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Realistic Caution and Ambivalent Optimism: US Intelligence Assessments and War Preparations against Japan, 1918-1941

In December 1940, less than one year before the Pacific War broke out, the Secretaries of State, War and Navy assessed the likelihood of Japan initiating hostilities with the US and its allies. Their memorandum stated that the military and political elite in Tokyo was contemplating a conquest of Southeast Asia in an effort to secure the oil and natural resources of British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies.¹ The possibility was also acknowledged that the Japanese might launch an expedition against the Philippines in order to neutralize the US Navy's capacity to interfere. Yet, 'it seemed more probable' that Japan preferred to achieve its objectives without resorting to war. The main reason cited was that the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) and Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) were hard pressed to provide sufficient strengths for large scale operations. As long as the Associated Powers, including the US, British Empire, and Holland, put up a 'vigorous and efficient defense', Japanese forces had to undertake a 'major effort', probably lasting several months. Under the circumstances, the prospects of a southward expedition seemed open to doubt.

The conclusion was noteworthy because it reflected the ambiguous views which the American defense establishment held on Japanese policy for a large part of the interwar years. On one hand, the leadership in Tokyo showed clear indications that it aspired to achieve a hegemonic position in the Far East. US intelligence staffs, along with defense officials, were able to identify the potential dangers which Japan's expansionist ambitions were posing for western interests in Asia. At the same time, a number of factors precluded a clear-cut forecast. Among the most important was the opportunistic and secretive manner in which Japanese leaders formulated their plans. Under the circumstances, the available intelligence could not provide a definite indication of the moves which the Imperial navy and army would undertake. The situation was further

¹ United States National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD (NARA 2), RG 225, JB 325, Joint Board, War Plans Division, Roll 11, JB 325, Serial No.670, Enclosure: Study of Immediate Problems concerning Involvement in War, by Secretaries of State, War and Navy, 21 December 1940

complicated because reliable pieces of evidence revealed how Japan did not possess the military and economic resources to defeat a coalition consisting of several great powers. The shortcomings also appeared to be making the Japanese government reluctant to commit the Imperial armed forces to a costly and extensive conflict. Therefore, the Americans were not inclined to anticipate a situation whereby the IJN and IJA undertook a full-scale conquest of the Asia-Pacific region. On the contrary, assessments on Japan's strategy were more likely to raise questions whether its leaders were willing and able to pursue any ambitious ventures.

The uncertainties surrounding Japan's strategy gave rise to a muddled set of war plans. On one hand, US strategists understood that in order to win any conflict against Japan, their forces needed to undertake a substantial effort to achieve naval supremacy in the Pacific. However, the indications pointing to the problems facing the IJN and IJA, coupled with evidence of hesitancy on Japan's part, led to the adoption of a policy that was based on the assumption that the mere presence of US forces in the Far East would deter aggressive moves. Again, the development was natural, given the absence of any firm evidence to suggest that the Japanese were planning to provoke a war against the western powers.

Historiography

The subject of American perceptions concerning Japanese strategy and the situation in the Pacific regions during the interwar period has been explored by a number of historians. The main works on the Washington naval treaty of 1921-22 have addressed the problems which the western powers faced in verifying Japan's adherence to the agreements.² Edward Miller provided a comprehensive analysis of the strategic and logistical challenges which defense officials faced in preparing for a campaign aimed at projecting American maritime power to the far reaches of the western Pacific.³ The

² C.L. Hall, *Britain, America, and Arms Control, 1921-37* (1987); E. Goldstein and J.H. Maurer (eds), *The Washington Conference, 1921-1922: naval rivalry, East Asian stability and the road to Pearl Harbor* (1994)

³ E. Miller, *War Plan ORANGE: the US Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897-1945* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1991)

official histories described how defense planners held doubts whether US forces were adequate to fight a global conflict.⁴ A number of scholars have explained the political and economic difficulties which the service departments faced in devising a coherent strategy.⁵ Among the greatest hindrances was the way in which successive US presidential administrations maintained an isolationist policy of avoiding entanglements in areas beyond the western hemisphere. An equally formidable obstacle was Congress's continuous effort to limit defense expenditure. However, few works have explored the aspect of intelligence and its influence on the policies devised by the Navy and War departments. The works on US intelligence prior to the Pacific War have focused on the efforts undertaken to decode Japan's secret communications, and the mixed results that were achieved.⁶ The information received from other sources, including the military attachés in the Far East, has not been scrutinized.⁷ A number of essays have covered US

⁴ L. Morton, *The Fall of the Philippines*, and *Strategy and Command: the first two years*, in series *United States Army in World War II: The War in the Pacific* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1962-1989); M. Matloff and E.M. Snell, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare*, M.S. Watson, *Chief of Staff: Prewar Plans and Preparations*, R.S. Cline, *Washington Command Post: the Operations Division*, R.M. Leighton and R.W. Coakley, *Global Logistics and Strategy, 1940-1943*, in series *United States Army in World War II: The War Department* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1950-1955)

⁵ G.W. Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: the US Navy, 1890-1990* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1994), Chapter 8; E. Cohen, 'The Strategy of Innocence? The United States, 1920-1945', in W. Murray, M. Knox, and A.H. Bernstein (eds), *The Making of Strategy: rulers, states and war* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), pp.428-65; L. Morton, 'War Plan Orange: Evolution of a Strategy', in *World Politics*, Volume 11, No.2 (January 1959), pp.221-250; T. Tuleja, *Statesmen and Admirals: quest for a Far Eastern naval policy* (NY: W.W. Norton, 1963)

⁶ The most significant works on US signals intelligence during the run-up to the Pearl Harbor attack include: L. Farago, *The Broken Seal: the story of 'Operation Magic' and the Pearl Harbor disaster* (NY: Random House, 1967); W. Honan, *Visions of Infamy* (NY: St. Martin's, 1991); R. Lewin, *The Other ULTRA: codes, cyphers and the defeat of Japan* (London: Hutchinson, 1982); J. Prados, *Combined Fleet Decoded: the secret history of American intelligence and the Japanese Navy in World War II* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1995); G.W. Prange, *At Dawn We Slept: the untold story of Pearl Harbor* (London: Michael Joseph, 1981); R. Stinnett, *Day of Deceit: the truth about FDR and Pearl Harbor* (NY: Free Press, 1999); T. Wilford, *Pearl Harbor Redefined: US Navy Radio Intelligence in 1941* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001); R. Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1962)

⁷ An important exception is B. Bidwell, *The History of the Military Intelligence Division, Department of the Army General Staff, 1775-1941* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1986).

assessments of its potential rivals.⁸ However, they have concentrated largely on military aspects, such as the quality and performance of the German and Japanese armed forces, and tended to focus less on intelligence related to war plans. The following analysis will attempt to fill the gap by drawing a connection between intelligence and net assessment, and thereafter explain the effect on US war planning.

In order to assess the effectiveness of US intelligence during the interwar period, it is important to establish a viable assessment criterion. Theorists have explained how one of the key hindrances to an accurate analysis is that the evaluators of intelligence, along with those involved in the policymaking process, tend to misinterpret the data. Richard Betts, for example, has argued, ‘in the best known intelligence failure, the most crucial mistakes have seldom been made by the collectors of raw information, occasionally by professionals who produce finished analyses, but most often by the decision makers who consume the products of the intelligence services’.⁹ Officials in a position of responsibility often fail to act upon the information, because they hold a number of fixed perceptions. The failure to properly gauge the situation can stem from several factors, including the ambiguous nature of the available information, the use of a flawed method of analysis, and last but not least, the preconceived biases which leaders hold. Michael Handel has also argued that the success of any intelligence activity depends upon whether ‘leaders are open-minded and encourage criticism’, and are willing to accept ‘accurate, though unpleasant information’.¹⁰ Military and political authorities frequently refuse to acknowledge the intelligence they receive, because they believe that making a decision based on the material entails the possibility of contradicting a pre-set policy agenda.

⁸ C.L. Christman, ‘Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Craft of Strategic Assessment’, W. Murray and A.R. Millett (eds), *Calculations, Net Assessment and the Coming of World War II* (NY: Free Press, 1992), pp.216-57; D. Kahn, ‘US Views of Germany and Japan in 1941’, E. May (ed.), *Knowing One’s Enemies: intelligence assessment before the two world wars* (Princeton, NJ, 1984), pp.476-501; T.G. Mahnken, *Uncovering Ways of War: US intelligence and foreign military innovation, 1918-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2002), Chapters 3-4

⁹ R. Betts, ‘Analysis, War and Decision: why intelligence failures are inevitable’, in *World Politics*, Vol.31, No.1 (October 1978), p.61

¹⁰ M. Handel, *War, Strategy and Intelligence* (London: Frank Cass, 1989), p.253

Indeed, US intelligence activities prior to the Pacific War were influenced by a number of misperceptions. One of the tendencies was to conclude that, because the losses which Japan was likely to incur in a war against the US outweighed the costs, the leadership in Tokyo thought likewise. By doing so, the Americans relied on a method of analysis which intelligence theorists and practitioners have defined as ‘projection’,¹¹ a practice of projecting one’s values onto the adversary, or ‘mirror imaging’,¹² that is assuming that the other side would follow the same principles as oneself when facing a similar situation. Intelligence staffs and defense officials also doubted whether the Japanese were able to construct a military machine that was capable of challenging the western powers, on the grounds that their technological advancement was not up to date.¹³ Nevertheless, the key factor which hindered an accurate assessment was the fact that, in spite of numerous proclamations of a desire to undermine western influence in the Far East, the Japanese did not develop a firm plan for initiating hostilities against the US and its allies until the autumn of 1941. Even then, the government and military shrouded their strategy under a tight veil of secrecy. Under the circumstances, the bulk of the intelligence appeared in the form of ‘noise’, or data which created a confused picture, rather than ‘signals’ which provided firm indications of an impending attack.¹⁴ For this reason, any judgment needs properly examine the results achieved with the limited data that US intelligence managed to obtain.

¹¹ R. Betts, *Surprise Attack: lessons for defense planning* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1982), p.120-2; Handel, *War, Strategy*, p.242

¹² M. Lowenthal, ‘The Burdensome Concept of Failure’, in A.C. Maurer et al (eds), *Intelligence: policy and process* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1985), pp.44, 49; M. Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War* (Cambridge: CUP / London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1996) p.228; Handel, *War, Strategy*, p.250

¹³ See Mahnken, *Ways of War*, Chapter 3; D. Ford, ‘US Naval Intelligence and the Imperial Japanese Fleet during the Washington Treaty Era, c.1922-1936’, in *Mariner’s Mirror*, Volume 93, No.3 (2007), pp.281-306; and ‘The Best Equipped Army in Asia?: US Military Intelligence and the Imperial Japanese Army before the Pacific War, 1919-1941, in *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, Volume 21, No.1 (2008), pp.86-121.

