Japan and World War II: Going Along if Going Alone?

Richard J. Smethurst

I

Why did Japan invade China in 1937 and attack the British and Americans in 1941? Was it, as a Korean student once told his American instructor, "because the Japanese are mad dogs"? Or, did Japan's leaders, as the American prosecutors at the Tokyo War Crimes Trials alleged in 1946, conspire from the time of the so-called Tanaka Memorial in 1927 to fight an aggressive war to conquer Asia? Was this aggression and its subsequent wartime atrocities the outgrowth of a Japanese state with a uniquely intense nationalism, or of a particularly coercive social order, or of repressive methods of child-rearing, or of economic and social inequalities? Or had Japan by the late 1930s entered a stage of late capitalist development that naturally segued into fascism? Was there a direct causal connection between the West's forced intrusion into Japan in the 1850s and Japan's aggression in 1937 and 1941? Various wartime and postwar Western and Japanese scholars have forwarded all of these views in discussing Japan's involvement in World War II.

One cannot analyze Japan's entry into World War II without discussing the broader question of why any country goes to war. Do leaders think through their reasons for beginning wars? What are their goals in doing so, their prospects of achieving those goals, the anticipated costs-in lives, in money, in destruction, in the war's impact on their society's values? Do decision makers have a reasonably clear view of how to end the war and how the postwar peace will be better than the prewar peace?

In the case of World War II, did the Japanese military leaders ask themselves these questions before they invaded China in 1937 and attacked the British and Americans in 1941? And if Japan's decision-makers did not ask these questions, or asked them but answered them incorrectly, why so? What was the impact of nationalism on their decision to go to war? To what extent did the political and military leaders who initiated Japan's aggression in China and attack on the United States and its allies let their views of their nation's and soldiers' superiority to potential enemies influence the decision-making process?

Before describing Japan's road to World War II, it might be best to lay out the five premises of this essay. First, before Japan's Manchurian takeover in 1931-1932, and maybe even up until the mid-1930s, Japan's foreign policy was not significantly different from that of the United States or Britain or other powers. Japan was an imperialist state that operated within the constraints of what was acceptable imperialist behavior. Only after 1931, and especially after its aggression in China in 1937, did Japan leave that framework. Second, Japan had legitimate grievances toward Britain and particularly the United States: Western refusal to accept Asians as equal to Europeans and North Americans, restraints on Japanese trade, unwillingness to allow the Japanese the same kind of freedom in Manchuria that Americans and British regularly

took for themselves in Latin America and the British empire, and the insulting policies of the United States toward Japanese immigration. Third, these grievances, real as they were, did not justify war-neither in policy terms, nor, given Britain's and United States's more powerful economies (the United States' GNP was then eight to ten times greater than Japan's), more highly developed levels of technology, and greater access to raw materials, in realistic terms. Japan undertook wars in China and against the United States that it could not win. Fourth, Japanese leaders like General Araki Sadao, who wrote in an interview in 1934 that "Japanese soldiers with bamboo spears are superior to Western soldiers with machine guns," let their chauvinistic views influence their decision-making.

This was especially true in the case of the invasion of China-Japan's leaders in the summer of 1937 were so sure of the overwhelming superiority of Imperial Army soldiers over Chinese ones that they thought the war would be ended by the following year. Fifth and most tragically for Japan, there was an alternative before 1936 that was not considered again until after Japan's defeat in 1945: because Britain and America were more advanced economically and industrially than Japan, it benefited more from cooperation than confrontation with the two English-speaking powers. In fact, as one Japanese critic of militarism pointed out shortly before his assassination by young right wing officers in 1936, Japan's army and navy themselves depended on American raw materials and technology-by going to war with the United States, the Japanese military not only took on a stronger country, but also cut itself off from the benefits of cooperation with that country.

II

Japan entered the modern world when the Americans, and the then much more powerful British, forced open its gates in the 1850s. When the Western countries revisited China and Japan in the mid-19th century, they came out not asking for trade, but demanding it. In the 100 years before Matthew Perry's incursion in 1853, and earthshaking revolution had occurred in Britain, and then in continental Europe and America: the industrial revolution. The West returned to Asia with new steamships, improved weapons, and a new attitude, an attitude that demanded China and Japan open themselves to trade. It also imposed the infamous "unequal treaties" on the two countries: treaty ports, extraterritoriality, tariff restrictions and the most-favored nation clause.

