

# Outbreak of WW2 in Asia-Pacific

## Background

### Asia and the Western Powers

- From about 1700, the Western European powers (especially Britain, France, and the Netherlands) embarked on a phase of colonisation in Asia
- By the mid-1800s...
  - Britain controlled India
  - The Netherlands and France had trading posts, military bases and colonies in Asia
  - They and the USA began eyeing China for its untapped economic potential

### The Modernisation of Japan

- To avoid being exploited like other Asian countries, Japan began a programme of modernisation in 1868 known as the Meiji Restoration
  - Introduced a new Meiji Constitution

- Provided a limited form of democracy
  - Kept the Emperor in charge
- Japan's industry underwent rapid expansion
- Quickly transformed Japan into an important Asian power by the early 1900s.
- Gained military might which allowed Japan to win...
  - 1894-1895: 1st Sino-Japanese War
  - 1904-1905: Russo-Japanese War
  - Result...
    - Annexed Korea and gained control over parts of Manchuria
- Developed alliance with Britain
  - Guarded its territories in WW1 in the 1920s.
- **Japan was a well-respected on the international stage**
  - Full member of the League of Nations
  - Participant in the post-WW1 disarmament process.
- In 1921, Japan signed the **Washington Naval Treaty**
  - All signatories agreed to the ratio for warship tonnage to be:
    - United States: 5
    - Britain: 5
    - Japan: 3
    - Italy: 1.75
    - France: 1.75
  - Japan had to reduce their naval strength more than the USA and Britain.
    - Many Japanese saw this as an unfair treaty
    - Fueled desire by Japan to establish itself as an equal to the West.
- At the same time, signed trade deals with Britain and the USA and expanded trade with the rest of Asia

## Japan's Ambition

- Japan wanted to be an equal with the Western powers that had empires
- As a result, **ultranationalism** began to grow within Japan
  - Examples
    - Approved conquest of Korea in 1910
    - Supported the idea of Japan expanding its empire
  - These beliefs were driven by Japan's natural limitations
    - Japan is covered by high mountains
      - Had little land to grow food to feed its rapidly growing population
    - Japan did not have raw materials such as iron ore and coal
    - In the 1920s, Japan depended on importing raw materials and food from China
- As a result of its limitations, many ultranationalists argued that Japan had to expand to get access to the raw materials that a modern nation needed

## Divide between Civilian Politicians and Military Leaders

- From the early to mid-1920s, the more moderate civilian politicians was in control
  - They preferred to advance Japanese interests by peaceful means (e.g. trade and int'l cooperation)
  - They also cut the military budget
    - Angered military leaders that it showed a lack of respect for the military
- Military leaders believed that other countries could not be trusted

- They also believed that a war between Japan and the Western powers was inevitable

## Japan's Expansionist Foreign Policy

### Rise of Japanese Militarism

- Tensions between civilian politicians and military leaders worsened as the ultranationalist military commanders (which many of them were) grew in influence thanks to the military victories in the early 1900s
- Ultranationalist military commanders believed...
  - Military service was an honor and noble calling
  - Many of them believe that Japan's destiny was to remove the Western powers from Asia and expand its rule over it
- Such beliefs became extremely popular, especially after the annexation of Manchuria
- On the other hand, the civilian politicians increasingly lost the trust of the people who they saw it as weak
- By 1936, the military was effectively in control of Japan

### Japan and the Western Powers

- From the Meiji period till the 1930s, Japan had used propaganda to encourage...
  - A strong sense of nationalist pride
  - Wariness towards foreigners, especially the colonial powers
- **The Japanese saw Britain, Russia/USSR, and the US as**

## **rivals and obstacles to its ambitions**

- **US:**

- **Seen to have** already turned against them with its economic policies against Japan in the 1930s as they had left 1000s of Japanese workers in unemployment when it stopped importing Japanese goods
  - Banned Asian workers from moving to the USA.
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- **Britain:**

- Cooperated under the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, 1902-1923 to prevent the USSR from advancing in the Far East
  - But by the 1930s, the relationship had deteriorated
    - British criticised Japan over the invasion of Manchuria
    - Britain was on friendly terms with the US who was increasingly in conflict with Japan
    - Japan increasingly seen as a rival power
      - British controlled colonies throughout Asia such as Hong Kong and Malaya
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- **USSR:**

