

Grand Strategic Scope in Early WWII Germany and Japan

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This paper tests and confirms key hypotheses from a theory of grand strategy change and adjustment. Specifically, it seeks to explain German and Japanese strategic aggression between 1939 and 1941, a high point of geopolitical reach for both states. Each state had set ambitious parameters for the geopolitical scope of its respective grand strategy, but once in place, these ambitions were defended as if they were inevitabilities. For example, faced with a “window of opportunity” in 1939 and then frustration on the Western front in 1940-41, the Germans plunged forward in accordance with an overarching strategic vision adopted in previous years. Similarly, Japanese leaders forged ahead with ever more dangerous territorial ambitions that conformed to their vision of a world divided into a few autarkic spheres of influence. How can we explain this persistent fidelity to high-risk grand strategies?

One important answer involves distinguishing between “dominant” and “subordinate” grand strategies. According to the theory tested in this paper, once in place, a dominant grand strategy will not change without a “collapse,” or a definitive demonstration of failure.¹ On the other hand, subordinate adjustments to the dominant grand strategy are more common, but these adjustments will support rather than alter the basic premises of the dominant grand strategy. In other words, even in a desperate situation, policy makers are more likely to respect than change the fundamental parameters of an existing, dominant grand strategy. Such arguments contradict theories suggesting 1) that grand strategies frequently change to meet shifting geopolitical realities or 2) that in fact, grand strategy does not even exist but is a post hoc analysis of events.

This study offers several contributions to existing scholarship. First, while much research already describes these World War II belligerents in terms of fascism, racial politics, total war, and paths to war, relatively less work considers how German and Japanese policy makers viewed

¹ Jeffrey W. Legro *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2005), 24.

the strategic world around them and how those views relate to theories of grand strategy. In addition, this paper contributes to our analytical understanding of grand strategy, a widely-used but relatively underdeveloped concept. The nature of grand strategy change is particularly interesting to many scholars, yet while some have proposed differentiating between major changes and minor adjustments to a grand strategy, there is little empirical research to test these ideas.

The following sections briefly describe the theory of grand strategy change to be tested, describe German and Japanese grand strategic “scopes” between 1939 and 1941, then, finally, demonstrate how both cases in fact fit the theory’s expectations.

Theory

Existing Research

The notion of a “grand strategy” usually extends to any power with a plan to assess and apply specific means to achieve national interests, especially security.² In turn, work on the nature of grand strategy falls into two interrelated categories: prescriptive and empirical. Prescriptive work focuses on determining which grand strategies best serve state interests;³ however, this paper focuses on understanding the empirical nature of grand strategy – in other words, how do grand strategies behave.

² Edward N. Luttwak *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (Belknap Press: Cambridge, 2009), 409 makes a similar case.

³ For a sampling of recent monographs in this vein, see Robert J. Art *A Grand Strategy for America* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2003) ; Andrew J. Bacevich *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2002); Charles A. Kupchan *The End of the American Era: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Geopolitics of the Twenty-first Century* (Knopf: New York, 2002); Christopher Layne *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2006); Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro, eds. *To Lead the World: American Strategy after the Bush Doctrine* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2008); Robert J. Lieber *The American Era: Power and Strategy for the 21st Century* (Cambridge University Press: NY, 2005); Steven E. Lobell *The Challenge of Hegemony Grand Strategy, Trade, and Domestic Politics* (University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 2003); Walter Russell Mead *Power, Terror, Peace, and War: America’s Grand Strategy in a World at Risk* (Knopf: New York, 2004).

One major cleavage in the empirical research involves whether grand strategies are stable (that is, governed by inertia) or constantly adjusting (that is, governed by changing circumstances),⁴ or whether grand strategies simply do not exist (that is, both state policies and state behavior are a function of bureaucratic politics and day-to-day events).⁵ This paper sides with the first school of thought. Here, scholars find that strategies and policies usually persist until a compelling reason arises to overcome high barriers to changing them.⁶ However, any given policy or strategy may be adjusted within broad parameters; the point here is that only when specific circumstances converge will policy makers be able to overcome ideational, political and bureaucratic inertia to change from one overarching strategy to another.

Jeffrey Legro offers one of these theories of grand strategy change that favors stability. For Legro, ideational and institutional inertia mean that states only revise their collective ideas about international politics when 1) a shock demonstrates clearly that the previous idea was a failure – a condition Legro calls “collapse” – and 2) one dominant new idea has a clear advocate and proves effective when first applied.⁷ For all other circumstances, decision makers may entertain competing ideas, but the conditions will be insufficient to make change possible. In this model, change is rare and happens at the broadest levels of foreign policy. For example, after World War II, Legro emphasizes the dominant grand strategy shift in US foreign policy ideas from “separationism” to “integrationism.” However, Legro has also suggested that

⁴ See for example Stephen Majeski and David Sylvan “Domination Without Grand Strategy: A Reinterpretation of U.S. Security Policy in the 20th and 21st Centuries” (Paper presented at the International Studies Association, New Orleans February 17-20, 2010), 1-3; Steve A. Yetiv *The Absence of Grand Strategy: The United States in the Persian Gulf, 1972 - 2005* (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore 2008), 11-12.

⁵ See for example John J. Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago 2001), 140-147; Benjamin Miller “Explaining Changes in U.S. Grand Strategy: 9/11, the Rise of Offensive Liberalism, and the War in Iraq” (*Security Studies* 2010) 19: 26-65. Kevin Narizny *The Political Economy of Grand Strategy* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca 2007), 12-17.

⁶ See for example Bacevich 2002, 5; Colin Dueck *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2006), 37; Legro 2005, 28-36; George Tsebelis *Veto Players: How Political Institutions Work* (Princeton University Press: Princeton 2002), 2-3; David A. Welch *Painful Choices: A Theory of Foreign Policy Change* (Princeton University Press: Princeton 2005), 8-45.

⁷ Legro 2005, 24

“adaptation” and “adjustment” within a standing grand strategy is possible without “the remaking of fundamental principles.”⁸

New Additions to Theory

Consequently, this project identifies two levels of grand strategy: *dominant* and *subordinate*. *Dominant grand strategy* is an explicit plan or observable trend involving “the coordinated use of all the instruments of state power to pursue objectives that protect and promote the national interest.”⁹ An example might be American liberal internationalism after World War II. More narrowly, a *subordinate grand strategy* is a “political-military means-ends chain, a state’s theory about how it can best ‘cause’ security for itself.”¹⁰ Also known as “national security strategy,” these grand strategies can be applied as means for the dominant grand strategy and might include America’s Cold War Containment strategy. In other words, dominant grand strategies rarely change, but between dominant grand strategy changes, subordinate adjustments involve policies, doctrines and reactions that respond to changing circumstances. By contrast, the “constant adjustment” camp recognizes no stable, dominant grand strategy and argues that any given grand strategy shift is a better reflection of (more or less) rational choosing between approaches than some overarching strategy. Similarly, those who recognize no grand strategies suggest that any given strategic decision merely reflects current bureaucratic interests and geopolitical pressures.

