

Imperial Japanese Army in the interwars period: operational concept, war plans and the Japanese state strategic goals


Ejército Imperial Japonés en el período de entreguerras: concepto operativo, planes de guerra y los objetivos estratégicos del estado japonés

Abstract: This article consists of an initial and exploratory research on the doctrinal formulation of the Imperial Army of Japan and its consequent concept and operational planning in the interwar period. The concept developed in this period, and eventually applied in World War II in Asia, was called *Sokkusen Sokketsu* (“Fast Combat, Fast Decision”). The article uses a historical-explanatory methodology. Its objective is to demonstrate that the doctrine’s independent formulation resulted in a detachment between the objectives of the Japanese State and the objectives listed in the war. For this, the article initially discusses the relationship between doctrine and Grand Strategy and, later, seeks to relate the Japanese doctrinal formulation to its international, security, and historical context. Thus, it is argued that the doctrinal and operational assessment cannot exist detached from the historical, economic, and social context in which the country finds itself. That is, the doctrinal effectiveness must be considered from the strategic objectives of a State.

Keywords: Japan; operational concept; China; Second World War; Second Sino-Japanese War.

Resumen: Este artículo consiste en una investigación inicial y exploratoria sobre la formulación doctrinal del Ejército Imperial de Japón y su consecuente concepción y planificación operativa en el período de entreguerras. El concepto desarrollado en este período, y finalmente aplicado en la Segunda Guerra Mundial en Asia, se llamó *Sokkusen Sokketsu* (“Combate rápido, decisión rápida”). A través de una metodología histórico-explicativa, el objetivo es demostrar que el desarrollo de esta formulación de forma independiente, en el período en cuestión, resultó en un desapego entre los objetivos del Estado japonés y los objetivos enumerados en la guerra. Para ello, el artículo realiza inicialmente un breve debate sobre la relación entre doctrina y Gran Estrategia y, posteriormente, busca relacionar la formulación doctrinal japonesa con su contexto internacional, de seguridad e histórico. Así, se argumenta que el diagnóstico doctrinal y operativo no puede existir desligado del contexto histórico, económico y social en el que se encuentra el país. Es decir, la eficacia doctrinal debe ser considerada desde los objetivos estratégicos de un Estado.

Palabras clave: Japón; concepto operativo; China; Segunda Guerra Mundial; Segunda Guerra Sino-Japonesa.

Paulo Gilberto Fagundes Visentini 

Paulo Gilberto Fagundes Visentini
Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.
Núcleo Brasileiro de Estratégia e Relações
Internacionais (NERINT-UFRGS).
Porto Alegre, RS, Brasil.
paulovi@ufrgs.br

Bruno Magno 

Bruno Magno
Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.
Núcleo Brasileiro de Estratégia e Relações
Internacionais (NERINT-UFRGS).
Porto Alegre, RS, Brasil.

National Chengchi University, Taiwan
Center for Security Studies (TCSS-NCCU)
Taipei, Taiwan.
brunomgn@gmail.com

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1 INTRODUCTION

This article consists of an initial and exploratory research on the formulation of operational concepts of the Imperial Japanese Army. More specifically, an analysis of its formulation in the 1920s and 1930s and its relationship with the Japanese strategic objectives of the period. It is concluded that the doctrine and concepts formulated were detached from the strategic goals of the Japanese state and, as a result, provoked an extended war against China and its subsequent defeat by this country and the other allies in World War II.

To achieve this objective, initially, some theoretical considerations are made about the perspectives and approaches used in the analysis. The following is a brief analysis of the economic, political and international context of Japan in this period. Third, we look at how the Army responded to this context. And finally, an analysis of the operational concept adopted by the Imperial Japanese Army in the period under review is discussed. By way of conclusion, a reflection is made on the impact of this doctrine and operational concepts on the Second Sino-Japanese War and consequently on the Japanese defeat.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Japan secured its entry into the list of great powers by getting rid of the system of unequal treaties, imposed through gunboat diplomacy in the previous century, defeating Russia, being the first military defeat of a European power by a non-European one, and being part of the victorious coalition in World War I. This way, the country was integrated and participated in the construction of the architecture of the International System of the immediate post-Great War erected by the League of Nations. However, although this new system was marked by an attempt to commit the powers to regimes of governance that sought to avoid further conflagrations, it failed to address their causes. That is, financial, economic and trade regulation mechanisms were not established, maintaining deep inequalities between established and emerging powers, making the maintenance of exclusive zones of influence the only way to overcome protectionist barriers in crisis situations of the system.

The international context described, combined with the internal political instability in China and the dependence of Japan on its zone of influence in the country, has progressively placed both on a collision course. For Japan, the option was imposed by two paths, the first would be a primarily economic leadership in the region for the maintenance of its National Revolution¹ and the second would be the maintenance of zones of influence by force and preparation for a war against the USSR. The economic crisis, institutional deficiencies and the collision between Japanese and Western interests allowed to ascend to the Japanese government, through the usurpation of civilian power, a coalition of Army forces and zaibatsu segments that opted for the second path.