- Communism was against rule by an Emperor
  - Japanese believed in loyalty to their Emperor
- Japan saw Communism as a ideology to be combated
- USSR border had a border with the Japanese Empire in Manchuria
  - E.g. In 1936, Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact with Italy and Germany
- Fear of USSR served to further motivate Japan to expand into Asia

- Wanted more buffer territories against the USSR
- Gain resources for a potential fight against the USSR

## The Great Depression and Japan's Search for Self-Sufficiency

- The Great Depression damaged Japan's economy due to its heavy reliance on foreign trade, which led to major political implications
  - The terrible unemployment and the other effects of the Depression increased the pressure on the civilian politicians
    - The economic crisis convinced the ultranationalist politicians and military commanders that democracy was failing as it could not solve the people's problem
  - The introduction of a range of tariffs by the US in the 1930s to protect its own economy, terribly hurt Japan's export trade
    - Examples
      - Electric light bulbs = 25%
      - Fish = 50% tariffs
      - Clothing = 75% tariffs
    - **US actions convinced the ultranationalists that other countries could not be relied upon and that Japan needed to be self-sufficient**

## The Manchurian Crisis and the response of the League of Nations

## Japanese Public Opinion

- With the changes in domestic politics, worsening relations with the Western powers and the economic problems, Japan began to see building an empire as a means to protect their economy.
  - For the great majority of these commanders and politicians, the obvious place for Japan to expand was through the conquest of China's territory, particularly in Manchuria.
- By 1931, the idea that influence and control should be extended over Manchuria had gained a lot of ground in Japan.
  - Manchuria was rich in coal and iron and was seen as the perfect solution to Japan's lack of natural resources.
- Such opinions even extended to civilian politician with moderate views
  - E.g. Shidehara Kijuro, Foreign Minister in 1931
    - had taken part in the negotiations to limit arms and was a firm supporter of the League of Nations
    - Even he believed that it was right and justifiable for Japan to expand into Manchuria

## Instability in China

- This view of extending control to Manchuria was strengthened by what was happening in China.
  - At that point in time, China was ruled by the Chinese Nationalist Party, also known as Guomindang (GMD, also known as Kuomintang) under Chiang Kai-shek.
    - Chiang faced serious threats to his rule. On the borders with Manchuria, many local warlords did not fully accept his authority.

- Some were prepared to collaborate with the Japanese in return for economic and military support.
- At the same time, Chiang was locked in an intense rivalry with the small but growing Chinese Communist Party (CCP).
  - China's troubles and instability seemed to provide the perfect opportunity for Japan

## Conquest of Manchuria

- These views became reality in **September 1931**. Ishiwara's (a ultranationalist colonel in the Kwantung Army, who believed Japan should rule Manchuria) forces blew up part of a railway track at Mukden (known as the Mukden Incident).
- Japan blamed the explosion on the Chinese government and used it as an excuse to take over Manchuria.
- **By December they controlled most of the region.**
- There was very little opposition in Japan to the invasion and the military commanders felt encouraged to continue.
  - In February 1932, they set up a puppet government in Manchuria, Manchukuo
  - Later in 1932, Japanese aeroplanes and gunships moved down south and bombed Shanghai.
    - The civilian government in Japan ordered the army to withdraw, but was ignored.
    - This signalled that the army, not the government, was assuming control of Japanese foreign policy.

## Response of the League of Nations

- When Japan invaded Manchuria, China appealed to the League of



Nations for international support.

- In October 1931, the League's Council passed a resolution by 13 votes to 1 calling on Japan to withdraw its troops.
  - The only vote against the resolution, unsurprisingly, was cast by Japan.
  - The Japanese claimed they were not invading China, but simply acting in self-defence to keep peace since China was in a state of anarchy.
- A commission was sent by the League to Manchuria to evaluate Japan's actions
- The League presented the Lytton Report ([further reading](#)) on the Manchurian Incident a year after the invasion.
  - The conclusion was clear – Japan had acted unlawfully and Manchuria should be returned to the Chinese.
- In February 1933, instead of withdrawing from Manchuria, the Japanese announced they intended to occupy more of China.
  - They maintained that this was necessary to defend their territories.
- On 24 February, the Lytton Report was approved by 42 votes to 1 in the League's General Assembly.
  - Again, only Japan voted against it.
  - **Japan rejected the Lytton Report and withdrew from the League on 27 March.**
- The League's economic sanctions were powerless without the support of the United States, Japan's main trading partner.
  - Britain also did not sanction Japan as it seemed more interested in maintaining a good relationship with Japan.
  - The League could not ban arms sales to Japan because the member countries could not agree on that.
    - They were worried that Japan would retaliate, and escalate the situation.