⁸ Legro, Jeffrey W. (2009) “A ‘Return to Normalcy’? The Future of America’s Internationalism” in *Avoiding Trivia: The Role of Strategic Planning in American Foreign Policy* Daniel W. Drezner, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press 2009), 56-57. Colin Dueck offers a competing model in which all grand strategy “changes” are in fact simply adjustments of emphasis within standing political culture; Dueck 2006, 38-41.

⁹ Adapted from “foreign affairs strategy” in Terry L. Deibel *Foreign Affairs Strategy: Logic for American Statecraft* (Cambridge U.P.: New York 2007), 10. This is also similar to Flint’s “geopolitical code” in Colin Flint *Introduction to Geopolitics* (Routledge: New York 2006), 55-65.

¹⁰ Barry R. Posen *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain and Germany between the World Wars* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca 1984), 13.

Drawing from Legro's theory in addition to the dominant/subordinate distinction, this project proposes several hypotheses:

H1: Once in place, a dominant grand strategy is unlikely to change without "collapse."

H2: Subordinate adjustments are more likely than dominant grand strategy changes.

H3: Without a dominant grand strategy collapse, subordinate adjustments are likely to be bounded by the conceptual parameters of the dominant grand strategy.

Testing

German and Japanese grand strategic scopes between 1939 and 1941 are fruitful cases to test these hypotheses. First, at several points during this period, each state faced negative feedback from its strategic efforts – Germany, for example, failed to knock Britain out of the War, and Japan saw confrontation with the US growing rather than diminishing. Thus, each actor had opportunities to change its grand strategy, yet both persisted with what proved to be self-destructive behavior. The hypotheses here suggest the reason is that decision-making was constrained by a previously-adopted, dominant grand strategy, so if the hypotheses hold in these cases, their explanatory power will have passed an important test.

Given the expansive literature surrounding both World War II and these actors in particular, these tests will focus on what can loosely be called "grand strategic vision." One element of this vision is scope, the geopolitical extent of a grand strategy and involves policy makers' geopolitical priorities, calculations and commitments. It captures a specific consideration in the minds of grand strategists – a consideration of which areas of the world are worth defense as crucial to national security.¹¹ In addition, "vision" also involves "a comprehensive, multifaceted policy ... reflecting a ruling elite's" perception of its state's place

¹¹ Related formulations include Flint's "geopolitical code," 2006, pp 55-56; Grygiel's "geopolitics" and "geostrategy," in Jakub Grygiel *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change* (Johns Hopkins University Press 2006), x.

in the world.¹² How the international system works and the state's role in that order are relevant here.

Cases

The cases are divided into three parts, each roughly corresponding to events in 1939, 1940 and 1941. The conclusion presents an analysis of how well grand strategic vision in these cases comports with hypothesized expectations.

Germany

Throughout the 1930s and into the period studied here, policy makers and other elites drew upon strategic notions developed in previous eras to formulate a dominant grand strategic vision for Nazi Germany. Overall, scholars tend to agree that what Rich called the “ideological factor” became crucial to Nazi foreign policy makers.¹³ Rather than pursuing a clear, status quo foreign policy, Hitler and his followers pursued risky expansionism and acted opportunistically with long-term, ideological goals in mind. For example, suggests Tooze, Nazi policy makers saw the relatively distant US threat as more than a great power rivalry: manipulated by a world Jewish conspiracy, America was an existential menace that would eventually have to be confronted. This long-range view of external threats, coupled with a grand vision of Germany's future, led Nazi strategists, and Hitler in particular, to view German expansionist strategy unfolding in stages or phases.¹⁴ Describing Hitler's intentions as a “gradual plan” in this sense is a heuristic “intended to cover the essential motives and immutable central aims of Hitler's foreign policy ... without losing sight of the dictator's ‘improvisations’ and his highly developed

¹² John P. LeDonne *The Grand Strategy of the Russian Empire, 1650-1831* (Oxford University Press: New York 2004), 219.

¹³ Norman Rich, *Hitler's War Aims: Ideology, the Nazi State, and the Course of Expansion* (NY: W. W. Norton, 1973), xiv.

¹⁴ Klaus Hildebrand, *The Foreign Policy of the Third Reich* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), 94. Andreas Hillgruber, “England's Place in Hitler's Plans for World Dominion,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 9(1): 8.

tactical versatility.”¹⁵ In other words, while Nazi Germany actively pursued the broad strokes of a grand expansionist plan, Hitler and his elite adjusted and changed their overarching aspirations as the war altered on-the-ground circumstances.

The following, therefore, briefly describes Nazi German “central aims” as they developed through the 1930s and resulted in stunning military successes in early 1940. It then considers first, German strategizing from the summer of 1940 to the invasion of the USSR one year later, and second, Nazi German grand strategy between Barbarossa and Pearl Harbor.

From Formation in 1930s to Success in 1940

Nazi German strategic views of the world were not radically new, but they were newly radical. National ambitions to consolidate a “greater Germany” and dominate Europe, as well as develop overseas territories, stretched back into the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Wilhemine era. By World War I, many Germans considered themselves geopolitically aggrieved: a large, economically developed power at the heart of Europe, Germany remained trapped between nearby great powers. Overseas, Germans held relatively few territorial possessions since their consolidated state entered the imperial game late in the day. Demanding reparations and dispossessing Germany of territories like Alsace-Lorraine, the Versailles Treaty magnified this sense of grievance, particularly given that Germans believed they had won the war in the East.

As they seized and consolidated power in the early 1930s, Nazis added racial dimensions to this geopolitical nationalism and proved willing to push their ideas, specifically Hitler’s ideas, to an “ultimate conclusion.”¹⁶ This vision remained intensely territorial – and therefore fundamentally geostrategic. Nazi thinkers considered their people to be the only “true creators of

¹⁵ Klaus Hildebrand, *The Third Reich* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1984), 144.

¹⁶ Rich 1973, xlii

culture;” thus, they enjoyed “a *moral* right to world territorial domination.”¹⁷ Hitler in particular acutely felt the “immediacy of Germany’s territorial requirements.” He argued that Russia and the East generally, peopled by racially inferior Slavs, offered a natural territorial outlet to avoid curtailing German population growth or wearing out Germany’s productive agricultural lands. Similarly, though he never desired acquisitions there, Hitler found himself drawn into southeast Europe to secure its raw materials (especially oil).¹⁸ One crucial Nazi self-image was as a cadre of empire builders to whom it had fallen, through rigorous breeding, training and experience, “to establish an empire that would elevate them to the status of world power” and compete for the world’s great resources.¹⁹ Without much knowledge of the situation, they were impressed with Britain’s minimalist imperialism over India, and they aspired to imperialism as “a violent fantasy of racial mastery, a demonstration of the prowess of a martial elite bred to lord over hundreds of millions.”²⁰

The Nazi program revitalized popular and elite aspirations for economic empire in Europe, expansion in central Africa and rearmament to stimulate the economy. To compete with the UK, Hitler envisioned acquiring overseas colonies and building a strong Atlantic navy,²¹ a tool the conservative Admiral Raeder later vainly sought to apply directly to the British in the face of Hitler’s fixation on Russia.²² Adam Tooze argues that the US also represented an “acute” military and cultural threat to Hitler’s vision of Germany, so Hitler “sought to mobilize the pent-up frustrations of his population to mount an epic challenge to this [Anglo-American] order.”²³ German supremacy, in other words, lay at the end of a successful war of conquest or destruction

¹⁷ Rich 1973, 3

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p 180

¹⁹ Mark Mazower, *Hitler’s Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (NY: Penguin, 2008), 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Hillgruber 1974, 10

²² Hildebrand 1970, 92

²³ Tooze 2006, xxiv

against the ascendant *status quo* powers. The 1930s economic recovery, coupled with a domestically popular *Wehrmacht* reconstruction, was the foundation of a diplomatic and military effort to launch German supremacy.²⁴ By aligning popular ambitions and worldviews with their own grand strategic visions, Hitler and his Nazi elite could steer an internationally aggressive course and later completely highjack the ship of state.