Japan's response presaged the cooperation-autarky dichotomy in later foreign policy debates. One group of samurai advocated cooperation with the West-open the country to learn how to make Western weapons in order to defend Japan from the West. The other group advocated resisting the West no matter what the costs-forerunners of General Araki's "bamboo spear" theory. In 1868, the former group came to power and Japan began to remake itself on the Western model. But you should keep in mind, of course, that the reform group's goal in remaking Japan using Western models was to defend Japan from the West. Members of both groups were nationalists reacting to what they saw as excessive and unwanted Western interference in their country's affairs.

The primary goal of Japan's leadership in the 1870-1890 period was to rid Japan of the unequal treaties; both the government and public opinion objected to the treaties' limitations on import

duties and to the despised extraterritoriality, the right of foreigners to live in treaty ports like Yokohama and Kobe under the laws of their home countries. Thus, the newly nationalistic Meiji leadership undertook a host of reforms aimed at creating a Japanese state. To them Japan needed to be unified in the face of the outside threat. The government promulgated a new taxation system, a modern, Western style army and conscription, a centralized local government structure, universal education, a legal system, and a Prussian-style constitution. The government built model factories to import up-to-date Western industrial technology, and encouraged entrepreneurship among rural landlords and the urban merchant class. Two reforms in this process of state-building stand out: the creation of an orthodox nationalist ideology centered on the emperor, and the creation of a unified and standard Japanese language.

The ideology focused on the emperor as descended from the founding deities, as national father figure, and as the focus of the citizens' loyalty. He became the symbol of the new nationalism. The newly created elementary school system was used as the primary disseminator of this patriotism. But in 1873, Japan did not have a unified language to spread nationalism. People spoke local dialects that were often mutually unintelligible, and the literate few wrote in a variety of difficult writing systems that were totally unlike the spoken language, consisting of Chinese writing in a variety of Japanized styles; sōrōbun, for example. Even the simplest took years to master. The writing system was not fit for creating mass literacy and spreading nationalism. Debates over how to reform the language raged throughout the late nineteenth century. Finally around 1900, the Education Ministry decided on implement a language reform: elite Tokyo spoken Japanese would become the basis of kokugo (that is, the national language) and the writing system, now simplified, would be based on this new language. In other words, the spoken and written languages would be more or less the same. These two reforms: the creation of a new nationalist ideology and of a new national language allowed the government to turn "peasants into Japanese," to borrow Eugen Weber's title of his book on France in exactly the same time period.

By the end of the 19th century, these reforms were well underway. Japan had remade itself to the point that it was able to negotiate an end to the unequal treaties. Japan regained tariff autonomy and Westerners in Japan came under Japanese law. But this did not end the Japanese quest for equality with the West. Once Japan had escaped its status as a victim of imperialism, it joined in the European and American game. That is, Japan began to build its own empire, to be one of the perpetrators. The drive for empire can be better explained in nationalistic than economic terms. Great nations have empires; if we are to be able to be a great nation, we need an empire. In 1894-1895, Japan won a war from China and gained its first colony, Taiwan; it also gained a huge indemnity from China and thus was able to take its monetary system onto the gold standard, a point of great national pride. Membership in these two clubs-the imperialist club and the gold standard club-reinforced Japan's fledgling status among the powers.

In 1902, Japan also made an alliance with Great Britain, another sign of its success, another Asian first, that is, an alliance with the world's primary power of the time. In 1904-1905, Japan fought a war with Russia, and won once again. This brought Korea into Japan's empire, and

Manchuria into its economic sphere of influence. These annexations of territory when viewed from today's perspective, look like blatant aggression; however, keep in mind that they were well within the acceptable framework of Western imperialism. Britain, by signing its treaty with Japan in 1902, and then re-signing the pact after the war, endorsed the Japanese annexation of Korea. Theodore Roosevelt, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts, mediated the treaty that ended the war. The Treaty of Portsmouth recognized Japan's supremacy in Korea and thus the United Stares pre-approved Japan's annexation of Korea (this was only seven years after the United States had taken the Philippines from Spain).

In 1905-1906, the conflict between the cooperative and the autarkic schools appeared again. Japan's military leaders, flushed with victory, pushed for larger military appropriations, nationalization of the railroad system for easier wartime mobilization, and greater funding for organizing the empire. Takahashi Korekiyo (1854-1938) was one of the leaders of the opposition, that is, of the anti-military approach.

