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The Second World War in the Pacific:

Question 13: What do the experiences of the United States and Japan during the Second World War suggest about the dangers posed by interservice rivalries?

26 Sept 2022

The three following dangers of interservice rivalries are suggested by the experiences of the United States and Japan during the Second World War. Notably, these dangers were common to fundamentally different militaries and political systems. They should be considered a signpost to the scholars and military professionals of today as a cautionary tale to be avoided in future conflicts. First, individual services prioritized relevancy at the expense of effective combined operations. Second, competition between services leads to suboptimal resource allocation. Finally, interservice rivalry resulted in inefficiencies during the war effort.

The United States Army and Navy had different views on the design and execution of operations and strategy to achieve Japan's unconditional surrender. "If by geography alone, war in the Pacific opposed the two services to one another."¹ General MacArthur, with his headquarters in Australia after being defeated in the Philippines in 1941, viewed the path to Japan as an island-hopping campaign northward. "Nimitz and the Navy, at Pearl Harbor, saw the almost empty ocean leading to the west...followed by blockade and economic strangulation."² These opposing views were heavily biased by service parochialism, which was exacerbated by a dysfunctional relationship with the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The Navy objected to assigning overall command of the Pacific to MacArthur, the senior-ranking military officer in the theater. "Admiral King would not allow an Army general whom he thought knew nothing of sea power to be put in command of the Navy's ships."³ MacArthur was also a potential political rival to President Roosevelt, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) were concerned that a congressional reform might make him the single head of the armed

¹ Eric, Larrabee. *Commander in Chief: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, His Lieutenants and Their War*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, reprint, 2004. 336.

² Larrabee. 336.

³ George W., Baer. *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: The U.S. Navy, 1890-1990*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994. 238.

services.⁴ These considerations were influential in the JCS reaching an awkward compromise; dual command of the Pacific Theater.

The problem with dual command, specifically between MacArthur and Nimitz, is that neither one was subordinate to the other. Each commander directly reported to their service chief; MacArthur reported to General Marshall, and Nimitz reported to Admiral King. Instructions to the services were sent through two parallel communication pathways from the JCS, who “declared that as a body they would serve as Supreme Command for Pacific planning and operations as a whole.”⁵ The JCS attempted to mediate when a conflict between the services arose but lacked the authority to make a final decision. “The consequences were that the Washington command post for the Pacific became diffused in its authority, entangled in interservice friction, and handicapped in quick decision making by debates and compromises...”⁶ Consequently, two divergent strategies were set upon from the onset of U.S. offensive operations. The Pacific Ocean Areas, or the central-Pacific campaign, was assigned to the Navy under Nimitz. The Southwest Pacific area was assigned to the Army under a supreme commander, MacArthur, violating the principle of unity of command and setting the conditions for decreased effectiveness of combined operations.

Such was the case during the Papua and Guadalcanal operations, which were assigned to the Army and Navy, respectively. The combined nature was limited to both operations being designed to seize a significant Japanese position at Rabaul. The allied forces, Australians and Americans, in Papua, faced critical shortages of supplies, disease, inhospitable terrain, and

⁴ Baer, 238.

⁵ D. Clayton, James. “American and Japanese Strategies in the Pacific War.” In *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*. Peter Paret, ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986. 726.

⁶ James, 726.

mutually supporting Japanese defenses organized in depth.⁷ On Guadalcanal, U.S. Marines conducted the first amphibious assault on enemy-held territory and faced relentless Japanese counter-attacks, reinforced by Rabaul, to force them off the island. Either campaign would have benefitted from the added combined strength of the other, and it would have been much less costly in terms of human casualties. “One man in eleven died in Papua compared to one in thirty-seven on Guadalcanal.”⁸ MacArthur’s insistence on recapturing the Philippines, together with the acquiescence of the JCS for dual command of the Pacific theater, set the conditions for Rabaul to become necessary, at least initially. While the overall effort to take Rabaul was combined between the two services, the isolated nature of the Papua and Guadalcanal operations was ineffective and costly.