1 National revolution here is understood in a furtadian perspective (in reference to Celso Furtado and his underdevelopment theory), that is, the alteration of state structures through the internalization of the (formerly transnational) decision center for the overcoming of underdevelopment and autonomous international insertion. This internalization of the decision center would take place, in a simplified way, through three initiatives: political centralization, economic industrialization and military modernization, which in the case of Japan corresponded to the agenda of the Meiji Restoration (1868) (MAGNO, 2018, p. 16-18, 35-40).

While China, from the end of the 1920s, resumed its agenda of National Revolution under the leadership of the *Guomindang* (GMD)², which faced a scenario of internal dispute with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and with The Warlords for supremacy. This instability was seen by the Japanese Army as the ideal opportunity to consolidate its exclusive zone of influence over China and prepare for a confrontation with the USSR.

However, was the option adopted by the Imperial Japanese Army and later by the Japanese state itself consistent with its strategic objectives or a Grand Strategy? Was the doctrinal formulation of this period consistent with this supposed Strategy? It is maintained that in reality, Japan was going through a period of strategic stalemate or indecision and that for this reason its doctrine did not match the military objectives established in the period.

2 THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to the Brazilian Army, the military doctrine consists of: “[...] set of principles, concepts, norms and procedures, arranged in an integrated and harmonious way, based mainly on experience, aimed at establishing lines of thought and guiding actions” (BRASIL, 2019, p. 1-2).

However, the understanding of the concept of military doctrine may differ from country to country. This divergence would be related to technological factors, internal factional disputes, perception of security and threat, competition between civilian and military leaders over budgetary priorities, security and strategic objectives in different countries (CHAPMAN, 2009, p. 1).

Despite these possible conceptual differences, it is common understanding that military doctrine encompasses the totality of a military force, being the guiding principle at all levels of warfare: strategic, operational, and tactical; and the defining factor in the conduct of a state’s war. As long as the levels of war have a hierarchy, they are not watertight. They overlap each other and do not have a clear delineation. In an academic assessment, this delimitation varies according to the unit of analysis under review (HARVEY, 2022, p. 83-84).

Given the scope that military doctrine has on all levels of war and the interrelation present between these different levels, it is by common agreement, in the literature of Strategic Studies, International Relations and Military Thought, that the doctrinal formulation of a certain military force is not only related to an internal correlation of forces. The doctrinal formulation is also related to the strategic objectives of the state in the international environment or, even, the maintenance of its security in an anarchic International System (AVANT, 1993, p. 410-411; CHAPMAN, 2009, p. 1). In reality, the focus of the debate around military doctrine is on how this formulation process takes place: what is the relative weight between domestic and international factors? Who has more interference in its formulation, civilians or military?

2 *Guomindang* (GMD) or Kuomintang (KMT) depending on the standard of transliteration adopted, is the Chinese Nationalist Party, responsible for the establishment of the Republic in 1911, during the Xinhai Revolution, under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen, later responsible for the reunification of the Chinese state in 1928 during the Northern Expedition, already under the leadership of Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek). In 1949, it would be defeated in the Civil War by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), transferring the seat of its government to Taiwan.

Or again, what originates, or who is most likely to formulate offensive, defensive, or deterrent doctrines? (AVANT, 1993; KIER, 1995; POSEN, 1984).

Although this article does not intend to answer these questions, they are relevant to the problem stated: it is possible for a military doctrine to give rise to operational concepts that result in plans that diverge from the interests and strategic objectives of the state. It is intended to answer this question with this brief case study and evaluate which path this phenomenon can take.

Since this is an early, exploratory and speculative research, it is not intended to build a definitive theory to explain this phenomenon. But rather, alert to the need to include in the explanatory models on the formulation of doctrine and operational concepts, more comprehensive assessments of the international system and the historical moment in which the state to be analyzed is inserted. This warning is even more necessary when the Western European states or the United States are not being analyzed, since the strategic and doctrinal formulations of the other states are reactive to the performance of these actors of these Western Powers in the International System³.

It is considered that military doctrine constitutes an integral part of the strategic objectives of a state in the International System and its foreign policy, either by disciplining the use of existing resources for military application, or by manifesting intentions to other states (POSEN, 2016, p. 160). In this sense, for Posen (1984, p. 13), military doctrine would consist of a subcomponent of Grand Strategy⁴ of a state and, therefore, a component of the highest state policy. From this reflection we can use the following concept to define doctrine more precisely: “military doctrine is a ‘set of principles of the Army used to guide its actions in support of national objectives’. [...] In Clausewitzian terms, doctrine reflects the operation of the ‘grammar of war’ “(JENSEN, 2006, p. 4).

