

THE POLITICS OF MILITARY PLANNING IN JAPAN DURING AND PRIOR TO WORLD WAR II

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During World War II and the period immediately preceding it there was a complete lack of coordination among Japanese military strategists themselves and between them and the central government. In fact there was not even a general consensus concerning the purpose of the war among Japanese leaders. By 1941 Japan had continued the large-scale war against China for four years, and at the same time had preparing for an attack against the Soviet Union. Under these circumstances, why did Japan begin the war against the U.S. and England in December, 1941? Did Japanese leaders consider how they might end the war at the time they decided to commence it? Was there ever any concrete prospect for ending the war victoriously against even only the U.S.? It is only natural that we still have doubts concerning these points.

In 1936, the national defense policy of the Japanese Empire, the highest long-term military plan of Japan, was revised the national defense policy had been decided by the highest ranking members of the army and navy since it was determined for the first time in 1907, but the central government did not participate in the decision making process. The policy determined in 1936 aimed at making the U.S. and the Soviet Union hypothetical enemies and also at securing such military and naval preparedness so that Japan could be a match for both of the above-mentioned countries. In accordance with this policy military and naval plans of operations were mapped out every year. The outline of the plans of operations against U.S.A. were as follows: to occupy the Philippines and Guam at the beginning of war; next, to defeat the main force of an advancing U.S. fleet in the Mid-Pacific, and, afterwards, to decide other plans of operations extemporaneously. These were the extent of the plans of operations made every year against the U.S. There were no decisive political measures or military strategies which aimed at the termination of war.

Why did Japan begin the war without being able to plan her victory?

This paper is an attempt to explore why Japanese military strategies internal politics diverged throughout the course of the war.

1. *The State Framework of Japan*

Let me first explain why the state organization of Japan itself made it impossible to coordinate politics and military planning. The state organization of Japan established in 1889 and extant until 1945 was characterized by an emperor with the powers of an absolute monarch in spite of the existence of the constitution and the National Diet. The diet

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only had the right to give its approvals or disapprovals to laws and the budget. The cabinet was the agency made responsible to assist the emperor in his rights of administering the affairs of state. The emperor had the prerogative of supreme command over the army and navy which even the Diet could not interfere with. The Army General Staff Office and the Naval General Staff Office which assisted the emperor in his prerogative of supreme command were under his immediate control and no restrictions were placed on them by the Diet or by the cabinet. Thus, viewing from the organization of the state, there was a complete separation between politics and the military command. Only the emperor had the function of unifying politics and strategies. Accordingly, if the emperor displayed his 100 percent leadership and made the most of his power, it might have been possible to unify politics and strategies, but the emperor had been educated so as to behave like a constitutional monarch and therefore seldom clarified his will nor displayed his leadership. Accordingly, no planning organization existed to unify the opinion of the cabinet and that of the military authorities.

Japan, during the war against China, established in November 1937 the "Imperial Headquarters" (Daihonei) as the highest military agency for coordinating the war effort. At that time, Prince Konoe ardently requested that representatives of the government be permitted to participate in the Imperial Headquarters. But, asserting that the emperor's prerogative of supreme command was independent of the government, the army and the navy refused the above-mentioned request of Prince Konoe. And, instead, the army and the navy established the "Imperial Headquarters liaison conference between the government and the military authorities" as an agency for harmonizing military politics and strategies.

The above liaison conference was as its name implies nothing but a meeting for mere liaisons, and was not an independent agency with a full-time staff. This conference had no right of decision-making; and this could not perform the function of coordinating politics with military planning. From around the end of 1937 until the beginning of 1938 the liaison conference considered the problem whether to abet the war with China or not should be brought to an end, but the conference could not come to any decision. The opinion of the General Staff Office of the army was not in concord with that of the government. Thus the conference could not make decision on the termination of the war. Since the conference could not obtain the necessary consensus, it was disbanded until its reopening in 1940.

During the before-mentioned period, the war between China and Japan escalated, and gradually become long and drawn-out. The army and the navy were anxious for an early solution to the war with China, the former with the intent of preparing for a war with the Soviet Union and the latter with the intent of promoting the building of warships to rival the U.S. However, the military authorities and the government could not compromise and cooperate with each other.

