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**JAPANESE STRATEGY AND OPERATIONAL ART AT PEARL HARBOR**

By

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A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College  
in partial satisfaction of the requirements of  
the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are  
not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or  
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# JAPANESE STRATEGY AND OPERATIONAL ART AT PEARL HARBOR

## ABSTRACT

The 1941 Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor has been variously characterized, then and now, as tactical brilliance, operational mediocrity or strategic imbecility. It may have been all those things but it is difficult to analyze or identify it apart from its historical and wartime context. Japan's historical and cultural influences on their World War II decision making reveal both the predictability and the futility of their military operations. The United States Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, a critical weakness, was mistaken for a critical vulnerability, that is, Japan envisioned Pacific Fleet destruction as a route to the American center of gravity, the U.S. will to intervene in the Pacific. But operational and strategic analysis of the planning and execution of that raid suggest that Pearl Harbor should not have been targeted at the time and manner it was, especially in the absence of the carriers. The engagement represents a failure of the operational art, in part triggered by the inability of the Japanese National Command Authorities (NCA) to formulate overarching national policy. The Pearl Harbor raid, originally visualized as a minor, supporting action to the Japanese empire's expansion into the coveted southern resource area inadvertently caused far-reaching, unintended and detrimental political and military consequences for Japan. An understanding of the events in question begins with Japanese historical experience dating from the 1500's, and the lessons illustrated are reflected in the modern military emphasis on the operational level of war.

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# **JAPANESE STRATEGY AND OPERATIONAL ART AT PEARL HARBOR**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The 1941 Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor had global political and military implications. The unexpected and unfortunate strategic ramifications for the Japanese set the stage for their ultimate defeat in World War II. With the benefit of over fifty years of hindsight, the lessons available from Japanese pre-war and Pearl Harbor attack planning validate the current military emphasis on the importance of the operational art. Japanese wartime planning and military activity may best be evaluated in terms of Japan's historical and cultural settings.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Japanese appreciation of the value of control of the sea can be traced to the defeat of Shogun Hideyoshi's invasion fleet by primitive Korean iron-clads in 1592.<sup>1</sup> In those failed attempts, which resembled the later Pearl Harbor attack plan, Japan learned success of overseas campaigns depended on control of sea lanes of communication and supply. A follow-on lesson was delivered two centuries later, when the first American warships entered Tokyo harbor, after which Japanese leaders initiated construction of a war fleet. By 1897 this fleet was larger than that of any nation except Britain.<sup>2</sup> The 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War saw Japan gain access to raw materials while thwarting threatening Russian territorial expansion into Manchuria and Korea. Again, key lessons of sea control were reiterated. To conclude this war, in a great sea battle comparable to Trafalgar, the Japanese fleet under Admiral Togo destroyed the Russian fleet in a single day at the Battle of Tsushima.<sup>3</sup> As a portent of events to come, Japan had begun hostilities without formal war declaration, and used her fleet brilliantly against a materially superior enemy, validating sea power theories of both Mahan and Corbett. By the end of the war, Japan had achieved great power status but the greatest change was within the Japanese culture. She had destroyed the myth of the White Man's invincibility<sup>4</sup> (the Russians were considered European Caucasians) and from this Japan derived a claim to a divine destiny of Asian leadership. The emotional and military lessons of Japan's history coalesced and were the birth of the tragedy at Pearl Harbor four decades later.

But the Japanese extracted the wrong - or at least incomplete - lessons from their history. In the Russo-Japanese War, Japan fought an isolated adversary. To prevent adverse escalation of the conflict, security arrangements with Britain (by treaty in 1902) and tacit endorsement from President Roosevelt provided Japan political and military "safety nets" to keep Russia isolated and end the war

when Japan desired. Such international support certainly was not a factor in 1941 when only Nazi Germany supported the Japanese attack. Japanese surprise attacks caught the Russians completely unprepared for war in 1904; America in 1941 was also ill-prepared, but the awareness of likely coming conflict limited both the material and psychological impact of the Japanese attack in Hawaii. The Japanese, in effect, used a Corbettian strategy at Port Arthur, not risking their principal capital ships and attaining local sea control to facilitate army successes ashore. Subsequently, at Pearl Harbor, there was little Japanese follow-up of the attack nor was it coordinated with land offensives in the vicinity. Even in an isolated war with an unprepared enemy, attrition rapidly degraded Japanese ability to force war termination with Russia in 1905, requiring the Japanese to risk a major, decisive sea battle. The Russian fleet was very poorly trained, unlike the World War II American Pacific Fleet, but the Battle of Tsushima was seen by the Japanese as a decisive, Mahanian-style end to the war. In reality, it was not viewed with the same significance by Tzar Nicholas who had intended anyway to negotiate an end to the conflict regardless of the battle's outcome. Internal social and political unrest within Russia, a factor in that decision, was thought by the Japanese to be replicated in the United States where racism, higher standards of living, ethnic diversity and overall wealth were believed to equate to division, laziness and lack of public will to fight a distant war. The Japanese naval successes in 1904-1905 caused President Theodore Roosevelt to reconsider even his limited endorsement of the Japanese claims for the Asian mainland when he realized the intent and scope of their military prowess. The Japanese applied incomplete lessons from earlier wars to a very different enemy and scenario in 1941, and placed their fate in the concept of the Mahanian decisive sea battle as a war determinant. Sea control was important but insufficient itself in determining war outcome. Neither did their reliance on a strong national sense of pride, divine right, racial superiority or spiritual destiny translate into military superiority. In 1941 the Japanese considered their military opponents to be completely inferior<sup>5</sup> and that Japanese spirituality compensated for lack of materials and resources.<sup>6</sup> This assessment was incorrect.

