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# War and Peace: International Relations 1878–1941

THIRD EDITION



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 **HODDER**  
EDUCATION

# 9

## The Countdown to War in Asia 1931–41

### POINTS TO CONSIDER

Japanese expansion into Manchuria and China had a major impact on the situation in Europe during the decade after 1941. Ultimately through the attack on Pearl Harbor the Japanese turned a predominantly European war into a global war. The nature of this impact, from 1931 to 1941, is studied under the following headings:

- The Manchurian crisis
- The outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War
- Japan and the Anti-Comintern Pacts 1936–9
- The road to Pearl Harbor 1940–1

### Key dates

1931	September	Mukden incident
1933	February	Japan left the League of Nations
1936	November	Anti-Comintern Pact signed
1937	July	Japan attacked China
1940	September 27	Tripartite Pact signed by Germany, Italy and Japan
1941	July	Japan occupied southern Indo-China
	December 7–8	Japan attacked Pearl Harbor
	December 8	USA declared war on Japan
	December 11	Germany declared war on the USA

### 1 | The Manchurian Crisis

Arguably, the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in 1931 was a continuation of policies followed by Japanese governments since the defeat of Russia in 1905 (see page 37) when Japan had been awarded the lease of the South Manchurian Railway and the right to protect it with some 15,000 troops. In the late 1920s these concessions were threatened by the turmoil caused by the Chinese Civil War, which broke out in 1927 and was fought between the Nationalists and Communists.

**Key question**  
Why did Japan occupy Manchuria?

### The Japanese occupation of Manchuria 1931

The failure of the Japanese government to deal with the impact of the Depression on the economy convinced the Japanese officer corps that it would have to act decisively and occupy the whole of Manchuria. This would then enable Japan to control the region's valuable coal and iron resources at a time when economic nationalism was already making it difficult for it to purchase these vital raw materials elsewhere. Consequently, Japanese officers in Manchuria decided to devise an incident which would provide the pretext for intervention. On 18 September 1931 a bomb exploded on the railway line just outside Mukden where both Chinese and Japanese troops were stationed. This was immediately blamed on the Chinese and provided the Japanese forces with the desired excuse to occupy not only Mukden but the whole of southern Manchuria.

**Key date**  
Mukden incident: September 1931

**Key figure**  
**Lord Lytton** (1876–1947)  
British Governor of Bengal 1922–7. In 1931 he chaired the Lytton Commission in Manchuria.

**Key question**  
What was the League's initial response to the occupation of Manchuria by Japan?

### The response of the League of Nations

China immediately appealed to the League of Nations, but the council responded cautiously. It first asked Japan to withdraw its troops back into the railway zone and, when this was ignored, sent a commission of inquiry under the chairmanship of **Lord Lytton**. The Japanese were able to complete the occupation of Manchuria and turned it into the satellite state of Manchukuo while the Lytton Commission was conducting a leisurely fact-finding operation in the spring of 1932.

**Key question**  
Why were both Britain and USA not ready to use force in the Manchurian crisis?

### Refusal of Britain and the USA to use force

It is easy to criticise the League for not acting more decisively, but without the commitment of the Great Powers it was not in the position to take effective action. Neither of the two most important naval powers, Britain and the USA, was ready to use force against Japan. From the Japanese point of view, the timing of the Mukden incident could not have been better. On 15 September a minor mutiny at the naval base at Invergordon, which was caused by a cut in the sailors' wages, threatened temporarily to paralyse the Royal Navy; and five days later Britain was forced off the **gold standard**. The USA, shell-shocked by the Depression, was unwilling to do more than denounce Japanese aggression. President Hoover, for instance, argued that economic sanctions would be like 'sticking pins in tigers' and would run the risk of leading to war.

