

Economic Concerns and Bureaucratic Politics in Japan's Interwar Years

17.537 Paper 1

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In *Japan Prepares for Total War: The Search for Economic Security, 1919-1941*, Michael A. Barnhart chronicles the history of Japan's futile search for autarky in the years leading to the Pacific War.¹ In examining the vital linkage between economics and national security in this period, Barnhart makes the argument that the perception of economic vulnerability as the main security issue facing Japan, combined with bureaucratic politics in the form of army-navy inter-service rivalries, led directly to both the impulse for empire in resource-rich mainland Asia and the attack on Pearl Harbor. However, Barnhart's history charts Japan's search for economic security without explaining its justification for and entitlement to seizing the resources and land of others, often brutally so. As such, the sterility of *Japan Prepares for Total War* downplays the role of racist attitudes and cultural myths in engendering the events described. Nonetheless, with strong evidentiary support Barnhart makes a compelling case for the ascendancy of economic considerations and bureaucratic politics as the causal factors in Japan's attack of the United States on December 7th, 1941.

Barnhart posits that Japan's interpretation of the lessons of World War I drove its leaders to view autarky as the basis for grand strategic planning. After all, Germany, possessor of a stronger military than its conquerors, had succumbed to defeat in WWI because it lacked an industrial base able to mobilize to a degree freeing it from economic dependence on other nations. Such dependence creates vulnerability because the dependent nation is subject to the whims and economic pressure of those nations on

which it depends. Japan had defeated Western power Russia in the Sino-Soviet conflict of 1904-1905, but its status as a resource-poor nation caused a number of influential civilian elites and military officers to become advocates of “total war,” or the national capacity to not only wage war with strong military forces but with the economic capability to supply all needed war materiel. Two essential elements were necessary for this plan to succeed in establishing autarky and thus security: a peace of at least five years with the hegemonic United States, and natural resources such as iron and oil. These material resources could be had on the Asian mainland, specifically in Manchuria and subsequently in China proper. As Barnhart points out, the Japanese chose to forcibly acquire these resources from its mainland neighbors, and this course of action brought it into conflict with the free trade philosophy and Open Door policy of the United States.

Japan’s course to national mobilization and self-sufficiency included the creation of a puppet state for the economic exploitation of Manchuria; Manchukuo was created in 1932 in concert with Japan’s first long-term mobilization plan. After “rational mobilization” of the domestic economy, Japan’s increasingly imperial interests turned to China while the military’s share of the budget rose to 45 percent. In 1937 Japanese forces commenced what Barnhart concededly calls the “China Incident,” in which China and its resources were claimed by Japan under the guise of establishing a Japanese-run corporation for economic development of the region.

Barnhart adeptly points out the ironies in Japan’s fight to acquire the Chinese mainland as a strategic resource. The original total war proponents understood the threat to security that belligerence in China caused for Japan: the United States, in defending the Open Door policy in China, might deny Japan the indispensable resources like

machine tools that it required to achieve self-sufficiency. Additionally, Japan's domestic economy and citizenry were greatly strained in what Barnhart terms the "bitter mortgage" of funding the efforts of empire in China. Barnhart therefore argues that Japan's aggressive imperial activities on the Asian mainland were counterproductive in its quest for autarky: they threatened the necessary peace with the United States and came at extreme costs to the Japanese nation.

Japan Prepares for Total War also contends that bureaucratic politics, specifically the competing interests of Japan's army and navy, played a significant role in shaping policy and determining the sequence of events leading to the Pacific War. In bureaucratic politics, the players in a government bargain and compete according to their organizational interests, resulting in policy that is not the product of a single rational decision but is instead an amalgam of the visions and choices of the players involved.² The army and navy in pre-WWII Japan were both strong players in compelling the nation's political leaders to allocate resources according to their perceived needs; Barnhart offers a number of examples of how their economic demands for strategic resources like iron and oil led to further pressures to expand the Japanese empire in order to acquire such goods.

Additionally, Barnhart takes the position that differing strategic conceptions of how to best approach the Southward Advance to commandeer the Dutch and French colonies of Southeast Asia fed a growing inter-service rivalry. This rivalry between the Imperial army and Imperial navy overshadowed rational considerations of the diplomatic and economic ramifications of the United States' reaction to aggressive Japanese imperialism as a means of achieving autarky. Barnhart documents that the navy in

particular instituted a practice of exchanging “more vigorous foreign policies” for greater resource allocations of strategic materials, and he argues that the military as a whole served as the “engine of real change” in Japanese policy with regard to economic expansion as a means of achieving national security. The quest of each service to outbid the other in acquisition of strategic materials therefore led to the diversion of goods and funds from exports and the domestic economy to meet military demands. It also led to the commercial pressures the United States somewhat ironically imposed to punish Japan for its imperialist imposition and attempt to create a sphere of economic and political influence in mainland Asia.