American acquisition of the Hawaiian and Philippine Islands prior to the turn of the century, and President Franklin Roosevelt's quest to double the size of the U.S. Pacific Fleet was viewed as a threat by the Japan. Japan saw itself restricted by surrounding Western, colonial states, and an emerging, independent China.<sup>7</sup> In the 1930's, militarists in Japan earnestly sought the regional hegemony deemed rightfully hers.<sup>8</sup> Steps to an Asian war were discussed, for example, Chief of

Army General Staff Sugiyama opined, "...we could capture enemy military and air bases, and make our position invulnerable, and we could use various means to frustrate the enemy's intentions."<sup>9</sup> Seemingly a rather vague prospect, although by 1941 the Japanese fleet was more powerful than the combined US/UK Pacific Fleets.<sup>10</sup> By 1941, Japanese leaders, increasingly militant, had created a self-fulfilling prophecy when they saw Japan trapped between its divinely ordained right of regional superiority and increasing Western isolation via racially biased and economically prejudicial policies. The second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) was the next step to break Japan's ring of encirclement and succor its burgeoning society with larger export markets and raw materials. In an exacerbating circle of action and reaction, Britain and America ordered increased military deployments to the Pacific, and imposed devastating economic embargoes to stem Japanese expansion.<sup>11</sup> It became increasingly self-evident to the Japanese that Southeast Asian resources (particularly oil) must be seized; the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (GEACPS) concept was developed, and the stage for conflict with America was set with only the timing of the impending war in question.<sup>12</sup>

General Tojo told the Japanese Foreign Ministry to concentrate on protocol and embassy parties and to leave the real decisions to the military.<sup>13</sup> Primacy of the Japanese militarists, inclined to view international relations purely in terms of military problems and solutions, acted to limit the country's political and diplomatic thinking and options. Without the separate "brake" of the primacy of policy associated with civilian leaders and politicians, the preeminent feeling was that annexation of territory (security) and raw materials (power) by military means was the only alternative to provide for national growth. Political and diplomatic incompetence fostered such attitudes.<sup>14</sup> Japanese leaders believed eliminating Chiang Kai-Shek would force America to forego further resistance to the planned Asian new world order, contradictory thinking that amounted to making war on the Chinese in the name of Pan-Asianism.<sup>15</sup> Imperial Japanese Army generals, riding the initial waves of victory fever in China pushed harder for war preparations against Western states.<sup>16</sup> The Japanese viewed themselves as innocent victims, deprived of their rightful place in the world, rather than as the architects of their own isolation. Confident of Japan's innate and divine superiority, War Minister Tojo told the Japanese Parliament that war with America and Britain must be accepted as the price of the fated expansion of the empire.<sup>17</sup> While stalemated in a ground war with the most populated country in the world, the Japanese decision to open hostilities with the largest industrial country in the world seems irresponsible and irrational in retrospect.

## DECISION FOR WAR

Coherent national policy in war is the critical underpinning of successful strategy. Without that rational foundation, military operations are likely to be disjointed and ineffective. War's main purpose is to support state goals, but Japanese leaders had only the most vague view of national objectives.<sup>18</sup> Japanese war plans placed too much emphasis on a spiritual belief in moral and ethnic superiority and destiny as the "chosen race".<sup>19</sup> Such attitudes limited their alternatives to militarized martyrdom and Japan forged into world war with little concept of an end state, as demonstrated by the fact that no military operation planned after 1941 was successful.<sup>20</sup> Given the military and cultural perspectives gleaned from their historical experience, from the Japanese perspective the decision to initiate hostilities at Pearl Harbor was perhaps understandable. After all, as the Combined Fleet Chief of Staff said, "Heaven will bear witness to the righteousness of our struggle."<sup>21</sup> But, such a decision was not based on political realities, rational calculus of the threat to Japan or overarching national policies. The resultant operational planning was similarly flawed.

The Japanese considered their war with Britain and America to be limited in the Clausewitzian sense, in that they sought only limited territorial gains from those nations. Recognizing their inability to topple a Western opponent,<sup>22</sup> the Japanese intended a war of short duration, yet each operation was designed for total victory. Initial successes (China) whetted appetites for more definitive results, fueling an expansion which mobilized far stronger nations to action, a primary danger of unlimited war aims. Aside from a basic policy and strategy mismatch, the operational principles of war the Japanese gleaned from their historical conflicts were unevenly applied and so rooted in their own cultural viewpoints as to be unrealistic and ineffective as guides to interaction with different enemies.

