World at War: 1931-1945'). Those in favour of further expansion argued that to cease at that point would make it increasingly difficult for Japan to defend what she had already gained (Overy 1988:83). In July 1941, to suppress further Japanese expansion, the United States froze all Japanese assets in America and previous partial restrictions on exports to Japan were extended to cover all oil and scrap metal exports. When the Netherlands followed suit with an oil embargo, Japan was faced with an oil crisis (Fewster and Gorton, 1989: 67; Beasley 1995: 202).

By mid-1941 the failing negotiations with the United States and lack of oil imports put Japan under increasing pressure, eventually pushing her to the point of impasse. Although negotiations between the two nations were ongoing, *repeated discussions proved of no avail* ('Japanese Note to the United States December 7, 1941'). This was

mainly due to opposing views over China. Agreements were drafted by the United States stating that [t]he Government of Japan will withdraw all military, naval, air and police forces from china and Indochina ...and...The government of Japan will not support...any government or regime in China than the National Government of the Republic of China ('United States Note to Japan November 26, 1941'). These demands were not acceptable to Japan which had clearly expressed its opposing view. Meanwhile the oil restrictions placed Japan in a dire situation, leaving her navy with only two years supply (Fewster and Gorton 1989: 67). The situation was now critical. Japan had to decide whether she would take the safe option in backing down from the path she had already begun, and retreating entirely from mainland Asia, accepting the United States proposals and having oil imports re-sanctioned. Alternatively, she could continue to expand southwards, seizing oil deposits in Indonesia, and face seemingly imminent American intervention. (Beasley 1995: 202) Japan's intentions were expressed in the 'Outline of National Policies in View of the Changing Situation':

Our Empire will continue its efforts to effect a settlement of the China incident, and will seek to establish a solid basis for the security and preservation of the nation. This will involve taking steps to advance south ... In carrying out the plans outlined above, our empire will not be deterred by the possibility of being involved in a war with Great Britain and the United States (Overy 1988: 114).

In light of this decision to ignore America's demands and take an aggressive approach, Japan decided its best hope of success would be to launch a surprise attack on the United States, striking hard and fast, and taking out as much of her Pacific fleet as possible before the United States had time to react. The Japanese warning given to America stated, *The Japanese Government...cannot but consider that it is impossible to reach an agreement through further negotiations* ('Japanese Note to the United States December 7, 1941'), and arrived more than six hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor began.

Although, as shown, various events and international pressures were pushing Japan in the direction of war, perhaps the final decision to commit came not from these global factors, but from the home front — domestic changes and ideas long rooted in Japanese culture. From the late 1920s, Japan had been experiencing an increase in patriotism and militarism (Fewster and Gorton 1991: 30). This patriotism, compounded by long-held feelings of inequality, dangerously clouded Japan's

judgement, causing certain sectors including the military to exert pressure on the Government. Japan's militaristic thrust was furthered when Prime Minister Fumiaro Konoe resigned just months before Pearl Harbor and was replaced by former War Minister Tojo Hideki (Beasley 1995: 203). The change of leadership was noted as a possible danger by the United States at the time:

The resignation of the Japanese cabinet ha[s] created a grave situation. If a new Cabinet is formed it will probably be strongly nationalistic and anti-American. If the Konoe Cabinet remains the effect will be that it will operate under a new mandate, which will not include rapprochement with the U.S.
(Wallin 1968)

Japan's militaristic approach may also have led her misinterpret America as weak in its persistent attempts to peacefully resolve the situation (Overy, 1988: 84). As one commentator has suggested:

The Japanese military was convinced of the willingness of its people to go to any sacrifice for their nation, and it was contemptuous of the "softness" of the US and European democracies...The military's overconfidence in its own abilities and underestimation of the will of these other nations were thus rooted in its own misleading ethnic and racial stereotypes.
(‘The World at War: 1931-1945’)

A final concept that may have helped Japan commit to war is an idea deeply embedded in Japanese culture, that you do not admit to defeat — that this is a sign of weakness bringing dishonour. To back down from America and give in to demands or even compromise would be to ‘lose face’, and this could not be tolerated.

Japan's decision to launch an attack on the United States in December 1941 was a bold one. It was not the result of one incident, but a culmination of various immediate and longer-standing pressures from home and abroad. It was not a rash decision but one made after reaching an impasse, where Japan had to choose war or remain in the West's shadow, relinquishing its perceived rightful place in the world. Grand notions of empire and the overpowering desire for equal treatment and world influence helped fuel ambitions. Japan sought self-sufficiency and economic stability, protection in buffer states, and new living areas for her people and for generations to come. With growing economic problems exacerbated by embargos on imports, Japan, much like her friends in the Tripartite Pact, felt she had no option: her very survival and any chance of future prosperity depended solely on her expansion and, when this was hindered, by commitment to war. Perhaps an eventual confrontation between Japan

and the West was inevitable. Had it not occurred in 1941, it may only have been postponed, with each side holding opposing views and strong emotions, and each acting to promote self-interest. Japan's strike on Pearl Harbor and her following victories, although short-lived, asserted her as a true contender in the battle for world power. Her actions caused the West to re-evaluate Japan as they struggled against the force which they, in part, were responsible for creating.

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Note: Minor adjustments were made to various quotations such as the addition of commas to aid fluency and spelling adjustment to keep spelling constant throughout.