When Prince Konoe organized his second cabinet in June, 1940, the Imperial-Headquarters-and-government liaison conference was reopened. The German victory on the Western Front aroused a lust in the military authorities for the English, French, and Dutch colonies in Southeast Asia, and as a result the liaison conference became a tool which the military authorities used to force the southward advance policy on the government. In 1940 some meetings were held in connection with the decision of commencing

war, but the liaison conference was not able to adjust and integrate the confrontation between the army and the navy and that between the military authorities and the government.

Soon after the commencement of the war in 1941, the lack of integration between military and strategies was the greatest obstacle to the successful execution of the war. For example, under the pretext of necessity, the army and the navy tried to commandeer all merchant ships that Japan possessed, while the government tried to secure a fixed number of merchant ships in order to maintain productive capacity. Consequently, a scramble for merchant ships was always a main theme at the liaison conferences even though the conference did not even have the authority to decide the distribution of merchant ships.

When the Marshall Islands were occupied by the U.S. naval force in February, in 1942, the Prime Minister, General Tojo, tried to combat this lack of unity by granting himself the post of Chief of the General Staff and also by letting the Minister of the Navy, Admiral Shimada, hold the post of the Chief of the Naval General Staff in addition to his cabinet post.

However, these organizational maneuvers only increased the disaffection of the military authorities with both General Tojo and Admiral Shimada.

After all the members of the Tojo cabinet had resigned their portfolios in July, 1944, General Koiso took office as Prime Minister and requested to become a constituent member of the Imperial Headquarters with the purpose of coordinating military strategies under the central government too. But this move was opposed by the military authorities and it failed. Instead the Imperial Headquarters-government liaison conference was renamed "the Supreme War Leading Conference" in August. The conference had only changed its name, however, and its substance was quite the same as that of previous one.

2. *The Confrontations between the Army and the Navy*

When a new régime was established as a result of the Meiji Restoration in 1868, both the army and the navy belonged to a single department of one ministry of the government. In 1872 the Ministry of War and the Ministry of the Navy were respectively refounded. In 1878 the General Staff Office became independent of the Ministry of War. Furthermore, in 1893 the Naval General Staff Office became completely independent of both the Ministry of the Navy and the General Staff Office. After that, the army and the navy stood on completely equal grounds with each other, and there existed no agency for their integration. Even when the army and the navy undertook a cooperative military action, both assumed positions of equality with each other and avoided any united command. Only the emperor, the highest commander of both the army and the navy, had to power to integrate their actions.

The army and the navy also competed with each other for the expansion of armament. In 1907 National Defense Policy of the Japanese Empire was decided as a long-term plan for the defense of the Empire. Both the army and the navy insisted on expansion of their armaments, and as the result thereof, the army made Russia its hypothetical enemy while the navy focused its plans on a war with the U.S. Thus, a policy completely lacking in unity was formulated.

Japan being nothing but a small country in Asia tried to possess an army and a navy respectively matching those of Russia and the U.S. at the same time. After 1910 the government exercised its power over the competitive requests for budgets, and political changes of government owing to that policy were made repeatedly.

In 1931 Japan occupied Manchuria, and came to border directly on the Soviet Union. This made the Soviet Union reinforce her military preparedness in the Far East, so that the relation between Japan and the Soviet Union became very tense. Thus, the army continued its plan to increase its military force in preparation for a war with the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the navy was dissatisfied with the limitation of auxiliary vessels under the treaty of London, and the hard-liners who requested naval parity with the U.S.A. came to maintain a superior position in the Ministry of the Navy. When military operations in Manchuria were brought to a cessation for the time being in 1933, the necessity of unification of fundamental national defense policies and foreign policies was asserted by both the army and the navy. The army maintained that a unified national policy to fix policies of national defense in preparation for war against the Soviet Union should be made; the navy planned to build warships to the full extent of the naval treaty of 1933 just prior to the expiration of the treaty. The navy also objected to the army's plans focusing on war with the Soviet Union. In the autumn of 1933, cabinet meetings attended by the Prime Minister, the Finance Minister, the Foreign Minister, the War Minister, and the Navy Minister were held often, but it was not possible to obtain the unified assert of both the army and the navy.