¹⁴ For an explanation of the problems of ‘signals’ vs. ‘noise’, see Handel, *War, Strategy*, pp.236-7.

US strategic priorities, and subsequent functions and organization of the intelligence establishment

Throughout the decades leading to 1941, the US defense establishment was aware that Japan's expansionist policies posed a challenge that could not be ignored. The presence of American imperial and commercial interests in the Asia-Pacific regions, coupled with the uncertain state US-Japanese relations, meant that an armed confrontation was a distinct possibility. The development of a strategy to protect the Far East from Japanese incursions was therefore treated as a priority. Equally important was to create an intelligence apparatus that could gauge the threat posed by Japan's armed forces.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the US had established a chain of island bases in the Pacific stretching from Hawaii to the Philippines, the purpose of which was to protect the sea communications with its growing trade and economic concerns in Asia. The rise of Japan's influence posed the greatest potential danger, especially after 1905, when its forces defeated Russia, and gained an ascendant position. In 1907, navy strategists took the first step towards developing a war plan against Japan, codenamed *Orange*.¹⁵ In the event of hostilities, the fleet was to sail to the Philippines, and the US army to protect major installations in the islands.¹⁶ Further apprehensions surfaced after the First World War, when the IJN emerged as the third largest fleet in the world. Japan also acquired the island colonies that had previously been held by Germany, including Micronesia and the Carolines, thereby securing a network of bases which lay astride the trans-Pacific sea lanes. Last but not least, in an effort to reap rewards for siding with the Allied powers, Tokyo demanded special economic concessions in China. This action threatened to undermine the US principle of maintaining an 'Open Door', which discouraged the pursuit of imperial gains that could jeopardize free trade in Asia. The main aim of the Washington Conference of 1921-22, convened by President Warren Harding, was to set up a treaty that restricted the possibility of Japanese expansion. The participants of the conference, namely the US, Japan, Great Britain and a host of other European powers,

¹⁵ 'Orange' was the color code designated for Japan. For example, Great Britain was designated 'Red'; Germany, 'Black'; Mexico, 'Green'.

¹⁶ Morton, *Strategy*, pp.22-5

signed a number of agreements which set limits on naval construction, while at the same time discouraging further territorial conquests in the Far East.

Although the Washington treaties alleviated the possibility of Japan encroaching upon Western interests, US defense officials were wary that peaceful relations could not last indefinitely. Indeed, Japan's pursuit of a pacifist policy ended in 1931, when the economic effects of the Great Depression led the military to demand that their nation's problems be solved through aggressive territorial expansion on the Asiatic mainland. In September, the Kwangtung army invaded Manchuria. In 1937, after the IJA launched a full scale invasion of mainland China, Japan made further moves to damage the status quo. Tokyo also took an increasingly hostile stand towards the West, as evidenced by the signing of the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy in September 1940. Between autumn 1940 and July 1941, Japanese forces started to menace Southeast Asia by occupying French Indochina. In response, the Roosevelt administration imposed sanctions on a number of vital war materials, including aviation fuel, scrap iron and oil. The steady deterioration in US-Japan relations provided convincing reasons to anticipate an armed confrontation, as well as motivation to establish an intelligence machinery that could monitor the situation in the Pacific regions.

The main bodies responsible for handling information on Japanese strategy were the Navy Department's Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), and the War Department's Military Intelligence Division (MID), also designated as G-2. Both organizations had existed since the latter part of the 1800s, and underwent significant growth during the First World War.

A noteworthy feature of US interwar intelligence was the absence of a centralized authority for coordinating the activities of the Navy and Army. The MID and ONI conducted separate operations, with few formal mechanisms for ensuring regular liaison. The lack of cooperation had some unfortunate effects. At the level of collection, the armed services did not always share the material they gathered. At the highest levels of the defense hierarchy, the Joint Board provided a forum where planning staffs from the

army and navy could exchange their views. However, the service chiefs did not have access to the intelligence reports produced by their counterparts, and lacked the means to present an informed critique of their rival service's conclusions. The process of net assessment was further hindered by lack of communication between the defense community and civilian agencies.¹⁷ Political leaders formulated their own policies, and did not always provide the armed services with clear guidelines on the strategies they needed to develop.¹⁸ Defense chiefs found themselves developing war plans without understanding the policies advocated by the State Department and Executive Branch. Equally uncertain was the level of funding that would be allocated for defense expenditure in the event of war, which in turn, made it difficult to predict the forces that would be made available.

Financial shortages also constrained intelligence activities. Congressional cuts in defense spending during the 1920s resulted in a dramatic reduction in resources. By 1922, G-2 slashed its staff from 282 officers at the end of the First World War, to forty-four.¹⁹ Its budget was also shrunk by almost one half. The ONI undertook a similar decrease in personnel.²⁰

Yet, in spite of the problems, US intelligence organizations undertook a sizeable effort to collect data on Japanese policy. Intelligence emanated from two main sources. The first was the signals intelligence organizations of the Navy and War Departments. The service attachés based in Japan and the Far East were the second key source. The incoming information was processed by the ONI and MID, both of whom operated dedicated sections for East Asian affairs. At the policymaking level, G-2 and naval intelligence regularly contributed extensive assessments on the situation in the Far East, and the

¹⁷ Christman, 'Strategic Assessment', pp.224-5

¹⁸ L. Brune, *The Origins of American National Security Policy: sea power, air power and foreign policy, 1900-1941* (Manhattan, KA: MA/AH Publishing, 1981), p.62-3

¹⁹ Bidwell, *Military Intelligence Division*, pp.252, 256-7

²⁰ W. Packard, *A Century of US Naval Intelligence* (Washington, DC: Office of Naval Intelligence / Naval Historical Center, 1996), p.17

documents were included as annexes to the memoranda produced by the plans divisions of the service departments.

In the area of signals intelligence, the navy and army achieved a significant expansion of their capabilities. Henry Hough and W. Galbraith, who served as Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI) between 1923-27, took the first steps in improving the ONI's sigint section, by establishing a research desk for studying wireless and cable interceptions.²¹ Despite the progress, as late as 1928, the ONI conceded that its code-breaking work was limited by the lack of personnel and funds.²² Nor did naval intelligence have the resources to establish an adequate number of cryptographic units in the Pacific.²³

Within army intelligence, for much of the 1920s, the joint War-State department cipher bureau, more commonly known as the Black Chamber, was responsible for intercepting and decrypting foreign signals traffic.²⁴ Established under the leadership of Herbert Yardley, a sigint specialist, the chamber achieved a number of breakthroughs, including the deciphering of highly-classified Japanese diplomatic codes. Unfortunately, cutbacks in funding curtailed the chamber's activities until finally, in 1929, Secretary of State Henry Stimson ordered it shut down, on the grounds that the interception of foreign governmental communications constituted a 'highly unethical' procedure.²⁵

The dismantling of the Black Chamber did not discourage the intelligence community's effort to develop a codebreaking apparatus. Within the MID's signals service, the government which received the greatest attention was the Japanese.²⁶ In fact, the Foreign Ministry's *Red* machine was the first cipher instrument to be studied while in actual use.

²¹ J. Dorwart, *Conflict of Duty: the US Navy's intelligence dilemma, 1919-1945* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1983), pp.41-2

²² NARA 2 RG 38, DNI Official Correspondence, Box 1, Comment on 'Relation between Naval Intelligence and Naval Communications': prepared by ONI, 18 April 1928

²³ NARA 2 RG 38, DNI Official Correspondence, Box 1, Cryptographic Section, Memorandum for Director of Naval Intelligence, by Lieutenant-Commander P.P. Powell, 10 January 1928

²⁴ Bidwell, *Military Intelligence Division*, p.327

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.329-30

²⁶ NARA 2 RG 457, Records of the NSA, Box 2, Studies on Cryptology, 1917-77: History of the Signals Intelligence Service, Volume 3, The Peace, 1919-1939

Naval sigint was equally active. Although the Asiatic Fleet's interception unit was phased out in 1929, the fleet still had an officer attached from the Navy's central radio intelligence organization in Washington, OP-20-G.²⁷ During 1931-32, when Japan commenced its incursions into Manchuria, Asiatic Fleet officers prepared to expand their sigint network. An intercept station had been established at Guam in 1925, and in the following year, another two were set up in the Philippines.²⁸ An intercept unit was also located at the US legation in Peking, and in summer 1935, a listening post was established at Shanghai. OP-20-G also stepped up the training of cryptanalysts. By 1936, there were half a dozen radio operators based in the Far East. The total number of ONI operators working with Japanese codes rose to 103 by 1941, including forty on the Asiatic station and twenty-nine in Hawaii. By 1938-39, Japanese naval codes and ciphers consumed all of the US Navy's cryptanalysis efforts, and ninety percent of its translation activities.²⁹ Yet, the Navy was unable to decipher anything more than ten percent of the IJN's coded traffic, owing to the complicated manner in which the communications were encrypted. Nonetheless, the Americans did obtain some valuable information, particularly when intercepting signals related to the IJN's fleet exercises. Intelligence obtained from the June-August 1933 grand fleet maneuvers, for example, confirmed that in the event of war, the Japanese navy was contemplating an attack on the Philippines, as well as preparing for operations to secure the mandated islands as bases for attacking the US fleet.³⁰

The service attachés based in Tokyo provided the second key source of intelligence. The information from this channel is also better documented than sigint. Between 1918-41, the ONI and G-2 stationed a succession of attachés in Japan who provided reports based on a range of sources, including the press, as well as statements by government and military officials. Naval attachés in diplomatic posts across Asia also monitored the

²⁷ Prados, *Combined Fleet Decoded*, pp.45-6, 81-3

²⁸ Lewin, *Other ULTRA*, p.28

²⁹ Mahnken, *Ways of War*, p.58

³⁰ Naval War College, Newport, RI, (NWC), Manuscript Collection, Papers of Captain Edwin T Layton, Box 21, C-in-C Asiatic Fleet, SRH-223, Various reports on Japanese Grand Fleet maneuvers, June-August 1933, dated 7 March 1934

Imperial fleet's movements.³¹ Following 1937, with the outbreak of hostilities in China, military attachés became an important source on the IJA's activities. On the whole, the attachés were familiar with the developments taking place within Japan and the attitudes which the government and armed services held in regard to the Western powers. Thus, US intelligence activities during the interwar period demonstrated an awareness of the need to collect information on the threat posed by Japan's pursuit of an imperialist policy. The lack of reliable intelligence cannot be attributed to poor tasking.

