THE EVOLUTION OF THE STRATEGIC DOCTRINE
OF THE
IMPERIAL JAPANESE NAVY, 1921-1941

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)
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May 1978

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PREFACE

Every year the reading public is bombarded with a new salvo of books dealing with the World War II era. These books are usually of one of two types: the "battle book", which rehashes the Battle of Stalingrad, Guadalcanal, or whatever; and the "technical manual", which is crammed with such juicy details as the airspeed of a Brewster Buffalo or the steering-gear protection of Italian battleships. But one usually will search among these volumes of military trivia in vain for detailed analyses of strategic concepts. Today's explosion of "war" literature treats such dreary subjects in a cursory fashion at best--strategy just doesn't sell.

This attitude is unfortunate. There will probably never be another Battle of Guadalcanal, and hopefully never another Brewster Buffalo; but the quest for national security which is expressed in battles and weapons systems will always remain a concern for all nations. Thus Americans in 1973 can learn more from a study of the Japanese Navy's strategic doctrines than from an account of the breakfast pilot Joe Blow ate on the morning of the day he sank a Japanese carrier.

For if we wisely utilize history, we may all continue to read about old wars instead of participating in new ones.
ABSTRACT

By 1921, the Imperial Japanese Navy had come to view the United States of America as its "hypothetical enemy" for the purposes of strategic planning. This perception was based on the appreciation that America had the power, geographic position, and resolve to thwart the Imperial Navy's Southward Advance Policy. The Washington Treaty of 1922, which restricted the size of the Japanese fleet and gave the U.S. fleet a comfortable margin of superiority, served to increase the problems facing Navy strategists.

Drawing on its experiences in the Russo-Japanese War, the Imperial Navy worked out an "offensive-defensive" strategy for use in a war with America which called for attrition tactics against the U.S. fleet until it was so reduced in size that it could be defeated by the qualitatively superior Japanese battle fleet. However, this doctrine was faulty in that it surrendered the initiative to the enemy, did not contemplate the possibility of a war against more than one nation, and was little more than an overblown tactical plan.

When Japan found herself faced with the probability of a two-front war in 1941, Commander-in-Chief Combined Fleet Admiral Yamamoto proposed to revolutionize the Navy's
traditional strategic doctrine by seizing the initiative at the very start of hostilities by means of a surprise carrier air strike against the American fleet at Pearl Harbor. By the time the U.S. Navy could be rebuilt, Japan would have prepared an impregnable defensive perimeter along the fringes of her empire which might convince America of the desirability of a negotiated peace.

Although this strategy was not successful in practice—in part because the Imperial Navy became overconfident after the outbreak of war—Yamamoto's "new look" in strategic doctrine was a true strategy which acknowledged the close relationship between political, economic, and military factors. Had the Japanese Navy adopted such a realistic attitude in its planning at a much earlier date, the history of the Pacific War might read very differently.
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CHAPTER ONE: THE NAVY'S ROLE IN GRAND STRATEGY

By 1921, the Imperial Japanese Navy was at the peak of its power. Although only half a century old, it had emerged victorious from three major wars and had established itself as a force to be reckoned with in international affairs. The Washington Naval Conference formally acknowledged Japan's position as the third greatest naval power, after America and Britain. But the radically altered international balance of power which emerged after the First World War was to present the ascendant Imperial Navy with its greatest strategic problems since the days before the Russo-Japanese War. While this paper is mainly concerned with the military strategy evolved as a response to these problems, such a study cannot be made without first examining the Navy's role in planning "grand strategy"—which involves the determination of national goals, the assessment of national capabilities—military, economic, political, and diplomatic—which can be employed to attain those goals, and the consideration of forces, internal and external, which may oppose national goals.

The Navy's Influence on National Goals

The primary aim of any military force is, of course, to provide for national security. But the definition of
"security" will vary greatly from country to country. In the case of Japan, national security was first defined as the protection of the nation itself against being "swallowed up" by the Western powers in the way China had been. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, Japan industrialized herself and built up a modern army and navy in order to avoid becoming another China. With the conclusion of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902 and the great victories over Russia in 1905, it appeared that this first goal had been achieved.

But Japan's security was still far from assured. By the 1920s, the Imperial Navy had become very concerned about insuring a stable supply of raw materials for Japan's growing industries which supported her military machine. Japan was very poor in natural resources, particularly in the one resource which a modern fleet could not do without—oil. Japan needed to import 90 percent of her peacetime oil requirements.\(^1\) The Imperial Navy observed that the lands to the south of Japan, including Malaya, Indochina, and the Dutch East Indies—the so-called "South Seas Area"—were richly supplied with the raw materials Japan needed, especially oil. This observation was the basis of the "Southward Advance Policy" which had become the major policy of the Navy by 1921.\(^2\) This policy, which was never expressed in a truly concrete fashion, called for the establishment of the South Seas Area as a secure source of raw materials for Japan. It must be emphasized that economic dominance of this region was not
to be achieved only by military conquest. Indeed, the Navy preferred that this policy be carried out by political and diplomatic means, with the employment of force as a last resort. Unfortunately, the peculiar structure of the Japanese Government made the co-ordination of any grand strategy very difficult, if not impossible.