In general, Germany's leading strategists conceptually arranged the wider world into concentric circles of importance, and they did this with a mix of social-Darwinian and utility calculations. Thus, where Nazi strategists lacked (or disregarded) geostrategic information, they projected their racial logics. Already Hitler had articulated disdain for the neighboring Poles' "racial value" and expected to seize their land to expand German *lebensraum*, or living space. However, through the mid-1930s, Poland itself served as a useful strategic buffer to Russia and was fed hopes of an amicable relationship with Germany.²⁵ Similarly, the secret non-aggression pact and agreement to divide Poland with the USSR later proved a cynical move to secure Soviet resources and trust – Hitler's unwavering vision was always to expand German territory into Russia's vast spaces. Western powers remained a major concern for Hitler and his advisors; however, while British and French racial inferiority remained less dramatic than Slavic inferiority, their toothless response to Hitler's expansionism and a decade of decreasing military budgets suggested that if war came, Germany could prevail. Across the Atlantic, the US had become a "corrupt and outworn system." Its cultural and racial melting pot allowed the "scum" (especially Jews) to rise to the top and formulate weak-minded international policies like neutrality.²⁶ While Latin America remained largely irrelevant to German policy makers, the

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 658-659

²⁵ Christian Leitz *Nazi Foreign Policy: The Road to Global War* (NY: Routledge, 2004), 63-68.

²⁶ Gerhard L. Weinberg, *World in the Balance: Behind the Scenes of World War II* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1981), 57-60 and 76-78.

Sino-Japanese conflict left Hitler and others, not wanting to lose possible trade with China, waiting to see which way the winds would blow.²⁷ In the end, the Nazis toned down their racial rhetoric toward East Asians. Ribbentrop, Hitler's Foreign Minister, saw mutual interests with Japan and communicated to Japanese leaders an open door to seize European colonial possessions like the Dutch East Indies.²⁸

By 1939, a "window of opportunity" had opened that Hitler refused to ignore.²⁹ As Tooze points out, Hitler perceived a deteriorating economic situation in Germany and suffered a "paranoid sense of menace" from Jews in other European capitals.³⁰ US neutrality and Soviet agreements further cemented Hitler's determination to press forward rather than pursue his originally long-term vision of confronting the West at some point in the future. Emboldened by British appeasement in 1938 and "glee" amongst the officer corps at the prospect of "deal[ing] with the Poles quickly," the September *blitzkrieg* against Poland became a near inevitability.³¹ Even Admiral Raeder, hardly a Hitler enthusiast, pushed unrestricted naval war in order to gain an advantage in the Atlantic before Germany lost its naval edge.³² As Hitler surmised,

No treaty and no agreement can ensure lasting neutrality on the part of Soviet Russia ... The best security against Russian attack is to make a clear display of superior German strength and a quick demonstration of power ... The attempt of certain US circles to lead the continent in an anti-German direction is at present unsuccessful but might not be so in future. Here too we must realize that time is working against Germany.³³

With Germany's relative power apparently at a peak, timely and decisive action seemed prudent to secure Nazi strategic aims.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 134

²⁸ Weinberg 1981, 107

²⁹ Stephen Van Evera, *The Causes of War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 94-99.

³⁰ Tooze 2006, 662

³¹ Leitz 2004, 72

³² Weinberg 1981, 80

³³ Hildebrand 1984, 51

Relatively easy success in Poland and official war with France and Britain crystallized German strategic thinking in late 1939 and early 1940. The German Foreign Ministry, for instance, began solidifying plans for African colonization and sent an emissary to South Africa to smooth relations as Germany reestablished and expanded its old empire.³⁴ Ribbentrop's advisors Carl Clodius and Karl Ritter as well as naval planner Admiral Kurt Fricke debated whether Germany should eventually seize massive swaths of the continent, perhaps to link with a putative German economic sphere, or target specific colonies like French Equatorial Africa and British Nigeria.

Closer to home, Hitler and his advisors began to look north and west. In April 1940, German troops entered Denmark and then Norway to deter the Soviets (who had just invaded Finland) and the western powers from cutting off raw materials like Swedish iron ore. Hildebrand also suggests that this move further established "a better defensive and offensive base for warfare in the Atlantic" which would solidify Germany's "future world strategy as a naval and colonial power."³⁵

Germany's subsequent, spring 1940 move into Western Europe subordinated ideology to strategic necessity.³⁶ Facing war with the allied powers, Hitler resolved to shape the conflict according to his overarching vision by "secur[ing] his rear" and then forcing Britain into an alliance before turning to his real objectives in the East.³⁷ As evidence of Hitler's uncertainty about how Western Europe fit into his primarily eastern grand strategic vision, Mazower points to the "sheer variety" of occupation regimes established by the Nazis.³⁸

"The Crucial Year" – Success in 1940 to Frustration in 1941

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 107

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 51

³⁶ Mazower 2008, 110

³⁷ Hildebrand 1970, 92

³⁸ Mazower 2008, 111

Despite its relative ease and popularity, the German move into Western Europe left some unresolved strategic questions and forced further adjustments to the Nazi “grand program.” Certainly by mid-1940, Hitler enjoyed peaking domestic popularity and could draw upon “unbounded authority and prestige” amongst old and new Nazi elites to advance his vision.³⁹ However, a “decisive problem” remained: Britain remained free and seemed completely unwilling to bandwagon with a successful Germany. Hitler had been convinced that the British agree to ally with Germany and “divide up” the world rather than side with the mutually detested Soviet Union.⁴⁰ In addition, at that moment, physically destroying the British seemed imprudent because, as Hitler told his generals, “We should spill German blood only in order that Japan, America and others might benefit” as they scooped up British colonies.⁴¹ America particularly troubled Hitler, who began to expect a great conflict with the US at some decisive historical moment in his own lifetime.⁴² Though the US continued to back British resistance without actually joining the fight, Hitler and his strategists remained optimistic that they could keep America out of the war by restricting naval warfare in the Atlantic.⁴³

These shifting circumstances, however, failed to overturn Hitler and his advisors’ fundamental strategic vision for the world. Regarding Britain, America and Japan, for instance, Hitler’s basic ambition to dominate the world in stages persisted: Germany and Britain would first partition the world as the greatest land and sea powers, respectively; meanwhile, Germany would begin planning colonies to supplant the British as their power waned; and, finally, Germany could face America and perhaps Japan once it enjoyed a position of unmatched

³⁹ Hildebrand 1984, 52

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 53

⁴¹ Rich 1973, 158

⁴² Hildebrand 1984, 53

⁴³ Stam 2003, 49

geostrategic strength.⁴⁴ Along the way, Germany coordinated the 1940 Tripartite Pact, fatefully sealing World War II's Axis alliance. German diplomats and strategists, less concerned about Japan as a fellow fascist traveler, saw the treaty as means to deter a US war against Nazi strategic ambitions, divide British naval power and secure access to Southeast Asian resources.⁴⁵ Later, Ribbentrop even briefly persuaded Hitler to adopt a "continental bloc" strategic vision that involved amicable spheres of influence between a few major powers, Japan, the USSR, Germany and the US.⁴⁶ However, international pressures as well as Hitler's own preference for military solutions ended this flirtation with continental blocs and led to reaffirmations of an international Nazi "New Order."

