

ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS IN THE DECISION TO BOMB PEARL HARBOR

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Introduction

In this essay I will explore whether and how economic considerations affected the Japanese decision to bomb Pearl Harbor. In this essay, I will argue that economic considerations were indeed a major factor in the decision to bomb Pearl Harbor. To do this, I will explain the origins of the conflict, the options that the Japanese were faced with to end the conflict, and how the decision to use force to obtain necessary resources led to bombing of Pearl Harbor. Finally, I will show that the Japanese quest for resources to achieve regional hegemony and to create an autarkic Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere were what essentially caused the Japanese to bomb Pearl Harbor. To conclude, I will explain why this case study is typical and that it can be applied to the broader world.

The Conflict

The origins of the conflict between Japan and the United States have “its roots in the 1930s, when Japan embarked on the establishment of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” (Levi, Whyte, 1997:798-799). The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was the idea of a “Japanese empire extending roughly from Manchuria in the north to the Dutch East Indies in the south” (798). The purpose of this empire was to, “give Japan economic self-sufficiency, dominance over China and Southeast Asia, and equal status with the Western powers” (798). For Japan, this meant access and control of access to all of the resources in the region including iron ore, rubber, coal, and oil from the Philippines, Malaysia, the Dutch East Indies, and the islands in the South Seas (Mimura, 2011: 188). They would then use this power to ensure their own access to key materials and deny the same access to their enemies. (Swan, 1996: 139-149).

The United States opposed the formation of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere because “the southwest pacific area was of undeniable economic importance to the United States- at the time most of America’s tin and rubber came from there, as did substantial quantities of other raw materials.” (Russet 1967: 89-106). The Japanese control over the resources in the region could directly inhibit the United States’ ability to obtain them. This obstacle could decrease the United States’ national security because the materials they received from the region were important strategic goods for any war effort and lesser access to them could mean lesser military power. In addition, the Japanese pursuit of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere threatened the United States as well as the British and Dutch, allies of the United States, with their plans to conquer their territorial possessions (Tarling, 1996: 132-138; Yu-Jose, 1996: 64-81).

When Japan pressed forward with their plans by moving into southern Indo-China, the United States, British, and Dutch governments responded with the “freezing of Japanese assets” (Russet, 1967: 95) In addition, “in 1940 fuel oil and scrap iron were brought under the new National Defense Act of the United States as goods which could not be shipped out of the Western Hemisphere without an export license” (96), making it harder for Japan to obtain these essential resources. Along with oil, Japan was already, “short of rice, tin, bauxite, nickel, rubber, and other raw materials normally imported from Netherland Indies and Malaya” (97), so the embargo imposed by the American, British, and Dutch governments were especially detrimental to Japan’s war potential. The United States, British, and Dutch government refused to relax the embargo and freezing of assets unless the Japanese government agreed to a return to the status quo in Indo-China, to end Japanese involvement in China, and to abandon the right to station

troops in that country (97). This ultimatum placed Japan between two unsuitable options: to concede to Western powers or to forcefully obtain the resources they require.

The Dilemma

The economic measures used against Japan left them with no choice but to react. “The embargo posed a threat to Japan’s economy and war-making ability”(Levi, Whyte, 1997: 799), such that if they did not react, their economy would slowly cripple and their fuel supplies would diminish until Japan lost its ability to wage war any longer. It was determined that without restored imports of fuel, Japan’s Navy would not be able to “remain an effective fighting force more than a year and a half” (Russet, 1967: 98) due to the fact that Japan and its Navy “heavily relied on oil imports from the United States” (Kawasaki, 2009: 229). If Japan did not react then they would lose their ability to defend itself in the event of a conflict and their national security would have been compromised. This still would have resulted in the Japanese losing their standing in China and the ability to pursue the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, putting them in a worse position than if they had initially decided to cooperate. This being determined, it would be irrational for the Japanese not to react. Since it has been established that Japan had to act, I will now explore the outcomes of the situations in which Japan does concede to Western powers and if it instead uses force to gain the necessary resources.

If Japan had conceded to the Western Powers then this “would have meant the end of all hopes of empire and even, so it was thought, of influence on the continent of Asia” (Russet, 1967: 97). In addition there was a, “perception that the U.S. embargo was weakening Japan” by slowly draining it of its resources (Levi, Whyte, 1997: 800). If the embargo continued, then soon the Japanese would not have enough strategic goods to fight if they wished to do so, which

would significantly decrease their national security. In addition, Japan had already incurred heavy costs in pursuit of the Co-Prosperity Sphere. If the Japanese were to renounce this goal then these costs would be seen as losses (800). These factors in combination made the option to concede to the United States unacceptable. This conclusion led Japanese government to make the commitment to “follow a policy that [would] result in the establishment of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere... no matter what changes... occur in the world situation” (800). With this commitment, concession to the United States was no longer an option and Japan needed to act quickly because their resources were diminishing so quickly that they were running out of time even to negotiate (Russet, 1967: 98). This led the Japanese to explore the option of force.