The Navy's Role in Japanese Politics

The planning of grand strategy requires the complete cooperation of a nation's government, military, and business structures. In this respect Japan was cursed with a miserable anachronism from the days of the Meiji Restoration—the "Prerogative of the Supreme Command". Under the 1889 Constitution, the chiefs of the Imperial Army and Navy General Staffs were responsible to the Emperor alone. Neither the Cabinet nor the Diet had any effective control over the services: the Emperor himself, while traditionally the source of all political authority in Japan, also by tradition had little power of his own. Therefore, an arrangement intended to keep the services free of political meddling resulted in making them accountable to no one! This absurd situation was relatively unimportant back in the days of the Restoration, for the control of the services and civilian government alike was in the hands of the extra-constitutional group of "elder statesmen" (genro) who had guided Japan on its road to modernization. But the genro had almost all died off by the 1920s, leaving no one to coordinate the constitutionally autonomous institutions of Army, Navy,
and civilian government.

The effect of this national schizophrenia on strategic planning is not difficult to imagine. Like the mythical chimera, Japan had three heads, but they were frequently in conflict with one another. Army and Navy planned separate strategies against different hypothetical enemies, while struggling fiercely against each other for larger military budgets. Politicians knew little about military affairs and army leaders were often ignorant of economic and diplomatic matters, yet the Army frequently meddled in political affairs to "protect" the nation from "corrupt" politicians who, in fact, were often tools of big business. As a former Imperial Army officer commented, "I would venture to say that the Japanese government organization was the poorest in the world." And a former Navy officer concluded that "there was virtually nobody qualified to establish over-all state policy in Japan." This institutional defect meant that the Navy had to virtually "go it alone" in planning a national defense policy which might or might not be supported by Cabinet or Army.

But the Japanese government was chaotic not only in a horizontal (Army, Navy, and Cabinet) but also in a vertical sense. A unique feature of the Japanese military system was the tradition of gekokujo--"the overthrowing of seniors by juniors".

"Middle-rank" officers (chukun shoko) in both the Army and Navy exercised an influence on their superior
officers all out of proportion to their rank. By threats and entreaties, it was they who often shaped military policy. The occupation of Manchuria in 1931, an act unauthorized by the Army General Staff in Tokyo, is an example of gekokujo at its best (or worst). The Army Staff, rather than reprimanding the "middle-rankers" of the Kwantung Army who engineered the conquest, actually stood up for them in the face of negative world opinion! Although gekokujo was never so pronounced in the Navy as it was in the Army, chukense shoko influence on naval planning did exist. In general, the chukense shoko were more belligerent than their superiors, more inclined to secure the "Southern Area" by conquest, and less mindful of Japan's inferior military potential in comparison with the United States. 6 These attitudes may reflect the fact that many chukense shoko were representative of the post-Tsushima generations which were spoon-fed tales of Japan's military invincibility. Older officers, however, recalled that the Sino and Russo-Japanese Wars were not "overwhelming Japanese triumphs" but had been only barely won through political as well as military efforts.

When all those political factors are taken into account, the "conspiracy theories" of Japanese aggression proposed by writers such as David Bergamini seem ludicrous. Japanese national defense policy could have been better formulated by the Keystone Cops than by the Bedlam which historians refer to as "the Japanese Government."
Naval Concept of the "Potential" and "Inevitable" Enemy

Nowhere is the lack of interservice cohesion in grand strategic planning more manifest than in the Army and Navy determination of "hypothetical enemies" for the purposes of drawing up contingency plans. Up until the time of World War I, Russia had been regarded by both services as the major potential enemy of Japan, although from 1907 on the Navy considered the U.S. as the second most important hypothetical foe. In 1918, however, Russia was weakened by the Revolution, and both services agreed that the U.S. was now potential enemy number one. However, when Soviet military power began to rise once again, the Army designated the U.S.S.R. as the most important potential enemy, an estimation with which the Navy did not agree. Therefore, throughout the '20s and '30s, there existed a dual-standard preparedness policy--the Army prepared against an attack from the U.S.S.R., while the Navy considered strategy for a conflict with America. This two-headed policy meant that the services fought viciously over their shares of the national budget, for the preparedness policies were not complementary, but contradictory.

There are several ways to explain why the Navy designated the U.S. as its potential enemy. In an ideological sense, it may be said that Japanese hostility toward America can be traced back to Commodore Perry's "opening" of Japan in 1853, an act which was resented by most Japanese more deeply than many American writers realize, even today.
Numerous American insults to Japanese pride, such as the San Francisco School Board segregation order of 1906, the 1913 California land ownership law, and the National Origins (immigration) Act of 1924, made many Japanese aware of the "yellow peril" sentiments prevalent in the U.S. at the time.