This New Order, though, remained vague. Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels, for instance, broadly spoke of uniting Europe according to modern technological capabilities but using force to overcome "peculiarities of individual states, prejudices, limitation and parochial ideas."⁴⁷ Racial politics also remained uncertain: German bureaucrats, opening up Germany's future *lebensraum*, pursued a clear National Socialist mission to dominate and exterminate undesirable populations in the East, but racial categorizations remained ambiguous in the Western occupied territories.⁴⁸ Outside Europe, the New Order took on more strategic characteristics. Hitler's geographic vision of the world during this "crucial year" involved 1) a belt of territory across central Africa to draw resources, open up land and disembody the old imperial powers; 2) reclaiming Southwest Africa; and 3) a group of bases in Morocco and the Canary Islands to dominate and possibly strike across the Atlantic.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Hildebrand 1970, 95-96

⁴⁵ Stam 2003, 49; Hosoya Chihiro, "The Tripartite Pact 1939-1940," in *Deterrent Diplomacy: Japan, Germany and the USSR 1935-1940* J. Moley, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 196.

⁴⁶ Hildebrand 1984, 56

⁴⁷ Mazower 2008, 558

⁴⁸ Rich 1973, 151

⁴⁹ Weinberg 1981, 112

Many of these broad notions of geostrategic dominance and New Order informed planning and activity throughout 1940-41. Colonial planning, including a short-lived initiative to deport Jews to Madagascar, continued quietly while the German leadership waited for British resistance to fold.⁵⁰ Naval building was also expanded to support expected Atlantic dominance, though any direct attack upon the US remained impossible.⁵¹ In Europe, Mazower suggests that Nazi Germany built an empire in spite of itself: “War and occupation became the Nazis’ way of integrating the continent ... But this was entirely a consequence of needing to mobilize its resources; no positive vision lay behind it.”⁵² In terms of economics, for instance, while some German businessmen and technocrats advocated a European financial and trade community, Hitler and many Nazi elites remained content with extracting West European industrial products.⁵³ Crucially, then, Europe itself became a tool “to serve the interests of Greater Germany,” a revolutionary actor seeking to overturn the geostrategic status quo.

From Barbarossa to Pearl Harbor

Nazi strategic visions reached their greatest application with Barbarossa, the invasion of the USSR. Already, Hitler had determined that eastern *lebensraum* in Russia was “fundamental” to German power. Indeed, he claimed, despite a nonaggression pact, “everything I undertake is directed at the Russians” because one way or another, “the solution will be forced upon us.”⁵⁴ In addition, the Anglo-American powers seemed poised to outstrip German military capabilities. By early 1941, while Germany itself expected declining raw material and oil reserves, Britain enjoyed abundant foreign reserves to pay for war, and the United States continued to expand a

⁵⁰ Hildebrand 1970, 99

⁵¹ Weinberg 1981, 82

⁵² Mazower 2008, 7

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 122-124 and 559

⁵⁴ Leitz 2004, 77 and 83

brehtaking rearmament program.⁵⁵ Thus, while Hitler plied Russian representatives with visions of an alliance stretching from Spain to Japan, privately he assured military commanders that once the Soviets were defeated, Britain would lose confidence while Japan could focus exclusively on engaging American attention in the Pacific.⁵⁶ Locked into the losing end of an arms race with the west, reasoned German strategists, quickly striking eastward began to seem strategically as well as ideologically necessary.

As planning for Operation Barbarossa proceeded, the “Janus-state” of Nazi Germany finally began to fracture: strategic power calculations succumbed to “irrational racist policy.”⁵⁷ Ideally, Hitler and his strategists hoped to defeat the USSR in about six weeks, force the UK to surrender and seize valuable resources in order to later confront the US. In turn, military planners spoke of a “global blitzkrieg” in which German forces struck south from the Soviet Union to meet up with forces already in North Africa.⁵⁸ This pincer move would deliver British-held Egypt (and the Suez Canal) into German hands while other German divisions moved into Afghanistan to threaten British India. Combined with Axis support and putative Atlantic bases, “global blitzkrieg” aimed to secure the entire Eurasian landmass in self-sustaining perpetuity.⁵⁹

Denied clear success in the Soviet Union, Hitler and his advisors began to accept total victory or complete failure as the only outcomes now possible for their grand strategic goals. Initially, sweeping German advances into Soviet Russia allowed pent-up colonial plans to move forward. Hitler wanted to extend Germany itself the way the US colonized much of North America, so Germans were (sometimes forcibly) relocated while economic and military leaders

⁵⁵ Tooze 2006, 666

⁵⁶ Hildebrand 1984, 54

⁵⁷ Hildebrand 1970, 107

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 109; Hildebrand 1984, 57; Mazower 2008, 134

⁵⁹ Meanwhile, African colonial planning was shelved, never to be revived. See Weinberg 1981, 128-9

agreed that new eastern lands could immediately serve as sources of resource extraction.⁶⁰

Racial and political confidence soon deteriorated, however, as Hitler's expectation of victory stretched from weeks into months. Buoyed by early victories, the German leader spoke of quickly confronting the US and its threatening imperial policies, but by September and October of 1941, Hitler was again speaking grandly about a future generation of united Europeans confronting the United States.⁶¹ By November, though, he warned that "if the German people is no longer strong enough and ready to make sacrifices, ... it must be destroyed and replaced by another, stronger power."⁶² In other words, war prospects with the US quickly shifted from favorable to undesirable to inescapable.

Nevertheless, German strategists had consistently hoped that Japanese conflict with the US would drain America's support for Britain, so in late November and early December 1941, Ribbentrop assured the Japanese Ambassador Oshima Hiroshi that Germany would support its ally when it attacked Britain and the US.⁶³ The two sides later optimistically agreed to divide the eastern hemisphere along 70° longitude, a line running through mid-Siberia, eastern Afghanistan and British India (now Pakistan).⁶⁴ Still, embroiled in a two-front war, reality grew increasingly disconnected from the master strategic plan that months before had seemed so promising. When Hitler finally declared war on the US, Hildebrand concludes that the move was "a forced reaction rather than a free decision in line with his overall programme."⁶⁵ Yet in the face of all this, Nazi leaders clung to that "overall programme" for another two years.