Japan also suffered from interservice rivalry at the expense of effective combined operations. They, too, had fundamentally different perspectives on the design and execution of operations in two distinct theaters and the strategy necessary to achieve multiple objectives. The Imperial General Headquarters (IGHQ) “was composed of two separate wings that acted independently, an army division and a navy division, each headed by its own chief of staff.”⁹ Similar to the dysfunctional command relationship in the American JCS, “the IGHQ had no overall chief of staff or any other holder of ultimate authority.”¹⁰ The result was that the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) and Navy (IJN) were planning in isolation for two fundamentally different campaigns.

⁷ Larrabee. 326.

⁸ Larrabee. 329.

⁹ David C. Evans and Mark R. Peattie. *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics, and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1997. 458.

¹⁰ Evans and Peattie. 458.

Coordination between the IJA and IJN did occur during Imperial Liaison Conferences, although not regularly until 1944, only for matters deemed critical for both. To be sure, issues discussed at these conferences were heavily, if not entirely, biased toward individual service priorities. “When held in front of the emperor (at the imperial palace), decisions at the conferences were considered to have automatic imperial approval, making them irreversible.”¹¹ This implied imperial consent and a cult-like adherence to bushido, which was evoked as further validation for each of the two strategies, resulted in a failure to consider alternatives once a course of action had been decided upon. The IJA focused its aims landward on a Northern Advance Plan toward China and Russia, enemies they deemed as the priority. The IJN focused on expanding the empire south by projecting maritime power. The IJN’s Southern Advance Plan identified the U.S. and England as the primary enemies of Japan.

The result was irreconcilable priorities making the effective combined operations necessary for both campaigns unattainable. “The recurring piecemeal nature of Japanese ground, sea, and air defensive operations demonstrated a serious lack of coordination between the army and navy commands (air units were integral parts of both services) that made American interservice rivalries appear mild in contrast.”¹² Without an arbiter with authority to focus the effort, each service was left to its own in determining priorities with an exclusively militaristic perspective to the detriment of diplomatic solutions. The only options were a success, honorable death in pursuit of the objectives, or Seppuku (ritual suicide to restore one’s honor) in the event of failure. This system prevented Japan from adapting to changes, severely limiting the fluidity necessary for effective combined operations. Here again, disunity of command results in a divided effort at the expense of effective combined operations.

¹¹ Evans and Peattie. 460.

¹² James. 718.

Dysfunction at the highest levels in Japan set the conditions for two competing strategies with significant obstacles to mutually supporting combined operations. “Japan’s Southern Advance Plan required a heavily defended outer perimeter of airfields on far-flung islands...”¹³ Heavily defended implies significant contributions from the IJA, which was embroiled in a costly stalemate with the Chinese Nationalists and, to a lesser extent, Chinese Communists. The quagmire in China was an inescapable paradox. By withdrawing from China, Japan would be forced to relinquish its expansionist ideals, disassociate from the cultural adherence to bushido, and forfeit the desire to become a continental power. The focus on China was also about obtaining enough resources to sustain the Japanese economy, which was wholly dependent on external commodities as an emerging industrial island nation. The IJN benefitted from the ability to concentrate its efforts solely on the Southern Advance Plan. However, the IJA, already overextended in China, was forced to divide its attention between both campaigns. Consequently, Japan didn’t achieve either objective.

Guadalcanal was one such far-flung island the IJN considered essential for establishing an outer defensive parameter and as a staging point for further advancement southwest toward Australia. However, the IJN failed to inform the IJA that the airfields necessary for the outer perimeter defense had not yet been constructed and, critically, the airfield on Guadalcanal was incomplete.¹⁴ The U.S. amphibious assault on Guadalcanal was successful because Japan was unprepared. The IJN had little choice but to request immediate reinforcement from the IJA position at Rabaul, which was not enough to repel the American assault. The interservice rivalry between the IJA and the IJN was prohibitive to the combined effort required for the success of the Southern Advance Strategy and directly contributed to the Japanese defeat at Guadalcanal.