Nature of the intelligence collected

Despite the progress achieved in establishing an intelligence apparatus, neither the ONI nor MID managed to secure comprehensive information on Japanese strategy. The secrecy with which Japan's leaders formulated their policies acted as a constant obstacle. Intelligence was mainly derived from open sources, and the material tended to provide a broad outline of the desires which the Japanese held for undermining Western influence in the Far East. However, US personnel were less able to secure information on more detailed aspects such as the extent to which the IJN and IJA were willing to initiate hostilities to achieve their aims, and the war plans they were considering.

The most significant problem facing US intelligence was that Japan did not have a definite plan for waging war against America and its allies for a large part of the interwar period. During the 1920s, following the Washington treaties, the service attachés could confidently report that US-Japan relations were likely to remain cordial. Pro-war sentiments were confined to military and naval circles, whose influence on government policy was marginal. For much of the decade, Tokyo maintained that following a policy of peaceful coexistence with the US was in the best interest for Japan's national security. Therefore, measures towards rearmament, such as the raising of the defense budget, were not necessarily taken as indications that the armed forces were preparing for war.³² The

³¹ NARA 2 RG 38, DNI Official Correspondence, Box 1, Naval Attaché (Tokyo) to Director of Naval Intelligence, 5 January 1928

³² NARA 2 RG 165, M-1216, Roll 2, MID 2063-324, Military Events in Japan during month of May 1929, prepared by Military Attaché (Tokyo), and Current Events in Japan during month of September 1925, prepared by Military Attaché (Tokyo)

Commander-in-Chief of the US Asiatic fleet claimed that he did not think 'there [was] even a remote possibility of trouble with [Japan] for some years to come'.³³

Yet, the possibility of Japan pursuing a more forward policy remained a possibility. The only developments that that could be calculated with certainty were the broad areas where it would seek to expand. Geographical factors provided a number of portents. As early as 1921, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Burnett concluded that one of Japan's key requirements was to obtain a secure supply of raw materials.³⁴ The Asiatic mainland was therefore a likely objective, since it provided the most accessible source.

The aftermath of the Manchurian incident in 1931 saw mounting evidence of Japan holding ambitious schemes. In 1933, the government announced a plan to establish a reserve of financial resources and armaments, in an effort to prepare for extended operations in Manchuria and China.³⁵ However, there was little evidence to suggest that Japan had drawn any concrete plans to initiate a war against the US.

The fact of the matter was that for much of the 1930s, Japan's main objective was to consolidate its gains, and avoid further breaches with foreign powers. The situation changed after the commencement of the Sino-Japanese War in July 1937, and US intelligence began to pick up indications of a desire to secure complete control over mainland China. Military leaders also showed little concern for respecting American commercial and economic concerns.³⁶ In gauging the situation in the Asia-Pacific region, US intelligence tended to monitor the security of American territories, including the Philippines, Guam and Hawaii. At the same time, a close eye was kept on the colonial possessions of America's allies, most notably Great Britain, France and Holland. In

³³ United States National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC (NARA 1), RG 38, Records of the Chief of Naval Operations, Intelligence Division, Box 459, File C-9-e, Naval Policy in the Far East: prepared by Captain A. St. Clair Smith, 31 August 1926

³⁴ NARA 2 RG 165, M-1216, Roll 17, MID 2023-376, Study of Japanese Troop Communications, prepared by Military Attaché (Tokyo), 5 October 1921

³⁵ NARA 2 RG 165, M-1216, Roll 2, MID 2063-324, Comments on Military Events in Japan, 8 March 1933, prepared by Military Attaché (Tokyo)

³⁶ NARA 2 RG 165, M-1216, Roll 3, MID 2063-357, Report on Current Events in Japan, by Military Attaché (Tokyo), 22 December 1939

conducting any operation against Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, Japanese forces were likely to seek measures aimed at removing the US navy's ability to interfere. In addition, any moves into Southeast Asia were bound to bring the IJN and IJA within striking distance of American positions in the western Pacific.

Yet, while Japan was undertaking moves which threatened the western powers, its strategy remained undecided. Officials in Tokyo understood that the annexation of British and Dutch territories in Asia could elicit US intervention, but were circumspect about facing such scenarios. The main objective was to bring the war effort in China to a successful finish, with southward expansion being a secondary goal. The development of a coherent strategy was further hindered by army-navy disagreements. The IJA viewed the USSR as the ultimate enemy, and insisted on preparing for an invasion of Siberia. Army leaders thus argued that southward expansion be limited to Indochina, and were particularly anxious to avoid a confrontation against US and British forces.³⁷ The IJN, on the other hand, envisaged a complete conquest of the southern regions, and maintained that in carrying out the move, Japan needed to engage in an oceanic war against the western powers. Yet, as late as June 1941, army opposition prevented the navy from implementing its strategy.³⁸ When Japan occupied southern Indochina in July, its leaders had not agreed on any definite policies for expanding into Southeast Asia. The aim was to place Japan's forces in a favorable position to seize the oil resources of the East Indies if the need arose, and in the meantime, continue with the China operations while remaining on guard against the USSR.³⁹ Only in August, after the US and its allies froze Japan's overseas assets and imposed an oil embargo, did policymakers decide that an occupation

³⁷ M. Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War: the search for economic security, 1919-1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1987), pp.174-5

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.208-9; N. Ike (ed), *Japan's Decision for War: records of the 1941 Policy Conferences* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1967), p.50

³⁹ A. Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific* (London: Longman, 1987), pp.144-6; N. Shinjiro, 'The Drive into Southern Indochina and Thailand', in J.W. Morley, (ed.) *The Fateful Choice: Japan's advance into Southeast Asia, 1939-41*, from translated series, *taiheiyo senso e no michi: kaisen gaiko shi - Japan's Road to the Pacific War* (NY: Columbia UP, 1980), pp.235-7

of the southern regions was imperative.⁴⁰ Even in September, when the decision was made to commence preparations for war against the US, Admiral Nagano, the navy chief of staff, along with the civilian leaders, insisted on a last-ditch effort to negotiate a rapprochement and secure a lifting of the sanctions.⁴¹ It was not until November, following the accession of Prime Minister Tojo's hard-line government, that the final decision for war was ratified. Nor was it until the same month that the high command approved Admiral Yamamoto's plan for a preemptive strike against the US Fleet at Pearl Harbor.

Under the circumstances, the bulk of the material collected by US intelligence was likely to suggest that Japan was preoccupied with its operations in China. In March 1938, Colonel Joseph Stilwell reported from Peking, 'since Japan cannot pull out and China refuses to quit, the prospect of a long-drawn-out struggle increases'.⁴² The available evidence also indicated that Japan wished to avoid taking on any additional adversaries. Lieutenant-Commander Henri Smith-Hutton reported that the Cabinet had rejected German proposals for strengthening the Anti-Comintern Pact into a military alliance aimed at Britain and France, out of fears that such measures might provoke the western powers into cutting off Japan's vital supplies of imported raw materials.⁴³ Although naval circles advocated an occupation of the East Indies, Japan was unlikely to undertake such moves so long as she had the option of securing oil supplies through diplomatic negotiations with the Batavia government.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Barnhart, *Japan Prepares*, pp.239-44; Ike (ed), *Decision*, pp.-112-29; J.W. Morley, *The Final Confrontation: Japan's negotiations with the United States, 1941*, from translated series, *taiheiyo senso e no michi: kaisen gaiko shi* (NY: Columbia UP, 1994), pp.163-7

⁴¹ Ike (ed), *Decision*, pp.131-2, 135-8, 160

⁴² J.G. Utley, *Going to War with Japan, 1937-1941* (Knoxville: Tennessee UP, 1985), p.34

⁴³ NARA 2 RG 38, Secret Naval Attaché Reports, 1936-1943, Box 6, Volume 1, Japan and the German-Italian Military Alliance, by Naval Attaché (Tokyo), 24 May 1939

⁴⁴ NARA 2 RG 38, ONI, Foreign Intelligence Branch, Box 20, Naval Attaché Reports from Tokyo, No.18, on Navy's Policy of Southward Advance, 28 January 1939, and Box 21, Naval Attaché Reports from Tokyo, No.99-40, on Strategic Materials Desired from the Netherlands East Indies, 20 June 1940; also, for a description of Japan's policies, see N. Shinjiro, 'Economic Demands in the Dutch East Indies', in Morley (ed.), *Fateful Choice*, pp.138-50.

Japan's moves also depended largely on developments transpiring in Europe. Before making a commitment to support Germany in its quest to destroy the British empire, the high command needed to monitor the strategic balance, and thereafter judge whether the situation favored the Axis powers.⁴⁵ The signing of the Tripartite pact in September 1940 emboldened Tokyo to take a bolder stand against the West.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Japan was more likely to hesitate to expand the scope of its operations, at least until the European conflict turned decisively against Britain.⁴⁷

An equally important consideration was the need to prepare for hostilities against the USSR. This became especially true after Germany launched operation *Barbarossa* in June 1941. While the IJA was reluctant to initiate a confrontation with the Red Army, especially after the defeats it suffered during the border clashes at Changkufeng and Nomonhan between 1938-39, the Japanese were unlikely to forego the opportunity to occupy Siberia and share the spoils of a German victory. In July 1941, a signals decrypt revealed that Foreign Minister Matsuoka had informed the embassy in Berlin that the IJA was 'preparing for all possible eventualities' and 'keenly watching developments' in eastern Siberia so that she could decide on when to join Germany in 'combating the Communist menace'.⁴⁸ American consuls in China also reported a steady buildup of army divisions along the Manchuria-Siberia frontier. The direction in which the main thrust of Japanese expansion could head therefore remained uncertain.