And from this Clausewitzian perspective we return to the relationship between doctrine and politics. Also according to Posen, in the Clausewitzian perspective of war, politics is present in all aspects of the conduct of war, despite the fact that we do not have an exact formula for the implementation of these principles or political objectives in doctrine (POSEN, 2016, p. 167-168). If the Grand Strategy constitutes the highest policy of a state,

3 The state-of-the-art of literature on modern military doctrine is largely the result of case studies (at various historical moments) of four countries: the USA, England, France and Germany. In these original studies, the explanatory models constructed tend to minimize the systemic aspects of the international environment, considering that these countries act autonomously in the International System and, to a large extent, their internal policies and interests have repercussions throughout the international system. Although these theories and explanatory models from these case studies are extremely useful for any research on military doctrine, the application of this instrument automatically and uncritically in case studies of other countries in various historical moments can be biased and anachronistic (BLACK, 2004, p. 66-68).

4 For Posen (1984, p.13), grand strategy consists of a chain of politico-military means and ends, in his words “a theory of the state on how best to ‘cause’ security for itself”. The grand strategy should identify threats to state security and formulate economic and military policy responses.

it is necessary to understand it in order to analyze the formulation, success or failure of a specific military doctrine.

However, it is not maintained that institutionalist approaches such as Avant's (1993) or culturalist approaches such as Kier's (1995), which emphasize internal variables for doctrinal formulation, do not have explanatory capacity. But rather, in the case study in question (and possibly in other studies that do not involve major Western powers) this logic is subordinated to international dynamics and the formulation of the Grand Strategy.

For example, the institutionalist explanatory model of Jensen's incubators (2006) is used to explain new doctrinal formulations in the US Army. Incubators would consist of military subunits free from civil or military bureaucratic hierarchies, free for doctrinal experimentation (JENSEN, 2006, p. 17-18). In his case study, Jansen qualifies incubators in a positive way, since they would be responsible for the capacity for innovation and doctrinal adaptation of the US Army.

However, doctrinal innovations do not exist alien to historical processes, the international system and the Grand Strategy of a state. The case of the Kwantung Army, which will be analyzed throughout the article, resembles that of an incubator, however, with extremely deleterious effects for the Japanese Army and the state as a whole.

This military organization acted for a long time practically in absentia of the Tokyo government, formulated its own conception of foreign policy, doctrine and operations, which at some point subordinated Japanese Foreign Policy and became the official doctrine of the Japanese Army. In the field of Grand Strategy and foreign policy, this formulation resulted in all-out war against China and later against the US. In the doctrine field, it resulted in a formulation based on and valid for the experience in Manchuria, but unable to provide valid answers for a protracted war against China and subsequently with the USA.

The Japanese doctrine gave rise to the operational concept to be analyzed from the *sokkusen soketsu*, "fast combat and fast decision". This concept privileged the offensive above all, in the pursuit of a quick and decisive battle. It was something applicable in Manchuria from the extensive existing railway infrastructure, but impractical in the vastness of China without a proper engine industry. In a historical moment of instability in the international system and of technological transition (from steam to combustion engine), of motorized warfare and of war from the air, Japan inserted itself without a doctrine and operational concepts adequate to its strategic objectives. In part, as will be shown, this was due to a void in the formulation of the Grand Strategy. Thus, there was no basic consensus in Japanese high politics that guided its civil and military institutions and its doctrinal formulation.

3 POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF JAPAN IN THE 1920S: TAISHŌ DEMOCRACY

During the 1920s, Japan experienced a period of great economic prosperity. To a large extent, this was in the context of the post-First World War. With European economies devoted to the war effort, the Japanese economy grew rapidly, occupying markets abandoned by Europeans (MIYAZAKI, 2009, p. 29; SHIGEMITSU, 1958, p. 26). This prosperity was accompanied by a moment of cultural effervescence, of greater political participation of the population with social movements and expansion of rights (such as the institution of universal male suffrage). There has been a foreign policy effort to maintain the regional architecture of Conservative Internationalism⁵ and the implementation of a non-intervention policy towards China. This period became known as Taishō democracy and, *roughly speaking*, ran from 1918 to 1927.

Meanwhile, the consecutive impacts of the Great Tokyo earthquake⁶ (1923), from the Showa Financial crisis (1927)⁷ and the Great Depression (1929) undermined the political and economic foundations of Taishō democracy (SHIGEMITSU, 1958, p. 27). Japan has become increasingly dependent on trade and investment in its zones of influence, especially Manchuria, which already in 1910 accounted for 40% of trade with China (MIYAZAKI, 2009, p. 29-30). In the period 1917-1929, 16.7% of Japanese foreign assets were in East Asia, and in the period 1930-1939 this figure jumped to 35.2%. The ratio of Japanese Foreign Investment to GNP rose from 0.91% in 1922 to 3.61% in 1937 (MIYAZAKI, 2009, p. 40, 44). The share of foreign trade in Japanese GNP went from 27% in the period 1917-1926 to 33.7% in the period 1927-1936, and East Asia's share of this trade was around 47.6% in exports and 37.4% in imports (MIYAZAKI, 2009, p. 40, 43, 46, 50-51). In 1945, at the end of the war, 37.5% of Japanese foreign assets were concentrated in Manchuria and northern China (MIYAZAKI, 2009, p. 41).