But there were also sound military reasons for the Imperial Navy's selection of America. First, it was natural for Naval planners to select the most powerful navy in existence as a "yardstick" for determining the size of Japanese naval expansion. A more important consideration, however, was the realization that America seemed determined to project its political and possibly military influence into areas marked by the Southward Advance Policy as essential to Japan's security. American annexation of Hawaii, Guam, and especially the Philippines was cause for great alarm to the Imperial Navy; for if the Army considered Korea to be "a dagger pointing at the heart of Japan", the Navy saw the Philippines as a bone in the throat of the Southward Advance Policy. If the Philippines were in the hands of a hostile power, Japan's lines of communication to the South Seas Area would be cut. America's Open Door policy for China and her attitude of maddening morality against any form of Japanese political or military expansion abroad seemed to place her in fundamental opposition to Japanese interests in Asia. The concentration of the U.S. Navy in the Pacific following World War I was also a matter of great concern to the Imperial Navy.
While it cannot be denied that the Navy was correct in its policy of designating the U.S. as a hypothetical enemy, there were two major flaws in its assessment. First, the Navy regarded the U.S. not only as the number one potential enemy, but also as the only potential enemy. It seems incredible, but Navy strategic planning throughout the '20s and '30s provided only for a possible war with America while completely ignoring the possibility of a conflict with Great Britain, the Netherlands, or any combination of the three powers. When one considers the fact that the Netherlands and Great Britain controlled most of the territory in the South Seas Area itself, their exclusion from all contingency planning is virtually incomprehensible. Yet, a thorough plan for simultaneous naval operations against all three powers was not drawn up until August 1941--just four months before the Pacific War.

A second and even more dangerous aspect of the potential enemy policy was that, as U.S.-Japanese relations continued to deteriorate throughout the '30s, the Navy gradually came to view the "hypothetical" enemy as a "probable" and ultimately an "inevitable" enemy. This frame of mind may have been a decisive factor in Japan's decision for war in 1941. While Navy leaders at that time felt the chances of success in a war against America were slim, many believed that war with America would come sooner or later, so why not attack before the Navy's oil supply was exhausted as a result of the Allied embargo? Officers
like Admiral Yamamoto who argued that Japan should avoid war with America at almost all costs were regarded as "appeasers" by those in the Navy who thought that the inevitable war should be fought while Japan still had some chance of victory. Some scholars have argued that this attitude of fatalism was not only the result of the constant political friction between the U.S. and Japan, but also of the Navy's obsession with the idea of a "hypothetical enemy".11
CHAPTER TWO: THE NAVY’S SPECIFIC MILITARY STRATEGY, 1921-1940

Once the Imperial Japanese Navy had formulated its grand strategy, it became necessary to develop a specific military strategy to implement the goals of grand strategy. But before this strategic doctrine can be explained in detail, mention must first be made of a very important political development of the '20s and '30s which had a profound effect on the strategic, tactical, and technical thinking of all major navies of the period: the naval limitations treaties which began in 1922.

The Naval Limitations Background

The complex international political maneuvering which underlies the history of voluntary naval limitations is a fascinating subject all by itself, but only the military implications of the treaties will be discussed here. The Washington Treaty of 1922 stipulated that the numbers of capital ships (battleships and battle cruisers) possessed by the U.S., Britain, and Japan be maintained in a numerical ratio of 5 to 5 to 3, respectively. No capital ship could exceed 35,000 tons in displacement or mount guns of greater than 16-inch caliber. A similar numerical ratio was imposed on aircraft carriers, which were still experimental
weapons at the time. In addition, no capital ships could be built or replaced until 1930, capital ships being defined as vessels of greater than 10,000 tons displacement and mounting guns of larger than 8-inch caliber. No limitations in quality or quantity were placed on ships below this size. Finally, a "freeze" was put on the fortification and development of all naval bases, potential or existing, in the Pacific, with the exceptions of Singapore, Hawaii, and Japan proper.

This Treaty caused great consternation among conservative naval circles in Japan. Naval experts at that time generally agreed that in naval warfare an offensive fleet needed to be 50 percent stronger than a defensive one. Many Japanese Navy planners argued that if the Treaty ratio were 10-10-7, the U.S. would have a 43 percent margin of superiority—not quite enough to effectively threaten Japanese security. But the 5-5-3 ratio gave America a whopping 67 percent superiority, which meant that Japan would not enjoy the "freedom from aggression" which was the stated principle of the Treaty. Nonetheless, Japan was forced to sign the Treaty for compelling economic and political reasons.

In an attempt to offset the dangers inherent in the Treaty, the Imperial Navy strove to expand its light naval forces which were not covered by the agreement. The Navy gave particular attention to the development of a force of heavy cruisers (10,000 tons, 8-inch guns) which were
the finest ships of their type in the world. But at the London Conference of 1930, Japan was forced to agree to limitations on her light naval forces as well. A 10-10-7 quantitative ratio was agreed to for light cruisers and destroyers; but Japan had to accept a 62 percent ratio in heavy cruisers with respect to the U.S. and Britain, which meant that she was now below the "danger level" in this category as well as in the capital ship and aircraft carrier categories. Japan was also given parity in submarines with America; which, as we shall see, was not acceptable for her concept of defensive operations. The conference also extended the capital ship "holiday" for another six years.