Japan

⁶⁰ Mazower 2008, 145-148 and 581-584

⁶¹ Hildebrand 1984, 57-58

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Weinberg 1981, 91

⁶⁴ Stam 2003, 76

⁶⁵ Hildebrand 1984, 59

Japanese policy makers also developed a distinct grand strategic vision of Japan's place in Asia and the world. Since the Meiji restoration in the mid-19th century, Japanese foreign policy makers had generally sought to build an international power comparable to European and American geostrategic might. Specifically, they "formally patterned" their imperial ambitions after Western "tropical empires."⁶⁶ European-style expansionism, however, led to a series of "strategic problems."⁶⁷ Seeking Asian ascendancy, the Japanese established Korea as a colonial foothold on the continent. In turn, they first competed with Chinese and Russian interests in Manchuria, then invaded China itself and finally, in the 1940s, expanded dramatically into Southeast Asia. As Peattie puts it, the "inner-logic" of Japanese grand strategy "committed the empire to ever-receding security goals, each colonial base being seen as a 'base' or 'outpost' from which the empire could, in some way, control a sphere of influence over more distant areas." This inexorable strategic logic coalesced with a set of domestic "dilemmas." In fact, foreign policy and military planners, after "peaceful expansion" in the 1920s collapsed, generated a dominant grand strategy of autarky that justified forceful expansion in the face of Western imperialism.⁶⁸ By 1940, Taliaferro finds, "aversion to perceived losses of relative power and international status caused Japanese leaders to pursue a series of highly risk-acceptant diplomatic and military strategies" that ultimately ended in war with the US.⁶⁹ As in the German case, then, a dominant grand strategy set the parameters of decision-making.

The following sections first outline Japanese grand strategic visions and foreign policy calculations as they evolved through the 1930s and into early 1940, when German successes in

⁶⁶ Mark R. Peattie, "The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895-1945" in *Cambridge History of Japan* J. Hall et al. eds (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 217.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 220

⁶⁸ Akira Iriye, "The Failure of Military Expansionism," in *Dilemmas of Growth in Prewar Japan* J. Morely ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 137.

⁶⁹ Jeffrey Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks: Great Power Intervention in the Periphery*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 95.

Europe crucially impacted Japanese strategic calculations. The second section traces evolving Japanese strategic ambitions from summer 1940 to summer 1941, a period paralleling Germany's "crucial year." Finally, the paper considers increasing Japanese desperation as grand strategic goals collided with US pressure.

The Late 1930s

Past lessons and ambitions channeled Japanese grand strategic thinking throughout the 1930s and into 1940. Shortly after Japan's victory in the 1905 Russo-Japanese War, policy makers began to wonder if they should strive for more than a middling status in the international system, if they should focus territorial expansion to the north or south and if they should focus on army or navy competence.⁷⁰ Just as profoundly, Germany's failure in 1918 convinced many Japanese strategists that "future wars would be fought not only with guns but with the entire resources of nations."⁷¹ Without access to raw materials and certain economic security, "the mightiest army would be paralyzed." In turn, Japanese political and military elites began to believe that peaceful, economic expansion in the 1920s failed as global trade collapsed and the League of Nations grew increasingly impotent.⁷² Rather than global integration, the world seemed to be sliding toward major autarkic units maintained through cooperation between great powers like Britain and Germany.⁷³

These lessons circulated amongst policy elites, combined with growing dissatisfaction over the international status quo and fueled evolving grand strategic visions. Konoe Fumimaro, Prime Minister three times between 1937 and 1941, particularly argued that 1918's Versailles

⁷⁰ Ikuhiko Hata, "Continental Expansion, 1905-1941," in *Cambridge History of Japan*, J. Hall et al. eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 271.

⁷¹ Michael Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War: The Search for Economic Security, 1919-1941*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 18.

⁷² Akira Iriye, "The Failure of Military Expansionism," in *Dilemmas of Growth in Prewar Japan* J. Morely ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 107.

⁷³ Akira Iriye, *Power and Culture: The Japanese-American War, 1941-1945*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 2-3

settlement froze international inequality such that “international justice ultimately required redistribution of the globe’s resources and land.”⁷⁴ Perhaps to justify Japan’s continental expansionism, he insisted, “We must overcome ... the status quo and work out new principles of international peace from our own perspective.”⁷⁵ Ishiwara Kanji, a General Officer and academy instructor through the 1920s and 1930s, articulated extreme – but prominent – formulations of this ambitious grand strategic vision. According to Ishiwara, war is the “mother of new civilizations” as cultures and ideologies “struggle for a survival of the fittest.”⁷⁶ When Japan and the US, as the culminations of their respective civilizations, met in inevitable conflict, “Japan must be victorious, not for the sake of her own national interest, but for the salvation of the world.”⁷⁷ Ishiwara found himself politically marginalized by the late 1930s, but by then, at least two of his specific views had become popular in the army: 1) airplanes made war total by shifting targets from soldiers to civilians and 2) an East Asian federation of equal states could “overthrow Western oppression by force of arms.”⁷⁸

Less high-flying but nevertheless potent ideologies also flowed from think tanks and intellectual centers like the Showa Research Association (*Shōwa Kenkyūkai*) and researchers for the South Manchu Railway (or Mantetsu). Supported by Konoe himself, thinkers at Showa sought to devise a coherent grand strategy that would preserve and enhance Japan’s East Asian superiority, by serving as Asia’s “stabilizing power,” while expelling both Western imperialists and Soviet communism.⁷⁹ Similarly, policy thinkers at Mantetsu “dreamed revolutionary dreams,” as Young puts it, of resolving Sino-Japanese tensions by extending the fundamentally

⁷⁴ Akira Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, (New York: Longman, 1987), 39.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 2

⁷⁶ Mark R. Peattie, *Ishiwara Kanji and Japan’s Confrontation with the West*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 55.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 57

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 61 and 320

⁷⁹ James B. Crowley, “Intellectuals as Visionaries of the New Asian Order,” in *Dilemmas of Growth in Prewar Japan* J. Morely ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 371.

capitalist Yen bloc and revitalizing Manchu society through modern urbanism.⁸⁰ Both this “new just society” and aspirations to be Asia’s “stabilizing power” underscore a basic ideological grand strategic vision: Japan could and should challenge the international status quo to advance its ambitions of regional and, perhaps, global ascendancy.

World War II Begins

Ideological visions of the late 1930s led to strategies of autarky and regionalism as European war broke out in 1939. Both the government’s economic Planning Board and the South Manchuria Railway predicted that, as in 1914, Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia would become “resource acquisition zones.”⁸¹ Already facing production shortfalls, Japan faced desperate competition for materials while it applied wage and price controls to achieve “total labor mobilization.” Specifically, the “South Seas,” rather than Manchukuo and China, could provide oil, iron, tin, rubber, bauxite and copper necessary to maintain leading military capacity and continental war-making.⁸² In an uncertain global context, autarky seemed ideal. The army, for instance, had already adopted a parasitical policy of local self-sufficiency.⁸³ At an imperial level, tightening demands on energy, loyalty and resources “transmogrified” Japan’s authoritarian colonialism into “a totalitarian imperium” with a self-perpetuating goal of securing resources and, thereby, security.⁸⁴

Notions of regional integration now coalesced with an alarming international situation. By late 1939 and early 1940, once-hawkish business leaders like Murata Shōzō and Kobayashi Ichizō tired of bloodshed in China, but they agreed that an East Asian bloc economy based on the

⁸⁰ Louise Young, *Japan’s Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism*, (New York: University of California Press, 1998), 241-242.