The government had sent Takahashi, who had begun his study of English at age ten in 1864, to London to sell Japanese war bonds, at which he was eminently successful. Foreigners provided over 800 million yen, 47% of the cost of the war, through buying Japanese treasury bonds. (The list of purchasers is a who's who of London, New York, and later Hamburg and Paris finance: Jacob Schiff, John Baring, Ernest Cassel, Otto Kahn, the Warburgs, the Rothschilds, and even Britain's crown prince, later George V). Takahashi learned two lessons in London and New York. Japan's victory depended on the goodwill of the Anglo-American capital (thus, Takahashi's adherence to the cooperative approach); the costs of paying the interest and repaying the principal of these loans required fiscal prudence in Tokyo. (Thus, his opposition to new military spending and the nationalization of Japan's railroad system). Takahashi's view won out for the most part from 1905 until World War I.

The conflict arose again in the wartime years over Japanese policy toward China. One group advocated a more autonomous Japanese policy on the mainland of Asia. Japan should issue loans to competing Chinese warlords and military intervention to gain what it saw as its deserved imperialist position in China. The Twenty-One Demands of 1915, the Japanese government's attempt, in the absence of an Anglo-American presence during World War I, to become the primary imperialist power in China, represented this view. Takahashi and others opposed this approach on two grounds: it alienated China, with whom Japan should cooperate economically, and it endangered Japan's relations with Britain and America. In 1920, Takahashi, while serving as finance minister, not only criticized his own government's China policy, but even advocated the abolition of the army's and navy's general staffs because they undermined the democratizing government's control over foreign policy. As one Japanese Marxist historian wrote, "Takahashi was the leading representative of the bourgeois politicians who advocated civilian control of the military." His China policy views won out temporarily. His prime minister, Hara Takashi, squelched his inflammatory memo on the general staff issue before it was made public.

Hara was assassinated in 1921, and Takahashi replaced him as Prime Minister to oversee Japan's enrollment in the Washington Treaty System, the symbol of international cooperation in

the post-World War I decade. This system, which went into effect with the signing of the Washington Treaty in 1922, limited Japan's navy (capital ships) to three-fifths of the United States and United Kingdom navies, required Japan to give up its leasehold of the naval base at Tsingtao in China that it had won from the Germans during the World War I. It also limited American, British and Japanese bases in the Pacific and required all signatories to "respect the territorial integrity of China," a euphemistic expression which meant no further aggressive military intervention in China. Takahashi, with the support of most of his party and all of the opposition party, thus bought into a policy of cooperation with the United States and Great Britain over China. Not all of Japan's leaders, and particularly not most of the army's and navy's leadership, agreed with this policy. That is, they still advocated a strong military and autonomy, but given the antiwar public mood of the 1920s, they acquiesced for the time being.

Under the façade of cooperation, several ominous portents appeared for Japanese who advocated internationalism. First was the success of the spread of nationalism through the school system. One can safely say that by the 1920s, Japan existed as a nation of Japanese.

Second was the success of rising standard of living and spreading education in creating a mass society. This, at one level, was a positive trend. Japan in the 1920s was more nearly democratic than at any time in its history before the allied occupation of Japan after World War II. But the creation of a mass society does not lead necessarily to peace. Even democracies can start wars.

Third was the Western, and particularly American, immigration policy, toward Japan. The United States government practiced blatantly anti-Japanese immigration policies, much of which developed out of the growing importance of California in American politics.

Anti-Japanese feeling was rampant on the West Coast of the United States (and later led to the arbitrary imprisonment of over 100,000 Japanese-Americans during World War II). This stimulated the Roosevelt administration to negotiate a "Gentlemen's Agreement" with Japan in 1907-1908 to limit Japanese emigration to the United States. It also played a role in the passage of the Immigration Exclusion Act during the Coolidge presidency in 1924, which excluded all Japanese immigration into the United States, even from Canada. Added to this, Japanese immigrants to the United States were prohibited from naturalizing as American citizens. And the powers, when they negotiated the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 which established the League of Nations, rejected a Japanese/Chinese proposal to add a racial equality clause to the treaty.