**Key term**  
**Gold standard**  
A system by which the value of a currency is defined in terms of gold. The value of the pound was linked to gold. On 20 September 1931 the pound was forced off the gold standard and its value fell from

It is sometimes argued that the British government and powerful financial interests in the City of London secretly supported Japan. It is true that Britain did have some sympathy with Japanese action in Manchuria. Like Japan it had commercial interests in China, which it felt were threatened by the chaos and civil war there. Britain also appreciated Japan's potential role in providing a barrier against the spread of Bolshevism from the USSR into northern China. Nevertheless, the British government

war on an issue that was not central to British interests. In February 1933 Sir John Simon, the Foreign Minister, told the House of Commons:

I think I am myself enough of a pacifist to take the view that however we handle the matter, I do not intend my own country to get into trouble about it ... There is one great difference between 1914 and now and it is this: in no circumstances will this government authorise this country to be party to this struggle.

### The report of the Lytton Commission

It was not until September 1932 that the League received the Commission's report. Although it conceded that the treaty rights, which Japan had enjoyed in Manchuria since 1905, had made Sino-Japanese friction unavoidable, it nevertheless observed that 'without a declaration of war a large area of what was indisputably Chinese territory had been forcibly seized and occupied by the armed forces of Japan and has in consequence of this operation been separated from and declared independent of the rest of China'. It proposed that Japanese troops should withdraw back into the railway zone, and then both China and Japan should negotiate not only a treaty guaranteeing Japan's rights in Manchuria but also a non-aggression pact and a trade agreement.

Essentially the report was mistakenly based on the assumption that the Japanese had no territorial designs in China and were ready to compromise over Manchuria. When it was adopted unanimously, with the single exception of Japan, by the League Assembly on 24 February 1933, Japan withdrew from the League in protest. It was obvious that only armed intervention by the Great Powers would now be able to force Japan out of Manchuria, and that option was not politically realistic in 1933.