Unlike Japan, America had huge manpower reserves, and was self-sufficient in nearly all critical resources. Industrial production in key areas ranged from two to 100 times that of Japan, and warships were being launched one per day, facts known to Japanese leaders.<sup>23</sup> Prior to the Hawaiian raid, the Japanese estimated their warship ratio at 70 percent of American shipping, with a 50 percent aircraft disadvantage.<sup>24</sup> Their most optimistic estimate of future aircraft production gave the Americans an 800 percent annual advantage.<sup>25</sup> In December, 1941 America had 1,900,000 shipping tons planned or in construction (compared with 320,000 tons in Japan),<sup>26</sup> and Japan estimated America without difficulty could maintain an annual shipping building rate at least six times greater than Japan's.<sup>27</sup> Also, America was Japan's largest trading partner, providing the vast bulk of her oil

imports.<sup>28</sup> However, the Japanese thought unimpeded German success in Europe and the Mideast would place America at war with Germany and that America would not risk a two-front war, so Japanese preparations for Pacific theater hostilities were accelerated. Ironically, the Wehrmacht's first major setback, outside Moscow, came the day before Pearl Harbor.<sup>29</sup> Unless the Japanese, unbelievably, expected that America would not only acquiesce to worldwide Axis expansion, but also accept without retaliation destruction of its Pacific Fleet, then attacking Pearl Harbor was irrational.

A review of the Japanese application of the various principles of war reveals operational planning lessons relevant today. While not all of the principles were equally important in any given campaign, Japanese thinking in each area was illustrative of their overall operational shortcomings.

### **OBJECTIVE**

The objective is by far the most important of the operational principles of war. If properly identified, the remaining principles become the means to attain it, but are useless in its absence. Admiral Yamamoto erred, as did the entire ruling political hierarchy, in setting Japanese policies and military objectives. For coherence and effectiveness, the objectives should originate from the highest civilian political leadership, to then be translated into strategy by the military establishment. In Japan, Yamamoto and the other military leaders pushed the policy up from below, formulating strategy based not on viable state policies, but rather on Imperial Navy resources and capabilities, and inter-service rivalries.<sup>30</sup> Japan intended to fight a "limited" war with the U.S. quickly leading to negotiated spheres of influence. But, there was no political determination in Japan of what military end state might realistically be expected to facilitate a negotiated resolution; the military was left to determine the desired result. Prime Minister Kono in 1941 noted that his government pursued diplomatic policies in conflict with the concurrent military activity, stating, "It was impossible for us who knew nothing about these preparations to align our diplomacy with them."<sup>31</sup> General Tojo refused to disclose the military's plans,<sup>32</sup> and the Army and Navy Chiefs of Staff deliberately deceived Emperor Hirohito who was appalled to learn military preparations proceeded at the expense of possible diplomatic and political solutions.<sup>33</sup> Post-war Japanese testimony revealed that, "...no real scientific research or systematic preparations were undertaken to wage war against the United States; only a wishful estimate was made..."<sup>34</sup> Japanese pre-war plans resulted in confusion and contradiction on such a scale as to arouse hostility and suspicion internationally,<sup>35</sup> exacerbating the Japanese isolation from which the military planning ostensibly stemmed in the first place. Nonetheless, elaborate military



planning proved to be a poor substitute for political guidance. Clear objectives were seldom defined and were not reconsidered as fortunes of war changed.<sup>36</sup> War termination planning consisted of vague possibilities such as: (1) a sudden change in American public opinion;<sup>37</sup> (2) establishment of an invincible defensive perimeter; or (3) an undefined, as yet unrealized ability to "...influence the future trend of affairs."<sup>38</sup> Navy Chief of Staff Nagano said, "...we have no sure way of bringing the enemy to his knees, so in all probability the war will be a protracted one."<sup>39</sup> Navy Minister Shimada stated in 1941 that the Navy had a good chance of victory over the Americans initially, but, if the war lengthened, inadequate raw materials and industrial strength would prevent victorious conclusion.<sup>40</sup>

In the absence of coordinated policy guidance other than the hazy Co-Prosperity Sphere concept, Admiral Yamamoto relied solely upon military concerns, in particular, the initial six-month offensive, in setting his objectives. This myopic effort, in view of factors such as the "fog" of war, was akin to building a bridge halfway across a river. Already limited by lack of resources, he was fundamentally unclear as to the long term aims and did not resolve the logistic and supporting force constraints he faced. The disastrously catalytic effect of his attack might have been predicted by a commander more attuned to political realities and cultural differences, although to foster such awareness, Japanese naval attaches in Washington since 1921 had been tasked with observing American society, attitudes, and fleet strategy.<sup>41</sup> The American center of gravity (COG) in 1941 was the will to intervene in what Japan considered regional Asian affairs within the Japanese sphere of influence. Yamamoto targeted the U.S. Pacific Fleet as an intermediate military objective in an effort to stave off American intervention. Military objectives were not explicitly tied to a desired strategic end state, and the intermediate objective of militarily influencing American behavior was risky at best. If the intent was to deter American interference in a Japanese war of "regional" objectives, Yamamoto should have assessed the possibility that the raid would likely have the opposite effect, in much the same way the World War I German unrestricted submarine warfare campaign eventually mobilized American industry and resolve to enter World War I..