During the Hirota cabinet in 1936, negotiations were also opened between the army and the navy for the purpose of securing the unification of national defense and domestic policy. During these negotiations, too, the army insisted on preparing for a war with the Soviet Union, namely, the northward expansion theory while the navy insisted upon promoting preparations for commencing war with the U.S.A., Great Britain, and Holland, namely, the southward expansion doctrine. Finally, in June, 1936, the army and the navy adopted a plan for expanding both southward and northward as national defense policy, thus compromising both the army's and the navy's strategies. In August, 1936, the five-minister meeting decided the national policy for advancing both southward and northward for the purpose of "establishing the Empire's footing in East Asia and advancing into and developing in the South Seas area." But this only proves that the will of the army and that of the navy could not be unified.

At the time of the outbreak to the Pacific War in 1941, there was a fundamental difference between the conception of the strategies of the army and that of the navy. The army hoped that Germany would defeat the Soviet Union, and therefore the main thrust of the plans for the war were still being concentrated upon a war against the Soviet Union. It was planned to use only ten army divisions for an advancing operation in Southeast Asia out of the fifty-one army divisions, which were all of the army forces at that time. Moreover, the army planned to finish the above advancing operation in three or four months, and also planned to leave only guards in occupied territories and to move the remaining military force to Manchuria to be used for a war against the Soviet Union. However, only the movement of one part of the fore mentioned remaining military force could be realized. From the beginning the army didn't intend to use a large scale army for war against the U.S. It was only after the battle on Guadalcanal Island that the above opinion of the army began to change. The navy thought that its main rival was the U.S., and tried to

fight a decisive battle against the main force of the U.S. fleet at an early stage of the war. But the navy couldn't get rid of the old conception that the outcome of the war would be decided by fighting a decisive battle with the main force of a fleet. The navy also lacked the understanding of the offensive and defensive battles on islands to be used for air-force bases, not to mention amphibious operations.

When the occupation of Southeast Asia was almost totally realized, the army and the navy disputed about the next operation. The navy thought that Australia, Ceylon Island or Hawaii should be occupied, but the army objected to these operations by asserting that enough army troops and supplies could not be supplied sufficiently after the occupation. As a result, the compromise was to attack the Fiji Islands, the Samoan Islands, New Caledonia and some other islands so that communications between the U.S.A. and Australia might be cut off. The army agreed to this, because said operation would require only a small army force. Such innumerable differences between the opinions of strategies of the army and that of the navy occurred throughout the whole war. No unified opinions could be brought to completion; regarding any of the above-mentioned strategies, the opinion of the army and that of the navy about strategies always came to inconclusive compromises.

3. *Internal Splits within the Army and the Navy*

I have already pointed out the conflict and conspicuous confrontations between the army and the navy. Now I would like to explain the internal splits within subdivisions of the army and among those of the navy. These confrontations revealed themselves as the predominance of the division in charge of operations and the self-complacency of the persons interested in operation. It was a distinctive characteristic of the Japanese army and navy that operation staff officers held prominent positions and had much more influence than persons in charge of information and supply. This was true not only in the central part of the army and that of the navy but also in high headquarters of the army and fleets. Therefore, matters regarding information and rear supply were treated lightly, while those concerning operations were given the first priority. In order to facilitate successful operations, information ought to have been collected first and then conditions of supply ought to have been arranged. Only after that, operations should have been planned. But, on the contrary, plans of operations were mapped out at first, and information and supply were subordinated thereto. For example, ambitious staff officers ignored the persons in charge of information and supply and hastened operations by force, thus bringing about failures.