- Britain and France would not risk their navies or armies in a war to stop Japan.
  - Only the United States and the USSR would have had the resources to remove the Japanese from Manchuria by force, but they were not League members.
  - The USSR even sold a railway line in northern Manchuria to the Japanese.

## Consequences of the Manchurian Crisis

### International Relations

- It tarnished the prestige of the League.
  - It demonstrated that the League was helpless in the face of aggressor nations such as Japan.
  - It undermined the confidence of League officials to tackle future crises.
- It encouraged Japan to further expand into Asia in the following years as Manchuria's location placed it in a strong position for expansion into China.
- The Manchurian Crisis was important in the events leading up to war in the Asia-Pacific.
  - Japan now had access to the raw materials and resources available in Manchuria needed for its growing industries.

### Japanese Politics

- The annexation of Manchuria was extremely popular in Japan as many of them saw Manchuria as a solution to Japan's economic problems.
- This increased the prominence and influence of the ultranationalists and military and resulted in the weakening of democratic politics in

Japan.

- The military continued to challenge the civilian politicians' authority, and gained more positions of power and influence in the government by 1932.
- From this point, Japanese policies were increasingly driven by ideas which promoted expansion.

## Japanese aggression towards China, 1933-1940

### Extension of Japanese Influence in the Region

- Encouraged by the success of Manchuria, Japan soon sought to extend its power and influence in the region.
- The death of GMD founder Sun Yat-sen in 1925 escalated the conflict between the GMD and the CCP.
  - This infighting created a great deal of instability in China, which the Japanese were keen to exploit to their own advantage.
- They came up with a strategy of getting their warlord allies to stir up trouble in a region and then invite the Japanese troops in to restore order.
  - It was not long before this led to an all-out war.

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1. **1933:** took control of Jehol province by forcing China to sign the Tangu Truce
  2. Tried to cite conflict between warlords in Inner Mongolia and the Chinese government

3. **1935:** invaded Chahar province
  - Established control by 1937
4. **July 1937:** Marco Polo Bridge Incident
  - **Start of the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945)**
5. **November 1937:** after a long and bitter battle, Shanghai captured
6. **December 1936:** Nanjing taken ([further reading](#))
7. **October 1938:** Wuhan and Guangdong province captured
8. **1939-1940:** Stalemate sets in

## **The Impact of World War II in Europe on Asia and the Pacific**

- In 1939, war broke out in Europe as well in response to the German invasion of Poland.
  - **Britain, France and the Netherlands all had vast territories in Southeast Asia but were not able to defend them while fighting Germany.**
- In June 1941, Hitler broke his pact with Stalin and invaded the USSR. This meant that the USSR had to defend itself from Germany's attack.
- These events were advantageous from Japan's point of view.
  - The USSR became less of a threat
  - Japan had a golden opportunity to take over the colonies of the Western powers in Asia-Pacific.
    - By 1941 it had taken control of French Indochina (present-day Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia). Things were going well for Japan, but its leaders were still concerned

# Japan-US Relations

## Different Considerations of the United States about Japan's Potential Threat

### Sources of tension

- As a result of the Great Depression, the United States introduced a range of tariffs in 1930 to protect its own economy.
- In 1937, tensions between Japan and the United States rose with Japan's invasion of China.
  - The United States condemned Japan's actions and provided financial and military aid to the Chinese leader, Chiang Kai-shek.

### Dilemma faced by the US

- On one hand...
  - The United States disapproved of Japan's expansionist actions and imposed economic sanctions.
  - Japan was both an military, economic and political rival that challenged its interests in Asia-Pacific.
    - **Military:** Japan's powerful navy competed with the US for control of the Pacific
    - **Economic:** Japanese companies competed with US companies to sell goods in Asian markets
    - **Political:** Japanese views about keeping Asia for Asians threatened US interests in Asia
- On the other hand...
  - Japan was strongly anti-communist and would be able to help the United States to hold back the spread of communism in Asia.

