Imperial Eclipse: Japan's Strategic Thinking about Continental Asia before August 1945

by Yukiko Koshiro
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Yukiko Koshiro's *Imperial Eclipse*—a study of Japanese military planning during the crucial years preceding the end of World War II—is an important and timely contribution to the scholarship on Japanese foreign policy. While several notable books have been published in this area in recent years, the approach Koshiro takes is particularly unique, and its controversial conclusions are bound to invite heated debates. In contrast to the excellent books by Richard Samuels and Kenneth Pyle, both published in 2007, which focus on Japan's complex relationship with the United States (as well as Great Britain), Koshiro's emphasis is squarely on Japanese strategic thinking on the Soviet Union.[1] Moreover, while most works on pre-1945 Japanese foreign policy, including those by Samuels and Pyle, seek to explain how Japan mismanaged its diplomatic affairs in the 1930s and found itself in a disastrous collision course with the United States, Koshiro aims to explain how Japanese military planners

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1 Kenneth B. Pyle, *Japan Rising: The Resurgence of Japanese Power and Purpose* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007); Richard J. Samuels, *Securing Japan: Tokyo's Grand Strategy and the Future of East Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

sought to get Japan out of the war in 1945 and lay the foundations for a favorable postwar strategic environment. Most importantly, contrary to Samuels and Pyle, who explain the strategic rationale behind Japan's close embrace of the United States since 1945 (also known as the "Yoshida Doctrine," after postwar Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru), Koshiro challenges the very premise that alliance with the United States was seen by wartime policymakers as the best option for Japan in the final months of World War II. She argues that Japanese military planners had imagined a role for postwar Japan as an autonomous actor that, in partnership with Communist China, would balance both the Soviet Union *and* the United States to keep Asia free from Western domination.

The book is organized into three sections, each aiming to challenge a commonly accepted narrative on Japanese foreign policy. The first section is on how Russia (and later the Soviet Union) was perceived in Japanese popular culture, as well as by intellectuals and policymakers prior to and during World War II. Under siege here is the notion that there was something "natural" about Japan's alliance with the United States in 1945—that is, the notion that since the late nineteenth century, Japan was on a steady path of cultural, economic, and political integration with the Anglo-American countries. From this perspective, Japanese anti-Western behavior in the 1930s was an aberration which was subsequently corrected once Japanese society was liberated from militarist control by the United States. Yet, as Koshiro argues, this interpretation of Japan's relationship with Western countries was a product of American mythmakers and their allies within the postwar Japanese government led by Yoshida. In fact, the Japanese saw themselves as more intricately linked to Eurasia compared to the Pacific Rim. In contrast to the United States, which was culturally alien to Japan, Russia felt more immediate to the Japanese given its blend of European and Asian racial and cultural influences.

In support of this claim, Koshiro notes that while Yoshida Shōin (1830-1859), the foremost samurai intellectual during the late Tokugawa

period, found inspiration in American culture, his mentor, Sakuma Shōzan, saw Russia as providing a better developmental model for Japan. Russia, then the Soviet Union, again emerged in the 1920s as a model for Japan, particularly among leftist intellectuals and progressive bureaucrats in the Home Ministry. It was not just the Japanese elites, who were inspired by the Soviet Union, Koshiro argues; the influence of Russia on Japanese mass culture was indeed comparable to, and in some ways more significant than, that of the United States and Western European countries. In support of this claim, Koshiro examines immigration patterns of individuals from the United States, Western Europe, and Russia/USSR. She notes that while most Americans residing in Japan were educators and missionaries, Russians tended to be employed as dockworkers, rickshaw pullers, and other blue-collar occupations. Americans also had minimal social interactions with the Japanese, Koshiro argues, and the level of intermarriage between Americans and the Japanese was low. In contrast, Russians were far more integrated into Japanese society.

This more sociological analysis is buttressed with an examination of Japanese intellectual discourse, and in particular, the prominent role Russians played in Japanese pan-Asian ideology. While Americans and Western Europeans were the clear racial other in Japanese cultural imagination and in scholarly debates of the 1930s and 1940s, the Russians were regarded as a hybrid European-Asian race with much affinity to the Japanese, and therefore could live harmoniously with the other Asian races within Japan's colonial empire. Russians, in fact, were depicted as model subjects in Manchuria, whose behavior should be emulated by other non-Japanese groups comprising the multi-ethnic "state" of Manchukuo. In short, there was nothing natural about Japan's integration into the U.S. alliance system in the 1950s. Japan's detachment from Eurasia was very much a product of postwar politics, rather than a continuation of a path Japan had pursued since the black ships first arrived in Tokyo Bay.