During the final months leading up to Pearl Harbor, the available intelligence did little to clarify the exact moves Japan intended to undertake. The problems of collecting information had become acute during the late 1930s. The Foreign Ministry introduced the

⁴⁵ NARA 2 RG 165, M-1216, Roll 3, MID 2063-357, Report on Current Events in Japan, by Military Attaché (Tokyo), 20 September 1940; RG 38, ONI, Foreign Intelligence Branch, Box 21, Naval Attaché Reports from Tokyo, No.137-40, on Japanese Foreign Policy, 8 September 1940

⁴⁶ NARA 2 RG 165, M-1216, Roll 3, MID 2063-357, Report on Current Events in Japan, by Military Attaché (Tokyo), 7 October 1940; RG 38, Secret Naval Attaché Reports, 1936-1943, Box 6, Volume 1, Japanese-German-Italian Agreement, by Naval Attaché (Tokyo), 7 October 1940

⁴⁷ NARA 2 RG 38, ONI, Foreign Intelligence Branch, Box 21, Naval Attaché Reports from Tokyo, No.79-41, on Third Konoye Cabinet, 29 July 1941

⁴⁸ W. Heinrichs, *Threshold of War: Franklin D Roosevelt and the American entry into World War II* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), p.122

Purple cipher machine in 1939, which used a more complicated code than its *Red* predecessor. In 1939, the IJN also overhauled its communications system and set up the JN-25a code. Although by late 1941, progress had been made in decoding JN-25a, the Navy undertook yet another switch in December by introducing a new variant, JN-25b, which remained largely unbroken until a few months following the outbreak of the Pacific War.

The service attachés also faced a difficult task, mainly because they did not have the means to collect intelligence via clandestine means. In 1939, the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) commented on how the ONI did not possess an undercover service equipped to carry out espionage, and lamented that the shortcoming gave US intelligence a ‘distinct weakness’ in comparison its foreign counterparts.⁴⁹ The MID did not propose the establishment of a secret intelligence network in the Far East until November 1941, and its creation was disrupted by the outbreak of hostilities the following month.⁵⁰ As a result, by the eve of Pearl Harbor, US intelligence was significantly handicapped.

The reasons for the failure to foresee the moves which Japan undertook during the opening stages of the war, namely the difficulties in decoding the IJN’s communications, the ineffective cooperation between the ONI and MID, and lack of appreciation for Japanese military capabilities, have been explained in previous works.⁵¹ However, two key features, both related to the nature of the material that was available to US intelligence personnel, deserve highlighting. First, information from human sources was not entirely convincing. While the naval attaché in Tokyo received several indications of an impending Japanese attack, the material did not provide concrete indications of the events which were to unfold. In March, an attaché report quoted a statement by a former IJN admiral, to the effect that war against the US would commence with the navy conducting attacks against the Philippines and Hawaii. However, the statement appeared

⁴⁹ Packard, *Naval Intelligence*, p.44

⁵⁰ Bidwell, *Military Intelligence Division*, pp.438-9

⁵¹ See Note 6, above.

more as a bellicose announcement.⁵² Reliable sources also indicated that the main thrust of Japan's expansion would be directed against Thailand and the Burma Road, in an effort to tighten the blockade of China's supply routes to the West. In October, the US consul in Hanoi reported that the Japanese had demanded access to four air bases in Cambodia.⁵³ US intelligence therefore became fixated on Southeast Asia, and was not compelled to pay close attention to the possibility of attacks against the Philippines or Hawaii.

Second, intercepts of Japanese communications, which intelligence staffs tended to rely on more extensively, provided reliable indications that war was imminent, but did not specify where the Japanese might strike. While American cryptographers had decoded *Purple* by 1941, the information provided by diplomatic sigint was limited to that pertaining to policy objectives, since they were written and sent by foreign ministry officials who did not have a full knowledge of the strategies which military leaders in Tokyo were planning.⁵⁴ On 15 November, Tokyo instructed its consulate in Honolulu to report regularly on the position of US ships based at Pearl Harbor.⁵⁵ Naval intelligence translated the message in early December, and the information suggested that the Japanese were contemplating an attack on Hawaii. Yet, the evidence simply indicated that efforts were being made to ascertain the status of the US fleet, without providing concrete details of an impending operation. US intelligence also picked up the foreign ministry's 'Winds message' of 19 November, ordering all diplomatic missions to destroy their cipher machines upon receipt of a coded weather report indicating the imminence of war.⁵⁶ On 2 December, both army and navy intelligence received word that Japanese missions in Washington, London, Singapore and Manila had been ordered to dispose their telegraphic codes and related documents. Nevertheless, the location of naval units could be determined only by breaking JN-25a and JN-25b, which by all reliable accounts,

⁵² Prados, *Combined Fleet Decoded*, p.163

⁵³ Heinrichs, *Threshold*, p.191

⁵⁴ Farago, *Broken Seal*, p.159

⁵⁵ Prange, *At Dawn We Slept*, p.355

⁵⁶ Prados, *Combined Fleet Decoded*, pp.167-8; Bidwell, *Military Intelligence Division*, pp.459-60

had not been fully decoded in December 1941.⁵⁷ The situation therefore does suggest that a significant portion of the difficulties facing US intelligence lay in the area of collection.

Intelligence assessments of Japanese strategy

The assessments produced by the ONI and MID reflected the vague nature of the information they received from the Far East. Although deductions could be made that Japan's leaders were striving to secure an Asiatic empire, the likelihood of their resorting to war remained open to speculation. To complicate matters, intelligence staffs in Washington had convincing reasons to conclude that Japan's strategy would be constrained by its fear of provoking a conflict in which it would have to confront the US and the Associated Powers. By autumn 1941, while the intelligence community was aware that the Japanese were preparing for further conquests, the accepted conclusion was that an advance into Southeast Asia entailed a number of risks which the leadership in Tokyo was unwilling to face. In the final analysis, the Japanese were considered unlikely to provoke a war which they could not win in the long run.

During the interwar years, army intelligence acknowledged the possibility that US interests in the western Pacific were subject to attack, and the Japanese could gain predominance with relative ease. As early as 1927, *Situation Monograph Orange* predicted, 'Japan will send a force which will assure the capture of [Luzon] before relief can come from the United States'.⁵⁸ The MID was also aware that the distances which

⁵⁷ For an alternative explanation, to the effect that the ONI was in fact reading JN-25, and thus able to decipher signals communications which suggested that the Japanese were launching an attack on Pearl Harbor, see Wilford, *Pearl Harbor Redefined*, passim. Although the book concludes that US officials at the top end of the defense hierarchy ignored accurate intelligence, the exact reasons remain unclear. Nor is there a clear explanation as to why US commanders at Pearl Harbor were deprived of the necessary intelligence. Wilford admits that any answer on the subject of dissemination must assess a number of variables, including interdepartmental rivalry, the chain of reporting, and bureaucratic organization, not all of which have been fully explored. Proponents of the conspiracy theory have thus far relied upon circumstantial evidence, namely, the fact that the Roosevelt administration was desperately seeking a valid pretext by which the US could enter the war without provoking hostilities. To date, there is no archival evidence to suggest that the US leadership's handling of the situation was part of a careful design.

⁵⁸ NARA 2 RG 407, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Box 63, File 167, Situation Monograph Orange (Draft), prepared by G-2, 1 January 1927

separated Japan's empire from America's main bases in the Pacific gave the enemy certain advantages in terms of defensive capabilities. A combat estimate prepared in 1939 concluded, 'so long as the sea routes between Japan and eastern Asia are under the control of the Japanese Navy it would be extremely difficult' for any power to oust the IJA from its conquests.⁵⁹ Similarly, the ONI deduced the probable scope of Japan's ambitions with considerable foresight. In 1923, an intelligence bulletin noted that the 'Japanese are thoroughly imbued with the idea that [their nation] must expand beyond her home borders to secure room for her surplus population and provide an independence in resources'.⁶⁰ A strongly-imbued sense of cultural superiority also gave rise to the belief that Japan had the preordained right to achieve domination over Asia.

Yet, while Japan had strong motives to wage a war of conquest, and was likely to possess certain advantages in such a conflict, the likelihood of encroachments on western interests in Asia remained difficult to predict. For starters, Japanese leaders had a number of compelling reasons to refrain from hostile action against the US. The most important consideration was to maintain an adequate war economy, given Japan's lack of indigenous supplies of raw materials. The ONI noted how the armed forces depended on American imports for the majority of their war materials, and if the home islands were blockaded, 'the deficiency of annual consumption over annual production would exceed eighty percent in the case of such vital essentials' such as oil, iron ore, rubber and tin.⁶¹ Because the US, the British Empire and China were Japan's greatest markets and principal sources of raw materials, a declaration of war against these countries appeared

⁵⁹ United States Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA (MHI), Army War College, Curricular Archives, Combat Estimate: Japan, prepared by G-2, 15 April 1939

⁶⁰ NARA 1 RG 38, Security Classified Publications, Box 13, 'Japan: Estimate of Political-Military Situation', in ONI Monthly Intelligence Bulletin No.8-1923, 15 August 1923

⁶¹ NARA 1 RG 38, Security Classified Publications, Box 16, 'Japan - Economic Estimate', in ONI Monthly Intelligence Bulletin No.12-1928, 15 June 1928

illogical.⁶² G-2 also concluded that Japan's shortage of raw materials would be 'disastrous' in any war where access to overseas markets was denied.⁶³

During the run-up to the Pacific War, US intelligence organizations could only hypothesize on where Japanese expansion was heading. Army intelligence acknowledged the possibility that the imperial forces could threaten Southeast Asia and the western Pacific. In February 1941, G-2 warned that, while the bulk of the IJA was tied down in China, the IJN was 'unhampered in the South China Sea'.⁶⁴ The Philippines, Singapore and the Dutch East Indies thus lay exposed to attack. However, the MID was unable to identify concrete signs of an imminent advance against US positions. On the contrary, its predictions were affected by credible signs that military shortcomings would continue to urge caution on Japan's leaders. Among the most important problems was that a large portion of the IJA's troops were committed on the Asiatic mainland, with the remainder defending the home islands. In January 1941, the assistant chief of staff opined, 'Japan will not risk an attack on the Netherlands Indies, Singapore or the Philippines without first establishing at home an army in the order of half a million men to guard against possible counter-invasion'.⁶⁵ The available intelligence provided 'no evidence of the mobilization of such a protective force'. The Japanese were considered unlikely to be able to muster the forces necessary for an extensive campaign. On the northern flank, the IJA was making a sizeable effort to prepare for war against the USSR in the event the Red Army collapsed, and the move hampered Japan's capacity to expand. Commenting on a report by the military attaché at Tokyo in July, which indicated a strengthening of the Kwangtung Army's divisions along the Manchukuo frontier, G-2 deduced that the IJA's operations in the south would be confined to Indochina, with the main drive

⁶² NARA 1 RG 45, Office of Naval Records and Library, 1911-1927, Box 704, Folder 7, Japan: Economic Estimate, 13 January 1925

⁶³ MHI Army War College, Curricular Archives, G-2 Estimate: Far East, 20 December 1933, Appendix 2: Estimate of the Situation in Japan and Manchukuo

⁶⁴ NARA 2 RG 165, MID Correspondence, 1917-1941, Box 1629, File 2657-288, G-2 Estimate of the Strategic Situation, 5 February 1941

