

How Japan's Plan to Become a Dominant Power Ended Badly

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Emperor Hirohito visits Hiroshima in 1947, two years after the atomic bomb was dropped on the city. Public Domain



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Commentary

For over 200 years from 1630, Japan followed a policy of strict national exclusion. Japanese citizens were not allowed to leave the country and foreigners were, with the exception of Dutch ships at a single port, forbidden to land. A rigid social structure enforced a feudal system and political power was in the hands of the shogun, a title reserved for the head of the Tokugawa clan. The emperors, though accorded sacred reverence, were kept in isolation.



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In 1853, an American fleet appeared in Tokyo Bay and demanded that Japan open itself up to diplomatic relations and trade with the outside world. This gunboat diplomacy worked—Japan was soon in commercial and political contact with the rest of the world—but it came at a great cost to Japanese pride.

Determined that they would never again be subject to bullying by foreigners, the Japanese ruling class vowed to change. The shogunate was overthrown, the role of the emperor was enhanced, and Western customs, military reforms, and technology were adopted. A constitutional monarch emerged with a bicameral legislature filled with politicians eager to make Japan a great power. After copying British and German modes of warfare, by 1900 Japan had developed an excellent army and navy able to take on European nations, as Russia discovered to its cost in the Russo-Japanese War.

In the 20th century, voices grew louder for imperial expansion. Korea and Taiwan were soon swallowed up, and after World War I Japan was given control of many former German territories in the Pacific. But China was the juiciest target in the sights of army officers and big businessmen. Politics grew increasingly lawless, and those statesmen who were more cautious about Japanese ambitions were often gunned down by ultranationalist gangs. By the 1930s, the military was dominant in the government and among the advisers to the young Emperor Hirohito.

At Mukden in northern China, Japanese troops, acting without orders from Tokyo, staged a false flag incident in which they claimed they had been attacked by the Chinese army. This provided the pretext for an invasion and the conquest of Manchuria, where in 1932 the



Emperor Hirohito after his enthronement ceremony in 1928. Public Domain

Japanese set up a puppet state called Manchukuo. This success fed the appetite in the Japanese public for more war and more expansion, but aroused much foreign opposition. In 1937, Japan launched a full-scale invasion and soon captured great swathes of territory, including the capital Nanjing where their army carried out horrific atrocities on the civilian population.

By now, the Japanese government was committed to a policy of becoming the pre-eminent power in eastern Asia, and of replacing European and

American colonial regimes with native governments willing to cooperate with Japanese hegemony. This would guarantee access to the oil, rubber, food, and vital materials that the domestic economy could not provide. But it meant that war with Western powers was inevitable.

The outbreak of World War II in Europe was encouraging to Japan; it meant that Britain, France, and the Netherlands would have fewer forces to protect their Asian holdings, and in 1940 Japan joined Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in a mutual defence pact. The great concern for Hirohito's government now was the United States and its powerful bases in the Philippines and Hawaii.

The Japanese military had drawn up comprehensive plans for an attack on these bases, developing new weapons and aircraft carrier tactics especially designed to destroy American assets. Generals and admirals reasoned that if the ships and aircraft at Pearl Harbor were eliminated, it would give Japan a year's grace to conquer East Asia and present Washington with a *fait accompli* by the time it had assembled

a new fleet in the Pacific. All that remained was to get the Emperor's final approval.

After a month of debates and policy papers, Hirohito gave the go-ahead for a war on the Americans, British, and Dutch on Dec. 1, 1941. A fleet of aircraft carriers that had sailed undetected into the North Pacific reached waters off Hawaii on the early morning of Dec. 7. Waves of level bombers, dive bombers, torpedo bombers, and fighters, plus mini-submarines, attacked airfields, ships, and infrastructure, sinking four battleships and three cruisers and destroying 180 aircraft. Over 2,400 Americans were killed while Japanese losses were 29 aircraft, five mini-submarines, and 129 dead.

Japan planned on declaring war before the strike, but a delay in decoding the instructions at their embassy in Washington meant that the declaration was never delivered. Thus, their actions could be depicted as a “sneak attack” and a “day that shall live in infamy.”

Forty-four months later, with Tokyo a smoking ruin and Hiroshima and Nagasaki radioactive heaps of rubble, Hirohito told the Japanese people that “the war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan's advantage” and ordered them to “endure the unendurable.” Japan had surrendered.

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