- After the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, the US was wary of upsetting Japan and pushing it closer to Germany and the USSR

## **US Economic War on Japan**

- The 1937 invasion of China prompted the US government to take a progressively harder line on Japan.
  - President Roosevelt was worried about Japan's growing ambitions and wanted to keep its expansion in check.
  - Thus, he announced a series of financial and economic measures designed to halt Japan's aggressive foreign policy.
- The initial sanctions by the United States proved to be ineffective.
  - Japan subsequently occupied French Indochina in 1940.
    - This was an attempt by Japan to gain an inroad into Southeast Asia to obtain resources to continue its war efforts against China.
    - In response, an embargo was placed on raw materials such as steel and iron in October 1940.
- After the failure of negotiations between the United States and Japan, and Japan's refusal to withdraw from China and Indochina, an oil embargo was imposed in August 1941.
  - Roosevelt resurrected a law from WWI - 'Trading with the Enemy Act', which seized Japanese assets in the United States, making it unable to buy essential goods.
- The United States policy was an attempt to strangle Japan financially.
  - Roosevelt's measures would cut off almost 90% of Japan's oil supplies.
    - This was damaging for a modern economy

- For a modern army, air force and navy, this was crippling; ships, planes and tanks were useless without fuel.
- The United States demanded that Japanese troops withdraw from China and promise not to threaten any territories belonging to the United States or its allies (particularly Britain)

## **Japan's Dilemma over the United States**

- The US demands were completely unacceptable to the Japanese.
  - It would mean Japan could be bullied and intimidated by the United States.
  - But the only alternative seemed to be a conflict with the United States.
    - The United States was an economic giant.
    - Its resources were estimated to be six times greater than Japan's.
    - Accounts from the time show the different perspectives of leading Japanese politicians and military commanders with regard to engaging the United States in a war.

## **Japan's Response**

### **Background**

- Japan's leaders gambled that they could take on the United States.

### **The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere**

- The first stage was to develop Japan's empire in the hope of rivalling US economic strength.
- In 1940, Japan launched a programme called the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

- Aimed primarily at the people in the various Asian territories which Japan controlled.
- The emphasis was on the goal of ridding Asia of the influence of the United States and other Western powers.
- The message was that the people of Asia should unite behind Japan, which would lead this campaign to drive foreigners out of Asia, and that Japan would protect the people of Asia and rule them fairly as a fellow Asian country.

# The Attack on Pearl Harbor

## Rationale

- Even with the increased output of Manchuria, Korea and all its other territories, Japan could not challenge the power of the United States outright.
- In September 1940, Japan signed the Tripartite Pact, which made it an ally of Germany and Italy.
  - The pact was meant to be insurance against US intervention.
- The Japanese commanders also decided that they needed to deliver a quick knockout blow to the United States from which the latter would take time to recover.
  - In that time, Japan would be able to conquer new territories, build up its economic resources and match US power.
- Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku devised a preemptive strike against the United States. The strategy targeted the powerful US Pacific Fleet base at Pearl Harbor which protected US and other Western interests in Asia.
  - This would destroy the US Pacific Fleet so that Japan could keep



control of the Pacific without US interference.

## The Attack

On the morning of 7 December 1941, some 300 planes took off from Japanese aircraft carriers to launch their attack on Pearl Harbor.

## Aftermath

- While the attack caused widespread destruction, Japan failed to destroy...
  - American repair shops
  - Fuel-oil tanks
  - Other crucial naval installations.
  - All three of the US Pacific Fleet's aircraft carriers
    - They were not present at Pearl Harbor.
- Furthermore, with this attack, the United States declared war on Japan triggering the outbreak of World War II in Asia-Pacific.
  - President Roosevelt called 7 December 1941 "a date which [would] live in infamy".
- The Pearl Harbor attack severely crippled US naval and air strength in the region, allowing Japan to continue its expansion to the rest of Southeast Asia.
- By 1942, Japan controlled most of Southeast Asia, including Indochina, Indonesia, Malaya, Singapore and the Philippines.
- But the fall of Pearl Harbor was not the knockout punch that Japan had intended.
  - The day after the attack, the US Congress declared war on Japan.
  - The United States recovered rapidly from the setback in 1941.