⁶⁵ NARA 2 RG 165, M-1216, Roll 19, MID 2023-673, Disposition of Japanese Forces, Estimate by Assistant Chief of Staff (G-2), 29 January 1941

directed towards the maritime provinces of Siberia.⁶⁶ Given their shortage of surplus forces, the Japanese were unlikely to conduct a southward advance. Although the IJA continued to assemble a field force that could be deployed against either Southeast Asia or Russia, its policy was largely influenced by the desire to ‘resort to every means available to keep the United States out of the war’.⁶⁷ As late as nine days prior to the outbreak of war, G-2 concluded that although Japan had the initiative, its forces were overextended, and unable to ‘concentrate the required forces to attack any of [its objectives] on a large scale and with assurance of success’.⁶⁸

Economic factors also appeared to limit Japan’s options. The oil embargoes and freezing of Japan’s assets drastically curtailed its supplies of raw materials, and made it imperative for Tokyo to reach an understanding with the US, or face further economic ruin.⁶⁹ Because Japan could not afford further breaches in its relations with America, any conquests in the southern regions were likely to be confined to areas such as Thailand, where the Japanese did not have to encounter the armed might which the Associated Powers could bring to bear. The most important factor which the Japanese were considering was their inability win a war against the US and its allies in the long run, so the MID believed. Although the assessment suggests a miscalculation of the events that were to transpire, the fact remained that the Japanese needed to contend with a number of obstacles before moving into Southeast Asia. In light of the available information, army intelligence was most likely to predict prudence on Japan’s part.

⁶⁶ NARA 2 RG 494, US Army Forces in the Middle Pacific and predecessor commands, Box 35, G-2 Memorandum on Mobilization of Additional Japanese Manpower, prepared for Army Chief of Staff, 17 July 1941

⁶⁷ NARA 2 RG 494, US Army Forces in the Middle Pacific and predecessor commands, Box 35, G-2 Memorandum on Developments in the Far Eastern Situation, prepared for Army Chief of Staff, 16 August 1941

⁶⁸ NARA 2 RG 494, US Army Forces in the Middle Pacific and predecessor commands, Box 35, Brief Periodic Estimate of the Situation, December 1941 to March 1942, prepared by G-2, 29 November 1941

⁶⁹ NARA 2 RG 494, US Army Forces in the Middle Pacific and predecessor commands, Box 35, Periodic Estimate of the World Situation, prepared by G-2, 5 September 1941

Naval intelligence was equally ambivalent, for similar reasons. The existing evidence appeared to indicate that the IJN would be discouraged from launching an attack on US and British interests, owing to the difficulties involved in carrying out such a complicated operation. In 1941, W.D. Puleston, the former DNI, contended, 'with all her strength, Japan labors under the inescapable disadvantage' of being an insular nation, dependent upon sea communications.⁷⁰ In the event of war, the US fleet based at Honolulu and the Philippines could cut off all Japanese trade routes with America and Europe.

Between late 1940 and December 1941, the ONI attempted to predict Japan's strategy, without complete success. The raw data did not suggest that Japanese forces would invade key targets such as the East Indies and Malaya, let alone US bases in the Pacific. In a series of fortnightly reports, naval intelligence concluded that Japan would seek to defeat China, and expand its influence in the southern regions through a combination of political maneuvering and economic penetration. In March 1941, when the Vichy government in Indochina rejected the IJA's demands that parts of Cambodia and Laos be ceded to Thailand, the Japanese brokered an agreement calling for the transfer of a smaller amount of territory.⁷¹ The move signified efforts to form closer relations with the Thai government and thereby expand Japan's empire by peaceful means.⁷² Likewise, Tokyo's application of pressure on Batavia for economic concessions did not enable forecasts that an invasion of the East Indies was forthcoming. While the Japanese press had adopted a bellicose tone, the general impression gained from government statements was that no drastic measures would be taken in the foreseeable future.⁷³

Statements by government and military officials were also taken to indicate a further deterioration in relations with the US. However, the ONI was reluctant to conclude that American interests in the Far East faced an imminent danger, owing to the lack of firm

⁷⁰ W.D. Puleston, *The Armed Forces of the Pacific: a comparison of the military and naval power of the United States and Japan* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1941), p.165, 168-9

⁷¹ NARA 2 RG 313, Joint Intelligence Center, Pacific Ocean Areas (JICPOA) Correspondence, Box 27, File A8/6 (1 of 3), ONI Fortnightly Summaries of Current National Situations, 1 March 1941

⁷² *Ibid.*, 15 May 1941

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 15 June 1941

intelligence. When the Roosevelt-Nomura-Hull meetings began in September, military leaders made a number of statements which suggested that 'Japan would use force, if necessary to break the American-British-Dutch-Russian encirclement' that threatened its empire.⁷⁴ However, the ONI went no further than to suggest that the move was probably aimed to strengthen public support for an impending war, and no forecasts were drawn as to which areas the Japanese were targeting. As late as November, when Japanese leaders were finalizing their war plans, the ONI could only state that the available evidence pointed to the possibility of further moves. Tojo stated that his government 'would continue [its] policy of building the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity sphere', but opinions among Japan's leaders appeared divided over whether to attack Siberia, or conduct a drive against the Burma Road in an effort to complete the strangulation of China's lifelines to the West.⁷⁵

Naval intelligence was also unclear on the significance of the information pointing to Japanese troop dispositions and location of task forces. By late November, the IJA moved close to 100,000 troops into southern Indochina.⁷⁶ Even then, the ONI only deduced that 'strong indications point to an early advance against Thailand'.⁷⁷ The conclusion fit squarely with the notion that Japan intended to avoid confronting the main Allied forces in the Far East. As far as naval activity was concerned, the deployment of forces in Indochina and the Mandates indicated 'clearly that extensive preparations are underway for hostilities'. However, the target could not be determined. On 26 November, the Fourteenth Naval District at Honolulu informed the ONI that the Japanese had been organizing a task force composed of two main fleets and the combined air force.⁷⁸ The

⁷⁴ NARA 2 RG 313, JICPOA Correspondence, Box 27, File A8/6 (2 of 3), ONI Fortnightly Summaries of Current National Situations, 15 September 1941

⁷⁵ NARA 2 RG 313, JICPOA Correspondence, Box 27, File A8/6 (1 of 3), ONI Fortnightly Summaries of Current National Situations, 1 November 1941

⁷⁶ NARA 2 RG 313, JICPOA Correspondence, Box 28, File A8/c Weekly Summary, Far East, by Op-16-F-2 (ONI), 29 November 1941

⁷⁷ NARA 2 RG 313, JICPOA Correspondence, Box 27, File A8/6 (1 of 3), ONI Fortnightly Summaries of Current National Situations, 1 December 1941

⁷⁸ NARA 2 RG 494, US Army Forces in the Middle Pacific and predecessor commands, Box 35, G-2 Memorandum on Japanese Naval Task Force, prepared for Army Chief of Staff, 26 November 1941

naval forces were en route to the South China Sea, while air units had been assembled at Hainan and Formosa. Yet, the most that could be deduced was that ‘a strong force may be preparing to operate in Southeast Asia, while component parts may be expected to operate’ from the Mandated islands. Without a definite indication of how the Japanese intended to use their army and navy dispositions, intelligence analysts could only speculate on the operations that might be undertaken.

At the decision-making level, the attempts made by US defense planners to gauge the possible scenarios that could arise, in the event Japan declared war, also reflected the difficulties arising from the lack of accurate intelligence. On one hand, observations of the Japanese leadership’s actions provided convincing reasons to conclude that it harbored ambitious plans for territorial expansion. In 1938, the Joint Planning Committee produced the *Study of Joint Action in Event of Violation of Monroe Doctrine by Fascist Powers*, which put forward a prophetic forecast of Orange objectives.⁷⁹ The assumption was that ‘Germany, Italy and Japan may be joined in an alliance’, and ‘the action of any one or two of these Fascist nations will receive the sympathetic support of the others’. Events had indicated that Japan sought control of China, along with objectives further afield, including the Dutch East Indies. To achieve these aims, it was in Japan’s interest ‘to avoid or reduce possible interference’ by neutralizing British and US naval power. Japanese strategy therefore had two additional objectives, the first of which was to occupy US positions in the western Pacific. The second aim was to establish an outer defense perimeter in the Marshall and Caroline islands in order to interdict naval forces that attempted to harass Japanese forces. The above-mentioned moves were exactly in line with those which Japan undertook during onset of the Pacific War. By 1940, defense chiefs became acutely aware of the strategic complications that could result from a further deterioration in relations between Japan and the western powers. General George Strong, the assistant chief of staff at the War Department’s plans division (WPD), warned, ‘the ejection of Great Britain, France and the Netherlands from the Far East would render

⁷⁹ NARA 2 RG 225, JB 325, Records of the Joint Board, War Plans Division, Roll 10, JB 325, Serial No.634, Study of Joint Action in Event of Violation of Monroe Doctrine by Fascist Powers: prepared for Joint Planning Committee, 12 November 1938

the United States hold on the Philippines and Guam wholly insecure'.⁸⁰ The possibility that Tokyo might resort to aggressive action was also acknowledged. In July, when the Roosevelt administration was considering the imposition of oil sanctions, the WPD argued that 'any further action denying the supply of petroleum derivatives... in a last analysis, would require measures which are tantamount to war'.⁸¹ Admiral Stark, CNO, and General George Marshall, the army chief of staff, also did not favor economic reprisals, on the grounds that such measures might provoke Japan.⁸²

At the same time, US officials concluded that, even if Japan declared war, the prospects of the IJN and IJA coping effectively with the forces ranged against them were open to doubt. Again, the contention was based on reliable indications which suggested that Japan did not have the strength to carry out bold moves. In January 1941, the WPD stated, 'the capture and occupation of [the oilfields in Java and Sumatra] in the face of British and Dutch opposition would require a major operation' that would take considerable time.⁸³ The IJA could spare no more than 100,000 troops for the southern regions, and 'only a portion of the air force' could provide sustained support for landing operations.⁸⁴ Aggressive moves by Japan could thus be ruled as long as the US and its allies maintained a presence in the Far East, or at the very least, until further British or Soviet

⁸⁰ NARA 2 RG 165, War Department, General Staff, WPD, Box 207, File 4295, Strategic and Economic Relations of the Netherlands East Indies to the United States, prepared by George Strong (Assistant Chief of Staff, WPD), 20 April 1940