With peaceful negotiations ruled out, the only way to obtain the necessary raw materials would be, “seizing Thailand, where there was rice; Malaya, with its sources of tin, nickel, and rubber; and the Netherlands Indies, with their oil” (98). To gain the necessary resources by force would mean to go to war with the United States because according to Japanese calculations, the United States was certain to fight if the British or Dutch territories in the Far East were attacked (98). The United States would be certain to fight because the Dutch and British were allies of the United States and because, “if the United States failed to defend the Indies it would lose its influence in China and endanger the Philippines” (95). Due to the inequalities of military power between the United States and Japan, the approach initially seemed hopeless. According to Japanese top naval officers, “a war against the United States was virtually unwinnable, and should be avoided at all costs” (Kawasaki, 2009: 229). While the United States’ fleet in the Pacific remained intact, it would be “strong enough to endanger seriously a sustained offensive and quite possibly strong enough to postpone Japan’s effective occupation of the Indies until her

raw materials ran out” (Russet, 1967: 98). Keeping in mind that the United States were almost certain to fight if the Japanese attacked the Indies, this move would have been a loss of scarce Japanese resources for an offensive that was likely to fail.

A Way Out

For the offensive to be a success, the Japanese would have to attack British and Dutch territories and extract their resources before the United States could counter-attack. This idea led the Japanese to a third option: “a pre-emptive surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and seizure of the Philippines” (98). Under this circumstance the Japanese forces would be able to, “destroy... the United States’ existing offensive capabilities in the Pacific... to extract [the islands in the Southwest Pacific’s] raw materials, and to turn the whole area into a virtually impregnable line of defense which could long delay an American counter-offensive” (98). The plan had potential of success in the first six months to a year of conflict, but it was warned by the inventor of the Pearl Harbor plan that the chances of victory were very small if the conflict lasted up to two or three years (98-99). Although this plan was not perfect, the Japanese chose this option because it was the only plan that, “was seen as having the potential to achieve Japan’s aims and avoid what were otherwise perceived to be certain losses” (Levi, Whyte, 1997: 801).

Economics and Pearl Harbor

The Japanese objectives before the bombing of Pearl Harbor were to win the Sino-Japanese conflict, which would later lead to the establishment of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (Kawasaki, 2009: 229). The sphere was meant to be “an economic and strategic organism centered on Japan” that would “follow the political and economic leadership

of Japan” (Swan, 1996: 145-146). With this organism, Japan would be able to achieve regional hegemony, autarky, and thus long-term national security (145). Although these goals do not seem economic at face value, a closer examination reveals that they indeed rely entirely on economic factors.

Japan's objective of creating the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere had political and national security implications, but was essentially an economic goal. The sphere would have granted Japan regional hegemony to nearly guarantee the supply of essential resources in the Sphere (Mimura, 2011: 170-194). In addition, the economies of the countries included in the sphere would have become dependent on Japan's economy. (170-194). Under these circumstances, the countries would be forced to comply with Japan's political agenda due to their economies' vulnerability to Japan. This would also ensure a steady supply of resources to Japan from these countries. This reliable supply of resources would act as a, “lifeline that would enable Japan to grow and become a continental power” (190). In other words, Japan's economic gains from the sphere would increase its political and potential military power. Furthermore, the countries included in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere had plentiful key resources, which could transform Japan into a “self-sufficient continental power” (189), thus making Japan essentially autarkic. With the combination of newfound hegemony and autarky, Japan would have an advantage in conflict because it would be very difficult to effectively interrupt the flow of strategic goods into Japan's borders. This advantage would have granted Japan with greater long-term national security. Through this closer examination, it is clear to see that the goals of hegemony, autarky, and long-term national security are all rooted in economics.

In order to achieve these goals, Japan needed crucial resources from Malaya and the Dutch East Indies so that they could continue fighting in the Sino-Japanese conflict. Japan

realized that these resources “could be obtained in sufficient quantity only by force” (Russet, 1967: 94). This means that in order to obtain the resources necessary to win the Sino-Japanese conflict and to establish the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere, the Japanese would have to use force that was expected to provoke a United States counter-attack. As stated earlier, the only circumstance in which Japan was willing to engage in war against the United States was if they were able to first weaken the United States’ Pacific fleet through the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Therefore, the shortage of Japanese resources was a major determinant in Japan’s decision to bomb Pearl Harbor.

Conclusion

Deep analysis of the decision to bomb Pearl Harbor reveals important information about how states will act in the presence of economic factors that threaten its national security. In this situation, when posed with the option to fight the United States or not, Japan chose to fight because the potential economic and political gains of fighting would have positioned Japan to have a relatively higher national security than if they did not. The attack on Pearl Harbor was an attempt to increase the likelihood of a Japanese victory so that the chances of their increased national security were also higher (Russet, 1967: 98). Under realist ideals, this decision was logical. Realists believe that states prefer relative gains to absolute gains (Meirshemer, 2001: 52). In the case of the decision to bomb Pearl Harbor, realists would choose to engage in war with the United States so that Japan could have the opportunity to increase their relative power and shift the distribution of power in their favor. This move would increase their national security, which relatively decreases the national security of any other nation. This shift in power increases the Japanese bargaining power and enables them to have a greater influence on

economic and political policy in their sphere of influence. The close examination of this case study shows that, as in many situations, economic considerations proved to be a major factor in the formation of foreign policy.

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