Certain of Japan's fate if war was protracted, Yamamoto moved the setting of the long anticipated decisive battle with the American fleet several thousand miles east of Japan's Inland Sea.<sup>42</sup> The 1941 objective of the Imperial Navy became one of preemptive offense, to some extent nullifying three decades of defensive preparation for the decisive sea battle planned for Japan's home waters. The subtle shift was from a naval strategy supporting national objectives and defense, to a

strategy that required defeat of the American Pacific Fleet at their forward base. This was an important change as defeat of the United States was not considered possible, let alone necessary for a negotiated settlement. Yamamoto did a good job of identifying American weaknesses, but these weaknesses were not appropriate vulnerabilities to access the actual center of gravity. Yamamoto misjudged both the importance of American reliance on battleships and the potential effect of their destruction on the American will to fight.<sup>43</sup> That he misidentified the tactical COG, American carriers, was surprising given his own appreciation of their power projection lethality. When he failed to destroy the American carriers, Yamamoto accelerated a change in American thinking, away from reliance on outmoded big-gun capital ships, to emphasis of the more potent naval air power.<sup>44</sup> Indicative of lack of understanding of likely subsequent military phases, he failed to target repair facilities, dry-docks, power plants, or the fuel oil tank farm. Although the ships and aircraft were decimated, destruction of the support facilities would have been more effective in delaying American ability to project naval power into the Pacific for most of 1942.<sup>45</sup>

Given the relative U.S. - Japan strength disparity, conflict should have been forestalled. Although delay would have exacerbated the imbalance, the decisive battle could have been fought as originally intended (a time and place more advantageous to Japan). The "invincible" GEACPS defensive barrier, never a realistic objective, might not then have been necessary at all. A military with insufficient force to dominate another, the advantage of surprise notwithstanding, is usually better advised to delay hostilities and the military culminating point, until overwhelming power can be accumulated. If, as in the case of Japan, the balance might never be sufficiently improved, then the onus for achieving political objectives logically belongs in the diplomatic rather than the military arena, unless the national leadership is certain that conflict can be favorably restrained, for example, within the bounds of the typical Bismarckian limited war model.

## **MASS**

Japanese naval strategy of the pre-war decades identified the United States as the most likely antagonist. The starting point of the Japanese strategy was sound recognizing that, in event of war, America must eventually transit the western Pacific where the Japanese intended to mass their forces for a Mahanian-style decisive fleet battle.<sup>46</sup> To compensate for naval treaty limitations, the Japanese would achieve decisive mass at the point of contact by building huge capital ships with unmatched 16 inch guns.<sup>47</sup> The Japanese navy trained for such a battle, intending to exploit all possible advantages

from the battlefield. The Japanese navy deliberately designed their ships for Japan's normally rough Inland Seas, sacrificing berthing, radius, and armor in favor of firepower and speed.<sup>48</sup> They trained for this specific battle to a high readiness but, according to Captain Fuchida (a leader of the Pearl Harbor raid), were mentally limited by the defensive paradigm.<sup>49</sup> In the lessons of the past, the Japanese saw the inevitability of World War II and accepted from the lessons a reliance on the stereotypical battleship fleet engagement. Yamamoto's development of naval air power rendered an eventual change to that reliance, but the basic strategy, employed since 1909, for an Inland Sea decisive battle was sound in terms of massing of forces and "Mahanian" attention to concentration.

Prior to Pearl Harbor, naval negotiations with the army led to transfer from Manchuria of enough air assets for the Malayan and Philippine operations to be conducted simultaneously and permitting diversion of the carriers for the Hawaiian raid. But, there were not the quantity of forces Yamamoto would have preferred.<sup>50</sup> December 7, 1941 commenced a series of military campaigns, which unlike the intent of the original defensive naval plan, left Imperial Navy forces widely dispersed and unable to achieve mass of forces at most decisive points.

