The invasion of South East Asia and the plans for the end of the war

In July 1940, with a commitment being made for a southward push, the Japanese Army (IJA) and Navy (IJN) put all their efforts into producing a battle plan for war in South East Asia against the Americans, British and Dutch territories, and they produced a plan for this by the summer of 1941. However, there was a key difference in the plans put forward by the Japanese Army and Navy regarding the invasion of South East Asia. After the Russo-Japanese War, the IJN had based their strategy on a Pacific-centred anti-Anglo-America strategy, their main plan being a ‘clockwise strategy’ moving from the Philippines, to Java, Sumatra and Malaya. This stressed the importance of removing the danger of an attack by the USA by invading the Philippines. However, the IJA favoured an anti-clockwise movement, landing first in Malaya, and moving in an opposite direction to that proposed by the IJN. It was thought that if the Far Eastern British Empire was invaded, Japan could avoid the involvement of the USA in the war. The movement of the IJA into South East Asia also limited its enemies to British and Dutch territories, and meant that an attack on the Philippines could be avoided or delayed. In the end, there was a lack of information about each route’s advantages and disadvantages making any decision difficult, and on 5 November 1941, the Emperor issued a decree, ‘The Army and Navy’s Southern Strategy Agreement’, which stated that both the Philippines and Malaya would be swiftly attacked, with a left and right southerly movement crossing into the Dutch East Indies.

The objective of this southern movement was to destroy and occupy American, British and Dutch bases, their main areas of operation being the Philippines, Guam, Hong Kong, Malaya, Burma, and Indonesia. The agreement indicated those areas that were to be invaded at the beginning of the operation, but after that changes in strategy meant that this soon became obsolete.¹ In addition to the South East Asia invasion plan the IJN, under
the control of Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, planned a separate attack on Pearl Harbor. This was part of a plan which aimed at destroying the American Fleet based at Pearl Harbor thus bringing the war to a swifter end, although many military leaders believed that Japan would be more successful in a war against Britain rather than one against the USA.

In early September 1941, three months before they opened hostilities, the IJA and IJN drew up their plan ('The guidelines for operations against America, Britain and the Dutch'). At the centre of this was the idea of ending the war, its main points being: ‘Force the surrender of the Chiang Kai-shek government, force the surrender of the British and Australian forces and this will cause the Americans to lose the need to continue the war’.

In other words, it was believed that the defeat of the Chiang government and the British would bring about a rapid end to the war. According to this plan, there was no choice but to take over Hong Kong and Shanghai in order to bring about the surrender of the Chiang government. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, any operations against China would ‘if possible avoid waste’ and no active military action would be carried out. On the other hand, in order to bring about a British surrender, Japan would have to rely on German military force. There were three ways in which the Japanese could help in the German war against Britain in Europe:

(1) Japan could co-operate with Germany’s push into the Caucasus, the Middle East and North Africa, by opening a new front in Western Asia and India, and thereby threatening the power of the British Empire in Asia.

(2) To relieve the German burden of fighting against the Soviet Russians, thus freeing resources to be used against the British. This would be achieved through Japan acting as an intermediary and negotiating peace between the Germans and Russians.

(3) To respond to a request from the Germans by attacking the Soviet Far East.

The third of these was Germany’s most consistently requested option. Some Japanese military leaders agreed that they should co-operate with this plan. However, the maintenance of good relations with the Soviets was necessary for the success of the war in South East Asia, and so the option preferred by Germany was never carried out. The Army, Navy and Foreign Ministry actively pursued the second option, but the Germans did not want to give up the possibility of an IJA attack on the Soviets and also there was little response from the Soviet side to the possibility of a peace with the Germans. The best way to end the war was to defeat the British, and this required the establishment of German supremacy and the invasion of the British mainland, a very ambitious project. Although an agreement on