Even in this scenario of dependence on Manchuria, combined with a strong international crisis, Japan turned to a countercyclical economic policy of fiscal expansion and freezing of military spending, especially in costing. This policy was carried out by Takahashi Korekiyo, one of the leading Japanese economic policymakers of the Taishō period, 11th Prime Minister of Japan (1921-22) and Minister of Finance (1931-36) tasked with leading

5 The Conservative Internationalism category was used by Robert Schulzinger to analyze the content of interwar diplomacy. It can be stated that the diplomatic initiatives of this period were characterized by the predominance of agreements and treaties negotiated on a case-by-case basis between the great powers over international organizations. Anti-communism presented itself as the consensus element of conservative internationalism. The entry of the USSR and the exit of Japan from the League of Nations demonstrated the exhaustion of this model (SCHULZINGER, 2002 apud MARTINS, 2013, p. 185).

6 The Great Tokyo earthquake was responsible for the death of more than 100 thousand people and more than 50 thousand families lost their homes. The destruction caused by the earthquakes was enhanced by a series of fires. The losses ranged from 5.5 to 10 billion yen, and there was a drop in exports, which turned the balance of payments negative.

7 The Showa Financial Crisis was a bank run resulting from the speculative bubble triggered by economic recovery efforts after the Great Tokyo earthquake. As a result, major Japanese banks collapsed and the zaibatsu (family industrial conglomerates that will be covered later) took control of the Japanese banking system.

Japan out of the Great Depression. Takahashi managed to reverse the Japanese recession and return the urban economy to full employment as early as 1935, a decade before the US⁸ (PAINE, 2012, p. 41). His policy was based on the exit from the gold standard, devaluation of the currency to stimulate exports, encourage consumption, investment in public works, civilian control over military spending, cooperation with the West and support for Chinese unification and economic development (PAINE, 2012, p. 41-42). Takahashi represented a policy of leadership for economic power and was favored by the civilian authorities in Tokyo, but provoked great resentment in the military for freezing its budget and for not supporting direct interventions in Chinese territory.

Specifically, Japanese economic policy and its policy toward China were inextricably linked, civilian cabinets sought cooperation with the West and a policy of progressive stabilization of China. In the economic field, they recommended domestic spending at the expense of spending on military costs, to consolidate industry and infrastructure and, thus, invest in a military modernization program (PAINE, 2012, p.15). The concept was similar to that of the Meiji Restoration: to have a strong economy to possess a strong army.

However, Takahashi's politics would gradually be deconstructed, ending the period of Taishō democracy. Among the critical factors that caused its dismantling, the support of a large portion of the conglomerates that made up the *zaibatsu*⁹ system stood out to the coup d'état, the institutional void left after the end of the *genro*¹⁰ and military disobedience in front of civilian cabinets, which aimed at increasing military spending and a military solution for China, culminating in a military rebellion in February 1936 (MAGNO, 2015, p. 42).

8 This achievement later let him be recognized as the John Maynard Keynes of Japan (PAINE, 2012, p. 41).

9 Vertical industrial conglomerates, initially formed by the families of landlords (daimiyo). With the advent of the Meiji Restoration, these ancient landowning samurai families assumed their role as captains of industry after surrendering their lands to the new centralized imperial government.

10 "*Genro*" is the name used in Japan for the samurai who promoted the Meiji Restoration. Anglo-Saxon literature translates the expression as "oligarchs". However, among us, the term "oligarch" is usually used to designate the class of landowners, whose power depends on the control of natural resources and labor. In Japan, the closest thing to this is the Daimyos, against whom the *genro* raised, therefore, "oligarch" misinterprets. In addition, "caudillo" in our environment is used to designate leaders whose power emanates from charisma, or prestige, and interference in politics through armed gangs. The designation "caudillo" is closer to "*Genro*", intermediate samurai, endowed with leadership and charisma, skilled in the use of weapons and in the conduct of troops (HALL, 1985, p. 246-247 apud Moreira DA SILVA *et al.*, 2011).

4 THE IMPERIAL JAPANESE ARMY IN THE 1920S AND 1930S

The international environment in the interwar period was marked by the attempt to establish international regimes concerning security, defense, and governance, see the Washington Naval Treaty (1922). However, it failed to regulate economic relations and settle trade disputes. Due to the European reconstruction process and the economic and the late 1920s financial crisis, an environment marked by economic protectionism spread, between 1929 and 1931 Japanese exports fell by half, while the Chinese increased fees for Japanese products and promoted boycotts (PAINE, 2012, p. 20-21). The collapse of the Japanese banking system in the 1927 crisis is also symptomatic, and it is possible that this factor contributed to the rise of the *zaibatsu* as a predominant political group in support of a military solution and its aggressive stance towards seeking direct control of its investments in Chinese territory (MAGNO, 2018, p. 55).

