

We use cookies to ensure that we give you the best experience on our website. If you continue without changing your settings, we'll assume that you are happy to receive all cookies on the BBC website. However, if you would like to, you can **change your cookie settings** at any time.

- [Continue](#)
- [Find out more](#)



This page has been archived and is no longer updated.

[Find out more about page archiving.](#)

Japan's Quest for Empire 1931 - 1945

By Dr Susan Townsend

Last updated 2011-03-30



Japan's slow-burning aggression was borne of frustration with a world whose order appeared tipped in favour of the west. Susan Townsend describes how the intensification of this feeling led up to the Pearl Harbor attack of 1941.

Unleashing force

When the Japanese Kwantung Army (also known as the Guandong Army) contrived to invade Manchuria on 18 September 1931, it unleashed military and political forces which led ultimately to the attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941.

... a minor engagement between Chinese and Japanese troops ... led to undeclared war between the two nations.

First, the post-invasion 'Manchurian Crisis' ended with the dramatic walk-out of Japanese delegates from the League of Nations in 1933. This was in reaction to the findings of the Lytton Commission, which had upheld China's appeal against Japanese aggression, thus leaving Japan effectively isolated in the world. By this time, however, the Japanese had successfully detached Manchuria from the rest of China, creating the puppet state of Manchukuo under the deposed Qing emperor Pu Yi.

Then in 1937 a minor engagement between Chinese and Japanese troops at the Marco-Polo Bridge, near Peking, led to undeclared war between the two nations. The 'China Incident' and the creation of a 'New Order' in East Asia in 1938 dominated Japanese military thinking until the summer of 1940, when the declaration of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere anticipated the expansion of Japan's empire into south-east Asia.

What were the forces that had pushed Japan down this road of military conquest in the east, leading ultimately to war with the west and catastrophic defeat?

Chasing power

Massive changes were unleashed in Japan by the Meiji restoration - a period of radical modernisation - in 1868, and out of these emerged the desire for wealth, power and prestige as a way of redressing the imposition of unequal treaties that had been placed upon Japan by western powers in the past.

Victory in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5 also gave Japan its first real foothold on the Asian continent, forcing China to recognise Korean 'independence' and cede Taiwan (Formosa) and the Liaotung peninsula.

The Treaty of Portsmouth, which ended the war, allowed Japan to dominate Korea ...

However, France, Germany and Russia, in the 'triple intervention', protested that Japanese occupation of Liaotung would pose a constant threat to China, and they forced a deeply humiliated Japan to abandon the peninsula.

Another effect of the war was to expose China's soft underbelly to the world, prompting the United States to formulate the Open Door Policy in 1899 in an attempt to prevent anti-competitive policies in China. But this didn't prevent the region from remaining one of fierce rivalries, with the US, Russia and Japan all involved, leading Japan to conclude an alliance with Britain in 1902 to counter Russian predominance in the region.

Three years later Japan's victory in the 1904-5 Russo-Japanese War amazed the western world, and encouraged some Asian nationalists (those not directly threatened by Japanese expansion) to regard Japan as the region's natural leader. The Treaty of Portsmouth, which ended the war, allowed Japan to dominate Korea and secure a new sphere of influence in south Manchuria. Maintaining and strengthening this position became a fundamental national commitment.

The threat of still further Japanese expansion into China brought Japan into conflict with the US Open Door Policy but the so-called 'blood-debt' of the costly Russo-Japanese war made it difficult even for moderates in Japan to contemplate a return to the pre-war position, despite the pressure to do so from America.

Seaborne empire

Things didn't move significantly until, after the formal annexation of Korea in 1910, Japan turned its attention to the *Nan'yo-Gunto* - or South Sea Islands. Japan's presence in the South Seas had formerly been limited to an assortment of Japanese traders and adventurers. But during World War One there were an influential few, engaged in business or military concerns - especially the navy - who advocated a southwards advance [*nanshin*] rather than the advance northwards [*hokushin*] favoured by the army. They made it clear that if Japan moved into the South Pacific and south-east Asia, abundant natural resources would become available.

