

## Japanese Strategy in the First Phase of the Pacific War

Kiyoshi Aizawa

### Introduction

On November 15, 1941, Japan's supreme war strategy body at the time, the Liaison Conference between the Government and Imperial General Headquarters, adopted the "Draft Proposal for Hastening the End of the War against the U.S., Great Britain, Holland and Chiang" (hereinafter called the "Draft Proposal"). At the time, Japan was already in a de facto state of war, with four years having passed since the outbreak of the "War against Chiang Kai-shek" (the Second Sino-Japanese War). The Draft Proposal, however, was the only Japanese war plan or strategy when the war against the U.S., Great Britain, and Holland (the Pacific War) started about a month later (on December 8).<sup>1</sup>

However, as the name "Draft Proposal" indicates, the plan fell short of something that could be termed an official national war plan. In fact, the Draft Proposal was extracted from part of the "Guidelines for the War against the U.S., Great Britain and Holland". The "Guidelines for the War against the U.S., Great Britain and Holland" was a draft overall war plan including basic strategy, war objectives, and measures to be taken towards other countries, which was developed at the working level by the Ministry of the Army, Ministry of the Navy, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs following the September 6 adoption by the Imperial Conference of the "Guidelines for Implementing Imperial Policy," that had decided on war against the U.S., Great Britain, and Holland.

In other words, much of this overall war plan could not be considered to be national-level decision-making. This was because, it was simply not possible to draw up a reasonable war plan, when war against the U.S. and Great Britain was preposterous from the perspective of Japan's national power. It was therefore difficult to present such plans to Emperor *Hirohito*, who had shown a negative attitude towards going to war at the September 6 Imperial Conference. Moreover, the Emperor had asked them to make sure of the outlook for finishing the war in

---

<sup>1</sup> Hata Ikuhiko, "Sensou shuumatsu kousou no sai kenntou—nichibei no shiten kara — (Reexamining plans to end the war: Japanese and the U.S. perspectives)," *Journal of Military History* vol. 31, no. 1/2: "World War II (3): The end of the war" (1995), p. 19.

drawing up a plan. Therefore, no more substantial war plan than the Draft Proposal was created at the national level.

Thus, at the outbreak of the Pacific War, Japan went to war against the U.S., Great Britain, and Holland without complete war plans. Of course, one can view the Draft Proposal, with its policies for ending the war, as essentially a war plan, albeit a short one. Even so, it was created and adopted over a period of just three months before the war began. How, then, did the Japanese Army and Navy prepare for major war with the U.S. and Great Britain in the absence of a war plan?

### **1. The Army and Navy's "Annual Operation Plans"**

The situation of "going to war without a war plan" was supported by the Army and Navy's respective "Annual Operation Plans,"<sup>2</sup> which they had been creating for many years. On November 5, 1941, 10 days before the Draft Proposal was adopted, and the day the Imperial Conference determined to go to war against the U.S., Great Britain, and Holland, Emperor *Hirohito* approved the "Imperial Army Operation Plan for the War" and the "Imperial Navy Operation Plan for the War," which determined operational plans for this major war. If, as a general rule, tactics (operation plans) are decided after strategy (war plans), Japan experienced the inverse phenomenon. Its operation plans and war plan were decided in the opposite order, if only by a matter of 10 days, when it went to war against the U.S., Great Britain, and Holland.

Both the "Imperial Army Operation Plan for the War" and the "Imperial Navy Operation Plan for the War" were decided after revisions to each of the Army and Navy's "Annual Operation Plans" for FY 1941. Generally created every year, these "Annual Operation Plans" set forth operations versus potential adversaries in the event that a war broke out. They were the basis not only for guiding operations, but also for guiding strategy as well. In addition, during peacetime they formed the basis of planning for the Army and Navy's armament, education, training, and so on.