### The consequences of the occupation

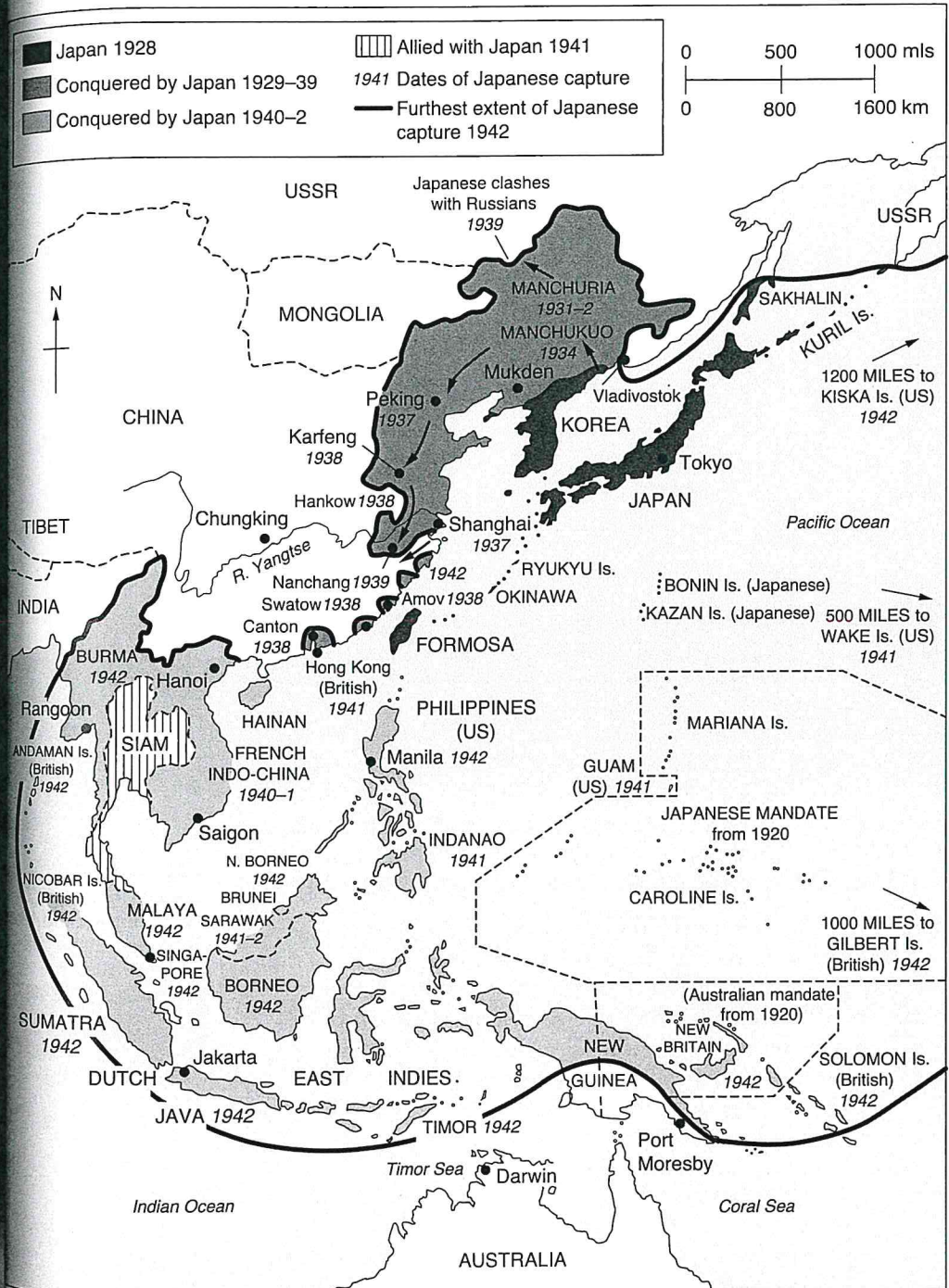
The Japanese occupation of Manchuria changed the balance of power in the Pacific. Japan had broken free from the restraints that had been imposed on it at the Washington Conference in 1922 by Britain and the USA (see page 128) and had guaranteed it access to valuable coal and iron ore resources. Above all, Japan was now in a favourable strategic position to plan a large-scale military invasion of China. The Manchurian incident is often seen as the first link in a chain of events that led to the Second World War. Later, a Liberal British MP, Sir Geoffrey Mander (1882–1962), argued that the 'pathway to the beaches of Dunkirk lay through the waste of Manchuria'.

← **Key question**  
What were the recommendations of the Lytton report?

