

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF IMPERIAL JAPAN'S PREDICAMENT IN CHINA AND U.S. QUAGMIRE IN POST-SADDAM IRAQ: SIMILARITIES, LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, U.S. hegemon has gradually presented clear signs of relative decline in the shifting international distribution of power, particularly in contrast to significant China's rise (National Intelligence Council 2012). Also, the hegemon has suffered huge fiscal deficits and financing problems consequent upon the so-called Lehman Shock of fall 2008, involving marked economic structural vulnerabilities. Most recently, the United States has continually faced a possible invocation of sequestration that will inescapably lead to large defense spending cuts and, then, the weakening of its military hegemony (Barno 2011).

A huge military expenditure of the protracted U.S. war on terrorism in the greater Middle East, with a major focus previously on Iraq and now on Afghanistan, has considerably worsened the U.S. national finance, significantly affecting the post-Lehman national economy. Today's hindsight shows us that the G.W. Bush administration mistakenly overreacted to the shocking terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 directly on the economic and military centers of the continental United States, with massive military intervention in Afghanistan and then Iraq for the purpose of nation-building and democracy-building in multi-ethnic environments.

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To explore why the U.S. committed such a strategic blunder, this study is intended to provide an alternative perspective that is based on a Japanese ecological-historical approach to the Eurasian landmass in general and the Japanese empire's historical experience in the 1930s and 1940s on the Chinese continent in particular. More specifically, this perspective is also relevant in analyzing the international politics of counter-insurgency warfare in different geographic regions, including not only the East Asia but also the Middle East.

Traditionally, Western and Japanese scholars in international studies do not communicate each other very well, especially when they analyze international politics and diplomacy in the 1930s and the 1940s, centered on the China question. This is because the mainstream of the Japanese scholars have primarily discussed the details of the Japanese historical experience, without presenting any good theories or efforts to theorize their narratives. Certainly, a majority of the scholars have had their core disciplinary training primarily in diplomatic history, not in Western political science in general and international relations studies in particular. Yet, diplomatic historians usually have at least an implicit framework of their narratives. This study is designed to fill in such a gap, given that most of the Japanese scholars devote themselves to the active intellectual discourse in Japanese in which little Western-styled theories and theorization are demanded.

More specifically, given the language barrier, Western scholars, particularly those in the United States, remain uniformed of Japanese works on the Japanese empire's predicament in China in general and the counter-insurgency warfare there in particular, and, as a result, continuously lack reference to the Japanese works. Yet, this study will argue that the Japanese perspective is most relevant to grasp the U.S. quagmire in post-Saddam Iraq and the continuing war on terrorism in the greater Middle East, given a series of striking parallels between the two cases despite their great temporal and spatial distance. In fact, as analyzed below, the U.S. government, military, and people today have fallen into the very similar pitfalls that once excruciated the imperial Japanese counterparts. This study is not intended to defend the Japanese war-related wrongdoings, though it conjectures the scope and extent of them were far limited than generally believed. Nor does it endorse the dark side of U.S. military activities in Iraq. Instead, the study will simply highlight the background, nature, and implications of being entrapped into counter-insurgency warfare in the developing world, such as China in the past and the Middle East today, particularly with a focus on post-Saddam Iraq. U.S. experience in the Vietnam War is irrelevant for policy prescription due to its quintessential nature as a war of national liberation in the context of the Cold War.

So are U.S. experiences in the post-Second World War democratization of occupied Germany and Japan, given that both needed no nation-building but reactivation of indigenous democratic tradition, as demonstrated respectively by the Weimar Republic and the Taisho Democracy.

Certainly, it may sound very odd to compare and contrast the past East Asia with today's Middle East. This impression is well taken, given the clear division-of-labor between global analyses and area studies in the teaching and research of international relations and comparative studies, and given the assumption that each geographic region possesses a unique political culture and a political dynamics to be explored. To challenge such a conventional commonsensical understanding, this study will emphasize the importance of the dichotomized categories of the developed vs. the developing worlds in its attempt to comprehend the dynamics of counter-insurgency warfare, related political phenomena, and politico-military outcomes across regions.

The following analysis will first present a series of striking parallels between the past Japanese and the contemporary U.S. experiences. Second, the study will provide a theoretical perspective on why the two cases share astonishing commonalities. Thirds, the study will explore the implications of the perspective to international politics, with a focus on the future of the U.S. hegemony.

