

History: US-led Pressures on Japan Performed a Central Role Leading to Pearl Harbor

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By 1920, America had become by far the world's richest country, whose strength held sway over much of the Western hemisphere, and was stretching further eastwards. As her influence expanded, the United States was posing a serious problem for the Empire of Japan, a major power with its own territorial ambitions.

Unlike Japan, the US had access to some of the earth's most resource-rich areas while enjoying unequalled security and scope. To justify US claims, pertaining to the Americas, Washington's statesmen occasionally invoked long-held principles of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine.

US president Calvin Coolidge (in office 1923-1929) said, in a White House statement of January 1927, that the Monroe Doctrine has a "distinct place" in US foreign policy - allowing American governments to act as they see fit in countries such as Nicaragua, in Central America. President Coolidge informed Congress on 10 January 1927 that,

"The US cannot, therefore, fail to view with deep concern any serious threat to stability and constitutional government in Nicaragua tending towards anarchy and jeopardizing American interests".

The US marines [once more entered](#) Nicaragua to remove any "outside influence", in a nation whose capital city Managua is almost 2,000 miles from Washington.

The Monroe Doctrine prevailed with little dispute. Yet in the east Asian and Pacific regions, very different attitudes were at large. An "Open Door Policy" existed for decades with regard to China, the world's fourth largest country, which allowed elite Western power far from home to encroach upon Japanese regional designs. After all, eastern China is situated just a few hundred miles west of Japan. By the late 1920s, there was also more than 5,000 US marines stationed on Chinese soil.

Resource-laden Manchuria, located in the north-east of China, constituted a land area that became an obsession for the Japanese. By 1931 Manchuria was under threat not only from Chinese nationalists, but from the mighty USSR looming on northern horizons.

Come the early 1930s, Manchuria was home to thousands of Japanese, many of whom were

making a livelihood by tilling its rich, fertile soil. Manchuria was pivotal to Tokyo's aspirations. Without control over Manchuria, a territory more than twice the size of France, Japan would be relegated to an inconsequential state, burdened by a steadily growing populace.

As the American author Noam Chomsky explained in one of [his earliest books](#),

“Manchuria remained independent of the Kuomintang, but Chinese nationalist pressures for unification were increasing. At the same time, the Soviet Union had significantly expanded its military power on the Manchurian border, a fact that could not fail to concern the Japanese military. Japan had a substantial investment in the South Manchurian Railway and, rightly or wrongly, regarded Manchuria as an extremely important potential source of desperately needed raw materials”.

Scanning their eyes seaward, the Japanese were surrounded by great foes: Soviet Russia to the north-west, China to the west and south-west, the US to the south. In the late 1890s, America was embarking upon its conquest of the Philippines, an island country lying less than 1,000 miles southward of Japan. America's capture of the Philippines was an early example of her saltwater imperialist ventures, and it clearly infringed on Japan's sphere of interest.

Yasaka Takagi, an expert on US history, [outlined that](#),

“the peace machinery of the world is in itself primarily the creation of the dominant races of the earth, of those who are the greatest beneficiaries from the maintenance of the status quo”.

In the early 1940s America, Britain and “free” France held dominion over approximately 70% of the world's resources, that is 30 million square miles of territory. The Axis powers of Germany, Italy, Japan and Hungary – who were supposedly winning the war while rampaging across the earth – held dominion over 15% of the planet's mineral riches, and a mere one million square miles of land.

The US political activist, A. J. Muste, envisaged in 1941 “a new American empire” and [that the US](#) “shall be the next nation to seek world domination – in other words, to do what we condemn Hitler for trying to do”.

For many years, America had been well positioned for planetary supremacy. Among the flies in the ointment was Japan, a nation comprising an obstacle to US hegemony over the lucrative Pacific and Asian zones.

Agreements hammered out, like the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922, were formulated mostly to reduce Japanese power in her own waters, while leaving entirely unharmed American and British capacities. The terms reached here, in the US capital, rendered Japan a second rate imperial power, as intended. However, Tokyo would strictly adhere to the Washington accords through the 1920s.