Japan left the League of Nations: February 1933

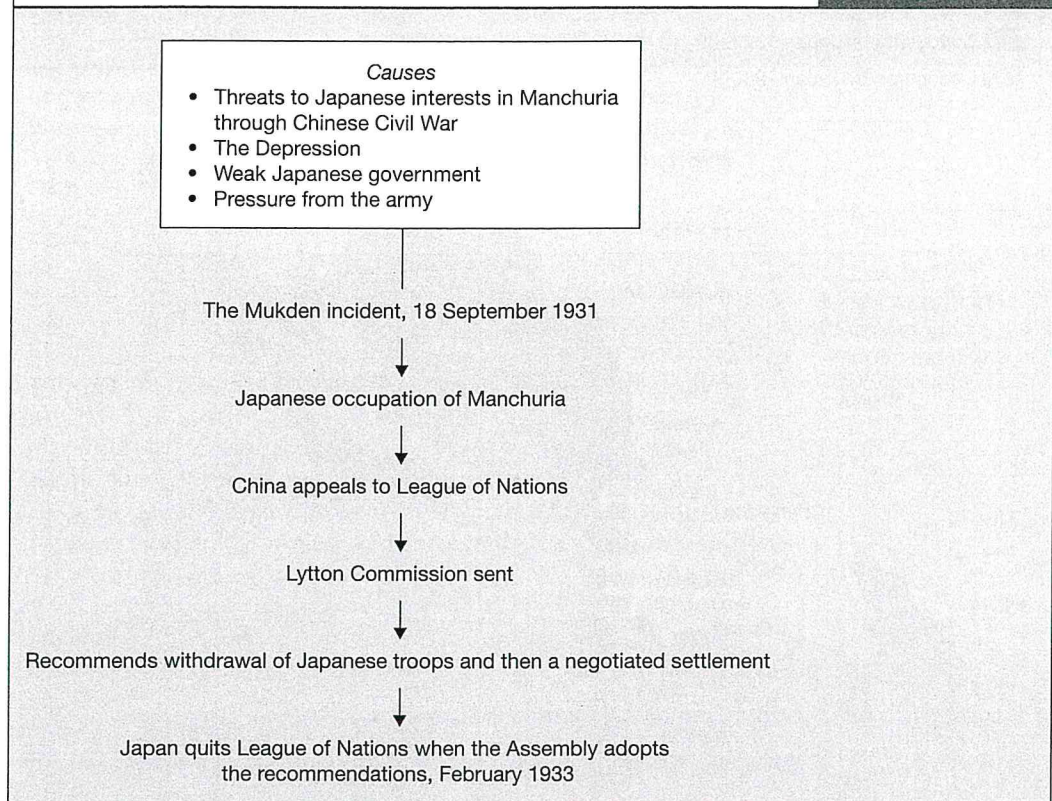
Key date

← **Key question**  
What were the consequences of the Japanese occupation of Manchuria?



Manchuria, East Asia and the Pacific 1931-42.

Summary diagram: The Manchurian crisis



## 2 | The Outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War

The war in the Pacific, which ended with the dropping of atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, began when a minor incident involving Japanese and Nationalist Chinese troops occurred at the Marco-Polo bridge near Beijing on 7 July 1937, and then rapidly escalated into full-scale hostilities. Japan was determined to turn northern China into an economic and political satellite and progressively to extend its influence throughout the whole of South-east Asia at the cost of the US and European colonial empires.

Inevitably, the war emphasised the fragility of British and French power as neither country could afford simultaneous hostilities in Europe and the Far East. Thus, as tension mounted in Europe, both governments in practice avoided confrontation with the Japanese. In 1937 a senior French diplomat bluntly informed the US ambassador in Paris that:

... as long as the present tension existed in Europe it would be impossible for France to take part in any common action in the Far East, which might imply at some stage the **furnishing** of armed forces ... It was regrettable that this situation existed ... but the situation was a fact and had to be faced.

← **Key question**  
What impact did the Sino-Japanese War have on Britain, France and the USA?