Moving on from a sociological and cultural analysis of Soviet-Japan relations, the second section (comprised of two chapters, one on China and the other on Korea) helps to set the stage for Koshiro's main argument that, rather than being blissfully ignorant or thoroughly irrational, Japanese military planners in the final months of World War II were proactive strategists, who carefully planned for Japan's inevitable defeat. Most importantly, these middle chapters highlight the sophisticated nature of Japan's intelligence apparatus, especially when it came to its analysis of political conditions in China and Korea. In particular, Koshiro's discussion of China is illuminating. She writes, "North China Area Army intelligence analysts had early indications that Chinese and Soviet communists had disparate goals… Far from a conciliatory gesture to Moscow, Tokyo's appeasement of the CCP reflected its expectation that Mao had the power to check both Soviet and U.S. ambitions and keep Asia for Asians" (87). It was not just that the Japanese correctly predicted how the Cold War would unfold in East Asia; Koshiro's analysis suggests that an anti-hegemonic alliance between Japan and China should not be dismissed as a pipedream of Mao and Japanese communists during China's isolation in the 1960s. It was a real possibility that Japanese policymakers contemplated prior to 1945, but was never pursued by Japan's postwar leaders.

The heart of the book lies in the three chapters comprising the final empirical section on strategic analysis and planning during the period preceding Japan's unconditional surrender. As Koshiro writes, the basic question confronting Japanese military planners was that of "to whom ought Japan surrender, in which theater, and at what time?" (155). Specifically, by answering these questions, we may better understand the logic behind two key decisions made by Japanese military planners in 1945 that have since been maligned by scholars as both strategically inept and highly costly in human life: the first to remove divisions from the Soviet-Manchuria and Soviet-Korea borders in the months prior to Soviet Union's abrogation of the neutrality pact; and the second to wait

until August 15 to surrender. Yet, contrary to conventional wisdom that holds that these decisions were indications of gross foolishness, Koshiro posits that they reveal Japanese wartime policymakers to have been true masters of *realpolitik*, whose strategic visions were left unrealized by Konoe Fumimaro, Yoshida Shigeru, and other Japanese politicians who played a prominent role in fashioning Japanese foreign policy in the months and years following Japan's defeat.

The first "strategic blunder" was for the Imperial Army to remove more than ten divisions and units from the Kwantung Army (stationed in Manchuria) to southern military theaters in 1944 (such as the South Pacific, the Philippines, and Okinawa), only to follow this with the redeployment of seven regiments from the northern frontier to Japan proper as well as to the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula. These actions (which left the long border with the Soviet Union precariously vulnerable to an attack by the Red Army), when combined with seemingly desperate attempts by Tokyo to solicit Stalin to mediate peace between Japan and the United States in 1945, have been typically interpreted by historians as demonstrating how divorced Japanese policymakers had become from reality. Such an interpretation, Koshiro argues, fundamentally misunderstands Japanese strategic thinking. Japanese military planners in fact *desired* Stalin to declare war on Japan and for the Red Army to capture Japan's continental empire, so as to "thwart America's singular takeover of Japan's colonial empire and its hegemony of postwar East Asia" (201). Similarly, Japan redeployed troops from the Soviet-Korea border in the north to the southern portion of the peninsula in order to defend against a possible invasion of Korea by the United States. The aim was to prevent American takeover of the entire peninsula and to engineer a divided Korea.

The delay in Japanese surrender until August 15, well after Japanese policymakers knew that the war was lost, also follows the logic of preventing domination of East Asia by either the United States or the Soviet Union, Koshiro argues. The standard narrative of the timing of

Japan's surrender is one of Japanese elites desperately holding on to the hope that American difficulty in invading Japan proper would convince the United States to negotiate a conditional surrender. In turn, Japan finally surrendered on August 15, 1945, because either (i) the utter destructiveness of the atomic bombs convinced Japanese policymakers that further resistance was futile, or (ii) the unexpected entry of the Soviet Union in the Pacific War led to the fear that the Red Army would march into Tokyo and demand the division of Japan into American and Soviet zones of occupation. While Koshiro agrees with scholars who see the Soviet entry as the primary trigger leading to Japan's surrender, the strategic logic behind this decision she provides is novel: "Ending the war *before* the Soviet attack had no place" in Japanese strategic thinking, "[s]ince Japanese planners and strategists had developed a vision for postwar East Asia *as the outcome of* anticipated Soviet participation in the war" (224). In other words, Japan waited eagerly for the Soviet Union to attack Manchuria and Korea in order to end the war in a manner that ensured that no single power would fill the vacuum in East Asia left by the collapse of the Japanese Empire.