It was reinforced with the London Naval Treaty of 1930, signed in the English capital, which again compromised Japanese naval freedom in the seas encompassing her shores. With the Great Depression having struck in late 1929, the contingencies of the London treaty were

bitterly resented by opposition in Japan; which resulted in Japanese militarists gaining greater control over the country's civilian hierarchy, which was felt to be endangering national security with its weak-willed strategies.

The capitulation of Tokyo's political entities in London during 1930 furthermore "was a great stimulus to the fascist movement" in Japan, as the historian Masao Maruyama wrote. Rising fascistic elements within the army, was a pronounced underlying factor behind appalling war crimes later committed by Japanese soldiers.

Image on the right: Osachi Hamaguchi (Source: Britannica.com)



Shortly after the 1930 London treaty, moderate politicians in Japan were assassinated, including the prime ministers Osachi Hamaguchi and Inukai Tsuyoshi; the former killed by a far-right terrorist and the latter shot to death by young navy personnel. These grisly acts deliberately undermined the nation's civilian infrastructure, and represented another boost for Japan's diehard military men.

The rise of Japanese militarists, along with its extremist factions, was as an indirect consequence of increased Western pressures. Analyzing the developments, [Chomsky noted](#),

"it seems clear that the refusal of the United States to grant Japan hegemony in its waters (while of course insisting on maintaining its own hegemony in the Western Atlantic and Eastern Pacific) was a significant contributory cause to the crisis that was soon to erupt".

On 24 February 1933, Japan caught the world by surprise in withdrawing from the League of Nations, an organization founded in 1920 whose stated primary goal was maintenance of global peace. The League of Nations roundly condemned Japan's occupation of Manchuria, and later recommended that Tokyo withdraw her troops and "restore the country to Chinese sovereignty". Not mentioned were Western policies that treated China as a semi-colonial state.

There were no international conferences organized so as to scrutinize US or British claims in

the Eastern hemisphere, let alone in the Western half of the planet. Japan's desire in the early 1930s to absorb Manchuria, and subsequently north-east China, is at least comparable to the US government annexation of about 50% of Mexico's territory during the mid-1840s.

Tokyo's foreign actions were often reported in the West as examples of "Japanese aggression"; much as it is recently "Russian aggression" when moves are undertaken by Moscow along her borders which cross US red lines.

Japanese imperialists looked on with growing displeasure as American corporate influence embedded itself within China. In 1931, Japan was overtaken by America as the major exporter of goods to China. Japanese exports destined for America also declined sharply, partly because of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of mid-1930 - signed into law in the US, which ensured protectionist trade initiatives that further stymied Tokyo.

As Japan was an advanced industrial state, hampered by lack of access to natural materials, the decline in world trade was a catastrophe for Tokyo, compounded by the aforementioned Great Depression.

Image below: Yosuke Matsuoka (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



Japan's future foreign affairs minister, Yosuke Matsuoka (who later met Hitler and Stalin for separate discussions) complained in [January 1931 that](#),

"we feel suffocated as we observe internal and external situations. What we are seeking is that which is minimal for living beings. In other words, we are seeking to live. We are seeking room that will let us breathe".

On 18 September 1931, the Japanese invaded Manchuria with Tokyo foreseeing the intervention as crucial to her nation's survival. Manchuria is indeed flowing in riches; from coal, iron ore and steel, to copper, gold, lead, tungsten, etc. Manchuria comprised a windpipe that would allow Japan to breathe somewhat easier.

Matsuoka asked,

“Is it for the United States, which rules over the Western hemisphere and is expanding over the Atlantic and Pacific, to say that these ideals, these ambitions of Japan are wrong?”

In addition, the Japanese viewed Manchuria as a most willing market for her manufactured goods, which by 1931 were largely excluded from Western countries by Depression-era tariffs. As a rapidly growing commercial state, Japan had an insatiable thirst for fossil fuels and other mineral deposits.

Tokyo’s use of “indiscriminate air power” in the early 1930s, such as during the Shanghai Incident of 1932, generated feelings of shock and revulsion in the US and Britain. Just over a decade later, there was little indignation expressed when American and British aircraft were razing dozens of Japanese and German cities to the ground.

