

# The Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia\*

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By

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Several attempts have been made to appraise the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia. So far as its impact is concerned, they have focused on the major theme that modern historians of Southeast Asia have adopted - as Ruth McVey has pointed out - and questioned its role in the creation of independent nations, Harry Benda, for instance, arguing for transformation, Al McCoy for continuity. My new book includes an attempt to review the question. It may share the different perspective that historians are beginning to offer on Southeast Asia - losing and gaining independence may not be the only or main way to structure a narrative - but of course it has to consider that question, out of which indeed the Japanese sought a justification for their action.

In the book - entitled by borrowing a phrase from Matsuoka Yosuke *A Sudden Rampage* - I have attempted to use and reuse material available in English. If the work has a claim to novelty, it lies in its perspectives. First: not only does it seek out continuities and discontinuities in Southeast Asia; it also tries to put the venture into a longer and larger Japanese context.

What that reminds one of is indeed the suddenness of the venture. Not only was it unexpected by others. 'We're all astounded over Japan', Oliver Hervey declared in London. 'We never thought she would attack us and America at

once. She must have gone mad.'<sup>1</sup> It was not well prepared by the Japanese. The 'rampage' itself was brilliantly planned and executed, but the occupation was improvised, amateur, even discounting the wartime conditions under which it was carried on, and indeed its basic concept, the economic sphere, deeply flawed.

If the Japanese contributed to independence in Southeast Asia, it was largely incidental, and it was done at enormous cost to Southeast Asian countries, even those not fought over. That relates to my second theme, a reconsideration of the rationales for the venture.

The Japanese had, of course, a long-standing interest in Southeast Asia. Their connexion goes back to the early 17th century. Broken off by the Tokugawa seclusion, it was sure to be renewed. Equally, of course, it was sure to be of concern to the colonial powers who meanwhile established themselves in the region, particularly after it secured Taiwan in 1895.

Japanese policy might, however, best be described as long-term. There was no evidence of political ambition in Southeast Asia, let alone of planned incursion. Indeed the Japanese could conceive that it would be unnecessary.

The Japanese, Frank Ashton-Gwatkin of the British Foreign Office, wrote in 1921, were interested in the oil of the Indies and in its trade. They appeared 'to have no definite political ambitions in this region. But they are obsessed by the idea that their country is one day destined to be mistress of the Pacific and of its islands. They regard Holland as a very weak Power, and her colonial empire as doomed to disruption. Japan must have a say in the disposal of this rich empire. So she is steadily increasing her knowledge of the country, her vested interests therein, and the numbers of her merchants and colonists', and keeping an eye on the native movement.<sup>2</sup>

After the Manchuria crisis 1931-3, Consul-General Fitzmaurice at Batavia reported that some of the Dutch officials thought that the Adviser for Far Eastern Affairs, Mouw, underestimated the threat. His view was that there was, 'at any rate for the present, no ground to fear sinister intentions on Japan's part': except in the commercial sphere, it would 'be fully occupied for many years to come with her own internal affairs and those of the Manchukuo State'. Fitzmaurice thought its activities might be 'largely consistent with a policy of gradual economic expansion only, but seem more consistent with a longer view on the part of Japan - with a vision perhaps of the possibility that in a near or distant future she may wish to take more active measures to increase her influence'.<sup>3</sup>

Japanese exports enjoyed considerable success in the interwar period, for example in Indonesia, particularly after the economic restructuring of the 1920s cheapened its manufactures: relatively few obstacles were put in their way. Only in the depression was there a risk that the colonial powers would become more protectionist and attempt to close the open door. Even that, of course, would not necessarily provoke a resort to force, though it might prompt an increase in diplomatic pressure.

For Japan the long-term prospects were still not discouraging. The colonial powers were facing increasing internal opposition. Japan's example encouraged it, and so did its discreet contacts with nationalist leaders. The US had recruited itself to the colonial ranks, but, under the 5-power Washington treaty of 1921-2, it could not build a modern naval base in the Philippines. It had also indicated that it would grant the Philippines independence when it was fit, though it did not set a precise date till the creation of the Commonwealth in 1935. The other main naval power, Britain, had been permitted to build the naval base at Singapore, but it had been slow to do so. Even that was to be the base, not a for a permanent Pacific navy, but for the use of a one-ocean navy when it was needed in Asia. The prospect that it would be needed in Europe was increasing as Germany rearmed.

Frustration in China might prompt the Japanese to reappraise their policy in Southeast Asia, but it was unlikely on its own to lead to a full-scale invasion. The current successes and the long-term future in Southeast Asia made that superfluous. Cutting those off would be another matter. What made the rampage rather suddenly appear necessary was the impact on the Japanese of the European war.

In Southeast Asia the Japanese remained cautious during the 'phoney war' of late 1939-early 1940. That war ended with the German attack on Denmark and Norway in April. That was followed by Hitler's onslaught on the Low Countries on 10 May. Those events shifted Japanese policy, but it remained cautious, its object being to keep the Indies out of the hands of a major power and to secure access to their resources. The surrender of France followed in June. That was far more surprising than the overrunning of the smaller European states, and it produced a major reaction among the other powers.