Until 1934, the American 67 percent margin of superiority was only a paper threat to Japan, since she had built up to Treaty levels while the U.S. showed little inclination to build up to full authorized strength. In that year, however, the U.S. approved the Vinson naval expansion program, which if carried out would give America the dreaded superiority in carriers and heavy cruisers, as well as in battleships, needed to conduct aggressive war against Japan.2

The Imperial Navy tried once again to press for a more equitable ratio. Its demands were rejected. Therefore, Japan withdrew from all naval limitations at the end of 1936. Although America and Britain agreed in the same year to abandon quantitative naval limitations, the Imperial Navy hoped that by abandoning all limitations it could gain
a qualitative advantage in warship types which might to some extent offset the larger numbers of U.S. warships. For example, the Yamato-class battleships which the Navy began constructing in 1937 were of 64,000 tons and mounted 18.1-inch guns, and it was hoped that a few of these monsters could outfight a larger number of "treaty battleships" of 35,000 tons and mounting 16-inch guns.

The Basic Plan—the "Decisive Battle" and Its Background

After the Washington Treaty of 1922 was signed, the Imperial Navy found itself with a difficult problem: how could the Southward Advance Policy, or even the defense of the homeland itself, be accomplished in the face of opposition from a superior fleet?

The Japanese Navy was not a stranger to the role of underdog. In the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, it had been faced with the task of safeguarding the lines of sea communication to Korea against the threat of a superior Russian Navy. After the Russian Pacific Fleet at Port Arthur had been destroyed, Admiral Rozhdestvenski arrived in the Pacific with the powerful, if somewhat shabby, Baltic Fleet. The tale of how Japan's Admiral Togo and his Combined Fleet (renzo kantai) annihilated the Russian force in the Straits of Tsushima is known throughout the world, but very few people know that this great victory was made possible by the detailed planning of one of the greatest geniuses in Japanese naval history—Akiyama Saneyuki.
Akiyama, then staff operations officer to Admiral Togo, drafted a complex operational plan before the battle which called for the attrition of the approaching Russian fleet by night torpedo-boat attacks, followed by daylight engagement with the main Japanese battle line. Night torpedo attacks would again follow this "decisive battle" in order to mop up enemy remnants. Although this plan, developed both from modern naval tactics and the maritime concepts of medieval Japan, was not carried out in all its particulars, Japan's great victory at Tsushima seemed to demonstrate the validity of its features.3

After the war, Akiyama's ideas on fleet organization and principles of naval engagement were included in the Japanese Navy's Regulations of Naval Warfare (kaisen yomurei), which remained the basic reference for Japanese tactical doctrine until 1940. It was only natural, then, that Akiyama should play an important role in planning a strategic doctrine for the possibility of war with the United States, a concern which dominated Navy planning by World War I.

Akiyama, like most naval officers of his era, was greatly influenced by the writings of Alfred Thayer Mahan, the famous American strategist. Akiyama accepted, to an extent, Mahan's proposition that the ultimate objective of naval strategy was to gain "command of the sea" by annihilating the enemy's fleet. But he also felt that confronting the main force of the enemy's fleet in a "decisive battle" should be avoided until the enemy's forces had been reduced
and disorganized by attrition tactics, a traditional Chinese
and Japanese military doctrine which can also be seen in
Mao Tse-Tung's operations against the Japanese and National-ists in China.4 Essentially, Akiyama used the tactical
concepts he had developed during the Russo-Japanese War as
a model for a strategic doctrine for a U.S.-Japanese war,
including an emphasis on attrition tactics and the idea of
wisting for an enemy fleet to come to you rather than seeking it out yourself.

Akiyama died in 1918, before the era of naval limita-
tions. But his colleagues continued to refine and update
his ideas, until by the 1930s a definitive strategic doctrine
had been evolved for use in a war with the "potential enemy",
the so-called "offensive-defensive" strategy which seemed to
offer the best hope of achieving command of the sea with an
inferior fleet. As one officer notes, "so firmly, indeed,
was this concept established and maintained that it almost
petrified the strategic thinking of the naval service."5

Naval planners assumed that, in the event of war,
the U.S. Pacific Fleet would plan to fight its way across
the Pacific, seizing bases in the Japanese-controlled
Marshall and Caroline islands along the way, in order to
relieve the Philippines. Once it was established in the
great naval base at Manila, the Pacific Fleet could blockade
Japan's commerce and possibly even invade Japan itself.
This essentially was U.S. naval doctrine until the eve of
the Pacific War.6
The Imperial Navy proposed to meet this challenge with a two-stage plan. First, the American fleet would be whittled-down in size by constant submarine attacks and air raids mounted from seaplane tenders or land bases in the Marshalls and Carolines, until it no longer enjoyed its comfortable 67 percent margin of superiority. Next, when this emasculated fleet arrived in the Philippine Sea, it would be attacked by the main force of the Combined Fleet and would be annihilated in a "decisive battle", a Pacific Trafalgar. This plan obviously aimed to repeat the brilliant tactics of Tsushima on a strategic scale. Although the overall concept was defensive in nature, the Combined Fleet was expected to be on the offensive against the weakened U.S. fleet when the decisive battle began.

Weapons Systems for the "Decisive Battle" Strategy

A strategic doctrine, however well conceived, can be no better than the weapons systems designed to implement it. What systems did the Imperial Navy devise for its "offensive-defensive" strategy?

