

Briefing Memorandum
What Should We Call “That War?”

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Introduction

This year is the seventieth anniversary of the outbreak of war between Japan and the United States. However, the issue with what we should call the war after the attack on Pearl Harbor that took place on December 8, 1941, still remains to be solved. More specifically, reflecting the disunity over the purposes of the war when it began, the post-war occupation policy by the United States, and the subsequent effects of politicization of understanding of modern history focusing on wars within Japan, the various terms such as “Pacific War,” “Greater East Asia War,” “15-Year War,” and “Asia-Pacific War” have been used to refer to the Japanese wars in the Showa period, and there have been vibrant discussions over whether each of those terms is acceptable or not, all of which still remain outstanding. Of course, although the same war may often be called differently depending on the nation, there are few cases in which the same war is called differently within in a single country.

The name of “World War II” is internationally prevailing, but worthless. When we talk about Japanese wars, it cannot be denied that some may persistently claim to “sensuously” have a sense of strangeness, in addition to the timing and regional issues.

The current governmental views of the name of wars have been made clear in the Written Answers (dated December 8, 2006, and February 6, 2005) to the two Questionnaires submitted by the House of Representatives Member Muneo Suzuki (then affiliated with no party). The answer of the government is that there has been no statutory definition of and ground for the “Greater East Asia War” and “Pacific War” since the end of World War II.

As a result, in the public scenes such as the “words” of the Japanese Emperor and the addresses and talks of the Prime Minister, the ambiguous wordings including the “last world war,” “past war,” and “that war” have been used. The Nihon Shinbun Kyoukai (The Japan Newspaper Publishers & Editors Association) has never discussed the name of wars, although it has conducted exchanges of views and opinions as to the terminology.

It would be a good idea to define a new name, taking into consideration hot debates on the existing terms. Let me take the August 13, 2006, article of *The Yomiuri Shimbun* in its serial column entitled “Inspection: War Responsibility” as an example. In concluding that serial column, they noted that none of the terms ever used is everlasting, and suggested that the “series of wars from the Manchurian Incident to the Sino-Japanese war and the U.S.-Japanese war” be called the “Showa Wars.” However, this suggestion did not diffuse. Thus, I would have to say that it is extremely

difficult to suggest and diffuse a new name. Therefore, the existing names should be compared and analyzed.

In general, although the term “Pacific War” is now widely prevalent in newspapers, magazines, school textbooks, and other media, I note that there have been notable changes in the use of name of wars among the academic societies and intellectuals. Those changes are the rise of the “Asia-Pacific War” and “revival” of the “Greater East Asia War,” and the resulting declination of the “Pacific War.” This might be because there are after all the certain fatal problems in the term “Pacific War,” if we consider the reality of the war, especially from the standpoint of the regions affected.

1. “Asia-Pacific War”

The term “Asia-Pacific War” has become prevalent after Junichiro Kisaka officially suggested it in August 1985. Kisaka mentions that he avoided the use of the names of the “Pacific War” and the “Greater East Asia War,” because the former name was given by the United States, there being a threat to underestimate the gravity of the Chinese front, while the latter would justify the Japanese invasion, and further that he “decided to call that war the ‘Asia-Pacific War’ in order to indicate that it was the war that was fought as part of World War II in East Asia and Southeast Asia, as well as on the Pacific Ocean, and reflect on the reckless war of invasion caused by Japan. More specifically, the term “Asia-Pacific War” was created out of fear that the term “Pacific War” might abstract the meaning of a “war of invasion” in Asia. In recent years, especially “liberal” intellectuals have often changed the term from the “Pacific War” and “15-Year War” to the “Asia-Pacific War.”

However, there are many problems with the term “Asia-Pacific War.” The primary problem is how it should be defined, namely the fluctuations of the subject period or description. Kisaka, who first suggested it, “referred to the three wars of the northeastern China war (author’s note: Manchurian Incident), the Sino-Japanese war and the Asia-Pacific War collectively as the 15-Year War,” and defined the third phase of the “15-Year War” (i.e., after the attack on Pearl Harbor) as the “Asia-Pacific War.” Nevertheless, those who supported that term concurrently supported the term “15-Year War,” which instead caused confusion regarding the relevancy of both the terms. As a result, some often track back the covered period to after the Sino-Japanese war, and before the Manchurian Incident.

The “Asia-Pacific War” is sometimes described as the “Asia Pacific War” without a hyphen [bullet in Japanese], which is more prevailing recently. The use of the “Asia Pacific War” without a hyphen reflects the emphasis on the inseparable, closely connected, and undivided “continuity” of the fights in Asia and the fights with the United States on the Pacific Ocean, not the number of characters or preference.

The second problem is its ideological nature, as discussed earlier. The term “Asia-Pacific War” implies the sense of history that stresses the “continuity (consistency)” of Japanese policies in Asia

and Pacific regions, as well as “invasion.” To such view, there are oppositions similar to those made to the “15-Year War.” For example, there would be oppositions to the views that the war with the United States was the inevitable consequence of the Sino-Japanese war, and further that it was the “war of invasion.”

The third problem is the ambiguous concept of “Asia.” For example, Natsuki Ikezawa, a novelist, recently said, “It seems to be ordinary to call it the Asia-Pacific War in today’s Japan. However, is the reference to Asia slightly too large? Afghanistan and Turkey were not the war theater” (“Difficulty with What We Should Call It: Name of Land and Name of War”; *The Asahi Shimbun*, August 3, 2010, evening edition). He criticized the use of the term “Asia” as being inappropriate, because Japan fought mainly in East Asia and Southeast Asia.

Given the many problems described above, the liberal intellectuals also pointed out that the use of the “Asia-Pacific War” is immature and should be avoided.