¹³ Sara C. M. Paine. *The Wars for Asia, 1911-1949*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 194.

¹⁴ Paine. 194.

Competition between services resulted in suboptimal resource allocation. “Carriers were a case in point of the divergence between MacArthur and the Navy.”¹⁵ MacArthur and King had competing views on how carriers should be utilized. From King’s perspective, carriers represented the Navy’s most potent offensive weapon if they remained in motion with room to maneuver.¹⁶ The waters in MacArthur’s area of operations were considerably more restricted than those of the central Pacific. Contrarily, MacArthur viewed carriers as “a highly desirable device for giving cover to amphibious landings until a field had been acquired ashore and his own land-based aviation could be brought in.”¹⁷ Recall King’s reluctance to place naval assets under the command of the Army due to thinly veiled service parochialism rationalized by the implied ineptitude of the Army at carrier employment. Add to it the notion that MacArthur’s campaign was viewed as peripheral, secondary to the Navy’s focus on the central Pacific. Consequently, the carriers would remain under the command of the Navy, not MacArthur, who would have significantly benefitted from carrier aviation while he sought airfield locations in Papua.

A suboptimal allocation of resources also existed in another peripheral campaign in China between Lieutenant General Stillwell and Major General Chennault. Stillwell was the U.S. Army commander of the China-Burma-India campaign. “Stillwell believed that victory in World War II required the prior defeat of Japan in China and a supply route through Burma.”¹⁸ Chennault was the commander of the 14th Air Force and felt that the war could be won from the air by establishing air bases in China for subsequent bombing raids on Formosa and the Japanese

¹⁵ Larrabee. 337.

¹⁶ Larrabee. 337.

¹⁷ Larrabee. 337.

¹⁸ Paine. 196.

homeland.¹⁹ The Burma campaign and the construction of airbases were endorsed, continuing the trend of multiple strategies.

The only means of supplying the U.S. and Chinese Nationalist forces was an air corridor over Burma. The preponderance of the minimal supplies that were delivered went to Chennault's Air Force, leaving Stillwell with critical shortfalls. Like MacArthur's insistence on recapturing the Philippines, Stillwell was unrelenting in recapturing Burma after his defeat there in 1942.²⁰ Japan subsequently commenced the Ichagō campaign against China, representing the most extensive campaign ever conducted by the IJA.²¹ Competing priorities and finite resources left both generals ill-equipped to accomplish their objectives or to stave off the Japanese offensive. In the end, Burma was lost, and most of the U.S. airbases were destroyed.

The rivalry between the IJA and IJN resulted in the suboptimal utilization of aircraft and pilots. Aircraft allotments were split roughly in half between the IJA and IJN. However, the IJA had to disperse its aircraft between China, Manchuria, and New Guinea, while the IJN had no such dispersion of effort.²² The aircraft and pilot losses at Guadalcanal were significant. "Almost all of the Navy's first-class pilots and a few of the Army's were lost in the Solomon Operations."²³ The IJA, supporting two geographically distinct theaters, transferred many of its aircraft operating in China to the Pacific theater to replenish losses there. Ultimately, IJA pilots and aircraft were redeployed from Manchuria to the Southern Pacific, leaving ground forces without air cover. For the IJN, significant reductions in aircraft and pilots resulted in impotent aircraft carriers making their defense untenable and inadequate support for the IJA.

¹⁹ Paine. 197.

²⁰ Paine. 200.

²¹ Paine. 201.

²² Phillips, O'Brien. *How the War Was Won: Air-Sea Power and Allied Victory in World War II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 405.

²³ O'Brian. 406. As quoted by Commander Tadashi Yamamoto.