2. Striking Parallels

On September 2, 1945, the Second World War ended with the surrender of the Japanese empire to the U.S.-led Allied Powers. At that time, the Japanese army still deployed more than one million soldiers in China proper (Jowett 1999) in addition to some eight hundred thousand soldiers in Manchuria (NIDS 1974). In fact, Japan was entrapped with the protracted counter-insurgency warfare in China, arguably, for 15 years since the Manchurian Incident of 1931. Concurrently, Japan waged a full-fledged inter-state war with the United States from 1941 to 1945, although the latter possessed overwhelming material and military power to which the former could never rival. This means that Japan already bogged down in China and expended great material and human resources, when it launched the war against the United States.

1) Political Goal, *Casus Belli*, and Protracted Occupation

It begs the question what the Japanese imperial army forces did in China for 15 years and, more specifically, if they constantly fought Chinese

insurgency forces and guerilla groups, while committing atrocities as often described in stereotyped mainstream historical accounts (Bentley et al 2011). The records show that full-fledged battles continued briefly for the initial six months or so, and that, for the rest of the 15 years, the Japanese forces were engaged in today's equivalent of counter-insurgency warfare, while facing sporadic skirmishes and guerilla attacks. The Chinese forces, including Nationalist, Communist, War-lords', were so poorly organized, equipped, and trained that they could not effectively counter the Japanese forces, which was then the only modern army in Asia. Yet, the Japanese forces could not take their organizational and technological advantages vis-à-vis the Chinese counterparts in urban warfare. Furthermore, the one million soldiers hardly satisfied manpower needs that were essential for the maintenance of peace and order in major cities, and, as a matter of course, could not at all effectively control the vast rural areas outside these cities (NIDS 1968; NIDS 1971).

Prior to the invasion of China, the so-called "single-blow argument", or the then Japanese version of "Shock and Awe", was the short-lived leading voice in the Japanese public discourse (Imaoka 1999). Rather, the "single blow" resulted in weakening the Republic of China central government under the Nationalists, involving acceleration of political and armed struggles among the Chinese. The Nationalists were severely divided. The Communists tried to diminish the popular support for the Nationalists while taking advantage of the united common front with them against Japan. The situation was further complicated by local warlords and large-scale organized criminal bandits. The Japanese government rejected any negotiated settlement with the routed Nationalist government, on the grounds that it refused to make any compromise while continuing its resistance by relocating itself deep into the hinterland, centered on Chongqing as the interim capital. Consequently, the Japanese government could not find any effective negotiation counterpart to reach a political settlement and was forced to install a series of puppet governments across the continent. The Japanese government vainly pursued Sinicization of local security troops in order to lessen its own military burden (Tateyama 1999; Tanaka 2014; Billingsley 1994).

It is needless to say that the past Japanese and the contemporary U.S. quagmires share striking similarities. The two countries seriously underestimated resistance after a major military victory, naively believing an idea that military victory will automatically lead to political triumph.

Surprising enough, major Japanese newspapers and other historical materials including diaries of ordinary soldiers at that time show that not only the Japanese government but also the people justified military operations in China, by appealing to the noble cause that Japan would salvage the Chinese

people suffering from deepening disorder there, and by bringing about modernization and prosperity (Maesawa 2004). With protracted military presence there, however, Japan had lost the cause itself. This is because that the Japanese forces in China ended up to be utter occupation troops although initially intended to serve as savior. Under the cause, the Japanese could not demonize the Chinese as immoral and evil enemy who deserved total destruction and liquidation. This is in sharp contrast to the United States that used extensive strategic bombardment against the Nazi Germany and the militarist Japan, and atomic bombs against the latter.

Again, another astonishing similarity is that, in 2003, the American people strongly supported the war against Iraq under the name of freedom and democracy, but soon saw the cause severely undermined by the protracted military presence there as well as by the inability of finding weapons of mass destruction in the post-war Iraq as *casus belli*. Whatever justification may be, the very existence of one country's troops on the soil of a third country over an extended period of time, if without the latter's genuine consent, will inescapably be a compelling case of foreign invasion.

2) Uncontrollable Front Expansion

Mired in China and then being pressed hard by the military, the imperial Japanese leadership expanded war fronts across China and, eventually, the greater East Asian region as whole. Originally, the war front was limited to Manchuria and northern China proper, but, in the ensuing period, the leadership opened multiple fronts across the continent one after another. The leadership continued to commit such a strategic blunder, motivated in part to secure the minimal spheres of interests by ensuring security in the area surrounding the spheres. Facing undiminished insecurity, this approach only resulted in a downward spiral of expansion, occupation, and another expansion. The Japanese leadership continuously raised stakes of the counter-insurgency war, while no individual leaders were willing to accept political responsibility of the unwinnable situation in China and the coming crushing defeat with the United States (Morley 1983).