The British did not give in, though they had only hopes of American support, rather than promises. Apprehensive that they might give in, or be forced to do so, the US indeed focused for a time on hemispheric defence. On 20 July

1940 President Roosevelt signed the bill authorising the building of a 2-ocean US navy, a recognition of the fact that the security of the US and Latin America had depended substantially on the independence of the British and the presence of their navy in the Atlantic. When, by August, Roosevelt became more persuaded that Britain would survive, he renewed and increased the support the US offered. The most obvious outcome was the destroyers-for-bases agreement. Keeping Britain's resistance alive in Europe also meant that it must continue to have access to the resources of its empire in India, Australasia and Southeast Asia.

These policies, though related to the unexpected catastrophe in Europe, had implications for Japan. The termination of the US commercial treaty in January 1940 had been part of a series of American actions, termed a 'moral embargo', designed to discourage Japan from creating the New Order in East Asia that Prime Minister Konoe had announced in November 1938. On 2 July 1940 the National Defense Act empowered the President to place embargoes on arms and munitions, and some categories of oil and scrap iron were later added to the restricted list. The object was to restrain Japan, but not to provoke it. The policies were indeed predicated on a traditional appraisal of Japan: that it was cautious in respect of the major powers, and that in China it had bitten off more than it could chew. That endured, despite the ambitious cast Konoe had given to its policy with his 'grand slam' of 1937-8, or perhaps in a sense because of it.

The American moves that followed the collapse of France were, however, far from traditional. The creation of the 2-ocean navy undid the basic calculations on which the Japanese had constructed their naval policy since Washington. Japan's security had in part been provided by the fact that the other major signatories of the Washington treaties, the US and the UK, had to meet worldwide commitments, but Japan did not. When Japan abandoned the naval agreement in search of parity in 1934, the US had been slow to build. But if it were now to employ its vast resources in a major programme, the days of Japan's predominance even in the Asian region were numbered.

The growing American interest in the fate of the Southeast Asian colonies - also the result of the shift in the balance of power in Europe in Germany's favour - worried the Japanese as well. Convinced that the resources of Southeast Asia and Australasia were important for keeping British resistance going, the US saw them as a means of protecting themselves without necessarily going to war. But that renewed US commitment to the area at a time when, since the estab-

lishment of the Philippines Commonwealth, it had seemed arguable that the imperialist venture of the Americans was only temporary. The prospect that Japan could expand at the expense of the colonial powers without a conflict was reduced.

At the same time the Japanese began to feel a greater sense of urgency about the transformation of the role of Southeast Asia. In its ultimate fate they had long had a strong interest, and they were convinced that its future lay more with them than with the colonial powers. Now it seemed that other powers were at the very least lengthening the timetable. Their wish, on the other hand, was to shorten it. Again that arose in part from the steps taken by others. Oil was a focus of this shift. If the US were going to embargo oil, it would have to be obtained elsewhere, and Netherlands India was the obvious source.

So far oil had been the concern of the navy rather than the army, and it had been the navy that had advocated footsteps in the south in 1936. During 1940 the army began to attach more importance to the issue. Without oil, it argued, the military machine would come to a halt. Remaining nervous about the Soviet Union in the north, it nevertheless became more interested in the south.

Early in 1940 officers from the army general staff had drafted 'Main Principles for Coping with the Changing World Situation'. That indicated its new concern with the south. Colonel Usui Shigeki explained the shift at a liaison conference with officers from the navy general staff. 'It seems to be an inevitable outcome of the European war that Germany and Italy will establish a bloc extending over Europe and Africa, separating Great Britain from the United States economically as well as strategically. As a counter-measure to this offence, Great Britain will try to secure a line of communication with the United States in the South Pacific, using India and Australia as their bases. In the meantime the enormous expansion plan of the US navy will have been completed in several years from now. The upshot will be the establishment of a strong Anglo-American bloc, economic as well as strategic, in the South Seas.'<sup>4</sup> Japan must form 'an economically self-sufficient zone, including the Southern Area, establish a powerful political structure, and institute a planned economy'. The navy staff agreed, of course, with the new priority, though it wanted southern expansion achieved by peaceful means 'if at all possible'.<sup>5</sup>

Prime Minister Yonai's reluctance led to his overthrow. The new Konoe government was installed on 17 July 1940, with Tojo Hideki as army minister, Yoshida Zengo as navy minister, and Matsuoka as foreign minister. The Outline

of Fundamental National Policy was adopted by the cabinet on 26 July and by the Liaison Conference on the 27th. Strengthening ties with the Axis would neutralise the Soviet Union, promote the 'southern policy', and prevent the US from entering the war in Europe or interfering in Southeast Asia. Chiang Kai-shek was to be subjugated; Indo-China controlled; the Burma Road closed; the resources of Netherlands India secured, preferably by negotiation. Relations with the US would deteriorate, but outright hostilities could, it was hoped, be avoided.<sup>6</sup>