There were many examples that information was ignored. When Germany won on the Western Front in 1940, persons of the army in charge of operations judged that the landing attack of the British Isles would be undertaken soon after that victory and that Britain would be defeated. As a result, the above-mentioned persons laid great emphasis upon the occupation of Southeast Asia. At that time, military attachés resident in Great Britain and Sweden had doubts about the possibility of successful landing operations by the German army, and therefore reported that England would not be easily defeated. But the operation division did not give credit to this information, and expected that Hitler would eventually win. Therefore, it was the operation division which resolutely started the war

against the U.S.A. and Great Britain. Moreover, when the war between Germany and the Soviet Union began in 1941, military attachés resident in the Soviet Union and the Soviet Union branch of information section of the General Staff Office placed great emphasis on the military capacity of the Soviet Union, and anticipated that the war would be a prolonged and drawn out one. However, staffs of the operation section of the General Staff Office were fascinated by Hitler and expected that the Soviet Union would be defeated at an early date. Thus, the operation section continued its plans to enter into the war against the Soviet Union. During 1941 this same section complied with the judgement of the information section, and decided not to enter into a war against the Soviet Union, but it still intended to enter into a war with the Soviet Union in the spring of 1942. Moreover, when the opening of the war against the U.S.A. was decided on December, 1941, the decision was not reached on the basis of rational judgement comparing the productive capacities and war-making capacities of the Axis powers and the Allied Powers. Conversely the decision was reached on the basis of wishful thinking that Germany would win.

In the case of outstation headquarters, there are many clear examples that the opinion of operation staff officers had priority and those of information and supply officers were ignored. In the case of the Imphal operation in which Japanese troops delivered attacks against India from Burma in 1944, Japanese troops ignored the capacity of British and Chinese troops to launch counteroffensives and carried out operations in disregard of connections with the rear troops and supplies. Therefore, Japanese troops were not only defeated by the counterattack of the British troops but in addition 100,000 Japanese soldiers fell short of ammunition and provisions. Furthermore, Japanese soldiers reaching half of the above number died of diseases or of hunger while they were retreating. This operation was a typical example of battle plans of which were made in spite of oppositions by persons in charge of information or supply. In 1942 when the Horii brigade failed in its attempt to go over the Central Mountains of New Guinea on foot from the north sea coast to attack Port Moresby, it was once again the result of a failure to heed the advice of information and supply officers.

4. *The Several Stages in the Development Military Strategies*

It is possible to delineate three distinct stages in the development of the military strategies of Japan during the Pacific War.

The first stage extends from the opening of the war in December, 1941 to the retreat from Guadalcanal in January, 1943. During the first half of this stage until the naval battle of Midway in June, 1942, Japanese forces took the initiative in military strategies up. During the second half of this stage, after the landing of the U.S. forces at Guadalcanal in August, 1942, a strategically protracted war continued between Japanese and the U.S. Throughout this period the influence of the military clique became strong due to the success of operations immediately after the commencement of the war, and as a result of this confrontations between the government and the armed forces did not manifest themselves openly. The army was mapping out a plan for opening a war against the Soviet Union and also a plan for attacking Chungching in China. At the same time the government and the military authorities failed to abandon their illusion of Germany emerging victorious.

The second stage of the war extended from January, 1943 to the last battle on the Mariana Islands in June, 1944. The initiative in war strategies in the Pacific Ocean was completely taken by the U.S. forces, and the Japanese troops were forced to assume the defensive. In the home islands conflicts between the necessities for domestic production and strategic requests became intensified, and confrontations between the government and the military authorities became evident. In September, 1943 it was decided that the Mariana Islands should be the final defensive line. But, in this battle which was strategically the last chance for Japan, Japanese forces were utterly decimated. At this time, the outcome of the war became apparent militarily. On the European Front, too, German troops continued to retreat after the battle of Stalingrad and the Italian surrender in September, 1943. Thus, the Japanese illusion of a German Victory was destroyed.

The third stage of the war extends from the resignation of the Tojo Cabinet owing to the defeat on the Mariana Islands to the general surrender in August, 1945. The prospect of the war became desperate, and conflicts between the government and the military clique grew more intensified. After the landing of the U.S. forces on Okinawa and the formation of the Suzuki Cabinet in April, 1945, the chief concern of the new leaders was how to control the chauvinists who were for the continuation of the war and thus bring about an end to the war. The central government and the military leaders diverged completely, and the conflicts between the army and the navy became intensified also. Thus, it became more and more difficult to obtain a consensus among political and military leaders, and Japan continued the entirely meaningless war. Finally, the Emperor (Tenno) and the old court politicians (Jushins), who represented the will of capitalists and civilian officials, suppressed the fanatic opinion of the military clique and the decision for surrender was made.