## **OFFENSIVE**

When the military maneuvered themselves to a position from which war seemed inevitable - politically, militarily and economically - Yamamoto recognized both the danger and the opportunity. His effort was to build a temporary military superiority vis-à-vis the United States Pacific Fleet, exploiting a window of opportunity during which Japan might seize and consolidate territorial objectives before the expected onslaught of the Western militaries.<sup>51</sup> Given the strengths of each military force in 1941, he saw no option except to abandon completely the long-held defensive posture and strike the first blow at the American fleet before withdrawing behind an expanded, hopefully impenetrable defensive perimeter. No doubt influenced by the 1940 British carrier launched, air-dropped torpedo attack at Taranto,<sup>52</sup> as well as his interpretation of the Battle of Tsushima, he recognized an opportunity in lax American peacetime behavior (e.g., by harboring the fleet each Friday, granting normal peacetime liberty, and by minimizing actual war preparations Admiral Kimmel provided exploitable weaknesses).<sup>53</sup>

Yamamoto called seizure of Hawaii a "strategic necessity" in case of war.<sup>54</sup> Born of Japanese weakness and need to negotiate quickly, he saw Hawaii as a bait to lure the remainder of the Pacific Fleet to battle before it could fully recover its initial losses.<sup>55</sup> Hawaii could then be negotiated in

return for American acceptance of the new regional hegemony.<sup>56</sup> An invasion would enable a virtual blockade of the West Coast, forcing the United States to coastal defense, and exposing Alaska and Panama.<sup>57</sup> A 1940 Fortune Magazine article reported most Americans would not favor military response if Hawaii were attacked,<sup>58</sup> and Yamamoto knew many had viewed the territory only as a distant land of Orientals. In fact, Hawaii's pre-war cultural ties were closer to Japan than America (forty percent of Hawaii's residents were Japanese, the largest ethnic group).<sup>59</sup> Thus Hawaii, identified as politically vulnerable, was slated for annexation into the Co-prosperity Sphere as early as 1940.<sup>60</sup> However, the Imperial Army still controlled strategy, saw Pearl Harbor and its fleet as a navy problem only, and overruled invasion plans as too risky, costly and difficult to sustain.<sup>61</sup>

Hawaii also had potentially critical military value. Yamamoto saw it as an unsinkable aircraft carrier at a vital Pacific crossroads. Its importance was demonstrated by the 1935 U.S. Pacific Fleet exercises, staged from Pearl Harbor, which targeted Midway and Manila in a simulated assault on Japan.<sup>62</sup> The 1938 U.S. Pacific Fleet exercise was a simulated Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which perfectly validated what would later become Yamamoto's attack plan.<sup>63</sup> Yamamoto's interest in Hawaii was validated when the Americans were able to strike the Marshall Islands with naval air based in Pearl Harbor just three months after the raid,<sup>64</sup> and Japan itself in the Doolittle Raid of April, 1942. Yamamoto's offensive error was in the attack's timing, specific targeting decisions, and hesitance to fully exploit the offensive.

## **SURPRISE**

Yamamoto used surprise as a force multiplier, to buy time and overwhelm the American commanders, paralyzing their response. This is a common resort of a weaker antagonist, but is an insufficient basis for an overall strategy. Admiral Nagumo was certain that lack of surprise would cost him his strike force, and the Navy General Staff agreed, predicating success on surprise, and disaster in its absence.<sup>65</sup> At Pearl Harbor, as throughout military history, surprise has been able to foster tactical, localized gain, but overall military victory usually accrues only from sustained, repeated operational successes.

## **ECONOMY OF FORCE**

Japanese economy of force was to some extent mandated by virtue of their resource limitations. Even with the decision to use all six available carriers, the raid was carried out with marginal force, insufficient to fully exploit advantage attained by the successful attack. This was

shown by Nagumo's hesitance to risk irreplaceable assets in a follow-on attack. Detection, violent weather, chance encounter with enemy submarines or the American carriers could have ended the operation and possibly decimated the strike force given the lack of operational protection and minimal forces allocated. Despite the potential benefits of a follow-on attack or even an invasion effort, the necessary resources and men could not be spared from the other concurrent operations, and few, especially in the Imperial Army, shared Yamamoto's opinion of the importance of the Pearl Harbor raid.<sup>66</sup> To help ensure surprise, a number of surface escort ships remained in Japanese waters during the Hawaiian raid. Yamamoto had previously noted an increase in American fleet activity whenever the entire Japanese surface force put to sea. Although Nagumo sailed with a force smaller than Yamamoto preferred, a number of ships were held in port in an economy of force measure that was also intended to deceive.

## **MANEUVER**

Operational maneuver was a key ingredient in achieving strategic surprise, and essential to tactical success at Pearl Harbor. Despite expected difficulties with underway replenishment, then still an immature art, the strike force approached through stormy seas north of Oahu, an avenue correctly calculated to minimize risk of detection, while avoiding American land-based air on the atolls astride the southern and central routes.<sup>67</sup>

The original Japanese strategy for a sea battle in the Inland Sea using interior lines was sound. The strategy was improved when modified to include attrition by Japanese submarines as the American Fleet fought its way across the Pacific, and improved again to include the increasing capability of naval air to further attrite the Americans prior to the decisive battle.<sup>68</sup> This operational strategy was appropriate in terms of maneuver in that it provided sufficient, concentrated force at the decisive time and place. The concept would have posed a dangerous dilemma for the American fleet, hampered in such a scenario by exterior lines, dispersed forces and extremely elongated, vulnerable SLOCs. However, when Yamamoto moved Japanese naval thinking into an offensive mode and took the first strike to the enemy camp, he then faced the same disadvantages the Americans would have but without benefit of sufficient resources or force agility to make his new strategy effective.