Again, this has another distinct commonality with the so-called "Rumsfeld's Rules": if you cannot fix a problem, make it bigger (Frum 2007). In fact, the Bush administration implemented significant troops surge in Iraq (Bush 2007a), while dispatching the second aircraft carrier battle group and the second expeditionary strike group (Abbas 2007; Reeves 2007). The administration also hinted it would open the second war front with Iran, and possibly the third one with Syria (Bush 2007b). Obviously, the administration

was unaware of bearing a mind-set similar to that of the militarist Japan's leaders and having a propensity falling into the comparable pitfalls.

3) Atrocity and International Law

On battlefield, atrocities are prone to being committed in counter-insurgency warfare. The so-called Rape of Nanjing has long been considered as an infamous exemplar (Chang 1997). After extensive archival researches, however, many Japanese historians have come to a consensus that 300,000 as the alleged death tolls is a fabrication of the Chinese Nationalist Party Propaganda Department. In fact, the estimated pre-occupation population of the City of Nanjing was around 200,000 (Higashinakano 2005). Yet, there is an extensive discussion among them regarding the probable execution of at least some several thousand Chinese soldiers. After Japanese forces approached to the city, the then-capital of the Republic of China, the Chinese commander fled away. Consequently, Chinese soldiers fell into panic and hid themselves into the safety zone created for civilians while taking off their military uniform, wearing civilian cloths instead and still carrying weapons (Higashinakano 2003). Their act constitutes a serious breach of the customary rules on warfare, codified today as the Geneva Convention, which requires a uniform and an insignia essential to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants. Failure to observe this requirement is subjected to execution. Yet, facing the great difficulty of coping with the inexperienced magnitude of the disguised deserters, the Japanese forces most probably implemented mass-scale execution without taking necessary court-martial procedures.

This is similar to the counter-insurgency warfare in Fallujah, Iraq. In fact, the U.S. forces there annihilated the city, killing virtually everyone there, both young and old, men and women, after proper warning and procedures. The insurgents in the city did not observe the Geneva Convention regarding the requirements of being combatants. Thus the U.S. troops were compelled to kill all of them, when necessary, in order to avoid their sporadic, organized, or suicidal attacks with hidden arms and explosives (West 2006).

Last, not least, the Japanese empire faced strong Chinese nationalistic rejection of the Japanese vested interests in China that were legitimate under international law. At that time, Japan as well as other Western powers possessed a variety of colonial and semi-colonial interests and concessions in China, based on treaties and agreements. In particular, Japan obtained them at the expense of large cumulative military spending and war casualties, including those entailed in the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese wars. No wonder that the imperial Japanese government and people saw the protection

of the interests and the sphere of influence as the lifeline for national security and prosperity. Certainly, these vested interests came into existence in the context of Western imperialism and colonialism. But the Japanese government and people then believed that the eventual elimination of the interests had to be carried out through step-by-step procedures as required under international law, given that the interests themselves were originally established as international legal arrangements. This sense was particularly strong in Japan, because the country was forced to conclude unequal treaties with Western powers prior to the start of modernization, and because the country itself went through such a tormenting and time-consuming revision process of the treaties (Kawakami 1937; Townsend 1939; MacMurray 1935).

Under the Washington Treaty system, however, Japan and Western powers agreed to dismantle these legal arrangements over time. Nonetheless, the Republic of China government and people rejected following peaceful legal procedures and instead often resorted to obstruction and violence. This propensity was evident even earlier in the last days of the Qing Dynasty, as typified by the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 which attacked Western and Japanese embassies in Beijing. As the Jinan Incident of 1928 and the Tongzhou Mutiny of 1937 demonstrated, Japanese consulate staffs, military personnel, and even civilian residents in China became targets of Chinese vandalism and atrocities, including butchery, rape, and terrible mutilation of corpses. A series of Chinese provocations against Japanese lives, property rights, and vested interests accumulated a strong sense of frustration in Japan, leading to a surge of popular support for armed intervention in China. This process was a chain of events characterized by Chinese provocations and Japanese overreactions, leading to Japanese invasion in China over time. At the bottom line, there existed unabated Chinese resentment and resistance to the imperialistic Western inter-state system in general and international law in particular. (Kawakami 1937; Townsend 1939; MacMurray 1935).

