

Why Japan Was Rational to Attack Pearl Harbor

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“On my honor as a student, I have neither given nor received any unauthorized aid on this assignment.”

On December 7, 1941 Japan launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, a major U.S. naval base in Hawaii. The attack killed 2,700 military personnel, destroyed many ships, and led the United States to immediately declare war on Japan. Japan ultimately lost the war and suffered massive casualties. Many scholars question how rational Japan was to attack Pearl Harbor and start a war with a more powerful nation. Offensive realists such as Mearsheimer would say, however, that Japan acted rationally. I agree Japan's decision was rational; it knew the U.S. Pacific fleet was the only major threat to its survival, and it believed this attack might deter the United States from war in the Pacific and weaken the U.S. fleet in the case of war.

Offensive realists' assumptions about states and their nature explain why Japan was rational for attacking Pearl Harbor. Offensive realists believe that, stemming from international anarchy, states are in a constant struggle for power, they fear each other's gains, and war is always possible. Additionally, they believe that states' primary goal is survival, that states are rational actors, and that it is impossible for great powers to know each other's true intentions. Japan knew that the U.S. Pacific fleet posed a threat to its survival. Given the geographical nature of the Pacific, naval forces were the most potent U.S. military branch to defeat Japan. If Japan decimated this fleet, it could achieve two possible outcomes. One, it could deter the United States from entering the war and defeating Japan. Two, if the United States entered the conflict, Japan would have a higher chance of winning after damaging the U.S. fleet. Furthermore, offensive realists believe that states distrust each other and thus that Japan had no reason to trust that the United States would stay out of the war, regardless of whether Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. U.S. allies Britain and France were already at war with Japan's ally, Germany. Furthermore, the United States demonstrated balancing when backing Britain and France in World War I, joining the war late and helping defeat Germany. Under offensive realism, Japan is

not expected to know exactly why America entered World War 1; perhaps Tokyo believed that Washington had interests in helping its allies, which shared democratic ideologies, and that the United States would similarly balance against Japan in World War 2. Moreover, the United States had stopped exporting steel and oil to Japan, (Japan's Quest), which Japan could have considered a threat to its survival given these resources' importance. This U.S. decision was another indication Washington was not pro-Japanese imperialism. Thus, with all signs pointing towards the United States entering the war sometime anyway, Japan launched a preemptive attack designed to intimidate and deter Washington from joining the conflict against it, as well as to deplete the Pacific fleet that threatened its survival, demonstrating a rational decision.

Skeptics, such as defensive realists, would argue that Japan's attack was irrational. Defensive realists argue international anarchy causes states to often remain relatively non-aggressive, with peace and security as their goal to survive as opposed to power maximization (Taliaferro 129). This theory's shortcoming is that it has proven to be historically inaccurate; there have been military incentives for nations before. Since the dawn of time, powerful nations have invaded other nations to gain resources, land, and power. From the Roman Empire to today, there has not been a prolonged period when powerful states have not been engaged in some kind of conflict. While there are currently no overt military wars between great powers, there are proxy wars, cyber wars, and neocolonialist policies in Africa that are attempts by states to enhance power. In hindsight, defensive realists would be correct that Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor led to its demise, but they are incorrect about states' inherent nature; the pattern of states fighting suggests international anarchy does not keep states non-aggressive. Thus, defensive realism seems irrational in Pearl Harbor's case.

Another skeptic towards offensive realists' views on Pearl Harbor would be a constructivist. Constructivism holds that states act based on social constructs, not international anarchy or nature (Hopf 174). A constructivist would argue that Japan was going along with the socially constructed assumption that great powers enter wars, but Japan acted irrationally because it was not obligated to. Because constructivists see Japan's actions as following a social construct, there is no proof that powers inherently enter conflict, and thus Japan did not need to attack. The problem with this notion is that there is no evidence of a single power setting a precedent to invade countries and act aggressively; in this sense, the social construct does not exist because there was never an intention by a nation to establish it. In reality, states have invaded each other throughout history. Like defensive realism, constructivism ignores this pattern of strong states acting aggressively to gain power; the Romans, Napoleonic France, and the Ottomans are three of countless examples. Furthermore, constructivists would argue Japan attacked because of domestic ideas and interests (Hopf 173). While this argument may hold some truth, it ignores how countries and empires with different regime types, political ideologies, religions, and ethnic groups have acted aggressively to bolster power. Constructivism does not provide a valid argument for why Japan acted irrationally because the idea that it attacked Pearl Harbor based on the social construct of war and its ideology seems far less likely than doing so to ensure its survival.

Offensive realism correctly addresses historical patterns of powerful nations acting aggressively to increase their power and ensure their survival, and therefore accurately explains why Japan struck Pearl Harbor. Additionally, this theory's emphasis on states' inherent behavior helps explain Japan's decision. Other theories, such as defensive realism and constructivism, fail to offer stronger arguments about why Japan acted irrationally. Japan had reasons to believe the

United States would enter the war, so attacking Pearl Harbor was a move it thought would deter Washington or at least deplete U.S. forces. In the end, Japan lost terribly, but that reality does not mean it acted irrationally.

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