## UNITY OF COMMAND/EFFORT

Yamamoto's brilliance in using carriers to strike at Pearl Harbor could not assure necessary unity of command or unity of effort. Rivalries between the services (the army was still dominant in setting Japanese policy and planning) left little common ground or mutually supporting objectives for the Pearl Harbor raid. Each service interpreted Japan's General Plan according to their narrow service needs.<sup>69</sup> The fight for fuel and resources among the various generals and admirals brought to fruition some operations because they were achievable by a single service, as opposed to their operational contribution to the unified strategy.<sup>70</sup> The army wanted an impregnable sphere from which to conduct a long war, but, to survive, the navy needed to win a decisive sea battle to end the war quickly.<sup>71</sup> Even within the navy, there was profound disagreement as to the desirability of the Pearl Harbor raid, which was finally authorized only when Admiral Yamamoto threatened resignation.<sup>72</sup>

The Navy General Staff had clung to the original interception/attrition plan.<sup>73</sup> Even Admiral Nagumo, chosen to lead the strike only 30 days beforehand,<sup>74</sup> had grave doubts about its validity, and did not share Yamamoto's views as to its wisdom, importance or intended effect. Nagumo was unimaginative in his approach to the raid and knew nothing of carriers or naval air power.<sup>75</sup> This factor accentuated the risk of separating responsibility for planning and execution. The Initial Assault Force commander, Admiral Shimuzu, on his own initiative, gave the midget submarines authorization to attack as desired, without regard to the timing imposed by Yamamoto's original orders.<sup>76</sup> These attacks failed to contribute to the raid, and provided advance warning to the Americans.

Neither was the Axis alliance a help to Japan, although it was intended to deter America by threat of a two-front war.<sup>77</sup> Hitler's war against the Soviet Union renewed Japan's fears of Soviet interference in China. The Japanese focus centered on Asia where German influence through an Eastern Front victory would have been problematic for Japan.<sup>78</sup> Within the Tri-Partite coalition, neither Germany nor Italy were informed of or planned operations in conjunction with the Japanese Pearl Harbor raid. There was no cooperation, economic or military aid - each Axis power fought a separate war and generally preferred it that way.<sup>79</sup>

## SECURITY/SIMPLICITY

Japanese security was poor and was a factor in success only insofar as American ineptitude nullified potential impact of the Japanese security failures. If acted upon, the Americans had sufficient

information to eliminate Japanese freedom of action and surprise.<sup>80</sup> American Intelligence at the time concentrated on enemy intent rather than capabilities,<sup>81</sup> and the sheer size and complexity of the expected Japanese Southern Campaign led American analysts to believe Hawaii was safe for the time being. All American intelligence efforts focused on the Philippines as the most likely target.<sup>82</sup> For nearly a month before Pearl Harbor, they completely lost track of the Japanese carriers.<sup>83</sup> Well before the attack, the first indication of it was inadvertently given by a Japanese diplomat at an embassy party.<sup>84</sup> American code breakers had been reading Japanese military and diplomatic dispatches, replete with countless clues and warning, for months.<sup>85</sup> Yet, most essential wartime preparations were incomplete. As it sailed from Japan, the Japanese battle group was detected by an American passenger liner, and the midget subs were discovered hours before the attack began, but little action was taken.<sup>86</sup> Such security lapses should have doomed the vulnerable strike force which depended heavily on surprise for its survival.

The operational plan for the attack was in some ways overly simplistic and at the same time too complex to be realistic. The simple intent, to strike a mortal blow at the enemy fleet, required: (1) precise timing and long-distance dead reckoning navigation; (2) radio silence and coordination between three diverse forces; and (3) precise targeting although inadequate means of obtaining current intelligence data were provided. Operations planning did not give significant consideration to the operation's political and military ramifications, and measures to exploit success were scarcely considered. To heighten security the Japanese Operation Order was completely compartmented, with each commander receiving only that portion he was to execute.<sup>87</sup> Thus, the Japanese Striking Force (surface ships and aircraft) had little knowledge of the Initial Assault Force's (submarines) actions, no one in the fleet was aware of the critical diplomatic timing (of the war declaration in Washington), and the Japanese army, yet the principal strategy planner, was hardly consulted. At the same time the plan hinged on numerous, often uncontrollable variables and a rigid timetable. Sailors washed overboard during the stormy transit were abandoned and the pre-planned advance included no time allowance for fueling difficulties, detection, vagaries of weather or even final determination and location of targets.<sup>88</sup>

### OPERATIONAL PLANNING

If the art of operational design is to provide a viable link between national policies and tactical execution of strategy, it follows the operational scheme will be influenced by and reflective of its

foundation of national objectives that can be achieved through war. Political policy guidance from the Japanese NCA was insufficient to coherently guide Yamamoto. Major operations were not readily coordinated into campaigns in pursuit of theater strategic objectives, and operational and strategic definitions of victory were not agreed upon. Thus, war termination planning could not proceed, and was left to be driven by as yet unforeseen events. The commander's intent could not be properly derived without clearer command and control arrangements and a concept of the desired end state, definitions which rest in the political purposes of the war.