... Japan had been allowed into the 'big power club', and for now she felt secure.

Thus, after joining the victorious Allies in World War One, Japan was granted Germany's Asian colonial territories under a League of Nations' mandate. The territories consisted of Tsingtao, on the Chinese Shantung Peninsula, and the formerly German-held islands in Micronesia.

At long last it seemed that the unequal treaties and the triple intervention had been avenged - Japan had been allowed into the 'big power club', and for now she felt secure. Talk of further expansion died away.

Deadlock

Until the late 1920s Japanese leaders generally supported the ideal, if not the practice, of economic liberalism. Their attempts to integrate the Japanese economy into a liberal world order, however, became frustrated in the early 1930s when the depressed western economies placed barriers on Japanese trade to protect their own colonial markets.

Many Japanese believed that the structure of international peace embodied in the League of Nations favoured the western nations that controlled the world's resources. Moreover, the west had acted hypocritically by blocking Japanese emigration through anti-Asian immigration laws in the 1920s.

... the idea began to emerge in Japan of an East Asian federation or cooperative body ...

As a result, the idea began to emerge in Japan of an East Asian federation or cooperative body, based on traditional pan-Asian ideals of universal brotherhood (*hakko ichiu* - eight corners of the world under one roof) and an 'Asia for Asians' liberationist rhetoric.

The Japanese aggression in Manchuria in 1931 was in this context, and was justified on the basis of the Manchurian-Mongolian *seimeisen* or 'lifeline' argument - the idea that Japan's economy was deadlocked. Three factors creating this deadlock loomed large - the shortage of raw materials in Japan, the rapidly expanding Japanese population, and the division of the world into economic blocs.

Political crises

Japan's increasing isolation abroad was exacerbated by political crisis at home. The last party prime minister, Inukai Tsuyoshi, was assassinated in May 1932 by right-wing extremists. Political parties survived but were out of power, as 'national unity cabinets' ended the democratic promise of the 1920s.

After an attempted *coup d'etat* on 26 February 1936, 'national unity' was skewed towards greater military power within the state. Then crucially, in May of that year, a rule that only serving officers could become military ministers was reinstated. This gave the military a veto over the cabinet, and the power to topple governments.

... the climate of assassination, intimidation and propaganda undoubtedly contributed to the breakdown ...

After the aristocrat Fumimaro Konoe became prime minister for a second time, in 1940, his brain-child, the Imperial Rule Assistance Association, failed to deliver a popular civilian government capable of checking the military. And when General Hideki Tojo came to power in October 1941 he presided over what was effectively a military-bureaucratic regime.

Although, after 1932, there had been a massive upsurge in fundamentalist nationalism, most of Japan's right-wing groups were not as radical as the European fascist movements to which they are often compared. Many embraced moderate politico-economic reform, as well as restorationist monarchical principles that had no parallel in fascist ideologies.

None of these groups ever seized power. However, the climate of assassination, intimidation and propaganda undoubtedly contributed to the breakdown of party government and the disappearance of international liberalism from public discourse. The mix of international events and domestic politics was to prove a lethal cocktail.

Deterrent diplomacy: Germany

The conclusion of the Nazi-Soviet pact in August 1939 was a great shock to pro-German groups in the Japanese government, who regarded the Russians as dangerous. And after German forces overran France and the rest of western Europe in the spring and summer of 1940, the Japanese began to fear that Germany would also seek political control of French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies.

... the Japanese were worried that German influence was thus affecting their interests in south east Asia.

These territories were part of Japan's vital supply route for men and materials to and from the Chinese mainland, and the Japanese were worried that German influence was thus affecting their interests in south east Asia. Neither were they sanguine about Hitler's long-term intentions.

Foreign Minister Matsuoka, therefore, advocated strengthening political ties with the Axis, and a 'Tripartite Pact' was concluded in September 1940.