⁸¹ NARA 2 RG 165, War Department, General Staff, WPD, Box 214, File 4344, WPD Memorandum for Chief of Staff, on the Stoppage of Gasoline and Oil to the Axis Powers, 26 July 1940

⁸² M. Lowenthal, *Leadership and Indecision: American war planning and policy process, 1937-1942* (NY: Garland, 1988), *Volume 1*, p.427, *Volume 2*, p.594; B. Mitchell Simpson, 'Harold Raynsford Stark', in E. Love (ed.), *The Chiefs of Naval Operations* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1980), p.126; R. Dallek, *Franklin D Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945* (Oxford, OUP, 1995), p.242

⁸³ NARA 2 RG 165, War Department, General Staff, WPD, Box 214, File 4344-2, WPD Memorandum on Oil Wells in the East Indies, 13 January 1941

⁸⁴ NARA 2 RG 165, War Department, General Staff, WPD, Box 109, File 3251-60, WPD Memorandum for the Secretary of War, on the Strategic Concept of the Philippine Islands, 3 October 1941

setbacks in the European theater created the 'favorable conditions' for actions against Southeast Asia and Siberia.⁸⁵

Logistical factors were also cited as a key obstacle. The War Plans Section at the Marine Barracks in Quantico, investigated the possible routes of advance which the Japanese could take from its bases in Indochina. An overland attack on the Burma Road or Malaya was not feasible, owing to the 'time and distances involved', and the 'difficulty of supply'.⁸⁶ A landing on the east coast of Malaya, within close proximity of Singapore, was possible, but required an overseas operation involving a large number transports and combatant vessels, and the difficulties of carrying out such a move were 'manifest'. In an assessment of enemy strategy prepared as part of an estimate of overall production requirements in the event of war, the Joint Board concluded that Japanese operations in Southeast Asia would have to be made at a great distance from home base.⁸⁷ If the IJN and IJA encountered protracted resistance, their ability to continue with their offensives was 'problematical', owing to a lack of adequate resources and industrial facilities.

US planning staffs also considered an attack on American territories to be unlikely. Again, the available intelligence provided good reasons to downplay the possibility of such scenarios. The majority of the IJA's troops were concentrated in Indochina, from which Thailand was the closest target.⁸⁸ An advance against the Philippines appeared to be riddled with military complications which the imperial forces would face difficulties in overcoming. An attack on Hawaii was also ruled out, for similar reasons. As early as 1928, army planners speculated that the Japanese would carry out a raid with carrier-based aircraft, and warned that the early detection of the raiding force would require a

⁸⁵ NARA 2 RG 165, War Department, General Staff, WPD, Box 230, File 4150, Strategic Estimate, prepared by WPD, October 1941

⁸⁶ NARA 2 RG 38, Office of the CNO, Strategic Plans Division Records, Miscellaneous Subject File, Box 47, Overland Routes from French Indochina, prepared by War Plans Section, Marine Barracks, Quantico, VA, 20 December 1940

⁸⁷ NARA 2 RG 38, Office of the CNO, Strategic Plans Division Records, Miscellaneous Subject File, Box 52, Joint Board Estimate of United States Overall Production Requirements, 11 September 1941

⁸⁸ Heinrichs, *Threshold*, pp.202-4

patrol of over 300 long-range seaplanes, many more than were available.⁸⁹ If the Japanese wished to commence the war by launching a surprise attack, the fleet at Pearl Harbor was most likely to suffer heavy damage. However, by 1941, the accepted conclusion was that Japan could not provide adequate forces for a large scale expedition in the central Pacific areas. An aide-memoir prepared by the Hawaiian Department, for the WPD, opined, 'an attack in force against Oahu necessitates an air superiority that can only be had by the establishment of land-based air within striking distance'.⁹⁰ The only suitable bases were the outlying islands, and Japanese forces needed to overcome strong US defenses in order to secure them. Again, in light of the apparent difficulties which the IJN was likely to face in executing an operation across large expanses of ocean, coupled with the absence of reliable indications that the Japanese were seriously contemplating such operations, US defense planners were unlikely to become overly concerned about the security of their Pacific bases. The speed and scale of Japan's advance was indeed necessary to convince the Americans that their adversary possessed substantial capabilities.

Influence on war preparations

War plans against Japan were based on an understanding of the key challenges which the US navy and army were likely to face, namely the potential scope of the operations that Japan intended carry out, as well as the measures needed to defeat enemy forces. The defense establishment's estimate of the situation in the Pacific was one of a myriad of influences on the policymaking process. A number of economic and political considerations played a pivotal role. Among the most important were the limits which Congress had placed on defense expenditure, which meant the armed services could not count on having substantial resources at hand. Isolationist opinion within the US public also restricted the extent to which defense planners could devise strategies which called for the deployment of large forces overseas. Nevertheless, perceptual factors were

⁸⁹ Miller, *ORANGE*, p.48

⁹⁰ NARA 2 RG 165, War Department, General Staff, WPD, Box 142, File 3672-32, Defense of Hawaii, Aide Memoir by Hawaiian Department (Honolulu) for Army Chief of Staff, 24 April 1941

significant. The ever-present possibility of Japanese encroachments on US interests in the Far East meant that planning had to be conducted with a sufficient level of readiness. At the same time, observations of Japan's behavior suggested that it was reluctant to provoke a war against the western powers. Consequently, the Americans developed a strategy based on the idea of maintaining a visible, albeit moderate, military presence in the Pacific regions. Such actions were aimed to dissuade Tokyo from embarking on any aggressive ventures, at least until US forces could be sufficiently bolstered to hold out against an onslaught.

During the early part of the 1920s, defense planners tended to draw up strategies that were beyond the capacity of US forces to implement. One official historian described the first post-World War One *Orange* plans as 'more a statement of hopes than a realistic appraisal of what could be done'.⁹¹ For example, in 1923, Admiral Robert Coontz, the CNO, proposed a plan whereby the Asiatic fleet, with its meager assortment of surface vessels and submarines, would attack Japanese convoys and merchant vessels.⁹² The plan reflected an optimistic appraisal regarding the relative capabilities of Orange and Blue⁹³ forces. A number of factors hindered the prospects of formulating a realistic strategy. During the postwar period, US politicians preferred to cut back on defense spending, in the hope that large scale wars were a thing of the past. Subsequently, the armed forces were not able to develop the forces necessary to carry out their ambitious plans. Military policy was also frequently based on principles, rather than a careful analysis of Japanese strengths. The first principle stipulated that a war in the Pacific needed to be won by going on the offensive.⁹⁴ The second principle was derived from the political belief that the loss of the Philippines would undermine national prestige.

Yet, strategic planning demonstrated an awareness that the defeat of Japan's forces required an arduous effort. In addition, as the interwar years progressed, the Joint Board paid heed to the possibility that in the event of hostilities, American forces might not

⁹¹ Morton, *Strategy*, p.30

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.56-7

⁹³ 'Blue' was the color code designated for US forces.

⁹⁴ Miller, *ORANGE*, p.125

have the strength to hold out. By the mid-1930s, war plans were scaled down, and US strategy was confined to the defense of the western hemisphere. Public opinion also continued to adamantly oppose the commitment of large forces to defend areas removed from the American mainland. The limits on defense spending further complicated efforts to develop a military machine that was capable of waging a large scale conflict. As the Pacific War approached, strategists were faced with a complicated problem. On one hand, US forces needed to deploy adequate resources to guard against Axis incursions in both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters. Because the German threat in the Atlantic was judged to be more serious, only a minimal force could be deployed against Japan. At the same time, Japan's intentions were uncertain, and the possibility remained that its leaders would hesitate to declare war on the US and its allies. Strategy was based on the assumption that, in spite of the weak state of American forces in the Pacific, a show of strength was sufficient to prevent Japanese encroachments.

Because a campaign in the Pacific was largely a maritime venture, the Navy had the predominant voice in the planning process. The Joint Board had a reasonably clear idea of the objectives which US forces needed to achieve. The 1928 draft of plan *Orange*, prepared in conjunction by the army and navy, articulated the measures to be taken in the event of hostilities, namely to gain control over the waters surrounding Japan's home islands, and destroying its war-making capabilities by strangulating the economy through an extended blockading campaign.⁹⁵ The establishment of naval power in the Pacific also required the development of a secure line of sea communications between Hawaii and the Philippines, and the occupation of intervening harbors and islands, including Guam. Much to the detriment of the US Navy, the 'non-fortification' clauses of the Washington treaty prohibited the strengthening of bases west of Hawaii, and for this reason, work on the Guam base made minimal progress.⁹⁶ However, the underlying principle of using the Philippines as an advanced base remained unchanged during the 1920s.

⁹⁵ NARA 2 RG 225, JB 325, Joint Board, WPD, Roll 9, JB 325, Serial No.280, Joint Army and Navy Basic War Plan - Orange, 14 June 1928

⁹⁶ Miller, *ORANGE*, pp.75-6

As the interwar years progressed, defense planners began to comprehend the difficulties of conducting a campaign across the extended distances of the Pacific. Due attention was paid to the possibility that Japan could attack the Philippines with overwhelming strength. In the 1928 joint basic war plan, the Army estimated that Japan could raise and transport an army of 30,000 troops within thirty days.⁹⁷ Against this, the Americans could put up a mere 11,000 troops. The most pessimistic assessments emanated from Philippine Department. A successful surprise attack, conducted by a sufficiently large expeditionary force, could enable the enemy to ‘establish [itself] firmly on the shores of Manila Bay and the surrounding country’, and thereafter prepare to destroy the arriving US Fleet with air attacks delivered from bases on Luzon.⁹⁸ While air and submarine operations against Japanese convoys could slow down the invasion, without sufficient land forces based in the Philippines, there were few realistic means of holding Manila.⁹⁹

The deteriorating situation in the Far East, following Japan’s aggression against Manchuria in 1931, led US officials to further reflect on the problem. The passing of the Tydings-McDuffie bill in 1934, which promised independence to the Philippines by 1944, also raised questions whether a military presence in the islands should be maintained. American forces were likely to face significant trouble in resisting a determined attack, but at the same time, the retention of the Philippines was important from a strategic point of view. In 1936, the Joint Planning Committee took note of the conclusions reached by the Secretaries of War and Navy, namely that the ‘cumulative effects of successive developments during the past two decades have so weakened [America’s] position vis-à-vis Japan’, that any war in the Far East could be fought successfully only with the greatest difficulty.¹⁰⁰ However, the development of a coordinated plan was made difficult because navy and army representatives were divided on the question of possible remedies. While the Army suggested that US positions in the Philippines were so untenable that

⁹⁷ Morton, *Strategy*, p.34

⁹⁸ NARA 2 RG 165, War Department, General Staff, WPD, Box 107, File 3251-1, Basic Plan Orange, prepared by Headquarters Philippine Department (Manila), 24 September 1928

⁹⁹ NARA 2 RG 165, War Department, General Staff, WPD, Box 107, File 3251, Report on the Defense of the Philippine Islands by Major-General W.M. Lassiter, 21 August 1928

¹⁰⁰ NARA 2 RG 225, Records of the Joint Board, JB 305, Roll 6, Serial 574, Military Position in the Far East, prepared by Joint Planning Committee, 19 May 1936; also see Morton, *Strategy*, p.37

efforts to strengthen them were futile, the Navy was reluctant to commit to any reduction, since the prospects of executing Plan *Orange* could be jeopardized unless the fleet had access to an adequate base in the western Pacific.¹⁰¹ In regard to grand strategy, the navy maintained that the defeat of Japan required a large scale campaign. The army, however, argued that such actions could detract from the main focus, namely the defense of the western hemisphere.¹⁰² The Americans were therefore attempting to formulate a viable plan without any guarantees that the necessary resources would be available. Nor was there any certainty whether the Army and Navy would be able to carry out a course of action.