The creation of these "Annual Operation Plans" was mandated in the "Outline of Strategy" of 1907, decided at the same time as the first "National Defense Policy" in 1907. Plans regarding operations were to be set annually and maintained with the approval of Emperor *Mutsuhito*. At the time this was decided, immediately after the Russo-Japanese War, the Army and Navy's operation plans placed the highest priority on single-country operations versus Russia. With the first revision

---

<sup>2</sup> The following description of the Annual Operation Plans is taken from Minoru Nomura, *Taiheiyō sensō to nihon kaigun* (The Pacific War and the Japanese Navy), Yamakawa Shuppansha, 1983, pp. 266–281.

of the “National Defense Policy” in 1918 and the second in 1923, however, points of conflict between aspects of the Army and Navy’s respective anticipated future war became apparent. From the start, an issue in deciding “National Defense Policies” was the fact that the Army and Navy saw different number-one potential adversaries, i.e., Russia and the U.S. respectively. Furthermore, there was vehement disagreement over the number of adversary countries likely to be involved in a future conflict. The Army held that it would be difficult to limit a future war to a single adversary, so the likelihood of war against multiple countries was high. The Navy, on the other hand, argued that future wars should be limited to single adversaries because Japan should not go to war with two or more countries due to its relative national power. Underlying this dispute were the respective lessons that the Army and the Navy had taken from watching the unfolding of total war during World War I. The Army saw the lesson for a future war as being that a limited war conducted versus a single adversary was now almost implausible. The Navy, however, wanted to deepen confrontation with the U.S. - which had become the most likely adversary since World War I and the Washington Naval Conference - and more than anything else, the Navy wanted to concentrate on strategy for a single-country war versus the U.S.<sup>3</sup>

This dispute, however, was resolved through a surprising level of compromise on the part of the Army, which moved closer to the position of the Navy. During the autumn of the year of the second revision of the “National Defense Policy”, the Army and Navy exchanged a memorandum of understanding. Beginning in FY 1924, the Army’s operation plans would be decided in as close accord as possible with the Navy’s operation plan based on its premise of a single-adversary. This was probably because Russia, the Army’s primary hypothetical opponent, grew weaker after the Russian Revolution, while the U.S. was elevated to the position of number-one hypothetical adversary by both the Army and Navy in the second revision of the “National Defense Policy”. Subsequent Army and Navy’s “Annual Operation Plans” thus came to be based on the premise of operations versus a single adversary. However, changes became necessary during the late 1930s with the third revision of the “National Defense Policy” (1936) and the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937).

First, the third revision of the “National Defense Policy” in 1936, added Great Britain to the U.S., Soviet Russia, and China as potential adversary countries. This addition was strongly desired by the Navy in particular. The Navy, which had hitherto emphasized the premise of a

---

<sup>3</sup> For the influence of World War I on the Japanese Army and Navy, see Kiyoshi Aizawa, “The Shock of the First World War: Japan and Total War.” *War and Peace in the 21st Century: Reflections upon the Century of War* (Report of the 1999 National Institute of Defense Studies Symposium on Security Affairs, 2000) pp. 16–22.

single-adversary focused on the U.S., no longer saw that country as its sole potential opponent.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it recognized that with the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in July 1937 and its subsequent escalation, if war began with another country it would obviously mean war with two countries, so plans for war with one country were therefore meaningless.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the Army and Navy's "Annual Operation Plans" for FY 1938 already planned for war against two countries "in the event that war was to break out with hypothetical enemies the U.S., Soviet Russia, and Great Britain during operations in China." Additionally, the plans included strategy for war against four nations at the same time "in the event that war was to break out with hypothetical enemies the U.S., Soviet Russia, and Great Britain during operations in China." With some modifications, these two-country and four-country operation plans remained in the FY 1939 and FY 1940 plans. Thus in FY 1941, the year that war broke out against the U.S., Great Britain, and Holland, there was still an operation plan "in the event that war was to break out with the U.S., Great Britain, and Holland during operations in China." After revisions to some parts, this plan became the "Imperial Army Overall Operation Plan" and the "Imperial Navy Operation Plan" mentioned above.

## **2. Twists and turns towards war with Great Britain and the U.S.**

Of course, the existence of operation plans for war against four countries in FY 1941 does not mean that the Army and Navy of the time thought it was possible to implement them in war with the U.S., Great Britain, Holland, and against Chiang Kai-shek's China. As discussed above, the Army and Navy's campaign planners began studying and drafting operation plans for wars with two or four countries after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Full-fledged study within the Army and Navy of going to war with multiple countries, and the U.S. and Great Britain in particular, may only have begun during the summer of 1940. A major problem standing in the way of this was the question of the ability of Japan's national power to support this type of major war.