Another significant issue for Japan was pilot training. Before the war, IJA pilots received two years of superior training, but by 1945 the training timeline was reduced to approximately four months.²⁴ In addition to the need to replenish combat losses, the expedited flight training was also a result of a reduction in the availability of oil. Further, attrition of trained pilots, such as those at Guadalcanal, meant that new pilots with minimal flight experience saw combat soon after completing the expedited flight syllabus, which exacerbated losses. Such was the case in the Marianas at what became known as the “Turkey Shoot.”²⁵

Many pilots were also required to fly themselves to their first duty assignment. “Among the most difficult of these deployment flights, for both the army and the navy, were those that had to be made to Rabaul or New Guinea.”²⁶ The process of flying across vast open stretches of ocean, at the outer edge of the aircraft operating envelope, was extraordinarily treacherous and resulted in non-combat losses. This was especially true of IJA pilots, who were accustomed to flying over land, redeploying from Manchuria to the Southern Pacific. Suboptimal pilot and aircraft allocation on the part of the IJA was a direct result of the requirement to support two campaigns with competing priorities. The expedited flight syllabus caused by a reduction of oil and the need to replenish losses quickly worsened the problem.

Interservice rivalry directly contributed to inefficiencies in the war effort. While similar to prioritizing relevancy at the expense of combined operations, the inefficiency caused by the service-centric American and Japanese campaigns is distinct. Recall the objectives of Stillwell and Chennault in China; defeat the Japanese in Burma and open an American logistics route while severing the Japanese from their supplies and establishing airbases from which bombing

²⁴ O’Brien. 410.

²⁵ O’Brien. 375.

²⁶ O’Brien. 407.

raids against Japan could be launched, respectively. The Japanese Ichigō campaign (April 1944 – Feb 1945) successfully defeated the Chinese Nationalists and destroyed many of the American airfields. During that time, the United States had been able to launch one bombing raid from an airbase in Chengdu per month with an average of 53 planes.²⁷ “Beginning on 24 November 1944, the United States began bombing raids from the Marianas, running an average of four raids of 68 planes per month.”²⁸ The IJA, still reeling from the humiliation of the Doolittle Raid, was compelled to redeploy their forces to defend the Japanese homeland resulting in the culmination of the Ichigō campaign. The Chinese theater became irrelevant to the defeat of Japan after Nimitz seized the Marianas islands.

The dual advance toward the Philippines, authorized by the JCS in 1944, resulted in two significant unintended consequences. Nimitz was ordered to bypass Truk to take the Marianas, after which he would seize the Palaus and support MacArthur.²⁹ The Central Advance would recommence after invading Luzon. The first consequence was that operations against the Palaus indicated to the Japanese that the next U.S. advance would be to recapture the Philippines. “After landing on Saipan, it was felt that the next attack would come in the Philippines, although it might come on Iwo Jima.”³⁰ Naturally, the Japanese strengthened their defenses on the Philippines, making the operations there much more costly. The second unintended consequence was that Japanese forces on Iwo Jima were given time to strengthen defenses on the island resulting in significantly more U.S. Marine casualties than would have been sustained if Nimitz had continued the Central Pacific Advance. “That famous island was defended by just a small

²⁷ Paine. 202.

²⁸ Paine. 202.

²⁹ George W., Baer. *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: The U.S. Navy, 1890-1990*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994. 245.

³⁰ O'Brian. 425.

number of unprepared Japanese troops when the Marianas fell.”³¹ These unintended consequences were inefficient and unnecessarily costly in terms of casualties.