At the same time, defense officials could not forecast Japan's actions with certainty, and the ever-present possibility that the removal of American forces may encourage aggression led the Joint Board to adhere to its policy of maintaining a forward base in the Philippines. On the other hand, Japan could hesitate to move, if its forces faced the prospect of military and naval opposition. In light of the uncertainties surrounding the conditions under which a war against Japan would be conducted, it was natural for any strategy to be speculative. War plans were improvised to fit in with the harsh reality that US forces may not be able to reinforce the Philippines immediately following the outbreak of hostilities. In December 1937, in an attempt to reconcile the navy and army views, the Joint Board demarcated the Alaska-Oahu-Panama triangle as the front line of defense.¹⁰³ The 'Royal Road' strategy, drawn up by navy planners, envisaged a gradual push to take control of key island positions that lay between Hawaii and Manila,

¹⁰¹ NARA 2 RG 225, Records of the Joint Board, JB 305, Roll 6, Serial 574, Enclosure A, prepared by Army Section of the Joint Planning Committee, 5 March 1936, and Enclosure B, by Navy Section of the Joint Planning Committee, 6 February 1936

¹⁰² NARA 2 RG 225, JB 325, Records of the Joint Board, WPD, Roll 10, JB 325, Serial No.617, Joint Army and Navy Basic War Plan - Orange: Navy Members of the Joint Planning Committee to Joint Board, 29 November 1937

¹⁰³ NARA 2 RG 225, JB 325, Records of the Joint Board, WPD, Roll 10, JB 325, Serial No.617, Joint Army and Navy Basic War Plan - Orange: Joint Board to Joint Planning Committee, 7 December 1937; also see Matloff and Snell, *Strategic Planning*, p.3

including the Marshalls, and eventually re-establishing the US Navy's hold on the western Pacific.¹⁰⁴

As the possibility of war grew during the late 1930s, US strategy was developed with a view to dealing with a variety of contingencies. By 1939, the rising threat of German aggression in Europe necessitated a plan that enabled the simultaneous deployment of forces in the Pacific and Atlantic theaters. The *Rainbow* plans, drawn up between 1939-41 were designed to cope with this dilemma. The 1939 version assumed that the Axis powers would undertake concurrent attacks on US interests if the opportunity arose, and stipulated that the defense of the western hemisphere take first priority.¹⁰⁵ At the same time, a number of eventualities could arise, and defense chiefs had to be 'ready to adapt and use existing plans by modifying them as necessary'. The *Rainbow* plans thus included five variations, each dealing with a particular scenario. The first version focused on the western hemisphere, with the second and third focusing on the Pacific. The fourth and fifth variations called for a projection of US forces to the Atlantic theater. The decision to send forces to the Pacific was dependent on the magnitude of Japan's conquests during the onset of hostilities. *Rainbow 2* stated that if the enemy confined itself to Indochina, reinforcements would be sent to the Netherlands East Indies and Malaya. *Rainbow 3* envisaged a situation whereby the Japanese had conquered the southern regions, in which case the US was unlikely to have the means to maintain sufficient naval forces in the area.¹⁰⁶

The widening scope of Axis expansion during 1940 necessitated a more forward strategy. Perceptions concerning the feasibility of containing the Japanese underwent significant

¹⁰⁴ Miller, *ORANGE*, pp.186-90, 199-201

¹⁰⁵ NARA 2 RG 225, JB 325, Records of the Joint Board, WPD, Roll 11, JB 325, Serial No.642, Joint Army and Navy Basic War Plans, Rainbow Nos.1-4: Draft of Joint Board Directives, 11 May 1939, and Serial No.642-1, Joint Army and Navy Basic War Plans, Rainbow No.1: Enclosure - Directive, 27 July 1939; also see revised version, Serial No.642, Proposed Revision of Directives for Joint Army and Navy Basic War Plans Rainbow: prepared for Joint Planning Committee, 9 April 1940; Morton, *Strategy*, p.69.

¹⁰⁶ NARA 2 RG 225, JB 325, Records of the Joint Board, WPD, Roll 11, JB 325, Serial No.642-2, Memorandum for Record, 12 September 1941: Enclosure - Joint Army and Navy Basic War Plan - Rainbow No.2: July 1940

changes. In 1939, planners were confident that even if Orange forces invaded the southern areas, the IJN would maintain the bulk of its forces north of Formosa, in order to protect the home waters from the US Fleet.¹⁰⁷ The Allies could thus use their advanced bases in the Philippines and East Indies to push back the enemy. However, by spring 1940, the fall of Holland and France meant the European powers could no longer be counted upon to defend the Atlantic, nor could they provide sufficient forces for the Far East. Under the circumstances, any strategy which assumed a substantial Allied presence in the Pacific was unrealistic.

At the same time, the Japanese threat had to be weighed up against the more pressing concerns arising from Germany's conquest of Western Europe, which jeopardized the security of the British isles. The maintenance of the latter was vital to protect the trans-Atlantic sea lanes and western hemisphere. Whereas encroachments on the Pacific were a possibility that could develop in the future, Nazi Germany's threat to the Atlantic was a real and present danger which required immediate action. The second and third variations of *Rainbow*, calling for concentrations the Pacific, were therefore not applicable.¹⁰⁸ In June, Roosevelt requested the army and navy planners to reconsider the *Rainbow* plan, and draw a strategy based on the assumption that Germany continued to threaten Britain, while Japan remained neutral.¹⁰⁹ General George Marshall and Admiral Stark both agreed that the protection of the British isles and the Atlantic sea lanes was a top priority, and for this reason, operations in the Pacific had to be confined to the defensive.¹¹⁰ *Plan Dog*, prepared by Stark in November, stipulated that American security depended to a large extent on Great Britain's survival. A British collapse held such serious ramifications that the US needed to provide every possible form of assistance, including the eventual dispatch of naval, ground and air forces to the Atlantic Ocean and Western Europe to defeat Hitler.¹¹¹ Insofar as operations in the Far East were concerned, the plan called for avoiding war with Japan for as long as possible, but acknowledged the possibility that a

¹⁰⁷ Miller, *ORANGE*, pp.256-61

¹⁰⁸ Morton, *Strategy*, pp.74-5

¹⁰⁹ Matloff and Snell, *Strategic Planning*, pp.13-14

¹¹⁰ Morton, *Strategy*, pp.81-2; Utley, *Going to War*, pp.113-14

¹¹¹ Brune, *National Security Policy*, p.116

confrontation could not be averted indefinitely. In the event that the US faced such a situation, its actions in the Pacific were to be limited to 'permit the prompt movement to the Atlantic of forces fully adequate to conduct a major offensive'.¹¹²

US war plans were thus based on the premise that commitments in the Far East had to be relegated in order to provide sufficient defenses for the Atlantic. On 21 December, the Joint Board ordered its staff to prepare the details of *Plan Dog*, so as to have them ready for presentation to the British during the upcoming Anglo-American staff negotiations to be held at Washington. Between January and March 1941, US and British defense planners aimed to clarify the objectives which Allied forces were to achieve in the event that America entered into the war. The final plan which emerged from the talks, ABC-1, closely resembled *Plan Dog*. ABC-1 described the Atlantic and European area as the most decisive theater, and stipulated that the main Allied effort was to be concentrated there. The US was not to increase its military strength in the Far East, but in the event of war, the Pacific Fleet was to be employed 'in the best manner calculated to weaken Japanese economic power'.

While US defense chiefs had a clear view regarding the paramount importance of the Atlantic, they were less realistic in their plans for defending the Pacific. The main mission was to contain Japanese aggression, and yet, the practical means for implementing the plan remained vague. After ABC-1 received the approval of the CNO and chief of army staff, the Joint Board issued a directive for the preparation of *Rainbow 5*.¹¹³ The general assumption was that initially, Allied forces would be fighting Germany and its European allies.¹¹⁴ Although Japan was not expected to be a belligerent, the Associated powers still needed to deploy their strengths against its intervention. The main tasks of US forces in the Far East were to 'divert enemy strength away from the Malay barrier' by conducting raids against the Marshall islands. The army was also to defend the Philippines in co-operation with the navy, while the Asiatic fleet was to 'raid

¹¹² Morton, *Strategy*, p.84

¹¹³ Matloff and Snell, *Strategic Planning*, p.43

¹¹⁴ NARA 2 RG 38, Office of the CNO, Strategic Plans, Box 34, WPL-46, Appendix I: Joint Army and Navy Basic War Plan – Rainbow 5, May 1941

Japanese sea communications and destroy Axis forces' while supporting the defense of British and Dutch territories. The plan appeared to overlook the fact that US forces were not adequate to hold out against a concerted attack. Again, in June, the Navy General Board prepared a memorandum titled *Are We Ready?*, and conceded, 'Rainbow No.3 is the only Navy basic war plan in suitable shape for effective execution'.¹¹⁵ The navy was also not ready for a two-ocean war, since it had only 40% of the necessary battleships.¹¹⁶ The assessment did not cause apparent concerns with Admiral Stark or any naval officials.