⁸¹ Barnhart 1987, 148-150

⁸² W. G. Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism 1894-1945*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 223-225

⁸³ Hata 1988, 302

⁸⁴ Peattie 1988, 269

Yen would enable Japan to preserve its strategic advantages as a regional leader.⁸⁵ In Manchuria, for example, army and business communities maintained an “uneasy partnership,” yet both sides agreed that regional imperialism could resolve Japan’s domestic and global economic crises.⁸⁶ More broadly, since Japanese strategists saw the world drifting toward “pan-regions” dominated separately by single great powers, they believed those other powers would tolerate Japanese expansionism in both China and, later, Southeast Asia.⁸⁷

All these pressures, ideologies and geostrategies found expression directly after the outbreak of European war in 1939. Young argues that in the late 1930s Japan entered a “third phase” of imperialism, called “autonomous diplomacy,” that lasted until defeat in 1945.⁸⁸ Disenchanted with Western inequities at the international level and spurred by rolling strategic ambitions, “Japanese statesmen withdrew from the great power club into which they had labored so long to gain entry.” They spoke of an “Asia for the Asiatics” but quickly resorted to force with their neighbors when diplomacy failed. In Autumn 1939, observing the German-Soviet partition of Poland, Nobuyuki Abe and his cabinet advocated rapprochement with Germany and the USSR. Akira is doubtful that “Japanese advocates of such a strategy really thought through all the implications,” though Abe was careful to appoint America-friendly Admiral Nomura Kichisabirō as Foreign Minister.⁸⁹ The subsequent January 1940 cabinet under Admiral Yonai Mitsumasa articulated a “balanced policy” of amicability with both Axis and Allied powers while the “New Order” policy of Japanese dominance in Asia persisted.⁹⁰ If anything, Army and Diet objections to this move favored a harder line against the capitalist imperial powers – powers

⁸⁵ William Miles Fletcher, *The Japanese Business Community and National Trade Policy, 1920-1942*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 149-150.

⁸⁶ Young 1998, 186

⁸⁷ Akira 1971, 123-125

⁸⁸ Young 1998, 47-49

⁸⁹ Akira 1987, 84-87

⁹⁰ Barnhart 1987, 156-157; see also Hosoya 1976, 201-202.

who happened to directly hold many of the Asian territories and resources coveted by Japanese strategists.⁹¹ Northern China and Manchuria were already seen as “part and parcel of the design for self-sufficiency,” now more distant strategic regions began to seem integral to both autarkic aspirations and ideological prescriptions for an ever-expanding grand strategic vision.⁹²

Japan’s Crucial Year – From German Successes in 1940 to Southeast Asia in 1941

Japanese geopolitical calculations grew ever more focused as Germany quickly overran most of Western Europe and drove British forces off the continent. This spring 1940 offensive convinced policy elites like Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke that whatever its ideological failings, Hitler’s Germany had replaced Britain as the premier European power.⁹³ A moment of decision seemed imminent as many Japanese feared they would “miss the bus” and men like Army minister Hata exhorted peers to “seize this golden opportunity!”⁹⁴ Even Matsuoka ominously warned, “In the Battle between democracy and totalitarianism the latter will win without question and will control the world. ... There is not room in the world for two different economies.”⁹⁵ Thus, in late July, the newly-formed Konoe cabinet released a definitive strategic planning document: “Main Principles for Dealing with the Situation Accompanying Changes in the World Situation.” It declared that the world faced “a major turning point” in which “new politics, economy, and culture are being created” around a few regional state groupings.⁹⁶ Japan, Manchukuo and China constituted the core of “Greater East Asia,” but ambitions to secure autarky in the face of competing regional blocs, especially the US, justified a putative military

⁹¹ Barnhart 1987, 157

⁹² Akira 1987, 93

⁹³ David Lu, *Agony of Choice: Matsuoka Yosuke and the Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002), 155.

⁹⁴ Hosoya 1976, 207

⁹⁵ Bix 2000, 374

⁹⁶ Akira 1987, 107

advance into Southeast Asia.⁹⁷ Overall, solidifying the Asian bloc through force as well as aligning with new bloc leaders like Germany and, possibly, the USSR would both be prudent and justified.⁹⁸

From of this regionalist thinking arose the notion of a “Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.” As outgoing Foreign Minister Arita Hachirō explained in June 1940, Japan could and should serve as a “stabilizing force” for the peoples of East and Southeast Asia, related “geographically, historically and economically” and “destined ... for their common well-being and prosperity” to coalesce in a “single sphere.”⁹⁹ A month later, Matsuoka wrote of Japanese “living space” ranging from Burma to New Zealand.¹⁰⁰ The Sphere’s precise form remained vague, but that Japan should use force to engender it and should enjoy preferential access to its raw materials remained certain in statements from top policy makers.¹⁰¹ In terms of business interests, organizations like the Japan Trade Patriotic League and the East Asia Business Council expected that geostrategic expansion under the guise of Asian Co-prosperity would first and foremost expand Japanese trade interests.¹⁰² Yet military imperatives tended to trump all others. As one Army planner put it, “We are aiming to put an end to seventy years’ dependence on Britain and America commercially and economically.”¹⁰³

Strategically, the Sphere embodied several elements of a broader, if looser, grand strategic vision. Linking with German power opened avenues into coveted regions like Southeast Asia, and an alliance with the USSR might even overwhelm the historically

⁹⁷ Barnhart 1987, 159-161; see also Akira 1971, 136

⁹⁸ Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 366-369.

⁹⁹ Beasley 1987, 226

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 228

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 230-234

¹⁰² Fletcher 1989, 140; Young 233-238

¹⁰³ Akira 1987, 103

unstoppable Anglo-American powers.¹⁰⁴ The Sphere offered ideological cover for such moves and helped animate arguments, especially from the Navy, that “Japan must once again become a maritime nation, ... not hesitating to go to war with England and America.”¹⁰⁵ Faced with a seemingly endless war in China, Army General Staff and War Ministry planners hoped that visions of a wider Asian community might attract resources to “settle the China incident” in order to then “solve the southern question.”¹⁰⁶ They and others believed that a quick offensive into Southeast Asia, without touching the American-held Philippines, would hive off the Dutch East Indies before Britain and US could respond.¹⁰⁷ In other words, The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, if realized, would secure Japan’s place as a global power in a world of autarkic regions.

Already Matsuoka had cautioned that unless the US and Japan respected one another’s spheres of influence, war was an “historical inevitability.”¹⁰⁸ By late summer 1940, Japanese policy makers and strategists considered a German alliance key to securing a geopolitical advantage over the US and protecting the East Asian sphere. Signed on September 27, the Tripartite Pact aimed to confirm German territorial disinterest in the region and, more importantly, deter the US from a Pacific showdown with Japan.¹⁰⁹ Both civilian and military leaders assumed that Japan would have to choose between Germany-Italy and Britain-US, and they believed the latter would demand an end to the incipient Co-prosperity Sphere, continued Western domination and unfavorable terms to end the Sino-Japanese War.¹¹⁰ The choice seemed clear: a German treaty could strengthen Japan’s geopolitical leverage over the US and, in turn,

¹⁰⁴ Ikuhiko 1988, 312

¹⁰⁵ Akira 1971, 126

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Akira 1987, 102

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 106

¹⁰⁹ Hosoya 1976, 191

¹¹⁰ Akira 1987, 114-116

East Asia itself while leaving open possibilities of peace with the USSR.¹¹¹ In fact, the Americans read the Pact as a direct threat, and Germany's invasion of Soviet Russia left Japan facing enemies on all sides.