2. “Greater East Asia War”

On the other hand, the term “Greater East Asia War” has become diffused especially among those who “affirmed the Greater East Asia War,” as symbolized by Fusao Hayashi, a novelist, although they made a wide variety of arguments. However, some often use the term “Greater East Asia War” from the different position, especially the position denying those who affirmed the “Greater East Asia War,” including, for example, Shunpei Ueyama, a philosopher; and more recently, Seisaburo Shinobu, a historian; Kennichi Matsumoto and Hyoe Murakami, both critics; and Ken’ichi Goto, a Southeast Asian researcher. Thus, their ideological positions are not necessarily exactly in accord with what they call those wars.

There are so many grounds for such use of the term “Greater East Asia War” by those who do not affirm it. Let me introduce the principle ones: First, the “Greater East Asia War” was the Japanese official term that went through the “legitimate” process of the decision of the cabinet (Imperial General Headquarters-Government Liaison Conference). Furthermore, the prohibition of the use of the term “Greater East Asia War” by GHQ’s “*Shinto Directive*” was superseded by the Act on Repeal of the Imperial Ordinance on Orders Issued Incidental to Acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration (Act No.81) promulgated on April 11, 1952, after Japan gained independence by the Treaty of Peace. Some view that the term Sino-Japanese War should also be used on the basis of similar grounds.

Second, some assert that the term “Greater East Asia War” has no ideological implication, such as the construction of new order in Greater East Asia, and is merely a geographical designation that better reflects the reality of the war geographically.

When the war began, the Cabinet Intelligence Bureau released its statement on the same day as the date on which the name of war was decided at the Cabinet meeting that the “name of the Greater

East Asia War meant that it was the war of which purpose was to construct the new order in the Greater East Asia, and was not intended to limit the war theater only to the Greater East Asia.” In response to the statement of the Cabinet Intelligence Bureau, Shiro Hara, the Army Major who was the staff of the Imperial Headquarters wrote that he “could only say the Cabinet Intelligence Bureau had run mad.” Behind that, there were confusions about the purpose of the war. More specifically, was the purpose of the war really to secure self-existence and self-defense? Was the “Greater East Asia War” the geographical designation like the “Pacific War” then proposed by the Naval Force? Or was the purpose of the war to construct the new order in Greater East Asia? Anyway, there is no denying that the disunity over the purposes of the war substantially affected the subsequent discussions about the name of wars focusing on the acceptability of the term “Greater East Asia War.”

The third ground for the use of the term “Greater East Asia War” is the assertion that for better or worse, it is “substantial” or “contemporaneous.” Fourth, this term is used ambiguously to mean “invasion” and “liberation.” This position recognizes the certain level of significance that affected the independence of Indonesia and India. On the other hand, there are some Southeast Asian researchers who use the term “Greater East Asia War” based on the awareness of the issue that the use of the term “Pacific War” would naturally abstract the meaning of the wars in Southeast Asia.

On the other hand, it is interesting that U.S. and European researchers have little sense of resistance to the use of the term “Greater East Asia War.” For example, an American historian John Stephan, from a regional point of view, pointed out that as “World War II” refers to too broad and the “Pacific War” is too narrow, “the term ‘Greater East Asia War’, though somewhat awkward, remains the most accurate designation for a struggle that Japan’s perspective encompassed the Indian and Pacific Oceans, as well as in the East Asia and Southeast Asia” (*Hawaii under the rising sun Japan’s plans for conquest after Pearl Harbor*, translation supervised by Takashi Takebayashi, Kobunsha, 1984).

Conclusion

Those who criticize the use of the term “Greater East Asia War” question the “falsified” thoughts to glorify and affirm the war implied by that term. If, however, the term “Greater East Asia War” stemmed from the simple geographical name, not the political purpose of “constructing new order in the Greater East Asia,” it would be a non-ideological term. Just as the “Pacific War” suggested by the Naval Force before the war began finally became the “Greater East Asia War” on the basis of geographical factors, the “Pacific War” has now been amended to the “Asia-Pacific War.” Ironically, this would reversely indicate that the term “Greater East Asia War” is correct.

Even the researcher who criticizes those who are in affirmation of the Greater East Asia War discusses that if the term “Greater East Asia War” is geographically understood as the “war fought in

the broader East Asia,” it would be hardly different from the intent of suggesting the use of the term “Asia-Pacific War,” and further that “if you deem the ‘Greater East Asia’ to be the simple war theater, there may no longer be the grounds for criticism and controversies” (Makio Okabe, “Asia Pacific War,” *Post-War Japan: Occupation and Post-War Revolutions I*, Iwanami Shoten, 1995).

For these reasons, there are many more intellectuals who use the term “Greater East Asia War” from the position that is different from those who affirm it, including, for example, Aiko Kurasawa, a Southeast Asian researcher; Soichiro Tahara and Hiroshi Hasegawa, both journalists; and Masataka Matsuura, a Japanese diplomatic history researcher (Messrs. Goto and Matsuura, and Ms. Kurasawa, all described above add the left and right corner brackets to discriminate themselves from those who affirm it). I wonder if the term “Greater East Asia War” has revived as the historic terminology, apart from the thoughts affirming that war itself.

References:

- Junichiro Kisaka, “Name and Character of the Asia-Pacific War,” *Ryukoku Hogaku*” Vol.24, No.4 (March 1993)
- Junichiro Shoji, “A Study on Issues with the Name of Wars in Japan,” *NIDS Journal of Defense and Security*, Vol.13, No.3 (March 2011)

The purpose of this paper is to respond to reader interest in security issues while promoting better understanding of NIDS. A "briefing," of course, is a background explanation. Our hope is that this paper will help readers to better understand the complex security issues. Note that the views expressed in this paper do not represent the official opinion of NIDS.

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