Indeed, the economic measures that the United States adopted in Japan’s interwar years to stem the flow of Japanese aggression exacerbated the international situation because the Japanese elites in power at various points in the course to war were either unwilling to abandon mobilization plans or unable to do so because of military pressures and demands. The moral sanctions and embargoes on goods such as aluminum and aviation fuel became progressively steeper as Japan sought more territory and strategic resources in Asia. Finally, the United States decided to freeze Japanese assets, and that freeze quickly morphed into full embargo. Barnhart makes the point that this decision reflected an unshakable belief on the part of United States leaders that Japan could not be deterred in the Southward Advance but might be slowed by even more drastic economic measures. He attributes the Japanese response, to push on with the advance, to the two factors he assigns ultimate importance in determining the outcome of the clash between the two powers: economic motivations and bureaucratic politics. Japan’s grand strategic motivation was the pursuit of autarky, and Barnhart argues that the July 2nd decisions for

how to best achieve that goal were an amalgam of the opposing viewpoints of the army and navy, resulting in decisions that were rational in that they were the only politically possible decisions within the Japanese government of the time.

Despite Barnhart's strengths in precisely documenting the changing economic condition of Japan in the interwar years and how its internal political dynamics and strategy shaped its path to war, *Japan Prepares for Total War* fails to address the cultural attitudes and myths that enabled its feelings of entitlement in the region. For example, scholars such as John Dower have suggested that cultural myths like that of Japanese descent from goddess Amaterasu Omikami were used as the psychological motivation for mobilizing the Japanese people and justifying horrific actions against other Asian peoples in the name of Japan's economic interests.³ Such cultural myths identified Japan and the Japanese people as holding a unique, predetermined status as the chosen natural rulers of Asia by virtue of their special descent from the true gods. Barnhart identifies the primary motivation of Japan in its imperialist pursuits as strategic resource acquisition. While his application of economic theory has wide explanatory power in the actions that the Japanese took in the pursuit of autarky, it does not explain why they felt entitled to or justified in their abuse of the territorial and human rights of other Asians.

Furthermore, Barnhart is careful to avoid overt statement of the brutality of the Japanese military in imperialist "incidents." For example, in the attack against Nanking that many scholars have characterized as rife with atrocities, Barnhart comments that it was an "unbounded military success;" his only concession to its putative unusual brutality is that the State Department condemned it as "contrary to the principles of law and humanity." Although it is perhaps common to dehumanize an enemy in war and thus

Barnhart might choose to leave discussions of Japanese brutality to other scholars because it is common to dehumanize an enemy in war, but he could strengthen his argument for economic motivations by discussing how a feeling of racial, national or cultural superiority played a role in justifying Japanese entitlement to control of the lands and resources of others. Moreover, justification for such Japanese positions as the Amai Doctrine, which claimed the Japanese right to supervise economic development of China and barred all other nations from that right, was clearly based on more than Japanese economic need, as it claimed Japan had a special right to control China, indicating a feeling of either extreme paternalism or inherent superiority to China.

While racist cultural myths are largely ignored by Barnhart, racism and misperception in international diplomacy are touched on as factors in the myriad misunderstandings that occurred between Japan and the United States. In *Japan Prepares for Total War*, both Japan and the United States are characterized as often suspecting the other side of “cunning” and “crafty” behavior, and President Roosevelt is noted as consistently holding an “anti-Japanese” attitude. These attitudes led to irrational fears; for example, Barnhart notes that Roosevelt feared a Japanese attack on the West Coast to the extent that he had crabbing operations checked for the possibility that the Japanese might use them as bases for war. Japan, too, based a number of decisions on misperceptions of the stance of the other side; for instance, it believed for a time that the Draft Understanding was a formal United States policy position, and thus changed its estimate of the probability of war with the United States, leading to confidence in more aggressive behavior. Barnhart demonstrates that racism and misunderstandings thus contributed to the policies of the time period in question, but such a nod to the role of

racism and misperception in policy is curious when his argument neglects to explain the possible of role of racism as justification for forcible economic expansion of Japan.

In conclusion, *Japan Prepares for Total War* is an economic history, one that serves its stated purpose of contributing to an understanding of how Japan's economic concerns and inter-service rivalries contributed to bringing about the Pacific War. Discussion of Japanese paternalism or racism in the pursuit of autarky is largely avoided by Barnhart, and this avoidance detracts to a small extent from the explanatory power of economic vulnerability and internal political dynamics as the causal variables in Japanese imperialism and attack on the United States. Perhaps Barnhart is merely trying to achieve objectivity and avoid a condemnatory tone, but in failing to question the legitimacy of Japan's special right to control the rest of Asia, he misses the opportunity to explain the role of the values and attitudes that supposedly lent justification to Japan's right to cruelly exploit its Asian neighbors. Despite this criticism, *Japan Prepares for Total War: The Search for Economic Security, 1919-1941* offers a detailed and thought-provoking account of the ironies of US-Japan relations and mistakes in the years preceding the Pacific War.

¹ Barnhart, Michael A. *Japan Prepares for Total War: The Search for Economic Security, 1919-1941*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press: 1987.

² Allison, Graham T. and Halperin, Morton F. "Bureaucratic Politics: A Paradigm" *World Politics* 24, supplement (Spring 1972): 40-79.

³ Dower, John. *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*. New York: Norton, 2000.

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