Japan attacked China: July 1937

Key date

**Furnishing**  
Provision.

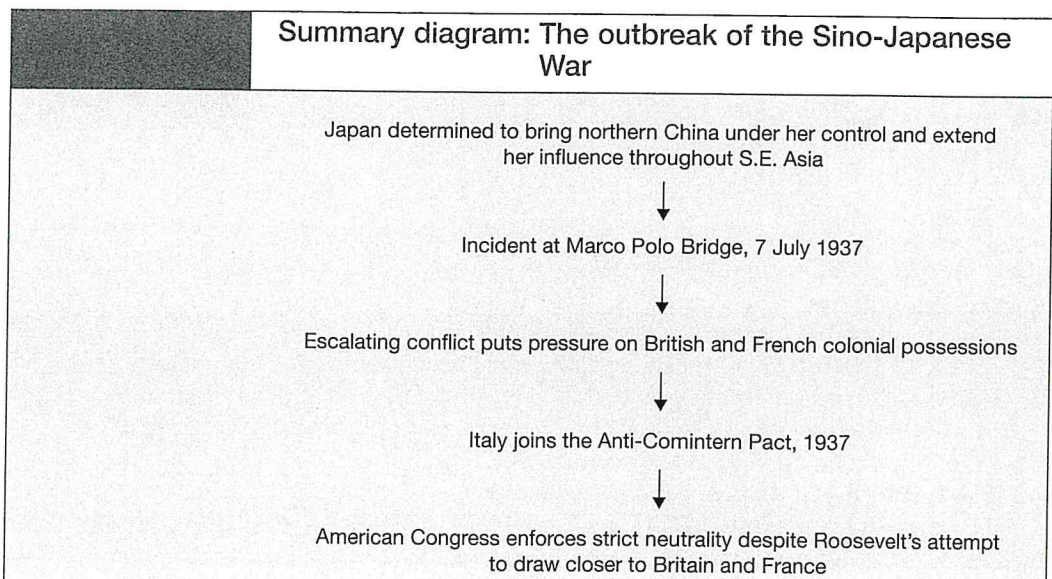
Key term

Japanese infantry advance while displaying their rising sun flag in China, 1938.



Although the USA was equally reluctant to take military measures against Japan, the spreading conflict did enable President Roosevelt to begin the slow process of realigning the USA with the democracies against the Axis powers and Japan. In December 1937, when British and US ships on the Yangtze river were attacked by Japanese planes, Roosevelt, despite immediate Japanese apologies and offers of compensation, took the potentially important step of sending a US naval officer to discuss possible future co-operation between the British and US fleets; but when Congress found out, there was an explosion of anger and Roosevelt was severely criticised for compromising US neutrality. No wonder that Chamberlain observed that 'It is always best and safest to count on nothing from the Americans but words.'

### Summary diagram: The outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War



Question  
What effect did the Sino-Japanese War have on Britain, France and the USA?

Key date  
July 1937

Key term

Key term

### 3 | Japan and the Anti-Comintern Pacts 1936–9

While the Far Eastern war increased the pressure on Britain and France, it did not automatically follow that Japan, Italy and Germany would find it easy to form a common front against the democracies. In December 1936, Germany and Japan had signed the Anti-Comintern Pact. Its value for Japan was that it could be seen as a counter-thrust to increasing Soviet penetration of Mongolia and to the activities of the Comintern in China. Tokyo could signal to Moscow that it was no longer isolated.

A year later Italy joined the pact. Again, the advantage for Japan was that it associated Japan with the two Axis powers in a vague and symbolic pact that was primarily anti-communist (see page 152), but which potentially could also be directed against the Western Powers as well.

#### Key question

What did Japan gain from the Anti-Comintern Pact?

Anti-Comintern Pact signed: November 1936

Key date

### 4 | The Road to Pearl Harbor 1940–1

One historian, J.G. Utley, has stressed that ‘the Japanese–American conflict grew out of two mutually exclusive views of world order’:

- Japan, regarding herself as a ‘have-not’ power, attempted to guarantee its access to markets and raw materials by gradually dominating economically and politically not only China but the whole of South-east Asia by creating the ‘Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere’ (see page 6).
- To the Americans, as was made clear in the **Atlantic Charter**, it was an article of both faith and practical economics that they should be able to trade and invest freely in China and elsewhere.

#### Key question

Why did US–Japanese relations deteriorate in 1940–1?

**Atlantic Charter**  
Statement of basic principles issued jointly by Roosevelt and Churchill in 1941.

Key term

With Germany having established a self-sufficient siege economy in Europe, it became even more imperative from the US point of view to stop Japan from doing the same in Asia. Washington responded to each fresh extension of Japanese power not only by building up its naval forces in the Pacific, but by restricting more and more tightly the exports of potential war materials to Japan, a measure which in fact only intensified the Japanese drive for economic self-sufficiency.

Both sides seemed therefore to be on a collision course. But history is never that simple. There were sufficiently ambiguous and conflicting signals coming out of Tokyo to encourage Roosevelt and the US State Department sometimes to believe that if sufficient economic pressure were applied, Japan would be forced to pull out of China and the influence of the army would be discredited on its government.