Aircraft and submarines were entrusted with the task of whittling-down the American fleet in its march across the Pacific. Therefore, naval aircraft were designed with emphasis on long-range capabilities and speed. The Type 96 twin-engined attack bomber, which entered service in 1936, is an excellent example of this trend. So great was its range that it astonished the world by its ability to fly
strategic bombing missions against China from Japanese home island bases regardless of weather—and this in 1937! Unfortunately, this long-range capability was often achieved only at the expense of armor and fuel-tank protection.

Submarines, the other half of this attrition diad, were also constructed with an eye toward high surface speed and long-range capabilities. These qualities were intended to give the vessels the ability to make repeated attacks on the Pacific Fleet, using their surface speed of 23 knots (superior to that of most U.S. battleships built before 1941) to keep pulling ahead of the fleet at night so as to be in position for another attack at dawn.

For the decisive battle itself, the Navy constructed surface warships which emphasized armament and speed characteristics. Since the naval limitations treaties put Japan in an inferior quantitative position with regard to warships, the Navy was determined to give its ships qualitative superiority over those of the U.S., at least in the area of armament. This trend was naturally accelerated after the treaties were renounced in 1936.

For example, the Fubuki-class destroyers (laid down before the London Naval Treaty went into force) were equipped with nine torpedo tubes and six 5-inch guns in enclosed turrets—an arrangement not found in American destroyers until 1944! Destroyers were intended to play an important role in reducing the U.S. fleet by night torpedo attacks just before the decisive battle, and they were very well
equipped for this task when in 1938 the fantastic Type 93 "long lance" torpedo was introduced into the Combined Fleet. This oxygen-propelled torpedo was so greatly superior to the torpedoes of other navies in the characteristics of offensive power, range, and speed that enemy ships downed by them early in the war literally never knew what hit them.

But Navy planners felt that in spite of their formidable weapons for attritioning the Pacific Fleet, the decisive battle would be decided by battleship lines smashing away at each other in time-honored fashion. Therefore, the Imperial Navy authorized between 1937 and 1942 the construction of seven battleships which would be qualitatively superior to the larger number of "treaty-sized" ships which America was beginning to construct. Of course, the construction of these monster ships would be kept a secret; but if America should tire of playing the "treaties game" and should begin building large-size battleships as well, any vessels of a size comparable with Japan's giants would not be able to pass through the Panama Canal. Five of Japan's seven planned superbattleships were of the Yamato class, displacing 64,000 tons and mounting 18.1-inch guns (only two were completed as battleships). The other two (never built) were of the "improved" Yamato class displacing 70,000 tons and mounting 20-inch guns. In the same time period, the U.S. authorized the construction of seventeen battleships, six of 35,000 tons displacement, six of 45,000 tons, and five (authorized after the treaties had become impotent in
1939) of 58,000 tons: all mounted 16-inch guns. The latter seven ships were never built. The Navy hoped that its "big seven" could outfight the "little seventeen" (none of the pre-treaty battleships were much of a match for any of these newer types).

The Japanese trained to fight the decisive battle at night, a technique which was generally believed before the war to give an advantage to an inferior but well-trained fleet.7

**Criticisms of the Strategy**

To modern readers, the most glaring deficiency of this plan is the emphasis on "obsolete" battleships as the instrument for deciding the decisive battle, instead of aircraft carriers. However, this concept was neither obvious nor necessarily true until the late '30s, and even then the issue was not decided until the Pacific War was actually underway. But there are plenty of other errors in the "offensive-defensive" strategy.

First, the concept itself was too passive in nature. It stressed a basically defensive posture, which meant surrendering the all-important initiative to the enemy. The U.S. could decide when and how it would make its advance toward the Philippines. Furthermore, this defensive posture meant that Japan had to maintain a constant level of preparedness, never knowing when the showdown would come, rather than setting a definite "target date" for hostilities and
preparing specifically for a war at that time. If this sounds like an advocacy of aggression, it was at least more consistent with the concept of the "inevitable enemy" than was the idea of passively waiting for that enemy to attack, a posture which placed a great economic burden on Japan. If one accepted the idea of a U.S.-Japanese war as "inevitable" (which most Navy planners did), then the "offensive-defensive" strategy was illogical.

Second, the attrition dial of aircraft and submarines might have failed miserably in practice. Naval historians today agree that, despite a few successes in this area, Japanese submarines should not have been employed against well-escorted U.S. task forces. The subs were too large and clumsy and were without radar, qualities which made them very vulnerable to U.S. antisubmarine techniques. Land-based air attacks from the Mandated Islands (Marshalls and Carolines) might have been a more effective means of attrition, except for one small problem: contrary to popular belief, the Mandates were not heavily fortified before the Pacific War. The bases for the naval air arm simply did not exist. A Navy admiral who inspected the Mandates in the summer of 1941 observed that "there are no defense systems or defense equipment at all in the whole area of the Marshalls. I doubt the mentality of the High Command."9

Third, the concept of the decisive battle became such an obsession with the Imperial Navy that the problem of protecting Japanese shipping was almost entirely ignored.
One Navy officer notes that "I spent nearly half of my career on the sea, but I never saw exercises dealing with warfare either against or in defense of maritime communication lines." It seems incredible that the Japanese did not learn from the example of Britain, whose battle-fleet superiority in World War I did not save her from being nearly starved out of the war by German submarine warfare against her shipping.