While the book is an important contribution to the scholarship on Japanese foreign policy, Koshiro's monograph, like any other, is not without its shortcomings. First, it must be pointed out that many of the claims the author makes are based on light documentary evidence. The author's controversial interpretation of the timing and logic of Japan's surrender, for example, is derived from circumstantial evidence interpreted through the framework found in an opinion paper written by Colonel Tanemura Sakō. While Tanemura was an important member of the Army War Operations Plans Division, there is no evidence that his private opinion was actually reflected in government policy. This shortcoming, nonetheless, is one that could not have been avoided given the nature of the subject matter. Japanese officials engaged in systematic destruction of written records pertaining to war planning, especially those concerning the final months of the war. Hence, basing a study of

Japanese strategic actions on readily available documents would lead us to a biased interpretation—in fact, one that Japanese military planners wanted us (be it the Japanese public or U.S. occupiers) to hold.

The second shortcoming concerns the first empirical chapters on the place of Russia within Japanese cultural imagination and intellectual discourse prior to 1945. As noted above, Koshiro provides evidence suggesting that Russians were far more integrated into Japanese society as compared to other Western immigrants, but she fails to emphasize that the Russian population was concentrated in Japan's peripheries: Hokkaido, Sakhalin, northern Korea, and Manchuria. This contrasts to foreign residents from the United States and Western Europe, who resided in the principal Japanese cities, such as Tokyo, Yokohama, and Kobe. More problematically, Koshiro uses pan-Asianist writings of the 1940s as evidence of Japan's cultural closeness to Russia in comparison with the United States and Western Europe. However, much of this literature was government propaganda intended to justify Japan's expansion into Northeast Asia starting in the 1930s.

Furthermore, as Oguma Eiji has demonstrated, rhetoric on Japanese national identity typically followed Japanese strategic decisions. For example, while academic discourse in the late nineteenth century portrayed the Japanese as being a *tanitsu minzoku* (racially pure people), in the aftermath of Japan's annexation of Taiwan (1895) and Korea (1905), the dominant view shifted to that of a *kongō minzoku* (racially mixed people).[2] As such, Japanese discussions of the Russians being Asian-like in spirit may reveal very little about "natural" Japanese dispositions. It is much more likely to have been a product of Japanese government officials and sympathetic intellectuals attempting to justify

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[2] Oguma Eiji, *"Nihonjin" no kyōkai: Okinawa, Ainu, Taiwan, Chōsen shokuminchi shihai kara fukki undō made* [The Boundaries of "Japanese": Okinawa, Ainu, Taiwan, Korea from Colonial Domination to Recovery Movement] (Tokyo: Shinyōsha, 1998); Oguma Eiji, *A Genealogy of "Japanese" Self-Images*, trans. David Askew (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2002).

the Soviet-Japan neutrality pact, as well as encouraging Russians living in Manchukuo to assist the Japanese in ruling over the other native inhabitants of this fake country. In general, a more critical discussion of Japanese wartime racial rhetoric would have been desirable.

Despite these shortcomings, *Imperial Eclipse* presents a bold interpretation of Japanese strategic thinking prior to the conclusion of World War II and is a book that should be read by any scholar interested in Japanese military history and foreign policy. Most importantly, this book provides us with an image of what Japan as a "normal nation" could look like at a time when Japanese foreign policy is at a major turning point. If Koshiro is right, Japanese wartime strategic thinkers imagined that the best course of action for postwar Japan would be that of an "offshore balancer" in East Asia, similar to how Great Britain kept continental Europe divided and balanced prior to World War II. During the Cold War, this role would have been best played by Japan allying with China and keeping U.S. and Soviet ambitions in East Asia at bay. In the current geostrategic environment, where China has replaced the Soviet Union as America's primary rival in East Asia, one could imagine Japan playing the role of an offshore balancer by positioning itself between these two great powers and working with other Asian countries, such as India, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia to prevent the region from being dominated by any single power. Douglas MacArthur, Yoshida Shigeru, and other postwar Japanese leaders have succeeded in making it seem that a close alliance with the United States is the best, or most natural, course of action for a "normal" Japan. Koshiro's analysis forces us to question this assumption, and imagine a more geo-strategically fluid East Asia where Japan could play an independent role in contributing to regional peace and stability.