American critical factors were improperly identified. If a center of gravity is a critical capability which when neutralized prevents attainment of enemy aims, the U.S. Pacific Fleet hardly qualified as an intermediate target in the short term, as long as the United States was launching nearly 400 warships per year. If American public opinion was the true COG, such intangible factors were more readily influenced by political efforts than military maneuver. There was no evidence to indicate that destruction of a part of the operational COG (U.S. Pacific Fleet) would influence the national will. Since destruction of the fleet would not likely influence American opinion in the manner hoped, a different operational COG should have been selected. This was especially apparent in the Pearl Harbor attack, as tactical success of the raid was largely due to American blunders, not a factor prudent operational commanders rely on. The raid as planned was too risky for the limited resources available. The strategic effects were too uncertain in view of the strength of the American economy.

Of Hawaii, the Philippines and Panama as the principal Pacific targets, seizure of the Philippines represented a far more direct contribution to the success of the Southern Operation. Destruction of that base delayed American advance into the Western Pacific as much as did the Hawaiian raid, and entailed lesser political risk than the Pearl Harbor blunder.<sup>89</sup>

Yamamoto's operational scheme contained elements of tactical brilliance, boldness and deception, but these strengths were unable to overcome the handicap of hazy strategic objectives. The intangible center of gravity and paucity of forces to influence the intermediate objectives over the long term required a less direct approach than that selected by Japan. There was little indication that exploitation of the Pearl Harbor weakness would decisively influence outcome of the Japanese Southern Campaign, and the Japanese had not sufficient forces to inflict a series of Pearl Harbor-scale defeats on the Americans so as to cumulatively impact the strategic national will. The best option might have been to proceed with the Southern Campaign, while interdicting American SLOCs,



separating and attriting U.S. forces to make more painful the inevitable American trek across the Pacific to the long planned decisive battle in Japanese home waters. Given the strength disparity, such actions would be delaying tactics, but more logical than an attack of an enemy weakness simply for the sake of a local tactical victory. And, such a strategy would be less overtly incompatible with the ultimate intent of negotiated settlement. However, if the strategic thinking mandated an operational fire for the Southern operations, such requirements would not have ceased because a (relatively minor) portion of the target had been destroyed. Further exploitation of the temporary advantage gained over that decisive point might have eventually accrued leverage over American public opinion. But, this said, Japan did not have and could not attain adequate forces to conduct necessary follow-up of sufficient magnitude - in a timely manner - without significant risk.

Judicious application of Japanese forces and assets was complicated by their scarcity. Without ability to press advantages gained, single engagements can seldom win or end wars, but no operational reserves were available to Yamamoto. He understood the concept of operational fires (hence the raid in question) and sequencing. However, there was in Japan little agreement as to sectors of main effort. The army considered the Pacific a secondary theater and Nagumo's foray in Hawaiian waters was therefore conducted under constraints which minimized its usefulness.<sup>90</sup> Yamamoto's movement of the navy's point of main attack from the Inland Sea to the mid-Pacific required a greater concentration of forces, theater-wide deception and reliable reconnaissance and intelligence data that was not available. The raid required a shift to extended and exterior lines and would have been more "successful" only with better defined objectives and improved intelligence data.

Lack of branches in the operational planning limited Nagumo's flexibility in response to unpredictable American behavior and the "fog" resident in all military activity. He had only two decision points at which he could accept or decline combat, one at an approach point of no return and the other subsequent to return of the second wave of attack aircraft.<sup>91</sup> In both cases, his flawed grasp of the commander's intent facilitated the wrong decision.<sup>92</sup> Nor were sequels based on the possible outcomes of the raid included in the planning. Regardless of the tactical result, whatever remained of the Japanese strike force was to retire to the north.<sup>93</sup> As the U.S. carriers were not located, whether they were north (or south) of Hawaii, a different sequel would have been required (or desired).<sup>94</sup> Nagumo hadn't the initiative, imagination or operational artistry to properly adjust the

operational plan as it progressed. Pearl Harbor demonstrated that operational fires are unlikely to prevent enemy maneuver without sufficient depth of attack to limit enemy redeployment and commitment of reserves. Fires are most effectively directed against those targets most capable of influencing one's own plans, the U.S. carriers in this case. As they could not be located, the decision to continue the raid at that time was problematic and thus foregone.

Yamamoto well understood the value of deception. He helped validate the American preconception that Hawaii was not a target. He emphasized OPSEC and provided the enemy false SIGINT in an attempt to ensure surprise.<sup>95</sup> In effect, surprise constituted his only operational protection. He applied minimum forces without operational reserves in a gamble that could possibly have cost him the fleet had it not by luck gone just as foreseen.