The government secured the closure of the Burma Road and the compliance of the Vichy French, though the Dutch proved more obstinate, and the US added to the embargoes. The Tripartite Pact - Konoe's second grand slam - was not productive. But Japan made some gains as a result of the Thailand-French Indo-China war early in 1941. The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June was a shock. Matsuoka's advice - to abandon the five-year neutrality pact he had just made - was ignored. The Japanese sought greater gains in the south, moving on southern Indo-China. There was still hope that their objectives might be secured by diplomatic means, particularly if the Germans secured a decisive victory.

Ambassador Nomura called on Admiral Turner, Director of War Plans in the Office of Naval Operations in Washington, on 20 July. The occupation of southern Indo-China was expected in the next few days, and he conveyed the impression that, if the US were accommodating, 'any action it might take in the Atlantic would not be a matter of any great concern to Japan'. But the US connected Southeast Asia with the European war, as Turner now emphasised. The occupation of Indo-China would affect the strategic position of the US. The greatest danger to the US, he told Nomura, lay in the continued military success of Germany. 'If Great Britain were to collapse, German military power might very well be directed against South America, and any such moves would cause great difficulties for the United States.' Anything that affected 'the future security of the UK, in any part of the world', was of interest to the US 'from the defensive standpoint'. The occupation of Indo-China was 'particularly important for the defence of the United States since it might threaten the British position in Singapore and the Dutch position in the Netherlands East Indies. Were they to pass out of their present control, a very severe blow would be struck at the integrity of the defense of the British Isles, and these Isles might well then be overcome by the Germans. It can thus be seen what a very close

interest, from a military viewpoint, the United States has in sustaining the status quo in the southern portion of the Far East.<sup>7</sup>

The Japanese moved on southern Indo-China even so. The French again gave in without a struggle. '[T]he most important question for France is to remain with some authority on the spot regardless of how restricted such authority may be or how humiliating its curtailment.'<sup>8</sup> But the US imposed embargoes of unexpected harshness. In the subsequent months the Japanese determined to risk a war for the resources of Southeast Asia.

There was an air of fatalism among Japan's decision-makers. 'The government has decided', said the chief of naval staff, Nagano Osami, commented on the Imperial Conference of 6 September, 'that if there is no war, the fate of the nation is sealed. Even if there is war, the country may be ruined. Nevertheless, a nation which does not fight in this plight has lost its spirit and is already a doomed country.'<sup>9</sup> 'The first stage of the war will not be difficult', Tojo told the Imperial Conference on 5 November. 'We have some uneasiness about a protracted war. But how can we let the United States continue to do as she pleases, even though there is some uneasiness? Two years from now we will have no petroleum for military use. Ships will stop moving. When I think about the strengthening of American defenses in the south-west Pacific, the expansion of the American fleet, the unfinished China Incident, and so on, I see no end to difficulties. ... I fear that we would become a third-class nation after about two or three years if we just sat tight.'<sup>10</sup>

If there were a more rational approach, Nagano had hinted at it. The empire could not subjugate the enemy, nor break its will to fight. But if the first stage of the operation were accomplished promptly, Japan could 'secure strategic points in the Southwest Pacific, and even if the military preparations of the United States develop as scheduled, we shall be able to establish the foundation for a long war by maintaining an invincible position'.<sup>11</sup> There was a hint here of a deal. The other powers would have to come to terms with Japan if it were in occupation. In that sense the invasion was a further step in the more forceful diplomacy Japan had been adopting. What was missing was any strategy for reaping political benefit from military success. What would Japan want? and how might it hope to realise it?

Wars, however, are easier to start than to stop. The war in China had started in 1937 without being declared: it had not proved possible to stop it. What in any case would represent victory? With whom, if anyone, would you

negotiate peace? Could you declare that you had won what you had never admitted starting in the first place? The war in Southeast Asia had more explicit objectives and more explicit limits. The colonial territories were to be acquired, and placed behind a defensive perimeter. That could be achieved in the short term and lay the foundations for a longer struggle. What was more difficult to envisage, let alone achieve, was the ultimate acceptance of Japan's predominance in Southeast Asia by the other powers. In the past they had in a sense defined Japan's policy by the extent of their collusion, complaisance, or opposition. In 1941 they had then set limits which the Japanese resolved to overcome by force. In that they enjoyed stunning success. But it could be temporary, unless the other powers accepted the outcome either by refraining from further contest, or by a process of negotiation. If, however, the Japanese had no strategic concept, and could not, with the Axis partners, aim at victory, nor did they have a means of securing compromise.