Fourth was Western foreign policy toward Japan. The United States, which had encouraged Japan's activities up until and through the Russo-Japanese War, began to see Japan as a potential threat. The Philippines, part of America's empire from 1898, was much closer to Japan than to the United States. Hawaii, another American colony, was also vulnerable to a strong Japanese naval presence in the Pacific.

The fifth portent was the newly developed Anglo-American rapprochement during World War I. Britain and the United States, after a century of estrangement, realized as they defeated

Germany in 1918 that they had similar foreign policy interests. The two English-speaking powers engineered the Washington Treaty of 1922, and the subsequent London Treaty of 1930 which extended the naval armaments ratios to other categories of ships, both to set up an overall security system in the Pacific and to provide cover for Britain to terminate its alliance with Japan. Under the treaty, Britain would be required to maintain neutrality if Japan and the United States went to war. The Anglo-Americans reasoned that Japan would not need the alliance if it were part of a regional security arrangement. One British historian has written that the abrogation of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1922, which the Japanese took as an insult equal to the anti-immigration law, provided the stimulus that began to turn Japan from cooperation to autonomy, and thus to World War II.

But the façade of cooperation continued to work in the 1920s, largely because key politicians like Takahashi, and Hamaguchi Osachi (1820-1931) and Shidehara Kijūrō (1872-1951), leaders of the Democratic Party (Minseitō), the other major political party of the 1920s, were committed to the cooperative policy of the Washington Treaty System. (To finance ministers like Takahashi and the Democratic Party's Inoue Junnosuke this policy had the added benefit of allowing Japan to maintain fiscal probity by avoiding a costly naval arms race).

1929 brought a bomb-shell to the region, and in fact to the world. In October the New York stock market crashed, and the Great Depression ensued. By 1931, reduced demand and thus reduced investment in new technology and facilities led to unemployment, underemployment and falling incomes.

Worldwide, economies spiraled downward. Given the panoply of policy choices available in times of economic downturn, one is stunned to find that virtually every country in the world chose the wrong ones in the early 1930s. Rather than increasing spending, governments raised taxes and balanced budgets, which drove their economies more deeply into deflation and depression. To protect employment at home, nations raised tariffs and quotas to keep foreign goods out. This led to retaliation and the destruction of their own export industries. Autarky, that is, economic self-reliance, became the order of the day. The United States passed the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act in 1930 and Britain gave preferential treatment within its empire to the various members. Takahashi, Inoue, Shidehara, and other advocates of cooperation were gradually discredited. Their opponents attacked them for relying on untrustworthy foreigners and advocated diplomatic autonomy and economic autarky.

The most powerful segment of the autarky group, or to use James Crowley's term, the people who led "Japan's quest for autonomy" were the military. They invaded Manchuria in September 1931 to thundering public applause. The mass society that they had brought Japan democracy in the 1920s helped bring it something else in the 1930s. The various portents discussed above: latent nationalism, resentment over America's treatment of Japanese immigrants, the increasingly unified British and American resistance to Japanese actions in China, and the suffering of many Japanese during the depression came together to create a climate of support for the military-the men on horseback, the men who had the easy answers, the men who advocated direct action, not weak-kneed democratic compromise. From 1931 until 1936, various segments of the military instigated overseas aggression, coup d'état attempts at home,

and assassinations that changed the nature of Japan's government and foreign policy. The military killed or silenced the people who advocated cooperation. The threat of assassination was a powerful weapon for keeping opponents in line.

Students of Japan have commented on the few voices of opposition to the rise of militarism, or fascism if you want to use that word, in Japan in the 1930s. Many of Japan's leaders (including important members of the mainstream and left-wing political parties) shared their right-wing countrymen's resentments toward the United States and the United Kingdom and segued from the cooperation to the autonomy camp. The socialists in the Diet, for example, supported Japan's road to war and war effort. Many who did not move to autonomy/autarky were murdered. For instance, Prime Minister Hamaguchi was assassinated in 1930; his Finance Minister, Inoue Junnoske, Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi, and the head of the Mitsui Corporation, Baron Dan, in 1932; former Prime Minister Saitō Makoto and Finance Minister Takahashi in 1936. It was with this in mind that the New York Times correspondent, Hugh Byas, entitled his book on the 1930s, Government by Assassination. Right wing or military youths murdered three of five prime ministers, and a fourth escaped only when young officers shot his brother-in-law by mistake. Two of three finance ministers were killed, and the third died prematurely from ill health. Takahashi, who served as Japan's pre-Keynesian, Keynesian-style finance minister from 1931 to 1936, fought the military constantly, both at budget-making time and in between, because he thought that the military's quest for political autonomy and economic autarky courted disaster. He was convinced that such politics would lead to economic stagnation, inflation, and worst of all, war with the United States.