At the same time, Japan was faced with an 'ABCD encirclement' of America, Britain, China and the Dutch, all of which threatened Japanese markets and interests in Asia. The Japanese thus felt obliged to strengthen their own position further south, and embarked on a southward advance into French Indochina. This gained in intensity on 22 September 1940, after the German-influenced Vichy government in France gave its agreement to the policy.

The Japanese also began negotiations with the Netherlands East Indies to increase the quota of oil exports to Japan in case oil exports from the US ceased.

Deterrent diplomacy: Russia and US

Relations with the Soviets had taken a down-turn in November 1936, after Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact (a pact to thwart international communism) with Germany. They reached their lowest ebb when Japanese and Soviet forces clashed in the Nomonhan sector of the Manchurian-Mongolian border in 1939. To defuse the threat of war with Russia, on 13 April 1941, discretion proved the better part of valour, and Japan signed a neutrality pact with the Soviets.

... the emperor himself was becoming concerned about the hawkish tone of the military ...

In June 1941 negotiations with the Netherlands East Indies broke down and on 2 July the Japanese endorsed a further push forward for their 'southward advance' while secretly preparing for war with the Soviets. When Japan occupied southern Indochina that same month, the United States imposed a *de facto* oil embargo.

By early September the emperor himself was becoming concerned about the hawkish tone of the military vis-à-vis negotiations with the United States. But a memorandum issued by US Secretary of State Cordell Hull, on 26 November, demanding that Japan withdraw completely from China and Indochina, played

into the hands of Japanese hardliners. On that day the Japanese fleet sailed for Pearl Harbor.

Awakening the sleeping giant

The history of Japanese expansionism highlights its basically ad hoc and opportunistic nature, as well as Japan's desire to create an autonomous region under Japanese leadership.

Japan's annexation of territory throughout SE Asia in 1941-2 was the immediate cause of war in the Pacific during World War Two. However, it was Japan's insistence on retaining its Chinese territory - seen as crucial to its existence by moderates as well as by hardliners - and US insistence that Japan relinquish this territory, that created the real tensions between the two. The tripartite pact (between Japan, Germany and Italy) of September 1940 was also a major stumbling block to good relations between the US and Japan.



Illustration of Pearl Harbor attack ©

... there was prejudice and misconception, but the Japanese government was also misled by military factions ...

On the US side, there was prejudice and misconception, but the Japanese government was also misled by military factions, who had learned the wrong lessons from their two short imperial wars with China and Russia. They believed that Allied weakness in south east Asia and American isolationist sentiment would mean another short war.

This, however, was not to be. What the Japanese had done was to awaken the fury of America, and to set in train a war that would end in their total defeat.

Find out more

Documentary sources

Japan's Decision for War: Records of the 1941 Policy Conferences translated, edited and introduced by Nobutaka Ike (Stanford University Press, 1967)

Pearl Harbor and the Coming of the Pacific War: A Brief History with Documents and Essays edited and introduced by Akira Iriye (Bedford, 1999)

Books

Deterrent Diplomacy: Japan, Germany and the USSR 1935-1940 edited by James William Morley (Columbia University Press, 1976)

The Fateful Choice: Japan's Advance into Southeast Asia edited by James W Morley (Columbia University Press, 1980)

Japan and the Wider World: From the mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present by Akira Iriye (Longman, 1997)

Japanese Imperialism 1894-1945 by WG Beasley (Clarendon Press, 1991)

The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific by Akira Iriye (Longman, 1987)

Pearl Harbor Reexamined: Prologue to the Pacific War edited by Hilary Conroy and Harry Wray (University of Hawaii, 1990)

War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War by John Dower (Pantheon Books, 1986)

About the author

Dr Susan Townsend lived in Kobe, Japan, in 1991-2, and now teaches modern Japanese history at the University of Nottingham. Her monograph on the philosopher Miki Kiyoshi, the architect of the philosophical principles of the New Order in Asia, is to be published soon.