In April 1934, Tokyo was [expounding on](#) a “Japanese Monroe Doctrine” which “argued for a Japanese mission in East Asia to achieve peace and stability in cooperation with China, and criticized the other powers’ intervention in China”. Japan’s version of the Monroe Doctrine was modest in scope by comparison to its US rival. Still, Tokyo’s aspirations caused a commotion in Washington and London, whose elites felt that their far-reaching aims were threatened.

As late as 1939 Joseph Grew, long-time US Ambassador to Japan, said that Tokyo’s imperial concepts were “depriving Americans of their long-established rights in China” and foisting “a system of closed economy” on the US. Ambassador Grew did not highlight China’s close proximity to Japan and the latter’s understandable concerns, nor did he raise the issue of Chinese independence.

During the autumn of 1939, US Secretary of State Cordell Hull resisted negotiating a new commercial treaty with Tokyo “unless Japan completely changed her attitude and practice towards our rights and interests in China”.

Japanese diplomats were not so bold as to outline Tokyo’s potential “rights and interests” in the Western hemisphere.

On 26 July 1939, Washington gave formal notification to Tokyo that they would terminate the Japanese-American commercial treaty of 1911. This came into effect in January 1940, forcing the Japanese to shift their gaze, such as towards French Indochina and in “gaining independence” for the Philippines.

In July 1940 the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration hit Japan with an embargo on aviation fuel, which the Empire could acquire from no other source – and on 27 September 1940, Washington placed a complete ban on scrap iron against Japan, as Tokyo invaded Northern French Indochina in a bid to bolster her still insufficient resources. Japan’s foreign policy acts were in advance all known in Washington, with the Americans having cracked Tokyo’s diplomatic codes.

On 19 December 1940, Roosevelt sanctioned \$25 million in aid to Japan’s neighbour, China, worth over \$400 million today; while on 11 March 1941, America’s president introduced the Lend-Lease Act, a program furnishing extensive war materiel to China; and likewise to other states with unfriendly dispositions towards Japan such as the USSR, Britain and the Netherlands.

Even more seriously, on 26 July 1941 Roosevelt froze Japanese assets across America, in response to Tokyo's move in occupying the southern half of French Indochina.

Roosevelt's policy amounted to a declaration of economic war on Japan, with Tokyo stripped of a massive nine-tenths of its oil imports, along with three quarters of her foreign trade. Due to American pressures, Japan would run out of oil by January 1943, unless she implemented further invasions of resource-rich states. Washington was in effect stoking the fires of war with Japan, and Tokyo would not need much persuading with her fervent militarists holding key positions of power, such as General Hideki "Razor" Tojo, prime minister for much of World War II.

Chomsky [elaborated that](#),

"The immediate cause of the attack on Pearl Harbor was the recognition, by the Japanese military, that it was 'now or never'. The Western powers controlled the raw materials on which their existence depended, and these supplies were being choked off in retaliation for expansion on the mainland and association with Germany and Italy in the Tripartite Pact".

As the 1930s gave way to the early 1940s, there was a widening propaganda campaign to denigrate Japan, stirred up by US government sources and media. Unsurprisingly, there was ongoing public antipathy towards Japan in the West. Paul W. Schroeder, the American historian, noted that the motive for this in part was "selling the anticipated war with Japan to the American people".

US strategists had long been planning a large-scale conflict with the Japanese. In January 1932 General Billy Mitchell, the "father of the US Air Force", wrote that

"Japan offers an ideal target for air operations" [and that her towns](#) "built largely of wood and paper, form the greatest aerial targets the world has ever seen".

In November 1940 these opinions were supported by America's renowned pre-war planner, General Claire Chennault, who revealed how US B-17 Flying Fortresses would destroy "the teeming bamboo ant heaps of Honshu and Kyushu".

Three weeks before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, US General George Marshall informed journalists in an "off-the-record briefing" that the "Flying Fortresses will be dispatched immediately to set the paper cities of Japan on fire. There won't be any hesitation about bombing civilians. It will be all-out".

Even had Hitler refrained from initiating a European war in 1939, it is likely that a deadly conflict would have erupted before long with America and Japan, possibly sparking a world war regardless. As seen, tensions between Washington and Tokyo were building for years prior to Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland. The breaking point would surely have been reached.

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