This point brings us to the fourth major fault of the "offensive-defensive" strategy: it was not really a strategy at all, but only an overblown tactical plan built around a decisive battle. Somehow it was assumed that after the decisive battle, the war would automatically end. This strategic myopia resulted in the development of a Navy which was designed to fight just one big battle—a "one shot" fleet. The fallacy of this approach is illustrated by the training program for Japanese carrier pilots. Before the war, pilot training was very selective and the system produced only a few pilots a year, but they were all of top quality. Almost all of these pilots were assigned to frontline carriers instead of being retained as instructors. After all, their main purpose was to fight in the decisive battle, so why dilute qualitative superiority by building up a large force of mediocre reserves for a prolonged war? But the Pacific War was a war of strategic attrition, not a decisive battle; and when many of the elite pilots died at Midway in 1942, the Navy found it difficult to expand
its training programs to produce those reserves, "mediocre" or otherwise."
CHAPTER THREE: THE YAMAMOTO REVOLUTION OF THE TRADITIONAL DOCTRINE, 1941

By 1940, the "offensive-defensive" doctrine had become well encased in the hoary mosses of Japanese Navy tradition. It had been the plot of the annual Combined Fleet maneuvers year after year. But in 1941, the Imperial Navy's strategic never-never land was shattered by a combination of two important factors: a radical change in the international balance of power brought about by the European War, and the influence of a charismatic but unorthodox Commander-in-Chief Combined Fleet on Navy doctrine.

Traditional Strategic Doctrine No Longer Valid

During 1940, Nazi Germany had overrun two nations with important holdings in the South Seas Area, France and the Netherlands. Although Britain did not fall, it was obvious that she could spare little of her military power to safeguard her interests in the Far East. Under these circumstances, the Japanese Army, already bogged down in a "no-win" war in China, began to take an interest in the Navy's Southward Advance Policy. But the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands East Indies, viewing Japan as a handmaiden of Hitler, responded to the Japanese military occupation of French Indochina by freezing Japanese assets.
in their respective countries on July 26, 1941.

The most important implication of this action for Japan was that unless she yielded to American demands (complete evacuation of Indochina and China), her oil stockpiles would soon dwindle to nothing. In eighteen months, the Navy would have a fleet without fuel—and then what demands might America not make upon Japan?\(^1\)

In August, therefore, the Navy and Army began to plan joint operations for seizing the oil-rich South Seas Area from Britain and the Netherlands. But war with America would probably result from this action (in April 1941, a Gallup poll indicated that 70 percent of U.S. voters would risk war "to keep Japan from becoming more powerful"\(^2\)), so plans must also be made for the occupation of the Philippines.

Now the Navy was faced with the grim possibility of a two-front war, a problem it had never seriously considered before. The Combined Fleet would be required to carry out not only defensive operations against the American fleet advancing from the east, but also offensive operations in the South Seas Area. Many Navy officers felt that the Fleet could do both, although it had never been designed for such a task. The Commander-in-Chief of that Fleet, however, disagreed.

His name was Yamamoto Isoroku.

The Rise of the Carrier Faction

Admiral Yamamoto was the leader of a fast-growing
faction in the Imperial Navy which challenged the notion that battleships should be the key weapons system of the traditional "offensive-defensive" strategy. This faction held that the capital ship of the future would be the aircraft carrier. Until 1937, aircraft carriers were regarded by the Navy as auxiliaries to the battle fleet, just as cruisers were. Their mission was to perform the minor roles of reconnaissance, gunnery spotting, whittling-down attack, and air protection for the battle line; doing in the air what cruisers and destroyers did on the surface. But during 1937, aircraft carriers and naval aircraft showed themselves to be very effective weapons in the China Incident.

From that time onward, some Navy officers argued that the carrier, not the battleship, should be the major weapons system for the decisive battle; its aircraft easily outranged the guns of a battleship and it was a much more flexible weapon--its aircraft could be thought of as "guided projectiles" which had greater utility than a "dumb" battleship projectile. Who ever heard of an 18.1-inch shell flying antisubmarine patrol? Battleship proponents (and they were in the majority) retorted that a battleship could deliver a more powerful punch in a given period of time than a carrier's air complement could, battleships were less affected by adverse weather conditions, and battleships were much better protected than carriers were. Besides, everyone else is building battleships, so we must build them too (the classic, unrefutable, and utterly stupid argument of naval
traditionalists everywhere!).