The most probable explanation for the insufficient attention paid to the lack of military preparedness was a growing belief shared by defense planners, that the mere presence of US forces in the Asia-Pacific area could deter Japan, and any operation by the Imperial navy and army would therefore be directed against more weakly defended areas. Defense planners not only became convinced that efforts to discourage Tokyo from provoking hostilities were likely to succeed. More importantly, given the weak state of US forces, the Americans needed to avert war by all possible means, at least until their strengths in the Pacific regions could be sufficiently augmented to cope with the Japanese. Convictions regarding the value of deterrence can be largely attributed to the uncertainties which surrounded the course of future events in the Far East.¹¹⁷ While all reliable information indicated that Japan's interests lay in the southern regions, there was always the possibility that she would move against Russia. Even if Japan did move south, there were a multitude of possible targets, ranging from Thailand, through Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. The Japanese also appeared to be fixated on finishing the war in China, and their conquests had been confined to areas where they did not have to engage the Associated powers. The occupation of Indochina was an opportunist move, largely encouraged by the disorganized state of the Vichy French forces. The question of whether the IJN and IJA would have the courage to attack British and US bastions at Singapore and the Philippines remained open to doubt. In October 1940, in response to arguments

¹¹⁵ NARA 1 RG 80, Navy General Board, Subject File, Box 134, File 425, *Are We Ready?*, Memorandum by General Board, 14 June 1941

¹¹⁶ Baer, *Sea Power*, p.158

¹¹⁷ Lowenthal, *Leadership*, Volume 2, p.689

put forward by Admiral James Richardson, the Commander-in-Chief of the US Fleet, that the US capital ships based at Pearl Harbor could not physically halt Japanese moves in the western Pacific, Roosevelt maintained that the retention of the fleet at Hawaii was essential to discourage further encroachments.¹¹⁸ The statement reflected a widespread view that the shortage of strength could be compensated by undertaking moves aimed to convince the Japanese that any expeditions would meet difficult opposition. Yet, the perception was natural, in light of the available intelligence.

The notion that deterrence could contain Japan became widespread by the autumn, after the Joint Board approved the plan to reinforce the Philippines with a substantial number of medium-range B-17 bombers. In June, defense chiefs already expressed serious doubts whether the Japanese could successfully attack the Philippines. Shortly after the American, British, and Dutch naval commanders finished their negotiations at Singapore (codename ABD), Stark and Marshall, with presidential approval, rejected the British and Dutch proposal that American reinforcements be sent to the Philippines. The justification was that the existing forces were sufficient, and any Japanese effort to defeat them would require 'a considerable effort'.¹¹⁹ On one hand, the service chiefs were divided on the question of how US forces should be allocated. While the Army argued that the European theater should receive priority, the Navy maintained that a large portion of the fleet needed to be maintained at Hawaii, so that it could be prepared to take action against Japan in the event of war. Nevertheless, the consensus was that the available resources did not permit the provision of substantial strengths for the Philippines. US officials also had to take into account the isolationist opinion which prevailed within the public and the legislature, which was most likely to oppose the peacetime stationing of forces in the western Pacific, to defend against an enemy that may or may not attack. The decision to bolster American strengths in the Far East was taken during summer 1941, out of concern

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Volume 1, p.398

¹¹⁹ Watson, *Chief of Staff*, p.397

that Japan's alignment with the Axis powers necessitated protective measures.¹²⁰ Army planners saw the occupation of Indochina in July as a further indication that an enhanced commitment was necessary.¹²¹ Nevertheless, the move was intended as a deterrent, without much thought given to how the forces would operate if hostilities broke out.¹²² Secretary of War Henry Stimson conceded to Roosevelt in October that the bomber threat might be doubtful, but claimed, 'even this imperfect threat, if not promptly called by the Japanese, bids fair to stop Japan's march to the south'.¹²³ By reinforcing the Philippines, the Americans could bide their time, and avert hostilities until their military position was strengthened.

Large sections of the defense establishment, particularly within the War Department, also concluded that Allied forces could inflict crippling losses on a Japanese expedition.¹²⁴ The belief was based on an exaggerated confidence regarding the capabilities of high-altitude bomber aircraft against naval task forces, as well as an underestimation of Japan's military strengths and its determination to eliminate Allied positions in Southeast Asia. However, in the absence of any firm indications that the Japanese were seriously contemplating a large scale expedition, policymakers were unlikely to have a clear idea of the dangers they faced. The WPD contended that the Associated Powers should attempt to halt Japan along the 'general line of Hong-Kong to the Philippines', the latter of which held the key to maintaining the line.¹²⁵ South of this line were 'successive positions from which the combined ground, air and naval forces of the Associated Powers could exact a tremendous toll'.

The prospect of suffering excessive losses, in turn, was cited as the main factor that would dissuade a Japanese attack. In an analysis on Japanese forces and capabilities, the

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.439; W.F. Craven and J.L. Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II, Volume 1: Plans and Early Operations* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1948), pp.176-7, 184-5

¹²¹ Heinrichs, *Threshold*, pp.131, 142-3

¹²² Lowenthal, *Leadership, Volume 2*, p.597

¹²³ Brune, *National Security Policy*, p.119; Heinrichs, *Threshold*, p.195

¹²⁴ Morton, *Philippines*, pp.31-2, 64

¹²⁵ NARA 2 RG 165, War Department, General Staff, WPD, Box 109, File 3251-61, WPD Memorandum for Chief of Staff, on Command in the Philippines, 13 October 1941

WPD went as far as contend that ‘the presence of adequate heavy bombardment based in the Philippine islands will deter the Japanese from any movement to the southward’ until US defenses were neutralized.¹²⁶ In addition, the army garrison that was planned to be established was expected to make the operation ‘so expensive that the Japanese will hesitate’. Any attempt to eliminate the air forces based in the Philippines required Japan to rely on carrier-based aviation, and intermittent long-range air support based in Taiwan. Again, the cost of the operation was deemed unacceptable to the Japanese.¹²⁷ Only the scale and speed of Japan’s advance into Southeast Asia and western Pacific in December 1941 could convince the Americans that their strategy was inadequate.

Conclusion

During the interwar period, two key factors complicated US efforts to forecast the moves which the IJN and IJA were likely to undertake. First, the Japanese leadership in Tokyo did not hold any definite plans to initiate hostilities against America and its allies. Until autumn 1941, the main objective was to secure control over the Chinese mainland. In spite of exhortations by the militarists for the elimination of western influence in the Far East, the Japanese demonstrated a willingness to achieve their objectives without having to confront the western powers. Second, even when the Japanese high command decided to declare war on the US, its strategy was guarded with a secrecy that hindered an accurate prediction. Under the circumstances, the Americans were unlikely to collect a significant amount of concrete information on an imminent attack on their main bases at Pearl Harbor and the Philippines.

At the level of analysis, intelligence staffs were aware that Japan held aspirations for achieving hegemony in the Far East. Furthermore, geographic factors gave the IJN and IJA certain advantages, in that they were able to deploy their forces against the western

¹²⁶ NARA 2 RG 165, War Department, General Staff, WPD, Box 109, File 3251-60, WPD Memorandum for the Secretary of War, on the Strategic Concept of the Philippine Islands, 3 October 1941

¹²⁷ NARA 2 RG 165, War Department, General Staff, WPD, Box 109, File 3251-60, WPD Memorandum for Secretary of War, on the Strategic Concept of the Philippine Islands, 7 October 1941

Pacific regions before the US could provide any substantial reinforcements. However, the assessments produced by the ONI and G-2 tended to reflect the difficulties that arose from the lack of accurate information. As late as 1941, neither organization was able to determine the objectives which Japanese forces would seek. The situation was further complicated because Japan's forces appeared to face a number of complications that could limit the scope of their operations. For starters, the navy and army were dependent on imported supplies of essential war materials, including oil, iron, rubber and tin. The economic sanctions imposed by the US and its allies during 1940-41, in response to the occupation of Indochina, cut off the bulk of Japan's supplies, and made it necessary for Tokyo to either seek a rapprochement with the US or alternatively, find new sources by conquering Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. The latter option entailed the risk of encountering opposition from Allied forces. The IJN was considered unlikely to launch operations in which it would have to face the forces which the US could bring to bear, while the IJA appeared to be committed on the Asiatic mainland, to the point where it could not provide the forces needed for large scale operations in Southeast Asia. Operations against Allied strongholds at Singapore and the Philippines were therefore ruled out.

The impact of intelligence on US war plans in the Pacific was more complicated. American defense policy during the interwar years was largely shaped by a number of political and economic factors, including a public apathy towards international affairs, coupled with limitations imposed by Congress on military expenditures. By the time the US began to depart from its policy of isolationism in 1940, its attention was focused on the European theater. Nazi Germany posed a more immediate danger, since its attacks on the British isles and the trans-Atlantic shipping routes directly threatened the US mainland and western hemisphere. The Pacific regions were relegated as a secondary concern, and in the event Japan declared war, US forces were to remain on the defensive. Because the North Atlantic was the area in which matters appeared to be coming to a head, policy towards Japan was geared to fit in with this pre-occupation.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Lowenthal, *Leadership, Volume 2*, p.694

Yet, while war plans in the Pacific were largely shaped by political factors and considerations related to the overall strategic situation facing the US, perceptions of the Japanese threat did play a distinct role. The Joint Board formulated its plans on the understanding that a campaign against Japanese forces required a substantial commitment of resources. At the same time, the unpredictable nature of Japan's strategy meant the Americans had to act in accordance with the prevailing circumstances. By the eve of the Pacific War, the absence of reliable indications pointing to Japanese encroachments on American interests gave rise to a widespread notion within the defense establishment that the presence of US forces in the Far East provided a reliable deterrent.

Poor intelligence was not the sole cause for the failure to protect the interests of the US and its allies in the Asia-Pacific regions during 1941. A more realistic argument is that the defense establishment was aware of the possibility that Japan could attack Southeast Asia and the western Pacific. At the same time, the available intelligence did not indicate that Japan had definite plans for undertaking a conquest of territories in the region that were occupied by the US and the Associated Powers. On the contrary, the information provided compelling reasons to conclude that Japan did not possess the potential to defeat an Anglo-American coalition, and was therefore unwilling to risk a war which it could not win in the long run. The result was an air of optimism within the defense establishment. US perceptions of the threat posed by Japan were realistic in light of the information provided by the available intelligence. On one hand, the Americans paid close attention to the indications pointing to Tokyo's ambitious policies, and made a conscientious effort to gauge the scenarios which could arise in the event the Imperial forces initiated hostilities. Yet, in the final analysis, the evidence suggested that Japan was not able to prevail in a protracted conflict against a combination of western powers, and for this reason, it was more likely to move cautiously. Therefore, a more accurate conclusion is that the shortage of good intelligence played a key role in convincing the US defense establishment that its war preparations in the Pacific were adequate, and that efforts to significantly bolster America's defenses were not necessary.