This profile would raise the *zaibatsu* as the main supporter of the expansionist adventure of the Kwantung Army. Between 1914 and 1931, Japan would jump from being the fourth largest foreign investor in China to second place, next to England. Japan accounted for 35.1% of the total stock of foreign investment in China, while England owned 36.7% (MIYAZAKI, 2009, p. 60). The result was increased dependence on *zaibatsu* investments in Manchuria – between 1926 and 1931, Manchuria absorbed 70% of Japanese foreign direct investment – and increased competition with Chinese companies (PAINE, 2012, p. 23). With increased competition between Japanese and Chinese companies, pressure groups linked to the *zaibatsu* began to advocate the adoption of aggressive policies against China and saw, in the expansion of military spending, a means of mitigating the effects of the crisis period. Thus, progressively, the *zaibatsu* came to support warmongering policies promoted by the Japanese armed forces.

The military, especially the army, had been divided into two major factions since the early 1920s, *Kodoha* and *Toseiha*. Both identified with fascist and militaristic views of society, believed that Japan should be led by The Emperor through the armed forces, opposing the parliamentary democratic model then in force. Meanwhile, the *Kodoha* had an ideology more associated with a Japanese ideal past linked to the land and the samurai moral code, *Bushido*, while the *Toseiha* advocated the broad modernization of the Armed Forces and an emphasis on progress and industrialization. Thus, the second faction, dominant mainly in the Kwantung Army, would find support in the *zaibatsu* (PAINE, 2012, p. 40).

Institutional deficiencies also played a role in the rise of the military in the Japanese government. The Meiji Constitution was contradictory as to the responsibilities of constituted forces in the Japanese state, indicating the Emperor as ultimately responsible for decision-making. It was through this space that the *genro* ruled from their direct appointment by The Emperor. After the death of most of the *genro*, governments gradually began to reflect the outcome of elections, becoming de facto a representative democracy. However, although the

cabinets now represented the popular will, the Armed Forces were constitutionally answerable only to the Emperor and not to the elected government. The result was the progressive independence of the Armed Forces, especially the Army stationed in Manchuria, from the decisions made in Tokyo. The main examples of this phenomenon were the attack on Zhang Zuolin in 1928 and the Mukden Incident (the pretext for the occupation of Manchuria) in 1931, which interrupted the attempts of the cabinet in Tokyo to negotiate with the nationalist president Jiang Jieshi (MAGNO, 2018, p. 56).

The military considered Manchuria a major military base, the main front for the inevitable war against the Soviet Union. Regardless of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria or the war against China, the ultimate goal of the Imperial Japanese Army was war against the USSR (PAINE, 2012, p. 47). The army saw an aggressive foreign policy against China as a way to overcome recession and as a mean of containing the territorial and ideological expansion of the USSR. In this way, the Kwantung Army, stationed in Manchuria, progressively implemented a foreign policy of its own, in absentia from the Tokyo cabinet and with the acquiescence of the Imperial General Headquarters.

After the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and the establishment of the puppet state of Manchukuo in 1933, the military handed over to the civilian government a *fait accompli*, which resulted in Japan's international isolation and consequent withdrawal from the League of Nations. The Kwantung and the Northern China Garrison Armies progressively undertook independent military campaigns, entering into treaties with local warlords, expropriating Chinese property and transferring it to *zaibatsu* and annexing new territories to Manchukuo or creating puppet governments. The civilian government had no means of backing down from the initiatives undertaken by the army on the continent, limiting its foreign and economic policies.

In addition to military activities in China, the series of coup attempts and assassinations by the army set up a transitional period in Japan, known as government by assassination (COOX, 1976, p. 23). Between 1930 and 1935, there were five coup attempts perpetrated by army officers accompanied by attempts and assassinations of ministers and politicians. The perception was that the military's takeover of the government was imminent. The culmination of this dispute was the coup attempt known as the February 26 incident in 1936. On this date, about 1500 military personnel in Tokyo occupied the seat of government and attempted to occupy the Imperial Palace, in addition to attacking the key members of the cabinet and the Privy Council of the Emperor, succeeding in the assassination of two former prime ministers. The military rebellion was only put down after three days and resulted in the dismantling of the *Kodoha*, identified as responsible for the initiative.

Although the rebellion did not achieve its main objective, to kidnap the Emperor and establish a military regime, it paved the way for the unification of the army around *Toseiha* and it ended any prospect of maintaining the dominance of a civilian government over the military. With this, the last *genro* still alive (who was also one of the targets of the revolting military), Saionji Kimochi, advised the Emperor to appoint Prince Konoe Fumimaro to the post of Prime Minister - ending the short-lived representative democratic experience. According to the *genro* he would be the only name capable of creating a consensus government and preventing the military from completely taking over the government (OKA, 1992, p. 45).

The combination of foreign and economic policy of *fait accompli* in China, with the political instability provoked by the coup attempts, assassination and persecution of civilian authorities who opposed an aggressive policy against China, made it impossible to restore civilian authority in the Japanese government. Perhaps the symbol of this event was the very assassination of Minister Takahashi Korekiyo in the coup of 1936, as it was the main civilian leadership in defending a policy based on the principles established still in the Meiji Restoration, of maintaining autonomy through economic development and military modernization.