The Navy's carrier faction was grossly underrepresented in important decision-making circles until Yamamoto became Commander of the Combined Fleet in 1939. It is an interesting commentary on the impotence of the carrier faction at this time to note that Yamamoto was appointed to his post not because of his views on air power, but for a peculiar political reason. In his previous capacity as Vice Navy Minister, he had spoken so forcefully against war with America that his superior decided to give him a less political position in order to save Yamamoto from being assassinated!4

Yamamoto, however, made the most of his opportunity. As soon as he assumed command of the Fleet, he ordered that priority be given to air training. He attached special significance to torpedo-plane training, reminding battleship proponents that "the fiercest serpent may be overcome by a swarm of ants."5 The 1940 Fleet maneuvers vindicated his philosophy, for referees ruled that the "enemy" fleet had been halved in strength by aerial torpedo attack. Yamamoto's chief-of-staff wondered, "is the time ripe for a decisive fleet engagement using aerial torpedo attacks as the main striking power?"6 Yamamoto thought so. In April 1941 he placed all Japanese carriers in the First Air Fleet, an administrative reorganization which made the carriers independent of the battle line and capable of becoming the nucleus of a formidable fleet themselves.
The Pearl Harbor Plan

But Yamamoto was not only interested in revising the Navy's tactical doctrine. Shortly after he became Fleet Commander, he decided that the place for the decisive battle should be in the vicinity of the Mandated Islands, not the Philippine Sea. Yamamoto did not like the passive aspects of the "offensive-defensive" strategy, which as we have seen had the fault of leaving the initiative in the hands of the enemy. But by early 1941, Yamamoto and a few other air-minded officers were working on a plan which would push the site of the decisive battle even further eastward, revolutionizing the Navy's strategic doctrine in the process. In August 1941, Yamamoto presented this plan for study to a select group of officers at the Naval War College, where the operations against the South Seas Area were being formulated.

Yamamoto knew that the bases in the Mandates which the traditional strategic doctrine relied on to reduce the American fleet were far from completion. He therefore believed that the American Navy could carry out its advance across the Pacific while the Combined Fleet was engaged in occupying the South Seas Area. The Imperial Navy would be outflanked by a superior force, and Japan would very likely lose the war.

Although Yamamoto thought that the chances of an ultimate Japanese victory were slim in any event, his plan aimed at maximizing Japan's possibility of success. Americans are so familiar with the details of his "day of infamy"
that it is difficult to realize today how radical Yamamoto's idea was at that time. For his proposal to the Navy patriarchs was nothing less than a plan to send a task force built around the six most powerful carriers of the First Air Fleet on a secret course for the great American naval base at Jahu, where the U.S. Pacific Fleet had been concentrated since May 1940. On the first day of the war, this force would launch a massive surprise air strike against the U.S. Fleet and annihilate, or at least incapacitate, it at its docks. By the time the Fleet had been repaired or replaced by new construction, the South Seas Area would be secured and the Navy would have developed a powerful network of bases throughout the Mandates and the newly occupied regions, a defensive perimeter which would be supported by the Combined Fleet. Yamamoto hoped that this barrier would prove so difficult to penetrate that the United States, concerned with the danger of Nazi Germany, might be willing to negotiate a settlement with Japan that would recognize her supremacy in the South Seas Area.

Strategically, this plan overturned the concepts of the traditional "offensive-defensive" doctrine in three major respects. First, it completely rejected the traditional doctrine's emphasis on defensive operations and surrendering the initiative to the enemy. Yamamoto believed that the best course of action was to seek out the enemy fleet at the very start of hostilities--a policy completely at odds with the legacy of Tsushima.
Second, Yamamoto had reversed the sequence of operations (attrition, then decisive battle) outlined in the traditional doctrine. Although there is a temptation to compare the Pearl Harbor plan with the Port Arthur attack of 1904 (itself an "attrition" operation), Yamamoto's plan was actually for a decisive battle. The Pacific Fleet was not to be whittled-down at Oahu; it was to be wiped out. But this decisive battle, unlike that of the traditional doctrine, would be fought in Pearl Harbor, not the Philippine Sea. And the key weapons system would be the aircraft carrier, not the battleship; for only carriers had a chance of penetrating the harbor's defenses with a powerful attack force without being detected. At Pearl Harbor, the carrier's advantages of flexibility and a longer-ranged "main battery" were conclusively demonstrated, to the battleship's embarrassment. After conducting this decisive battle at the outbreak of the war, Yamamoto intended to pursue a strategy of attrition along the defensive perimeter.

Finally, the Pearl Harbor plan and its underlying assumptions were hallmarks of a strategic doctrine that really was a strategy, not just a dressed-up tactical plan. The Pearl Harbor attack was the keystone of a strategy which tried to tailor military doctrines to fit political realities. Yamamoto's military plans were conceived with the definite objective of presenting America with the prospect of a difficult, prolonged war--a war which he hoped American leaders would perceive as not being in their
country's best interests. Compare this analysis with the
hazy assumption of the traditional doctrine that to win
the decisive battle was tantamount to winning the war,
regardless of the economic or political factors involved!
These, then, are the major features of the "Yamamoto revolu-
tion" in Navy strategic planning.

Yamamoto's proposal was not well received by most
Navy leaders, not only because it departed so radically from
traditional concepts but also because of the tremendous risks
involved. It was clear to all that the success of the plan
rested on secrecy, and many doubted that so formidable a base
as Pearl Harbor could be safely approached. Yamamoto argued
that war with America was a desperate gamble, so Japan might
as well "go for broke" in her prosecution of it. It is a
tribute to Yamamoto's charisma that his plan was finally
approved by the Navy just one month before the outbreak of
war.

