

“Were Japan’s Attempts at Regional Expansionism and its Attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 Destined to Fail?”

The question this paper will try to answer is as follows: ‘Were Japan’s attempts at regional expansionism and its attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 destined to fail?’. This paper will state that, yes, both Japan’s ambitions towards a Greater East-Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and the attack on Pearl Harbour during the 20th century were doomed to be unsuccessful. This paper has incorporated several academic articles, for example from the Journal of Peace Research, and papers to support this claim and to provide this statement with several examples as to why this was indeed the case.

By the end of the 19th century, Japan was, especially in comparison to other South-East Asian countries, modernized to a high degree. With this modernization and industrialization of Japan

came a surge of nationalist sentiment. Though the Japanese government wanted to adopt a policy of restraint¹, nationalist increasingly argued for territorial expansion, longing for a stronger international position on a global scale (Saniel, 1963, p. 52) and independency from the West, especially when it came to resources like iron, coal and oil (Fisher, 1950, p. 187). Thus, under the device of 'Asia for the Asiatics', Japan started to look to the South-East as a possible territories to be gained, since not only were those countries very rich in resources, but their the climate and geographical features were similar, making it easy for the Japanese to use their industrial and agricultural advancements in that region as well (Fisher, 1950, p. 180). Their goals were to create a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, an island empire (Cohen, 2000, p. 352).

Japan's blueprint was to use the iron and coal of the Philippines, Malaysia, China and Manchuria for railroads, machines, shipyards

¹ The Japanese government wanted to refrain from territorial expansion and international conflict until Japan was fully modernized and industrialized. (Saniel, 1963, p. 52)

and warfare supplies, while setting up small industries all over South-East Asia to produce products made from local materials² as a replacement for industries planted by Western powers. Furthermore, various big enterprises would have been established, as Java, with its sulphur, limestone and favourable climate, seemed well-suited for electro-chemical industries and Malaysia and Indonesia possessed the necessary resources for electro-metallurgical productions (Fisher, 1950, p. 185, 186).

This plan was, however, doomed to fail. This was, of course, largely due to the wars they were fighting in China, Manchuria and with United States of America on the isles of the Pacific. The war required Japan to use vast amounts of resources and supplies, leaving, for example, their merchant marine inadequate in size to fuse their mainly insular empire together through maritime links (Fisher, 1950, p. 188). Also, Japan's dire need for resources demonstrated itself in the devastating exploitation of their gained

² For example textiles, cigarettes and pottery.(Fisher, 1950, p. 186)

territories leaving the population famined and unemployed due to a severely unhinged economy. This created anti-Japanese sentiments in every country under their control, escalating into revolts and uprisings. The presence of the Japanese Military Police (kempeitai) further worsened the situation, to the point where, as Cohen (2000) states, people in South-East Asia began thinking “that Japanese dominance might prove to be less bearable than Western” (p. 352), for the kempeitai were practically massacring the ethnic Chinese in South- East Asian countries and brutalizing the citizens in general (Cohen, 2000, p. 352, 353).

We can thus conclude that due to the war and the atrocities committed by the kempeitai which led to anti-Japanese sentiment, it would have been virtually impossible for the Japanese to keep hold of their empire, even if they had had more time to strengthen their position. But what could have happened if the Japanese had managed to keep the US out of World War II? It seems safe to assume that even under more favourable circumstances the

Japanese would have failed in their expansionist ambitions, since, presumably due to their nationalist views in that time period, they were very racist towards the people and cultures of the regions they were occupying, for example forcing upon them a program of Japanization (Cohen, 2000, p. 355, 356). Furthermore, even though Japan's plans might have led to the disappearance of politic and economical division and a better local farming and industrial system, in the long run it would have created a localized industry instead of a centralized one (centred in a city), which would have led to a less commercialized society or in other words a poorer one. To cite Fisher (1950): "Japan's relative industrial immaturity rendered her incapable of replacing the West as a supplier of producer goods without which the economic life of the Southern Regions must remain retarded." (p. 189-190). Cohen (2000, p. 352) also observes that Japan could not provide the goods that Western countries imported in South-East Asia. We can thus conclude that it is probable that Japan's expansionist ambitions were doomed to fail, even without the war to hinder matters.

If the Japanese were to harbour any hope of succeeding in creating their Great East-Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, they had to prevent America from interfering or joining the war. However, as peace talks failed to ease the tensions between the two countries and the US started to put embargos on resources critical to Japan (Hosoya, 1968, p. 106, 107), the Japanese military felt it necessary to adopt a new strategy: attacking the US troops in such a way that Japan had sufficient time to build a strong base in South-East Asia before the Americans could retaliate, after which new negotiations could be ensued. The Japanese knew war against the US could not be won, unless under extreme favourable circumstances, but they hoped the US would begrudge a long war with the Japanese Empire (Russett, 1967, p. 98-101). This new strategy resulted in the battle plans for Pearl Harbour, a naval base in Hawaii where America's Pacific Naval Fleet was stationed. The goals of Operation AI or Operation Hawaii were to delay American operations with 6 months, destroying battleships, aircraft carriers and airfields stationed on the island and to kill as many navy personnel as possible (Paige,

2013, p. 9-10).

The destined failure of the operation to detain the American army lies in these goals themselves. The Japanese battle plan was intent on, as Paige (2013) puts it, “destroying the tools of war, rather than the means of war, thus they missed the critical targets” (p. 26). These critical targets were the oil reservoirs, reparation facilities, submarine docks and dry docks of Pearl Harbour, necessary for the upkeep of a large fleet yet very easy targets in an air raid. The Japanese succeeded in damaging battleships and even sinking some, but since the reparation facilities and the dry docks stayed intact, most of the battered ships could be redeployed in the Pacific war in a matter of months. Had the fuel reserves and the reparation facilities been destroyed, the US Army would have been forced to relocate their ships to the South Coast of America itself, which would have gained Japan, according to Paige (2013), at least 12 months’ worth of time and an extra 3,814 kilometres (Paige, 2013, 20).

Furthermore, the Japanese admiral Nagumo decided not to scout for the American aircraft carriers, absent from Pearl Harbour. Thus, the most important and useful warships of the Pacific Fleet were ignored, making it possible for the USS Enterprise, one of the aircraft carriers within close proximity of Hawaii, to defend Hawaii the very next day from possible further attacks by Japanese aircrafts. These ships also played a crucial role during the continuation of the war with the Japanese Empire, for example during the Battle of the Coral Sea and the Battle of Midway (Paige, 2013, p. 16, 24).

Lastly, Japan's hopes of the US not entering the war, even though they attacked Pearl Harbour, proved futile. The Japanese government had thought, in vain, that their alliance with Nazi-Germany and Italy (The Axis Alliance or Tripartite Act, 1940) might perhaps lessen the possibility of the American Army to engage in war. However, the US government had already resolved to not yield to Japan's threats and intimidations as a strong anti-

Japan sentiment arose in the nation (Ho- soya, 1968, p. 109-110).

If the Japanese had also hoped to deter the Americans by attacking Pearl Harbour, they failed miserably to grasp the emotional impact such an attack would have on a nation. Instead of destroying the American's morale, they gave cause for the whole nation to unite in their revenge against Japan (Paige, 2013, p. 1). The Japanese had thus failed in both delaying and deterring the USA, causing the start of a Pacific War that would last for 3 years and would lead to Japan's defeat.

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