Konoe took office in June 1937, promising to reconcile civilians and the military and to promote a foreign policy towards Pan-Asian integration. However, a month into his rule, the Kwantung Army provoked the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, the trigger of the Second Sino-Japanese War. This way, Konoe's cabinet was at the mercy of the decisions of the Army, becoming hostage to the politics of *fait accompli* and making the path of war without return.

From this moment it was clear that the Japanese state no longer acted under a consensual Grand Strategy. The civilian government of this period possessed a different perspective on Japanese strategic objectives and on how to pursue them. Progressively, the strategic conception arising from the experiences of the Kwantung Army in Manchuria, would become dominant and the officers of this military organization would assume command of the entire government.

The decision-making power had, in fact, passed to the military of the faction *Toseiha*, who would assume the cabinet in 1941 under general Tojo Hideki. The priority would become full control of northern China in preparation for a war against the USSR. However, due to the strategic impasse, the lack of consensus on a new insertion profile in an International System in transition and the misreading of international politics, the operational plans and doctrine formulated in this period no longer correspond to the new strategic objectives or to their consequences. The operational plans and doctrines formulated reflected the experiments and experiences of the Kwantung Army in Manchuria, not corresponding to a perception of the needs of the Japanese state, nor to its profile of international insertion.

5 STRATEGIC THINKING, OPERATIONAL CONCEPT, WAR PLANS AND STATE OF THE JAPANESE FORCES

During the 1930s, Japan was preparing for war, not against China, but against the USSR. The Japanese goal was the protection of Manchuria, which considered its lifeline to the continent and the world and saw in the USSR and communism the main threat to this lifeline. New military operations in northern China were aimed at securing a strategic rear for Manchuria in an eventual conflagration against the Soviets and preventing their support for the Soviet Union. *Guomindang* (GMD) or the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which could eventually lead Japan into a war on two fronts. At no time did Japan prepare or intend to start an all-out war against China.

The original mission of Japanese forces stationed in northern China and other territories in that country was to protect investments, property, and the lives of Japanese citizens in these localities. However, from the mid-1930s, the perceived threat to the USSR from Manchukuo increased, while simultaneously increasing Chinese hostility towards the Japanese. Chinese hostilities, in addition to posing a great risk to the Japanese economy, also posed a threat to the modernization program of the Japanese Army. Added to this is the possibility of having a war on two fronts, against the USSR to the North and against China on the western flank, a considerable risk taking into account the lack of strategic depth of the Japanese position. From these contingencies, the Imperial Army redone its operational plans, adding the northern region of China, between the Shandong Peninsula and the Great Wall, as the strategic rear area for confrontation with the USSR (DREA, 2011, p. 107).

In this way, the Japanese Army intended to eliminate the threat of the GMD and ensure the delimitation of this strategic rear in northern China by the means of a preemptive war against China. However, this was not the original planning of the civilian government, this scenario was gradually formed through covert operations of the so-called “field armies” in China, the main one being the Kwantung (Guandong) Army commanded by General Tojo Hideki (who would later command the country during the war). In March 1937, the commanders of China’s armies were summoned to Tokyo to explain their actions, but at the time they demanded from the central government that no more concessions be given to China and that it was necessary to “crush the Nanjing government” in order to continue preparations for a war against the USSR (DREA, 2011, p. 106-107).

Since the 1910s, contingency plans had existed for a war against China to defend Japanese interests in Manchuria. These plans called for the use of 13 divisions to occupy Manchuria, part of northern China and Beijing, with the use of two more divisions to secure the lines of communication between Beijing and the sea (DREA, 2011, p. 108). From the 1931 Manchurian Incident and its subsequent occupation, these plans were detailed for an eventual Sino-Soviet alliance that would jeopardize Japan’s position in northern China and its occupation of Manchukuo. The plans described a two-month campaign that would require 16 divisions, of which 14 would be destined to face the Red Army and two would engage against the nationalists. The objectives were practically the same, to protect Manchuria, occupy strategic points in northern China, including Beijing, and ensure its communication with the sea (DREA, 2011, p. 108). Only in the event of an escalation and a total and open war against China, treated as unlikely, was the reinforcement of ten more divisions planned, but for action still in northern China. Operations in central China would be limited to the occupation and blockade of major cities on the coast and only two divisions would be earmarked for this purpose (DREA, 2011, p. 108).

Despite the existence of these plans, between 1932 and 1936, the priority of the Kwantung Army was preparation for war against the USSR. While the GMD remained weak and divided, operations against China were to be limited, avoiding possible escalation. This perception changed progressively throughout the 1930s. However, the evolution of these plans demonstrated that, until the eve of the war, all Japanese plans prioritized an occupation of only northern China, even in a war on two fronts, there was no provision for an overthrow of

the GMD government or for the conquest of the entire territory. Even the possibility of occupation of Wuhan, in the interior of central China, which was considered in 1935 plans, was ruled out in its 1936 revision due to lack of troops and resources (DREA, 2011, p. 108-109).