On July 27, 1940, the Liaison Conference between the Government and Imperial General Headquarters decided upon the "Outline of the Main Principles for Coping with the Changing World Situation". It was examined based on the judgment that "the changing situation (Germany's

---

<sup>4</sup> Regarding the worsening of naval sentiment towards Great Britain, see Kiyoshi Aizawa, "Nihon kaigun no taieikan no saikentou" (Reexamining the Japanese Navy's view of Great Britain), *Military History Studies Annual* no. 4 (National Institute of Defense Studies, March 2001) pp. 51–62.

<sup>5</sup> For changes in Army attitudes towards war during this period, see Ryoichi Tobe, "Rikugun to jiki taisen" (The Army and the next great war), *Kokusaiseiji* no. 91 (May 1989) pp. 70–85.

western offensive)” since the spring of 1940 in World War II - which had broken out in Europe in September 1939 - made a German invasion of Great Britain possible in the near future. In fact, this produced a significant change in the Army's strategy direction. In other words, until now, the Army had held sacred its belief in a “northern war” (versus Soviet Russia) as a future war. Now, it “turned” its strategy “toward a southern advance”<sup>6</sup> (to go “south first, north later”); to aim first for a “southern war” (versus Great Britain), in part to finish the Second Sino-Japanese War.

The Army relied on the Cabinet's Planning Agency to assess the national power, including the amount of oil and number of ships, needed to execute a “southern war”. The result was the “Tentative Plan for Emergency Mobilization of Supplies and Resources”, which was completed at the end of August. It found that a “southern war” was impossible. Supplies of most subsistence needs would fall by nearly 50 percent. Even munitions would suffer major decreases, and the ordinary daily lifestyles of the people could not be maintained. Even so, the plan's final conclusion was that “If civilian demand can be suppressed to the extreme, a short war might be feasible. However, oil will be a critical factor.” As a result, a concrete consideration of military invasion of the Dutch East Indies in order to secure oil supplies began. Regarding this study of national power, the Minister of the Navy at the time, Zengo Yoshida, issued strict orders that the Department of the Navy was to “make absolutely no contribution to this research.” This was because there was still a serious gap between the attitudes of the Army and the Navy regarding waging war with Great Britain.<sup>7</sup>

At the time the abovementioned “Outline of the Main Principles for Coping with the Changing World Situation” was decided, the idea of a “southern war” or southern military advance, favored by the Army's mid-level staff officers in particular, was seen as a chance to seize upon the favorable opportunity, in the light of Germany's succession of victories in Europe. There were two conditions for putting it into operation: 1) a German landing in Great Britain; and 2) a ceasefire in the Second Sino-Japanese War. Regarding the second condition, some within the Army judged that even without a Sino-Japanese ceasefire, going to war against Great Britain in conjunction with a German invasion of that country would still allow a favorable conclusion to the Second Sino-Japanese War. For that situation to develop, however, a major premise would be the non-participation of the U.S., even if Japan were to occupy British possessions in the Far East. In other words, Great Britain and the U.S. would have to be divided. The Army's concept of a

<sup>6</sup> Sumio Hatano, *Bakuryoutachi no shinjuwan* (Staff Officers' Pearl Harbor), Asahi Shimbun, 1991, pp. 36–39.

<sup>7</sup> Shinji Kondo ed., *Kindai nihon sensoushi, daiyon hen, taiheiyō sensou* (Modern Japanese military history, vol. 4, The Pacific War), Dodai Economic Club, 1995) pp. 203–205.

“southern war” at the time was based on the judgment that the war would be against Great Britain alone.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, the Navy believed that invasion of British Far East colonies would lead to war with the U.S. In other words, it would be impossible to divide Great Britain and the U.S. This was the Navy's traditional view of Great Britain and the U.S. This position meant that if, according to the abovementioned Planning Agency study of national power, Japan's ability to wage war against Great Britain alone was seriously limited, then a “southern war” against the U.S. and Great Britain at the same time would be even less feasible. Navy Minister Yoshida's order not to contribute to the Planning Agency's research on national power was likely related to this Navy attitude. This does not mean, however, that the Navy was therefore completely opposed to the decision to adopt the “Outline of the Main Principles for Coping with the Changing World Situation”. Instead, the Navy worked to increase its own benefit, by emphasizing the danger that the launch of a war with Great Britain would have in potentially leading to war with the U.S., and therefore emphasizing the consequent need to prepare for such a war against the U.S.