Before the war began Admiral Yamamoto was apprehensive about slipping into an unlimited war against the US. A letter he wrote to Sasakawa Ryoichi early in 1941 was published during the war as a means of rallying Japanese morale. A crucial passage was omitted: 'if there should be a war between Japan and America, then our aim, of course, ought not to be Guam or the Philippines, nor Hawaii or Hong Kong, but a capitulation at the White House, in Washington itself. I wonder whether the politicians of the day really have the willingness to make sacrifices, and the confidence that this would entail?'<sup>12</sup>

He appears to have looked for a negotiation. In September 1941 he told Sasakawa that Japan would have everything its own way for a while, 'stretching out in every direction like an octopus spreading its tentacles. But it'll last for a year and a half at the most. We've just got to get a peace agreement by then. The right time would be when Singapore falls.'<sup>13</sup> By that time, however, the Japanese were studying the next stage of the operations. They finally resolved on the Pacific option, and Yamamoto himself advocated it. It was, Kirby puts it, a means of destroying the remnants of the US Pacific fleet before it could be rebuilt.<sup>14</sup> The idea, Agawa suggests, was 'to score a victory that would give a second chance for an early peace settlement'.<sup>15</sup> Either way it failed at Midway. Yamamoto and Nagumo had made the 'limitless' war more likely, not less.

The early victories made it difficult to seek a settlement, given Japan's success and the consequent hubris of the military. The subsequent deterioration of its position also made it difficult. Not only would the military find it difficult



to accept. Japan would also appear to be negotiating from a position of weakness. In any case Prime Minister Tojo's judgment of the Allies was faulty. He seems to have thought that, involved in Europe and facing a *fait accompli*, the US would not fight to undo what Japan had done. He had, of course, some reason to think along these lines, for the US had not committed itself to resist Japan until the European war began, and had been planning to leave the Philippines. In the war, moreover, the Americans made the defeat of Germany their priority. They did not, however, intend to accept the *fait accompli*. At Casablanca in January 1943 they committed themselves to unconditional surrender, and the joint Anglo-American declaration at Cairo in December 1943, repeating that, also indicated that Japan would be required to give up all the gains it had made since 1895. Those Japanese who thought in terms of negotiation had an almost impossible gulf to bridge. If the military leadership had never accepted negotiation, it would certainly not accept humiliation. Japan's policy became both obscure and, designed to bridge internal divisions, more formulaic than ever.

Foreign Minister Shigemitsu looked to the Soviet Union, with which the five-year neutrality pact made by Matsuoka in April 1941 had been loyally sustained. In September 1944 he had the Foreign Office prepare a draft on Diplomatic Measures to be taken vis-a-vis the Soviet Union. The purpose was to maintain the pact, to promote peace between Germany and the Soviet Union, to utilize Soviet assistance in improving Japan's situation if Germany collapsed. If Germany made a separate peace, or if a general peace were secured through the good offices of the Soviet Union, Japan would accept a number of Soviet demands. So, too, if it were necessary to guard against Soviet attack. Such demands could include a sphere of interest in Manchuria, peaceful activities in China, and title to southern Sakhalin and the northern Kuriles. The Soviet Union refused to accept a special envoy, and on 7 November Stalin denounced Japan as an aggressor. The Japanese still not give up the hope of a negotiation. Nor was the hope entirely destroyed when, shortly after the invasion of Okinawa began, the Soviet Union announced that it would not renew the neutrality pact when it expired a year later.

The same day Prime Minister Koiso resigned. Significantly the foreign minister in the new Suzuki cabinet was Togo Shigenori, once ambassador in Moscow. Like his predecessor, he was ready to make large sacrifices, should the German collapse make it possible for the Soviet Union to bring about a general peace, or should relations with the Soviet Union deteriorate so as to threaten an

attack on Japan. Even after Germany's surrender on 8 May 1945, however, the majority of the War Council thought more in terms of securing Russia's friendship than its mediation. If it came to mediation, involving Russia might be a means of avoiding the demand for unconditional surrender that a direct approach to the Allies would involve. The object was a negotiated peace. Either way, the Japanese might still hope that the Soviet Union, originally pushed into alliance with the West by Nazi Germany, could be brought over to participation or mediation. They were not aware, though Togo suspected, that the Western Allies had already outbid them at Yalta. Talks between Hirota and Ambassador Malik were ineffectual. A proposal to send Kono to Moscow was deflected. The Potsdam declaration of 26 July repeated the Allied demand for unconditional surrender, though adding the words 'of all Japanese armed forces'.<sup>16</sup> The government did not accept it, though it did not dismiss it, as a phrase Admiral Suzuki Kantaro used seemed to imply.<sup>17</sup> It sought to ascertain Soviet intentions. But what Sato Nobuhiro got in Moscow on 30 July was entirely non-committal.

One week later, on 6 August, the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Foreign Minister Molotov finally met Sato on 8 August, only to indicate that the Soviet Union was war declaring on the 9th, and it soon unleashed its army on the depleted garrisons of Manchuria. A second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. On 14 August the Japanese decided to surrender.