However, the proposed sequencing of events did not proceed as planned. The submarine intelligence and offensive assets fell out of sequence and were not productive,<sup>96</sup> and timing a massive attack thousands of miles from home within a few minutes of a future diplomatic event in the American capital proved impossible. Proper sequencing should provide a flexibility, including branches and sequels, to maximize operational control at the decisive point. Since it is rare that operational or strategic success comes from a single engagement, Yamamoto and his subordinate commanders needed a clearer view of how the raid fit into subsequent operations and ultimately within the overarching political goals. Operational momentum was both achieved and then quickly relinquished during the raid and its aftermath, and with it went Japanese potential to cumulatively or psychologically influence the American will to quickly seek a negotiated peace with Japan.

The essence of the commander's intent in operational planning is to balance scarce resources yet accomplish strategic and operational objectives. That the Japanese failed was not unexpected given their materiel weakness versus the American economic strength. Japan was overextended from the start, and achievement of the various intermediate objectives which comprised the defensive barrier of the GEACPS lay beyond their economic and industrial culminating points. Logistical sustainment capability did not permit delay in seizing the oil resources and also limited ability to exploit those resources that were seized. The Imperial Japanese Navy's dramatic successes through early 1942 rapidly exceeded sustainment capability such that their success itself became a vulnerability. More importantly, Japan did not achieve a cooperative application of national power against agreed upon political objectives. That those objectives were lacking or inadequate in the first

place is both the genesis and the culmination of the Japanese operational failure versus the Americans in World War II.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Japanese experience in World War II demonstrated the need for an operational link between strategic and tactical objectives. Japan's military failures clarified the four requirements for operational planning. First, such planning should concisely communicate the top level decisions and policies which are its foundation. The necessity of decentralized execution requires subordinates to know the "why" behind operational tasking. Such understanding of the strategy and intent provides a flexibility to seize the initiative and continue toward the objective, even when intended goals are frustrated. The Japanese failure at this first step essentially doomed long term success of their military operations.

Secondly, a complete plan should also serve as a model of the resources and level of effort required to achieve one's goals, a sort of "acid test" to judge the relationship between a definition of success and one's culminating points. Obviously, Japanese awareness of their material limitations drove the attempted expansion, but their self-delusion of over-confidence and underestimation of opponents prevented a rational calculus of the intended enemy or adequate net reassessment, which would have constrained their war aims or precluded war in the first place.

Third, an operational plan should also be a means of organizing the national effort - it should assign resource priorities, reduce internal friction, establish clear command relationships and, in essence, "choreograph" national power along focused military vectors. Sound planning should integrate each of the various forms of warfare, providing "force multipliers" where available (i.e., the proficiency of Japanese naval aviators in 1941). But, the Japanese were hamstrung by tensions between the army and navy, within the government and between the Imperial Japanese Naval Staff and the Combined Fleet Commander. At no time did they achieve significant unity of effort and, without that vital cohesion, such ambitious aggrandizement could not have succeeded.

Finally, an operational plan should include provision for change of ends, ways and means. A plan insufficiently flexible to react to real-world situations - which the Japanese repeatedly overlooked - becomes a constraining handicap rather than a toolbox of capabilities and alternatives which permit steady progress against the main objectives. Not only did Japanese planning not

anticipate or respond well to unexpected American offensive maneuvers but it also failed to foresee or sustain initial Japanese successes in the Pacific.

Japanese failure at the operational level may be illustrated in three areas, which today have become accepted means of evaluating operational planning. First, the Japanese NCA failed to identify what military conditions must be established in order to realize strategic objectives. Pearl Harbor was a strategic operation (i.e., it was intended to both begin and terminate hostilities with the Americans) and was thus a strategic matter within the purview of the NCA rather than the military. When the military usurped the NCA, such war termination issues were irretrievably clouded.

Next, if a sufficient answer to the first issue had been provided to the military, they could then construct concepts of operations, choose courses of action and design a sequence of events to create the desired military conditions. No military action is appropriate unless it contributes to the desired end state and the political objectives of the war. Thus, from an operational perspective, the Hawaiian raid was by definition ill-advised in that strategic political intent and results were insufficiently calculated beforehand. That "Remember Pearl Harbor" became a catalytic rallying cry for Japan's enemies during the war illustrates the folly of Japanese operational planning in the absence of appropriate consideration of these first two tests.

Finally, although Japanese failure was probably foreordained with the decision to open hostilities at Pearl Harbor, had it been otherwise, the military might next have considered in advance how to utilize existing forces and resources to execute the desired sequence of events. Egregious overextension - militarily, economically and industrially - confirms such consideration was not an integral part of their planning process. Nor did the Japanese realistically consider the risks and costs of the undertaking. They saw national destruction as the only alternative to open military hostilities. This "reasoning" and focus was driven by an "all or nothing" mentality, perhaps stemming from the purely military emphasis on winning or losing as the only conceivable outcomes to international conflict.

In the decades since, the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor has been analyzed from a variety of perspectives. Regardless of the rationale for the act, it can be characterized most realistically as a failure, in that it did not contribute to its stated purpose. It was a mistake, born of the failure of the Japanese operational art.

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