The signing of the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy that September further increased the influence of the European situation on Japan and its “southern policy”. The Army moved forward with further study beginning at the end of the year. The important question was whether the premise of a division between Great Britain and the U.S. could be met; if it could not, the issue would shift to Japan's national power in the event of war with both countries. The result was the “Outline of the Main Principles for the Southern Advance” (hereafter, the “Outline”), which was finally decided upon about six months later, on June 6, 1941, by the Imperial General Headquarters. In terms of the above two issues, it concluded that the idea of “dividing Great Britain and the U.S.” was no longer applicable. Regarding war against the U.S. and Great Britain, it said, “the Empire's physical national power for the prosecution of a long-term war against the U.S. and Great Britain is uncertain,” and “concern regarding economic power to resist, especially liquid fuel, will arise because of the interruption of imports,” so “there will be no favorable opportunity for the use of military force in the south.” Additionally, the “Outline” stated that the “main rule is to achieve the objectives” of Japan's southern policies “through diplomatic means.” In other words, the principle was to “advance to the south to the extent that war with the U.S. and Great Britain does not break out.” However, in the event that, 1) an embargo of Japan by Great

---

<sup>8</sup> For details of the Army's study of a war against Great Britain, see Haruo Tomatsu, “Nihon rikugun no taiei sensou junbi—Mare- shinkou sakusen keikaku o chuushin ni— (The Japanese Army's preparations for war against Great Britain: centered on operation plans for a Malaysian invasion) in Yoichi Hiram, Ian Gow, and Sumio Hatano ed., *Nichiei kouryuushi 1600–2000*, 3, *gunji* (History of Japan-Great Britain relations, 3, Military affairs), University of Tokyo Press, 2001, pp. 198–208.

Britain, the U.S., Holland, and so on threatened to harm the Empire; or 2) the U.S. - alone or with Great Britain, Holland, China, and so on - threatened Japan's security by attempting to further encircle it, Japan would "use force to defend its own existence." The important point in this decision, however, was that "from considerations of national power, a war plan cannot be formed for a simultaneous war against Great Britain and the U.S."

Following the determination of the "Outline," a major implementation of its policies towards the south was the invasion of French Indochina by the Japanese Army at the end of July. In accordance with the principles of the "Outline," the Japanese side judged this plan for a southern advance to be "short of war."<sup>9</sup> As is well-known, however, the U.S. reaction to Japan's action was extremely strong: a complete oil embargo. The American attitude towards Japan had hardened at the end of June when war broke out between Germany and Soviet Russia, but Japan still had not expected such a strong and antagonistic response to its invasion of French Indochina. The resulting complete oil embargo clearly met the conditions described in the Outline of the Main Principles for the Southern Advance for a war of self-defense. Furthermore, as time passed, Japan's oil reserves would vanish, and it would face the loss of its ability even to engage in such a war. Thus, at the September 6 Imperial Conference, there was no choice but to strengthen resolve regarding war with Great Britain and the U.S., even though it was a war for which, originally, a plan could not even be formed.

### **3. The position of Yamamoto's strategy**

Thus Japan went to war against the U.S., Great Britain, and Holland on December 8, 1941. One person who faced great difficulties as Japan "went to war without a war plan" was the Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Fleet, Isoroku Yamamoto. The Navy would have to take the leading role in the fight against the greatest enemy in the war, the U.S.; success or failure would depend on the operations of the Combined Fleet.

With what kind of operations, then, was the Navy to fight in this war, for which they had been unable to fully develop a war plan? Of course, the Navy's "Annual Operation Plans" for the past few years would form a basis for operational action. Indeed, the FY 1941 operation plan included the plan for "Operations in the event that war was to break out with hypothetical enemies the U.S., Soviet Russia, and Great Britain during operations in China." For operations against the

---

<sup>9</sup> Study Group on the Causes of the Pacific War, Japan Association of International Relations ed., *Taiheiyō sensō e no michi*, 6, *nanpō shinshutsu* (The road to the Pacific War, 6, southern advance), Asahi Shimbun, 1987 edition, pp. 265–266.