The second perspective in my book that may offer some novelty in approach is influenced by the current interest in the relationship of rhetoric and reality. One is a rationalisation of the other, but not a mere rationalisation, and it may take on a life of its own: words do more than frame reality. The Japanese concept of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was manipulated over time and in changing circumstances, but it also itself influenced what was done.

The conquest of Southeast Asia was the result not of a long-term plan, but of a sudden frustration. It was clearly in part a result of this timing that, when the venture began, military objectives predominated, and that planning for the empire was limited and largely improvised. The rhetoric continued to change, affected by the initial hope of a negotiation, then by the continuance of the struggle, then by the attempt to avoid humiliation and surrender. Japan's opportunistic policy-making had long combined with a visionary rhetoric that spoke first of equality with the West and then increasingly, as Japan 'returned' to Asia, of some kind of leadership in Asia. That might help win support at home. Its

reception elsewhere - in the West, in China, in Southeast Asia - was likely to be different. Even in Asia it might not appeal: it might alienate.

Japan shared a Confucian background with China and Korea, but it had no special bonds with its neighbours, and handling them was complicated not only by the interests of the West but by Japan's emulation of the West. '[A]s England might say of Ireland or Russia of Poland, proximity made neither for successful imperialism nor co-prosperity.'<sup>18</sup> The New Order rhetoric of 1938 was, as Kunitada Miwa says, presented in traditional terms so as 'to have a readier appeal to the sentiments of the Japanese public. It was also hoped that it would have a similar effect on the Chinese.'<sup>19</sup> But it was a forlorn hope.

The acquisition of Manchuria prompted attempts to accommodate national self-determination with pan-Asian rhetoric. The Great Asia Society (Dai Ajia Kyokai) was founded in 1933 on the day Manchuria was proclaimed.<sup>20</sup> Its emphasis was neotraditionalist: it spoke, for example, of the harmony of the five races. The Showa Study Association (Showa Kenkyukai), informally inaugurated in November 1933, sought a more 'scientific' approach. But if proximity did not help in defining Japan's relationships, nor did distance. Extending the rhetoric to cover the non-Sinitic world was still more challenging.

Unsurprisingly, it was seriously attempted only in 1940. Konoe's New Order of 1938 had not been concerned with Southeast Asia. '[I]ts definitional extension to include Southeast Asia was the result of a sudden turn in international events and of Japan's opportunism in seizing upon this turn, rather than the consequence of a long-considered or widely held interest in the co-prosperity of the Southeast Asian peoples.'<sup>21</sup> 'The countries of East Asia stand in close relationship to the regions of the South Seas in terms of geography, history, race, and economy', Foreign Minister Arita declared in June 1940. 'They are destined to enjoy prosperous coexistence by mutual help and accommodation.'<sup>22</sup> A few weeks later the Konoe government and its foreign minister, Matsuoka, put forward the vision of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere. But it was still a piece of rhetoric that could be subject to many interpretations, and was.

It could not emphasise a Sinitic heritage. It therefore tended to emphasise 'liberation'. Four days after the war began the government announced that the Anglo-American war would be called a Great East Asia War 'because it is a war for the construction of a new order in East Asia'. It entailed the 'liberation of East Asian peoples from the aggression of America and Britain', which was to

lead to 'the establishment of genuine world peace and the creation of a new world culture'.<sup>23</sup>

That was as hard to reconcile with Japan's own interests and attitudes, however, as pan-Asianism had been earlier, if not harder. The task force on ideology at the navy ministry in June 1941 had voiced its dismay over the contradictions within the concepts *hakko ichiu* (eight corners of the world order under one roof, universal peace) and imperial 'benevolence' as the guiding principles of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. The terms seemed limited to a Japanese audience. 'Don't we have any "slogan" comparable with the universality of America's "democracy"?' asked one naval officer. An adviser suggested redefining *hakko ichiu* as 'universal brotherhood', but soon all agreed that 'although we say "universal brotherhood", it probably means that we are equal to the Caucasians but, to the peoples of Asia, we act as their leader'.<sup>24</sup> An academic adviser declared in October: 'The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere is not a reality, nor is it capable of becoming so. We are deceiving the world.'<sup>25</sup>

The Total War Institute, an officially sanctioned think tank, struggled with the task early in 1942. The desire for independence of peoples in the Co-Prosperity Sphere was to be respected, 'but proper and suitable forms of government shall be decided for them in consideration of military and economic requirements and of the historical, political and cultural elements peculiar to each area'. Independence was to be based on the construction of the New Order, differing from 'an independence based on the idea of liberalism and self-determination. ... The peoples of the sphere shall obtain their proper positions, the unity of the people's minds shall be effected and the unification of the sphere shall be realised with the empire as its center.'<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, the planning for the administration of the south put priority on Japan's economic needs. In a sense Japan was going only one step beyond the policy already followed in Indo-China and attempted in Netherlands India. That affords further evidence that the endeavour was not only developed in the short term but, other than the acquisition of resources, its objectives had not been finalised, and that the possibility of a deal with the Allies had not been ruled out. Invoking the rhetoric of the Sphere, when it was done, was a matter of expediency. An army document of 25 November 1941 spoke of gradually indoctrinating the local people with 'the policy of liberation in East Asia, so that they will be available for use in our operational schemes. Security of property rights

and destruction of the hated white races' power should be played up in our propaganda.<sup>27</sup>