The Japanese were not immune to inefficiency. Another problem the Japanese confronted because of their interservice rivalry manifested in inefficient aircraft maintenance practices. IJA and IJN aircraft maintenance procedures were completely isolated, resulting in not having spare parts to repair the other’s planes.³² Therefore, relatively minor maintenance issues had significant impacts on aircraft readiness. Additionally, the IJN failed to assess the significance of maintaining and protecting sea lines of communication. This oversight had many far-reaching implications, including ensuring aircraft parts' availability on distant airfields. When the Japanese realized that standardization in aircraft maintenance was required, the previously mentioned insufficient pilot training and the combat and non-combat related aircraft losses compounded to make the issue moot.

Some might say that the interservice rivalry between the United States Army and Navy during the Second World War was beneficial and contributed directly to victory over Japan. Service parochialism was a significant contributing factor in the decision for dual command of the Pacific theater. MacArthur’s Southwestern campaign and Nimitz’s central-Pacific advance effectively kept the Japanese off balance. “The United States, with its dual offensive and very flexible naval strategy, kept the initiative.”³³ The American forces exploited the freedom of maneuver by selecting when and where to wage battle. Bypassing enemy strongholds (leapfrogging) was a concept first demonstrated successfully by MacArthur’s operations in Papua and New Guinea.

³¹ O’Brien. 425.

³² O’Brien. 412.

³³ Baer. 232.

The Japanese were never able to focus on both MacArthur and Nimitz, thus placing them in the horns of a dilemma. MacArthur's campaign was directed at the heart of the Japanese Southern Resource Area, which contained the essential commodities required for Japan to continue the war effort. Nimitz's central thrust captured the Marianas, which enabled bombing raids on the Japanese homeland. Losing either one would invariably lead to defeat. It was only a matter of time.

Additionally, the Navy's fast attack carriers protected MacArthur's operations on the New Guinea coast by luring the combined fleet away from the Palaus and also supported his assault on Hollandia.³⁴ The dual campaigns enabled the United States to remain flexible and mutually supportive. These were significant advantages over the Japanese, who were incapable of such flexibility due to their highly individualized militaristic system, which was made more rigid by strict adherence to bushido. Additionally, the United States, possessing great superiority in firepower, mobility, and material resources in 1943-1945, could afford flawed command arrangements and strategies.³⁵ The independence of each campaign placed the Japanese in a whipsaw, forcing them to shift focus from one to the other. The mutual support offered flexibility and concentration. Indeed, some aspects of interservice rivalry set the conditions for victory over Japan.

However, American operations from mid-1943 to mid-1944 demonstrate that dual command's teamwork was more inadvertent than planned.³⁶ The Bougainville Campaign and the invasion of Biak were commenced without naval superiority because the Navy had recommenced central-Pacific operations. In response, the Japanese diverted aircraft planned for

³⁴ Baer. 246.

³⁵ Clayton. 728.

³⁶ Clayton. 727.

the defense of the Marianas, which allowed Nimitz to seize the islands without facing significant Japanese air defense. Further, when Nimitz took Saipan, the Japanese moved forces designated to attack MacArthur at Biak only to meet disaster in the battle of the Philippine Sea, which allowed MacArthur to capture Dutch New Guinea.³⁷ The whipsaw strategy was successful but only became intentional in the war's later stages. Clausewitz would concur with the aspect of the U.S. strategy that kept the Japanese off balance. But, he would not condone the division of military strength to attack small pockets of Japanese forces. Further, if the Japanese had redeployed the entirety of their troops from the continental east to the Pacific, the dual campaigns of the United States would have been unwise.

While the American strategy was ultimately victorious, the U.S. Army and Navy prioritized their relevancy at the expense of sustained, effective combined operations. It was also exceptionally inefficient. The fact that the United States possessed the industrial depth to make up for inefficiency, to afford lapses in strategy, and to have an awkward command relationship does not make it acceptable. The allied troops paid a heavy price for the interservice rivalry demonstrated at the highest levels of command. We should be careful when attempting to justify success made possible by inefficiency and a lack of a unified strategy. In the case of the Allied forces in the Pacific theater, the war could have ended sooner.

³⁷ Clayton 727.