U.S. in particular, however, Yamamoto had devised a plan that differed from the FY 1941 operation plan.

At the end of August 1939, Yamamoto moved from his position as Vice Minister of the Navy to Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Fleet. About one year later, the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy was signed. Yamamoto had opposed the treaty as Vice Minister because he feared it would lead to war with the U.S. Yamamoto is said to have begun full-fledged study of potential operations for a war against the U.S. at that time. Because of his career, Yamamoto had his own ideas about operations. In short, while the Navy's core tactical idea was the traditional battleship-oriented theory of large ships with giant guns, Yamamoto favored an aviation-oriented theory. Yamamoto gained confidence in this idea while serving during the 1930s as head of the Engineering Department of the Naval Aviation Headquarters and later of the entire Naval Aviation Headquarters, but he was clearly already aware of the possibilities of aviation from an earlier stage in his career. Yamamoto attended the London Naval Conference of 1930, which further hardened the Japanese navy's opposition to the U.S., as a junior member of the Japanese delegation. At that time, Yamamoto wrote to Vice Chief of the Naval General Staff, Nobumasa Suetsugu, that "with the Imperial Navy forced into relative inferiority, to fight the superior U.S. Navy, we should first use air attacks to deliver heavy blows."<sup>10</sup> In other words, he clearly had the U.S. in mind as the target of his aviation-oriented theory.

In contrast, the Naval General Staff's traditional operation plans maintained the battleship-oriented ideas that had led to the glory of the Combined Fleet's complete victory at the Battle of Tsushima during the Russo-Japanese War. The four-countries operation plan for fighting a war against the U.S., Great Britain, and Holland, found in the "Annual Operation Plans" for FY 1938 and beyond, was also based on fighting the U.S. or the U.S. Navy by first destroying the enemy's Far Eastern Fleet, and then waiting for the main strength of the enemy fleet to come to the Far East, where it would be met and destroyed by Japan's main battleship fleet.<sup>11</sup> As in the Russo-Japanese War, victory in this battle of main fleets was to bring about victory in the war as a whole. However, Japan had a major weakness as far as executing this concept of operations was concerned. The U.S. would be able to freely choose the timing of the decisive fleet engagement.

Throughout the late 1930s, the Japanese and U.S. Navies had engaged in a fierce shipbuilding race after Japan withdrew from the naval arms control regime. The result was that during the first half of the 1940s, the naval balance between Japan and the U.S. was tilting

---

<sup>10</sup> Eiichi Sorimachi, *Ningen Yamamoto Isoroku—gensui no shougai* (Human Yamamoto Isoroku: An Admiral's life), Kowado, 1964 edition, p. 304.

<sup>11</sup> For each year's Navy Annual Operation Plan, see Military History Department, National Institute of Defense Studies ed., *Shiryoushū kaigun nendo sakusen keikaku* (Sourcebook: Navy Annual Operation Plans), Asagumo Shimbunsha, 1986.



increasingly towards absolute superiority for the U.S. because of its enormous national power. Thus, the longer the U.S. put off the decisive fleet engagement, the less chance there was of Japanese victory. The time limit, that is, the period during which Japan had a chance of winning, was already pressing by 1941.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, even if the U.S. were to seek a decisive fleet engagement soon after the war began, it would still be able to freely choose the timing and location of the battle. Japan believed it needed to secure southern resource areas during the first stage of the war in order to prosecute it. If the U.S. main fleet were to attack while the Combined Fleet was spread across a broad area reaching the South Pacific, Japan would have found it hard to fight back. This was because the U.S. fleet was not the Combined Fleet's only enemy.

The first blow of the war, the surprise attack on the main U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, by Yamamoto's carrier task force, can be seen as having been a suitable means of dealing with these problems. Of course, conceiving of this tactic was characteristic of Yamamoto, who had turned his attention to air power all through the 1930s. However, the Naval General Staff, which had created the "Annual Operation Plans" ever since the first "National Defense Policy" was set, strongly opposed it. One reason was that this Hawaiian strategy was a very risky gamble, but primarily it was because the General Staff was unable to free itself from its conventional battleship-oriented theory of decisive fleet engagements. In the end, the Navy's high command, the Naval General Staff, accepted the Hawaiian plan for the Combined Fleet in September or October 1941. This was only shortly before the Navy's final plan, the "Imperial Navy Operation Plan", was approved by Emperor *Hirohito* on November 5.