The Tokyo and regional press frequently reported Takahashi's anti-military rhetoric in this period (during one cabinet meeting for example, he told the army minister not to speak like an idiot). On another occasion, when told that a young officer had publicly shouted, "Bury Takahashi," he replied, "If all the lieutenants in the army shot me it would be too much." But such courageous stands against the rise of militarism were few, so few that the great Marxist economist, Ōuchi Hyōe, wrote that Takahashi's murder in February 1936 destroyed any hope of stopping the military.

This did not mean that war was inevitable in February 1936, but it meant that the chances were much greater than they had been before the coup d'état attempt of that month. The last opponents of autarky had been removed by murder or the fear of murder. Takahashi's successor as finance minister doubled the military budget in one year, Japan invaded China in 1937, and Japan was involved in a war it could not win. The invasion of China was not planned aggression-the war broke out over a skirmish between Chinese and Japanese troops in the suburbs of Beijing (why Japanese troops were there is another story). Japan's military leaders, caught up in their own nationalistic rhetoric, decided to use the incident to punish the Chinese armies in north China, because they believed that the Chinese soldiers could not possibly resist the Japanese, who were backed not so much by modern weaponry as by their Yamato damashii, that is, their "Japanese spirit." But the Japanese generals were wrong. In spite of unspeakable atrocities (or maybe because of them), the Chinese soldiers fought well and the Japanese military was never able to pacify China. One assumes Takahashi, if he could look

down (or over?) from the Buddhist Western Paradise, would have shuddered when he saw what his countrymen were doing.

The story of the transition from aggression in China in 1937 to the attack on Pearl Harbor is a complex one that includes an alliance with Germany and Italy. This alliance of was one for "have nots," that is, the nations that felt they were excluded from full membership in the Western imperialist order. But you should not overlook the role the war in China played in the Japanese decision to go to war with Britain and the United States. Since Japan's generals could not accept the fact that the Japanese imperial army could not defeat Chiang Kai-shek's and Mao Tse-tung's soldiers in an army-versus-army conflict (how could the emperor's army not defeat the benighted Chinese?), they had to find another explanation for Japan's inability to pacify China. The answer they came up with was Anglo-American support of China. The way to defeat China was to cut off its supply lines from the West. In other words, move into Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. There were other reasons that Japan moved into French Indo-China, and then decided to attack the American, British, and Dutch colonies, but one important reason was to outflank China, to cut off its connections with the allied powers.

When Japan took its first step southward and moved into the French colony in Indo-China in the summer of 1941, the United States answered by placing an embargo on the export of scrap iron and petroleum to Japan. Takahashi's prophecy about Japan's dependence on Western raw materials began to come true. Without the needed petroleum and iron, Japan had to look elsewhere: British Malaya for iron ore and the Dutch East Indies for oil. This led to the decision to attack Southeast Asia, and the United States bases in the Philippines and Hawaii to protect the Japanese navy's flank. One mistaken step led inexorably to another.

Which brings us back to the beginning. The Western imperialist impact on Japan set in motion a series of events: the rise of Japanese nationalism, of Japanese economic and military power, of Japan's quest for an empire, of Japanese emigration to America and elsewhere, and of the Western reaction to all of these things, that led almost a century later to Pearl Harbor. One cannot say that Pearl Harbor was the "inevitable, delayed rejoinder" to Perry's visit in 1853-far from it. In fact, as we have seen, there were two basic approaches Japan took in its relations with the British and Americans-the cooperative and the autarkic approaches. Unfortunately for Japan, those who wanted Japan to follow an autonomous, independent approach to dealing with the world won out after 1936 and led Japan into a disastrous war. After Japan's defeat in 1945, its postwar leaders returned for good to cooperative policies of men like Takahashi.

Richard J. Smethurst

Richard J. Smethurst is Professor Emeritus in History at the University of Pittsburgh. His research interests include the origins of Japan’s World War II in Asia, the modern history of noh theatre in Japan, and Japanese industrial policies of the late 1800s.