The final version of China's war plans maintained these objectives, which were the occupation of northern China and the major coastal cities of central China (Nanjing, Shanghai and Hangzhou). Two scenarios were foreseen in the plans: the first referred to general operations in northern China and established the advance of operations along the main railways, exits from Beijing to the Yellow River, anticipating the occupation of the five provinces of northern China; the second concerned operations against a Sino-Soviet alliance, the main difference of which was the reduction of the occupation area in northern China, due to the redirection of forces for engagement against the Soviets. Although these plans advocated a prolonged occupation, none considered the possibility of a prolonged war of attrition. All focus was given to initial battles, possible responses to the Chinese reaction should be considered "contingent on circumstances" (DREA, 2011, p. 111).

However, all Japanese policy towards China from 1936 considered only solutions of force, although its main objective was to conserve forces to invest in a program of military modernization for confrontation with the USSR and to ensure a strategic rearguard in northern China. This contradictory planning concerns three factors. The first, already referenced, was the complete exclusion of civilian leaders, both elected and bureaucratic, from the process of formulation and political and strategic decision-making after February 1936. The second factor relates to the division between Tokyo HQ, which favored limited action against the Chinese, and the "field commanders" in China, who advocated preemptive war against China. The third factor concerns Japanese intelligence on the Chinese situation.

Although Japan had an efficient signals intelligence in China, had the ability to decode most Chinese communications and was aware of the situation of most Chinese forces, its political intelligence was unable to understand the situation in the country after the unification promoted by the GMD (PEATTIE, 2011, p. 56-57). The Japanese drew on their previous experiences negotiating with warlords in China and prejudices that depicted Chinese leaders as corrupt and inept and reaffirmed the racial superiority and the Japanese state as the leader of Asia. The rise of the GMD was seen as a new feud between warlords and the anti-Japanese sentiment they promoted would result from the influence of the USSR, the CCP and parochial interests. The Japanese failed to understand the new moment of Chinese political and social reality, the promotion of a modernization agenda and the union of the different political forces on an anti-Japanese front, resulting precisely from the initiatives of aggression against China. Within these established scenarios, the Japanese believed that the Chinese would not be able to organize prolonged resistance on a national level and that, as in previous events, it would acquiesce after a quick and decisive military victory.

This quick and decisive victory was the basis of the doctrine of the Imperial Japanese Army. Its main command manuals, the “Principles of Command” (*totsui koriyo*) and the “Principles of Operations” (*seno koriyo*), considered that the victory was tributary to the *Elan* superior morale and offensive capability¹¹. The Japanese operational concept consisted of fast, high-mobility operations seeking the decisive battle early in the campaign. The only means of achieving the objectives was the offensive, the infantry would be the main weapon of the maneuver and the artillery had the function of supporting its advance. It advocated making surprise attacks, night operations and having the ability to surround the opponent even in the smallest numbers. If its forces found themselves on the defensive, the commander should look for opportunities to deliver an overwhelming counterattack and regain the initiative. This operational concept, which sought the decisive battle at any cost, was termed the principle of “fast combat and fast decision”, or *sokkusen sokketsu* (DREA, 2011, p.112-113; SATOSHI; DREA, 2011, p. 159), and underpinned all Japanese operational planning in China, at least until the Battle of Wuhan in 1938, when it reached its limit.

Despite the heavy emphasis on infantry and the superiority of Japanese soldier morale, this operational concept was only feasible due to a highly trained force, proficiency in combined arms warfare, great superiority of firepower, mobility, and air and naval support, did not consist of a blind bayonet charge as common sense may eventually attempt to reproduce (DREA, 2011, p. 115). This type of operational concept, was tributary to the doctrines of *attaque à l'outrance* and the cult of the offensive that was born in World War I and strongly inspired Japanese doctrine, especially German military thought. The cult of the offensive was the result of a reinterpretation of Clausewitz based on chauvinist nationalism and “scientific” Darwinism. It was an attempt to justify the offensive war of aggression through a scientific veneer of a supposed survival of the fittest, in this case, the nation of higher race and morals (SONDHAUS, 2013, p. 42-43). This formulation survived in the interwar period and served as the basis for the formulations, in Europe, of the war of annihilation and total war, which also had a strong influence on the Japanese doctrinal formulation and, consequently, on its operational concept (DREA, 2011, p. 112). This thought can also be attributed to the great flaw in Japanese human intelligence, since its reports used stereotypes and prejudices to justify its racial superiority and an inevitability of a military victory based on the *sokkusen sokketsu*, attributing characteristics to the Chinese as petty, greedy, corrupt, and treacherous (DREA, 2011, p.131-133).

To execute this operational plan, the Imperial Japanese Army counted, on the eve of the war, with a force of 247 thousand men on active duty, distributed in 17 infantry divisions¹², four tank regiments and 54 air squadrons composed of 549 aircraft. Part of this order of battle was already stationed in China: The China Garrison Army, based in the Japanese concession of Tianjin, which had 2 regiments and an independent mixed brigade and the Kwantung

11 These precepts were so absolute that in the revision of the Principles of Command of 1928, the terms surrender, withdrawal and defense were removed from the manual (DREA, 2011, p. 112).