## Conclusion

Yamamoto's Hawaiian operation was positioned as an important operation in Japan's only plan for the war, the "Draft Proposal". The grand design of this battle was to allow Japan to secure the resource areas it needed to prosecute the war, enabling it to be self-sufficient over the long term. At that initial stage, the Hawaiian operation was indeed intended to remove the U.S. fleet as the greatest threat to Japan's securing of the southern resource areas.<sup>13</sup> In part because of the great success of the attack on Hawaii, the Japanese Army was indeed able to secure the resource areas within several months after the start of the war. However, inconsistencies between the "Draft

<sup>12</sup> For the relationship between the Japanese Navy's withdrawal from arms control and the path to war, see Kiyoshi Aizawa, *Kaigun no sentaku—saikou shinjuwan e no michi—* (The Navy's choice: rethinking the road to Pearl harbor), Chuokoron-Shinsha, 2002, pp. 15–45.

<sup>13</sup> Ikuhiko Hata, "Admiral Yamamoto's Surprise Attack and the Japanese Navy's War Strategy," Saki Dockrill, ed., *From Pearl Harbor to Hiroshima: The Second World War in Asia and the Pacific, 1941-45*, London: Macmillan, 1994, pp. 64-66.

Proposal” and Yamamoto's strategy later became apparent. After the southern resource areas were secured, the “Draft Proposal” called for the establishment of a self-sufficient stance for a long-term war. In other words, it shifted to a defensive strategy. Yamamoto's Combined Fleet headquarters, however, pushed for an aggressive strategy with continued expansion of the front. There was concern over the U.S. carrier fleet, which had not been hit at Pearl Harbor, and that threat was indeed realized in the Doolittle Raid on Tokyo. Furthermore, in light of the U.S.'s enormous naval shipbuilding capacity, there may have been a sense of urgency about continually needing to strike out at the enemy. For these reasons, Yamamoto strongly pushed to carry out the Midway operation in early June 1942.

Of course, the Naval General Staff again strongly opposed this Midway strategy of expanding the front. In this case, reason was on the Naval General Staff's side, in terms of the overall war plan in the “Draft proposal” as well. However, riding on its success at Pearl Harbor, Yamamoto's Combined Fleet headquarters was able to once again to brush aside all objections. Yet, the result, of course, was that four of the aircraft carriers responsible for Japan's succession of victories were lost in a single battle. The loss of this battle was a turning point for the Pacific War itself.

Finally, while this is only speculation, the author would like to consider the question of whether, if Japan had not lost at Midway, Japan could have won the war if the Combined Fleet had continued its method of warfare of seeking a series of decisive battles. As discussed above, when Japan went to war with Great Britain, the U.S., and Holland, no one in Japan had been able to draw up a “plan for victory.” What about Yamamoto, then?

There is a hint of an answer in a letter that Yamamoto wrote to Minister of the Navy Koshiro Oikawa in early 1941, strongly urging implementation of the Hawaiian operation. In his written statement of opinion called “Opinion on armaments,”<sup>14</sup> Yamamoto said the following regarding beginning a Japan-U.S. war.

“In a war between Japan and the U.S., the first essential matter to be carried out is to furiously attack and destroy the enemy fleet at the beginning of the war. This can cause the U.S. Navy and the American people to lose their morale to such an extent they will never get it back...We must strive extremely hard to make the best of a war between Japan and the U.S....We thus need to be determined to win or lose the war on the first day...”

---

<sup>14</sup> War History Office, National Defense College, *Senshi susho hawaii sakusen* (Military history series: Hawaii strategy), Asagumo Shimbunsha, 1967, pp. 82–85.

Even though the surprise attack on Hawaii on the first day of the war was so successful, Japan never even caught a glimpse of the possibility of winning the war. In the end, even Yamamoto was unable to draw up a “plan for victory.”