Tojo's speech to the House of Peers on 20 January 1942 went somewhat further. Explaining the aim of the triumphing invaders, he echoed the rhetoric of the War Institute. Japan wanted each country and people in the Sphere 'to have its proper place and demonstrate its real character, thereby scuring an order of co-existence and co-prosperity based on ethical principles with Japan serving as its nucleus'. Japan would deal with areas 'absolutely essential' for defence, such as Hong Kong and the Malay peninsula. 'As regards the Philippines, if the peoples of those islands will hereafter understand the real intentions of Japan and offer to cooperate with us as one of the partners for the establishment of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, Japan will gladly enable them to enjoy the honour of independence. As for Burma what Japan contemplates is not different from that relating to the Philippines.'<sup>28</sup>

The following month Singapore fell, and in March the Indies. The superintendent-general of military administration in Singapore indicated in August that the national policy was 'to defer final decisions on the eventual status of the occupied areas'. Local military authorities should not 'prematurely reveal the Empire's intentions or make commitments to the local inhabitants'. The Philippines and Burma would have independence 'after they have evidenced their cooperation with the empire', but 'military affairs, foreign affairs, economics, and other affairs shall be placed under the firm control of the empire'.<sup>29</sup>

In the following months a less haphazard approach was adopted. Some officials saw the need for a central planning agency for the occupied areas. The haphazard nature of the policies of the occupying forces was an argument for it, put forward by civilians on the planning board and in the colonial ministry. With that they invoked the need to prepare for the new Asian order. Even so, they noted that the major goal of the new organisation would be 'to carry out the establishment of a great East Asian order properly and expeditiously so as to enable all regions of Asia to concentrate their resources on the strengthening of [Japanese] fighting capabilities'.<sup>30</sup>

There was opposition. Some of it originated in bureaucratic rivalry, but by no means all. Former financial leaders, like Fukai Eigo, thought it a mistake to separate Asian countries from others. They thought, too, that the agency would symbolise compulsion, and alienate those whom it was intended to win over.

After Midway the proposal was also criticised by the foreign minister, Togo Shigenori. 'Like the privy councillors, he thought an East Asian ministry would represent a point of no return in Japan's determination to separate the region from the rest of the world. It would be particularism in the extreme, making it more difficult than ever to come to terms with the Western powers.' Though now flushed with victory and inflamed by hatred, the Japanese should be making plans to end the war. That task would be more difficult if policy towards Asia was left to a new ministry.<sup>31</sup> He argued in vain and resigned. The new ministry was established on 1 November 1942.

The concept of Greater East Asia had not, however, thus received a final definition. It remained part of the debate among the Japanese, and its role changed as their fortunes changed. Overall the trend was to emphasise its 'liberationist' aspect. The military leadership could see that as a means of recruiting support as the war turned against them, though they remained cautious. Others could see it as a means of universalising Japan's war aims, and so perhaps facilitating a settlement, while yet persuading the Japanese themselves that they had not fought in vain. The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere thus became a means to peace as well as an obstruction in its way.

The treatment afforded the nationalist movements in Burma and the Philippines differed from that accorded the Indonesians, while French rule was retained in Indo-China. But the war was increasingly presented as one of liberation. The Allies were fighting to regain their colonies, Shigemitsu told the Diet in October 1943. Japan's aims were quite different. 'To East Asia and its peoples, this is a war of racial awakening - a war for the renaissance of East Asia. No wonder that all the peoples of East Asia have risen *en masse* to join this supreme and stupendous enterprise. ... The present war is to us a war of national emancipation, which to our enemy is nothing but a war of aggression. ... The war of greater East Asia is a war for justice to combat aggression. It is a war of liberation.'<sup>32</sup> For the foreign minister, the rhetoric was a means of persuading the Japanese that they were winning, as well as a means of stirring fellow Asians to greater efforts, but it was also, partly as a result, a route to peace. 'We must be prepared to make peace so soon as our aims have been attained. The emphasis on our war aims and the limits we assign to them will provide the groundwork for the restoration of peace.'<sup>33</sup>