Again, this constitutes another impressive parallel between the past Japanese and the contemporary U.S. quagmires. The United States has been deeply engaged in the Middle East for geo-strategic and geo-economic reasons, especially oil. The United States also has played the security guarantor role of Israel whose existence has been firmly established under international law. On the other hand, the Arabs have rejected the legitimacy of Israel's existence *per se*. The United States have experienced the Iran hostage crisis at its embassy in Teheran (1979-1981), the 9.11 attacks, and the brutal hangings of American civilian contractors in the occupied Iraq (Gittleman 2004), among others. The United States kept military presence, once in Saudi Arabia and Iraq, and now in the Gulf region and other countries through proper interna-

tional agreements, while having exercised a series of military actions across the region.

Over the decades, the world has seen a chain of events of Arab provocations and U.S. overreactions across the region, which peaked with the concurrent military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq under the Bush administration. Today's hindsight tells us that its military policy to Iraq lacked a sense of prudence. Yet, out of the accumulated sense of frustration and anger, the American people then supported the administration firmly to take a reckless approach at least at the early stage of the armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the greater Middle East. With its troops mired in Iraq, the United States reduced itself over time from a self-appointed agent of freedom and democracy to an unwelcomed armed interventionist, and, for many Arabs, simply to an aggressor. At the bottom line, there exist undiminished Arab resentment and resistance to the Western inter-state system in general and international law in particular.

3. How to explain the similarities

Why did the Chinese once demonstrate unabated resentment and resistance against the imperial Japan? Why do the Arabs today behave very similarly vis-a-vis the United States? Why is making an exit from protracted counter-insurgency warfare a very difficult enterprise?

To answer these questions, it is crucial to comprehend the essential features of the process of world history, especially those over the last several hundred years. Yet, a genuine world history started with the advent of the Mongolian empire in the 14th century, which covered an overwhelming portion of the Eurasian landmass. Before the empire, there was simply a heterogeneous mixture of regional and local histories without a dynamics as an integral whole, but no world history. The Mongolians first built a Eurasia-wide network of communication and transportation by horse. Even after the breakdown of the empire, imperial order continued to exist as the predominant organizational mode of a large-scale human society. The empire broke into several regional ones, later replaced by, for instance, the Tamerlane, the Mogul, the Ottoman, and the different Chinese empires.

Under an imperial order, individuals identify themselves first and foremost as the subjects of an empire. Their parochial ethnic, religious, sectarian, local, class, and other identities become secondary and oftentimes insignificant focal points of socio-political conflicts. This is because an imperial order tolerates peaceful coexistence of many communities that are based on diverse identities, while never failing to mercilessly annihilate rebels as typi-

fied by the practice of the Mongolian empire.

Later, the imperial mode of order faced unsurmountable challenges stemming from the rise of nation-state. This is demonstrated by the fact that traditional empires eventually crumbled away into disorder, subjugation, and underdevelopment at the hand of major modern Western nation-states. Their military power overwhelmed that of traditional empires in terms of social organization, technology, and industrial production. The political evolution from absolute monarchical polities to bourgeois revolutions on the one hand and the emergence of the industrial revolutions on the other hand made effective combination of these factors.

Surprisingly, the key to the transformation lies in the medieval age that only Western Europe and Japan experienced (Umesao 1974). These two were not invaded by the waves of the Mongolian nomadic corps thanks to topographic features and tough resistance. The nomadic corps could not march *en masse* into the Japanese mountainous archipelago, while the mountainous terrains, large rivers, and temperate vegetation prevented the Mongolians from advancing into Western Europe. Due to the similar topographic and climatic features, small political communities came into existence both in Western Europe and Japan, and the communities continuously fought one another through which to nurture belligerent strategic cultures and to accelerate their mastery over military skills. No wonder that the last two to three centuries have seen that the Western inter-state system has been predominant while traditional empires disappeared after crushing defeats with Western powers and Japan which made a successful entry into the Western inter-state system.

Today, many peoples in the developing world face great difficulty in nation-building as a major precondition of nation-state building. This is because the disappearance of imperial orders have left them with multiple identities, such as ethnic, religious, sectarian, local, and class, that are overlapping somewhat, yet significantly competing and even conflicting one another. Without a cohesive national identity, peoples after empire cannot define their uniform societal interests as the basis of settling social-political conflicts, particularly the allocation of wealth and politico-economic opportunities as related to the allocation. As a result, these peoples have been unable to build alternative political orders. This is what exactly happened in the post-Saddam Iraq as well as in China after the breakdown of the Qing dynasty.