The Strategic Road to Pearl Harbor

The grand strategic vision of New Order in Asia would be built on Japanese strength and foreign powers' non-interference, so over the next months, Japanese planners adopted a more aggressive strategic stance.¹¹² Navy leaders proved particularly forward-leaning. Expecting a Japanese move into the Dutch East Indies to spark war with the US, they began reorganizing the fleet to for major Pacific operations.¹¹³ By June 1941, they believed war with the US was imminent and urged a rapid occupation of Indochina and Thailand to preserve resource flows and, revealingly, to command regions that "lie between the spheres of influence of Japan and the Anglo-American nations."¹¹⁴ Unlike many Navy planners, Army personnel maintained that no basic disagreement haunted Japan-US relations, so they were bitterly disillusioned when the US seemed to reject Japanese proposals for peace in China.¹¹⁵ Suddenly, as Chief of Staff Sugiyama Gen explained in early July 1941, collapsing the Nationalist government in China was crucial, and the best way to do that was cutting off Anglo-American support arriving through Southeast Asia.

¹¹¹ Lu 2002, 156-165

¹¹² Some dissent against Japan's strategic trajectory did surface. In Autumn 1940, for example, the Economic Planning Board voiced grave concerns about aggressive attempts to achieve self-reliance. Within months, however, Konoe and others pressured the Board to hire a batch of new military personnel who advocated a "new, noncapitalist society." When industrial leaders suggested such plans were "red," key Planning Board members themselves were arrested in April 1941 for communist activity. See Barnhart 1987, 171-174. See also Peattie 1975 323-325 on Ishiwara's East Asian League and Prime Minister Tojo's suppression of the movement.

¹¹³ Akira 1987, 116

¹¹⁴ Akira 1971, 130

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 133-134

Matusoka in particular believed the conflict in China threatened to compromise both the New Order in Asia and Japanese abilities to resist outside powers.¹¹⁶ Thus, visiting Moscow in April and securing a neutrality pact with the USSR, he articulated interest in surrendering claims on south Asia and certain Siberian oil rights in exchange for greater strategic leverage over the US and isolation of the Chinese nationalists.¹¹⁷ Overall, he presented to Stalin a “grand design” for a new world order that pictured the Axis powers and the USSR “struggling to reduce Anglo-American influence in the world.”¹¹⁸

Matsuoka’s grand strategic vision began to unravel in June 1941 when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Suddenly, the USSR was inextricably “driven to the Anglo-American camp;” however, with major conceptual elements already in place, grand strategic discussions amongst policy makers reached “the high point of prewar Japanese strategy.”¹¹⁹ High ranking Army, Navy and political players already had been wrangling about whether to attack the Soviets and when to strike southward. Now, an early July Imperial Conference to assess changing international circumstances released an “Outline of the Empire’s Policies.” It prescribed “constructing the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere regardless of the changes in the world situation” and adopted the Army plan to immediately seize Southeast Asia, no matter the consequences, then prepare for a war with the USSR.¹²⁰ Thus, Japanese policy makers at the highest levels, surrounded by strategic challenges but guided by a particular vision of regional ascendance, now officially stated that war with Britain and the US was possible, even likely.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Lu2002, 193

¹¹⁷ Lu 2002, 207

¹¹⁸ Akira 1987, 132

¹¹⁹ Akira 1987 140-143

¹²⁰ Barnhart 1987, 209-212

¹²¹ Bix 2000, 396

That vision became more concrete on July 28 when negotiations with Vichy France led to a peaceful Japanese occupation of Indochina. The US responded (for a set of reasons not discussed here) by freezing Japanese assets and imposing an oil and gas embargo. War seemed imminent, so when Prime Minister Tojo framed as tantamount to a war declaration a note from Secretary of State Cordell Hull about the status of China, the Army in particular felt cornered.¹²² As Tojo put it, accepting US terms would mean “the achievements of the China incident would be nullified, the existence of Manchukuo would be endangered, and our control of Korea would be shaken.” The grand strategic vision that now animated Japanese policy was at stake and, in turn, national survival was threatened.¹²³ According to at least one General Staff officer, that fall’s British-US Atlantic Charter was “tantamount to America’s declaration of war” by broadcasting an “intention of world conquest through the maintenance of the status quo as defined by liberalism.”¹²⁴ Whatever their differences, the Cabinet, Navy, Army and the emperor began to perceive a stark choice between capitulation and war.

Japan’s window of opportunity to seize the strategic-high ground in Asia now seemed limited but promising. It faced an apparently inevitable war with a still-underprepared US, declining oil reserves, debilitated European colonizers and a distracted Soviet Union.¹²⁵ In early November, Tojo and other key decision-makers agreed that US power would continue to grow while Japanese resources would dwindle, and that the US would continue to support the Chinese nationalists while the USSR could get more involved in the East.¹²⁶ Attacking the US fleet at Pearl Harbor would cripple a US counterattack while the Japanese consolidated an “impregnable,” self-sufficient position ranging from the Dutch East Indies to Hokkaido.

¹²² Akira 1971, 135

¹²³ Bix 2000, 405-407

¹²⁴ Akira 1987, 155-156

¹²⁵ Van Evera 1999, 89-92

¹²⁶ Akira 1987, 177

In sum, Barbarossa sparked active pursuit of an existing grand strategic vision. Army and Navy planners, intellectuals and politicians endlessly debated the specifics, but an anti-Western, autarkic vision of Japanese ascendance in Asia dominated their discourse. Rather than continuing to evolve, it was put into action in summer 1941. At that point, policy makers sensed a window of opportunity (or perhaps a window of vulnerability) to defend and advance Japan's place in a seemingly inevitable world of autarkic, great power regions. And once seen as inevitable, the grand strategic vision had to be defended tactically.

Conclusions

A Dominant Grand Strategy

Similar dominant grand strategic visions for both states seem to take shape for the years studied here. They can be compared along several key elements of a dominant grand strategy.¹²⁷ One is *adversary*: this falls into two sides, a) who is the specific actor and b) what is the type of actor that policy makers consider a fundamental or primary threat? Both German and Japanese strategists focused on the “Anglo-American powers” and the Soviet Union as their ultimate challengers. Other actors in their respective regions mattered to strategic calculation and formulation, but Britain, the US and the USSR all bordered German and Japanese regions of interest and had the capacity to staunch expansionist efforts. More broadly, thinkers and policy makers in both states detested communism and the physical threat it posed by captivating the one massive state dominating what was popularly considered the “Eurasian heartland.” Liberal capitalism seemed little better: as a system, it had led to centuries of imperialist domination of German and Japanese aspirations and seemed to have now failed completely.