12 Each Japanese infantry division, in peacetime, consisted of 12,000 men, divided into two brigades of four thousand men, and field artillery, engineering, and a transport battalion regiments. In wartime, each division could reach 25 thousand men (DREA, 2011, p. 118).

Army, stationed in Manchukuo, which had four divisions. Two other divisions were stationed in Korea and two more infantry regiments in Taiwan. In addition, Japan had a reserve of conscripts, ready for employment, of about 742 thousand men in 1937 (DREA, 2011, p. 115-116).

As for logistics and equipment, the Japanese were extremely dependent on railways. Its logistic doctrine considered that Japanese maneuvering units should act within a radius between 190 and 290 km of a railway so that it could be properly supplied (DREA, 2011, p. 122-123). To completely motorize the army, it was estimated that 250 thousand trucks were needed, the Japanese industry in the 1930s was capable of producing only 1000 trucks per year (DREA, 2011, p. 119). Due to this deficiency and terrain conditions in China, outside the railway lines all logistics were done on foot or with animals. A transport regiment, in wartime, had 3,500 men¹³, 300 horses and 2,600 more animals (DREA, 2011, p. 123). There were also shortcomings in the industry for the production of ammunition for artillery and for tanks and armored personnel carriers. Logistical and production problems would overwhelm Japanese capabilities throughout the war, undermining the material and technological superiority they possessed over the Chinese at the start of the war. Against opponents of the same technological level, these deficiencies would result in catastrophic consequences (DREA, 2011, p. 121).

In short, the Japanese, despite their material and technological superiority over the Chinese, had a number of shortcomings that, throughout the war, would prove to be critical. Among them: flawed decision-making, with the overlap between field commanders and Tokyo HQ; vague operational plans that did not match the reality faced in the war; productive and logistical difficulties; and an operational concept inadequate to the type of war the Japanese were about to face.

6 BY WAY OF CONCLUSION: THE SECOND SINO-JAPANESE WAR

In 1937, with the Marco Polo Bridge incident, the Second Sino-Japanese War would begin, which would escalate to World War II. In this conflagration, China built an operational concept that related to its economic and political reality, as well as possessing a clear understanding of the enemy and its strategic objective. The strategic objective of China was the defense of its national revolution process and the concept used was the *chijiuzhan* or the protracted defensive war. The *chijiuzhan* aimed to negate the enemy's economic and technological superiority through the extension of their lines of communication and broad numerical superiority, provoking enemy attrition and blurring on the battlefield. It was sought to obtain a strategic stalemate that would force the retreat of the enemy.

Meanwhile, Japan, recovering from an economic crisis and experiencing a severe institutional crisis, had a vague strategic objective and an operational concept disconnected from political reality. The Japanese strategic goal was the guarantee of a strategic rear for Manchukuo

13 The transport forces were filled by second class officers and reserve soldiers with little or no experience. Because logistics was not directly involved in offensive actions, it ended up receiving unequal treatment and was relegated to the background (DREA, 2011, p. 123).

for a future war against the USSR. The operational concept used was the *sokkusen sokketsu*, which meant “fast war, fast decision”. This concept was based solely and exclusively on offensive warfare and saw its strategic goal achieved only with the destruction of the enemy, denying the possibility of political actions for the resolution of the war. Add to this a flawed decision-making process, with overlap between field commanders and Tokyo HQ, vague operational plans that did not match the reality faced in the war, and productive and logistical difficulties. Moreover, the kind of war Japan faced was largely unheard of. However, the rigidity of its decision-making process and its moment of political crisis prevented it from adopting a more flexible operational planning model that would match the reality on the battlefield.

In this way, throughout the three main stages of the war (Shanghai, Wuhan and Ichi-Go), the Japanese attempt at definition at any cost was observed. The Chinese, in turn, drew Japanese forces deep into the territory, eroded their supply lines, and made use of their numerical superiority until it became untenable for the Japanese to execute major offensive operations.

This way, a strategic stalemate was established, since the Nationalists did not nourish the illusion of a decisive victory against the Japanese on the battlefield, but believed that the greatest possible cost should be imposed on their advance, preventing the enemy from being able to take advantage of the gains of their momentary tactical victory. Despite the Chinese losing Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan, Xuzhou and their access to the coastline, the Japanese would become unable to sustain further significant offensive operations until 1944, maintaining a stalemate and making it a burden to maintain the occupation of territories¹⁴. And, even with the Japanese victory in operation Ichi-Go, the largest offensive of the entire war, Tokyo would not be able to extract any effective gain from the victory, completely collapsing its war machine, coming to surrender after the atomic bombing and the Soviet offensive on Manchuria on August 15, 1945.

¹⁴ Despite this, the cost of victory for the Nationalists was extremely high, as the eight years of blockade and heavy casualties would result in an extreme economic, administrative, and productive deterioration of the Chinese state. The result was the deterioration of their combat capability, the loss of important territories and extreme popular dissatisfaction. These factors would position the communists to the advantage in the leadership contest of the Chinese national revolution that would follow the end of the war.

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