As it turned out, the American commanders at Oahu
were as confident of Pearl Harbor's impregnability as Yama-
moto's detractors had been. Therefore, the Japanese
carriers reached their launch point safely, and shortly
after dawn on December 7, 1941, the attack began. At a
cost of 29 planes, Yamamoto's fliers sank or severely dam-
aged five battleships, as well as several lesser vessels.
However, no U.S. carriers were in port at the time of the
attack; and the Japanese task force commander, fearful of
his force being detected, decided against another strike
directed towards installations and oil tanks at the base. The force returned to Japan unmolested.

The Validity of the Yamamoto Doctrine

Did Yamamoto's revision of the traditional Navy strategic doctrine accomplish its objectives? The Pearl Harbor attack was unquestionably a tactical success in the sense that the Japanese inflicted more damage than they received, but this judgment does not validate a strategic concept. The question to ask is, did the attack forestall the advance of the U.S. Pacific Fleet into the western Pacific? The answer would appear to be yes. Naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison says that the U.S. basic war plan, calling for assaults against the Japanese Mandates as soon as possible after the outbreak of war (in order to draw Japanese forces away from the South Seas operations as well as to facilitate the advance of the Pacific Fleet toward the Philippines), was suspended indefinitely. As the commander of the U.S. Fleet observed, "the loss of battleships commits us to the strategic defensive until our forces can again be built up." This change to a defensive strategy was not only prompted by the material damage inflicted on the Fleet, but also by the psychological effect of the attack. The American Navy realized that "anything can happen now." Who knew where the next blow might fall?

Thus, the U.S. left the strategic initiative in the hands of the Japanese, who would retain it until the Midway
disaster six months later. Previous estimates of the time required for the U.S. Fleet to secure the Mandates ranged from six to nine months, but such operations did not actually begin until two years and two months after Pearl Harbor.\textsuperscript{13}

Did the Imperial Navy use this time well to prepare the defensive perimeter which was to repel American counter-attacks? Unfortunately, no. The Japanese, made overconfident by their initial success, embarked on a series of hastily planned "second-phase operations" which overextended their new empire beyond their capability to defend it. When the strength of the First Air Fleet was shattered in one such operation, at Midway in June 1942, the Navy found that it had too much territory to defend and not enough to defend it with. Plus, as we have noted, a fleet designed for one decisive battle was not well suited to conduct a strategy of indefinite attrition. Yamamoto, opposed as he was by many Navy conservatives, could not rebuild the fleet to his specifications in a few short years.

The political assumption underlying Yamamoto's strategic doctrine—that the U.S. would not be willing to make a major military commitment to Asia when Germany was so powerful in Europe—was also faulty. As we have seen, the American people were willing to fight to contain Japanese expansion, and the perceived perfidy of the Pearl Harbor attack intensified this resolve. The United States also had the industrial power to successfully wage a two-front war, as the Axis learned to its regret. Americans saw the
war with Japan as a fight to the finish, and they never seriously doubted who the victor would be.

Was Yamamoto's "new look" in strategic planning therefore a failure? This writer believes that any Japanese Navy planner trying to prepare a workable doctrine for use against a nation with ten times Japan's industrial capacity was faced with a nearly insurmountable task. But it need not have been an impossible task, and to glibly reject any Japanese strategic concept by saying "but they never had a chance anyway," is to deny ourselves the treasures of history.

Yamamoto's doctrine, despite its faults (many of which resulted from deficiencies in execution and equipment and did not stem from the conception of the doctrine itself), was a step in the right direction for the Imperial Navy. Unlike the traditional doctrine, it recognized the complex interaction between military and political activities and did not see war as some sort of perverted athletic contest which involves nothing more than preparing for a single great battle against a solitary opponent. Had the Imperial Navy followed such a realistic course in its strategic planning even ten years earlier, who can say how the history of the Far East might have changed?

The lesson of the Japanese Navy's experiences in planning a strategic doctrine can be simply stated: the true strength of any nation's navy is not to be found in the quantities or technical qualities of its equipment, but in the intelligence of the planning which determines how that
equipment is to be used. It is "headware", not hardware, that is the measure of a great navy!
FOOTNOTES

Chapter One


4 Ibid.


8 Fuchida and Okumiya, p. 11.


11 Auer, p. 18.

Chapter Two

1 Fuchida and Okumiya, p. 14.

2 Ibid.

4Ibid.
5Fuchida and Okumiya, p. 11.
6Morison, p. 82.
7Yokoi, p. 72.
8Fuchida and Okumiya, p. 15.
10Yokoi, p. 73.
11Fuchida and Okumiya, p. 242.

Chapter Three

2Morison, p. 61.
3Yokoi, p. 72
4Potter, p. 36.
5Ibid., p. 31.
6Ibid., p. 52.
8Morison, p. 43.
10Potter, p. 135.
11Morison, p. 220.
12Ibid., p. 218.
13Potter, p. 126.