¹²⁷ This list is culled from notable Political Science formulations of grand strategy. See, for example, Posen, Barry R. and Andrew L. Ross (1996/1997) “Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy” *International Security* 21(3): Winter. pp 5-53. Colin Dueck *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2006). Christopher Layne *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

Another element of grand strategy is *core state interests*: in the face of extensive economic, military and political interests, which of these do policy makers prioritize as worthy of security commitments? Both strategic visions in this study considered autarky essential to national survival. For the Germans, *lebensraum* became the watchword of grand strategic vision – the state required more territory for population growth and more access to raw materials to avoid atrophy. Similarly, military men had come to dominate Japan’s strategic discourse and believed that imperial ventures like the one in Manchukuo could provide the oil, rubber and metal ore necessary to preserve a world-class power. In time, men like Matsuoka even adopted the language of “living space” to justify expansionism.

A third element is *favoured alliances*: major powers tend to form a web of alliance commitments, but which commitments remain more central to strategists’ planning? Both German and Japanese alliances offered means to a common end: self-sufficiency and regional dominance. Each had established formal neutrality with the USSR, and both suspected that eventual war with the Soviets might be inevitable. Early on, furthermore, Hitler hoped to convince the British to ally with Germany, while many Japanese planners believed they could at least keep the US out of Asian affairs by not directly attacking its interests. The Tripartite Pact itself, of course, bound Germany and Japan in ways perhaps neither expected, but it was a marriage of convenience aimed (poorly) at deterring US interventions. Finally, both actors pursued a range of forced alliances with neighboring and lesser powers to obscure what were in effect imperial relationships.

A similar consideration is *scope*: what are policy makers’ geopolitical, especially geographic, priorities and calculations? Again, both strategic visions prescribed regional dominance as a perquisite for putative global dominance. In this regard, German visions proved

more expansive: Hitler nursed ambitions for colonial expansion and ultimately rejected an international system arranged around continental blocs. Japanese strategists consistently focused on the community of “Greater East Asia.” Some like Ishiwara expected that a great, global reckoning would arrive, but most believed (or hoped, at any rate) that Japanese regional dominance would situate their empire in an unassailable position. Tellingly, whereas Nazi Germany saw Soviet Russia as raw territory to absorb into the Reich, the Japanese tended to accept the USSR as an inevitable player in the great game of competing regional leaders. In the end, though, the Tripartite Pact proved feasible precisely because German and Japanese regional ambitions shared the same aggressive characteristics but, territorially, they barely overlapped.

A fourth is *nature of the system*: what do policy makers perceive as the dynamics of the international system? German Nazis explicitly portrayed a world of nations and civilizations competing in a social-Darwinian struggle. Japanese militarists perceived a competitive world of pan-regions developing and welcomed force as a tool to secure Japan’s place in that new order. In essence, strategic visions in both states prescribed agency within inevitability: strong states able to seize opportunities could succeed in a competitive and forceful international system, but no state could change the dynamics of the system. From Berlin and Tokyo, the future looked like a world of struggle and self-reliance, not cooperation and economic integration.

The final element of grand strategic vision considered here is *role*: how do policy makers perceive their state’s position in – and obligations (if any) to – the international system? Germany’s “New Order” and Japan’s “Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere” situated their respective states as regional leaders and revolutionaries against the Anglo-American status quo. Given the West’s “capitalist imperialism” and economic bankruptcy as well as the Soviet Union’s dangerous communist alternative, German and Japanese strategists declared that they

could and should remake the international system. Of course, this vision remained nationalistic: racial politics, economic interests and military imperatives drove both strategies toward imperialism.

Results

How well do the hypotheses articulated earlier explain these cases? The overall theory states that dominant grand strategy changes are rare, and that in the absence of a collapse, as Legro defines it, the substance of subordinate grand strategy adjustments and policies will most likely be constrained by the dominant grand strategy. The specific hypotheses:

H1: Once in place, a dominant grand strategy is unlikely to change without “collapse.”

H2: Subordinate adjustments are more likely than dominant grand strategy changes.

H3: Without a dominant grand strategy collapse, subordinate adjustments are likely to be bounded by the conceptual parameters of the dominant grand strategy.

Taken together, H1 and H2 seem to be confirmed. While a number of adjustments occur, at no point do leaders in either state revisit and then alter the fundamental elements of their grand strategic vision. Stated differently, there appear to be no dominant grand strategy changes for either of these states, but several subordinate adjustments are observed. In 1939, in line with a long-stranding, conflictual view of international politics, the Germans seized a perceived “window of opportunity” to expand territorial holdings as well as knock out their West European adversaries. By the end of 1940, the Germans were stymied in the West, yet their failure to defeat Britain remained insufficient to force a “collapse” of the dominant grand strategy. Confronted with changing European fortunes in 1939 and 1940, the Japanese reiterated and solidified a similar view of the world. Having given up on a peaceful rise in the 1920s, an autarkic and confrontational view of geopolitics now dominated Japanese strategic thinking.

Germany's Barbarossa and Japan's ultimate decision to attack the United States in 1941 were dramatic decisions, yet in terms of grand strategy, they were variations on a dominant theme: territorial expansion to secure resources for leadership in a world of violent great power competition.

The most substantively interesting prediction, H3 also seems to be confirmed. Both Germany's "New Order" and Japan's "East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere" appear to define several subordinate adjustments. For example, Hitler had hoped to forestall direct conflict with the US until a later time – perhaps even until a later generation – but his declaration of war on the US shortly after Pearl Harbor does not represent a major break with Germany's dominant grand strategy. Rather, though an unwelcome development, war against the US simply shortened the timetable for confrontation. Similarly, Japan's fateful move to the south in 1941 and its subsequent war with the US were tactically, intellectually and rhetorically tied to a specific vision of Japanese ascendance.

In Sum

For Germany and Japan of 1939-1941, dominant grand strategic visions shaped a series of foreign policy decisions. Strategizing in these cases was not merely reactive but directed and constrained by overarching, if contested, notions of the state's place and aspirations in the world. One can hardly imagine Germany invading the Soviet Union without understanding Hitler's geostrategic priorities, or Japan's final, fatalistic march toward war with the US without understanding its focus on building a self-reliant Asian bloc. On the other hand, once set in motion, events conditioned strategic visions. The Nazi vision prescribed securing the east *then* challenging the west, but the Western powers intervened before this could be realized. Similarly, events in Europe – from German successes in the West to German self-destruction in the USSR –

forced Japanese policy makers to revise their long-term time-tables for confronting the United States. Furthermore, these visions were shaped by beliefs about power and geopolitical ascendancy – they weren't purely ideational or idealistic; they were based on similar ideas about how to achieve and maintain geostrategic dominance. Specifically, German and Japanese strategists argued that seizing new regional territories would 1) secure the home state and 2) facilitate an extractive-style autarky. Their perennial problem, of course, was a billiard ball effect: offensive moves in one direction raised a series of subsequent strategic challenges so that expansion reached one logical conclusion in both cases – carving up the entire Eastern Hemisphere into two pieces and confronting or displacing the United States. In the end, ambitious grand strategic visions of geopolitical destiny contributed to military self-destruction.