In sum, it is crucial to understand that today's world is in the continuing macro-historical process ensuing after the breakdowns of imperial orders and the subsequent disorders. That is, the Middle East is in the post-Ottoman process, and, to a lesser extent, China in the post-Qing one. Japan played a central role to form Chinese national identity, given that it was a resultant

of continued Japanese cultural, economic, political, and military pressures after the 1895 Chinese defeat in the war against Japan. As Mao told that the Chinese would not have been able to salvage themselves from severe fragmentation to unification under the Communist Party without Japanese pressures (Mao 1964). These pressures continue to exist even today, although the military pressure is weak. In fact, while the Chinese still possess competing ethnic, local, class and other identities and lack a deeply entrenched sense of national identity, anti-Japanese sentiments often turn the incoherent identity temporarily cohesive, often affecting the stability of Sino-Japanese relations.

Similarly, growing anti-American sentiment has generated a significant unifying effect on Middle Easterners across the region, both Arabs and non-Arabs, who would otherwise remain fragmented indefinitely due to their competing and conflicting identities. Ironically, it is American cultural, economic, political, and military pressures in general and the intensified U.S. armed intervention after 9.11 in particular that have brought about expedient alignment, although still temporary in nature, among traditionally sectarian foes, such as the Sunni Hamas, and the Shiite Hezbollah and Iran.

Both Japan and the United States have been involved respectively in China and the Middle East as highly interventionist modernizers. Their involvements have resulted in the two regions' cultural, economic, social, and political transformations, while having concurrently mitigated and compounded the socio-economic and socio-political contradictions of these regions. Japan and the United States are, therefore, partially responsible for the problems that China and the Middle East struggle to solve or manage. Yet, the root cause lies in the lack of a solid or deeply entrenched national identity, without which a stable political order cannot be built, and without which development and modernization and, eventually, freedom and democracy, cannot be realized. Blaming Japanese and Americans and trying to reduce all the problems to them simply constitutes evasion to confront painful realities.

4. What to do about the Middle East

Henceforth, the study has made it clear that, as typified by the imperial Japanese and the contemporary U.S. leaders, the world has not been fully aware of the central importance of the macro-historical process after empire and the serious constraints on social engineering to achieve modernization and development, and freedom and democracy. This is understandable because the Japanese underwent the mediaeval age in the Far East, and because the Americans inherited the experience of West European mediaeval age in the far West. It is necessary to lower the level of expectation regarding the

scope and tempo of the achievable transformation in the developing world after empire.

In order not to repeat Japanese mistakes in China, the Americans must realize that the utility of military instruments is very limited. The problem is macro-historical in nature, and the solution must be political in essence. Military instruments are effective only when they are employed to achieve well-defined and hence limited political objectives.

As the imperial Japan was long mired in China, the United States won't be able to make an easy exit out of the Middle East. Yet, the premature withdrawal of military forces will likely worsen the situation to the extent that the United States would be compelled to give up even the minimum political goals set prior to armed intervention. Whiles stakes are very high, less ambitious goals have to be set.

Given the Japanese experience in China, the United States are well advised not to be deeply involved in nation-building, on the grounds that they will inescapably shoulder almost all the burden to secure the domestic security order of a nation in the making. The United States must not intervene in a zero-sum sectarian civil war and have to restrict itself to shielding a Middle Eastern nation-state in the making from foreign infiltration, particularly from Iran, Syria, the Al-Qaeda, and other extreme jihadist group, and to ensuring the survival of poppet governments that it has installed, for example, in Baghdad and Kabul. It has to be noted that the instantaneous creation of a coherent national identity is impossible and that, should there be a precarious one, it is an anti-American identity.

Based on the Japanese failure in China, the United States is urged not to open a second and a third war front: it must not fall into the Rumsfeld's approach. Otherwise, the United States would most probably suffer from horrific losses of human and economic resources and, as a result, face debilitation of the global predominance and leadership. In the worst scenario, the United States might lose all the strategic bridgeheads and military presence in the region.

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ABSTRACT

This study will first present a series of striking similarities between the imperial Japanese predicament in China and the contemporary U.S. quagmire in post-Saddam Iraq. Second, the study will provide a theoretical perspective on why the two cases share such commonalities. Third, the study will explore the implications of the perspective to international politics, with a focus on the future of the U.S. hegemony. The study is based on the basic understanding that the developing world across regions today has continued to suffer the ongoing single macro-historical process consequent upon the breakdowns of empires as the once-predominant organizational mode of human societies. The analysis argues for the central importance of a stable national identity for modernization and development as well as freedom and democracy.

KEYWORDS

Counter-insurgency Warfare; Imperial Japan; U.S.; China; Post-Saddam Iraq; National Identity.

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