A Greater East Asia Conference met in Tokyo in November 1943, attended by leaders from Free India, the Philippines, though not by Pibun of Thailand,

who failed to come, nor by the Indonesians, who were not asked. The Liaison Conference had seen it as an opportunity for Asian countries to declare their 'firm resolve to continue the war and to establish the great East Asia co-prosperity sphere'.<sup>34</sup> Tojo's welcoming speech used the rhetoric he had used in 1942. In Greater East Asia, each nation was to have 'its proper place', 'enjoy the blessings of common prosperity', and 'practise mutual help'. Such was the 'spiritual essence of the culture of Greater East Asia'.<sup>35</sup> But the declaration of principles adopted on 7 November was rather different. The countries of great East Asia were to 'cooperate together in order to secure the stability of East Asia and establish an order based on the principle of coexistence and coprosperity'. They were to 'respect their mutual autonomy and independence, extend aid and friendship to each other, and establish an intimate relationship throughout East Asia', and to 'respect their respective traditions, promote each other's creativity, and enhance the culture of the whole East Asia'. The countries were to cooperate closely 'according to the principle of mutuality, plan their economic development, and promote the prosperity of East Asia'. They would also 'maintain friendly relations with all nations, abolish systems of racial discrimination, undertake extensive cultural exchanges, voluntarily open up their resources, and thus contribute to the progress of the entire world'.<sup>36</sup>

The declaration had been drafted in the foreign ministry. Kase Shun'ichi had the Atlantic Charter of 1941 by his side when he drafted it, and it was, as many Japanese newspapers observed, a kind of answer to it. Indeed, while retaining key concepts like coexistence and coprosperity, it was more universalistic in tone than pan-Asianist. 'It is Japan's tragedy', the diarist Kiyosawa Kiyoshi noted, 'to have had to draft a declaration which is similar to the Atlantic Charter, granting all peoples their independence and freedom.'<sup>37</sup> Yet while the statement was adopted at a conference designed to support the war, its invocation of universal principles could also be a means of working towards peace. If they were accepted in Tokyo, they would give the Japanese a sense of achievement and avoid humiliation. At the same time they might also be accepted in Washington and, less readily, in London.

'In retrospect it can be seen that Shigemitsu and others were preparing themselves and the nation for accepting defeat by calling it a victory for certain universalistic principles', Iriye comments. 'It is clear that they were hoping to salvage the war from a complete disaster by devising a formula for a symbolic "victory".'<sup>38</sup> But it would, of course, be far more than symbolic. For any such

plan, while bringing an end to the exclusivity of the Sphere, would also bring an end to the treaty system in China and the colonial system in Southeast Asia. That, in a sense, was what they wanted their Tokyo colleagues to see as a victory, so as to make a settlement possible. They might also hope that the Americans might accept such a formula, particularly if the other super-power put it forward.

A memorandum on the independence of Java produced by the ministry of foreign affairs early in 1944 argued that granting independence to Java might restrict 'the Empire's pressing military and economic measures and obstruct military operations in no small degree'. Taking such a step when the military situation was becoming unfavourable might also 'lead to misinterpretation of the Empire's true intentions as a mere stratagem, thus giving the impression that the Empire is weakening'. 'Temporarily leaving aside the possibility of an overwhelming victory for either side, should a stalemate be reached, and should a delicate situation arise making it necessary to terminate the war because of internal and external factors, it will obviously be of utmost importance to leave everything on an open basis as much as possible to assure diplomatic flexibility.' But there were arguments on the other side. The Empire would find it difficult to achieve its war aims if government and diplomacy remained 'chained to the concepts of the old order', and there were no 'deep conviction' in the principles that would 'govern the next stage of history'. Even if independence were not finally 'upheld by diplomatic negotiations after the termination of the war' and were 'temporarily left in abeyance as a future problem', not even the enemy would be able to 'deny the fundamental truth that independence inevitably follows the formative development of a people; if so, and if independence is granted by us, then half the victory can be acknowledged as ours'.<sup>39</sup>

Togo convened a second Greater East Asia conference in Tokyo on 23 April 1945, attended only by ambassadors, rather than heads of state, because of the physical conditions. One aim was to demonstrate Asian solidarity at the time of the UN conference in San Francisco. It 'set forth' the independence of the Indo-China states and looked towards that of the Indies.<sup>40</sup> Its declaration stressed, not Japan's leadership, but cooperation, political equality, economic reciprocity, non-aggression. Iriye's adjective is 'Wilsonian'. It was a response to the nations of Greater East Asia. It was also, perhaps, a signal to enemy nations, a means of conveying peace terms. 'More important', a signal at home: peace would not be



a disgrace. '[I]t would simply mean an agreement with the enemy about an acceptable framework for Japanese foreign affairs.'<sup>41</sup>

The thrust was a failure, but the Japanese continued to claim 'half' the victory. To what extent can we accept that? The main effect of the Japanese venture was to dislodge the colonial regimes. The long-term prospects of those regimes were no doubt in any case limited, and they might be regarded as transitional. Once interrupted, however, they could not be restored. The judgment the French made was, in that sense, the right one. The old regime was not restored in Burma, though it was reconquered, let alone in Malaya or Indonesia, though they were not. Not only had the 'prestige' of the Europeans suffered an irreparable blow. They now had no effective means of winning that collaboration without which the deployment of such force as they had would operate in a political vacuum. The break in colonial continuity was sufficient to allow the nationalists their chance. To them, again, the Japanese offered little that was positive.

It cannot properly be said that the Southeast Asian states owe their independence to the Japanese. Breaking the colonial continuity indeed meant that it would be difficult for the colonial powers to return. But securing independence out of the international situation at the end of the war was very much the work of the Southeast Asian elites. They had been helped by the Japanese, but also hindered, since the main aim had been mobilisation, not the creation of new states. They now faced the victorious allies, the colonial powers in somewhat equivocal relationship with the triumphant US. Only the Vietnamese - caught up in a new war, though a cold one - were unable to secure independence for their country. Otherwise the victory was to the Southeast Asians, though in the war they had been fought over rather than fought. It remained to be seen whether the elites could redeem the enormous suffering of the masses and meet the expectations of those for whom they now became directly responsible.

## NOTE

- \* This paper is based on a lecture given in the History Department, University of Malaya, on 9 April 2001. The book *Sudden Rampage: The Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia, 1941-1945*, to which it refers was published by Hurst later that year.
- <sup>1</sup> *The War Diaries*, London: Collins, 1978, p. 71.
  - <sup>2</sup> Memorandum, 8 September 1921. FO 371/6696 [F3600/901/23], Public Record Office, London.
  - <sup>3</sup> Fitzmaurice/Foreign Secretary, 29 June 1933, 77. FO 371/17407 [W9005/663/29].
  - <sup>4</sup> q. Murakami Sachiko, 'Japan's Thrust into French Indo-China 1940-1945', PhD thesis, New York University, 1981, p. 61.
  - <sup>5</sup> q. J.B. Crowley in James W. Morley, ed. *Japan's Foreign Policy 1868-1941*, Athens: Columbia University Press, 1974, p. 85.
  - <sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 87.
  - <sup>7</sup> Turner-Stark, 21 July 1941. *Foreign Relations of the United States Japan* [FRUS], II, pp. 518-19.
  - <sup>8</sup> Leahy/Hull, 22 July 1941, 921. FRUS, V, pp. 221-2.
  - <sup>9</sup> q. Crowley/Morley, p. 98.
  - <sup>11</sup> q. Ike Nobutake, ed. *Japan's Decision for War*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967, p. 238.
  - <sup>12</sup> q. Crowley/Morley, p. 97.
  - <sup>13</sup> q. Agawa Hiroyuki, *The Reluctant Admiral*, Tokyo, New York: Kodansha, 1979, p. 291.
  - <sup>13</sup> q. *ibid.*, p. 292.
  - <sup>14</sup> S.W. Kirby, *The War against Japan*, London: HMSO, 1957-69, II, p. 226.
  - <sup>15</sup> Agawa, p. 321.
  - <sup>16</sup> R.C.J. Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954, p. 133.
  - <sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 145ff.
  - <sup>18</sup> S. Lone, *Japan's First Modern War*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994, p. 124.
  - <sup>19</sup> In James W. White, Michio Umegaki, and Thomas R. Havens, eds, *The Ambivalence of Nationalism*, Lanham: University Press of America, 1990, p. 149.

- <sup>20</sup> M.R. Peattie in P. Duus et al, eds, *The Japanese Wartime Empire*, Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 209.
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 211.
- <sup>22</sup> q. Murakami, p. 48.
- <sup>23</sup> q. Iriye Akira, *Power and Culture*, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 64.
- <sup>24</sup> q. Crowley in Bernard S. Silberman and H.D. Harootunian, eds, *Japan in Crisis*, Princeton University Press, 1974, p. 293.
- <sup>25</sup> q. *ibid.*, p. 294.
- <sup>26</sup> q. Tsunoda Ryusaku, Wm. T. de Bary, and Donald Keene, comps, *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1958, pp. 294ff.
- <sup>27</sup> q. Ooi Keat Gin, *Japanese Empire in the Tropics*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 1988, p. 30.
- <sup>28</sup> q. Joyce C. Lebra, *Japan's Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere in World War II*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 79-80.
- <sup>29</sup> q. Harry H. Benda, James K. Irikura, and Kishi Koishi, *Japanese Military Administration in Indonesia*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965, p. 187.
- <sup>30</sup> q. Iriye, p. 69.
- <sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 69-70.
- <sup>32</sup> q. Duus, introduction, p. xxvi.
- <sup>33</sup> Shigemitsu Mamoru, *Japan and her Destiny*, London: Hutchinson, 1958, pp. 289-90.
- <sup>34</sup> Iriye, p. 118.
- <sup>35</sup> q. Lebra, pp. 88ff.
- <sup>36</sup> q. Iriye, p. 119.
- <sup>37</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 121, 170.
- <sup>39</sup> q. Benda et al, pp. 240ff.
- <sup>40</sup> L.D. Meo, *Japan's Radio War on Australia 1941-1945*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1968, p. 189.
- <sup>41</sup> Iriye, p. 241.