In June 1940 Hitler’s victories strengthened the hand of the hawks in Tokyo who advocated the occupation of the European colonies in South-east Asia. A relatively moderate government, which wished to avoid confrontation with the USA, was replaced by a more anti-Western regime under **Fumimaro Konoe**, which

**Fumimaro Konoe**  
(1891–1945)  
Japanese Prime Minister 1937–40 and from July 1940 to October 1941.

Key figure



Japan occupied southern Indo-China: July 1941

Japan attacked Pearl Harbor: 7 December 1941

USA declared war on Japan: 8 December 1941

Germany declared war on the USA: 11 December 1941

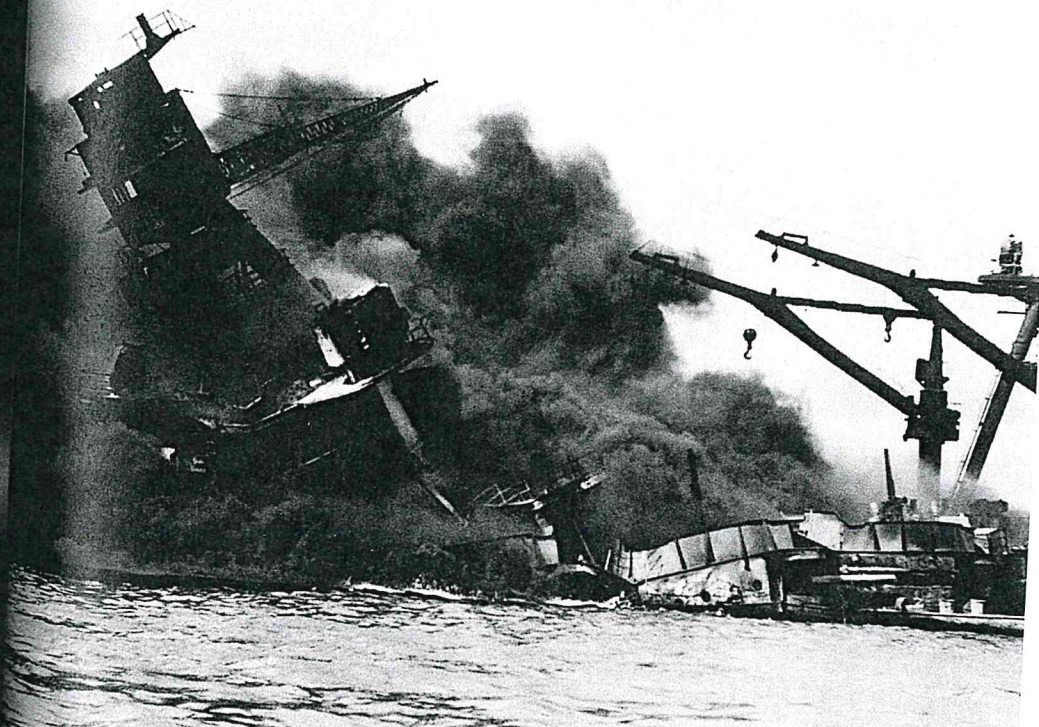
**Key question**  
What were the immediate causes of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor?

openly proclaimed its aim of creating a Japanese-dominated Asia. Washington responded by suspending exports of vital aviation fuel and lubricating oil. To neutralise growing US opposition the Japanese then tried to negotiate a Four-Power pact with the Axis states and the USSR. They succeeded in reaching an agreement with Germany and Italy in September (see page 178) and they signed a five-year treaty of neutrality with Stalin the following spring. But the German invasion of the USSR in June 1941 terminated any prospect of a grand four-power alliance against Britain and the USA.

Konoe then urged that Japan should desert the Axis powers and come to an agreement with Britain and the USA, but he was overruled by his Foreign Minister and the armed services, who all believed that Hitler would quickly defeat the Soviets. Thus, Tokyo and Washington remained on a collision course.

### Pearl Harbor

In July 1941 the Japanese occupied the southern half of French Indo-China and the Americans responded by imposing a comprehensive oil embargo on Japan. The embargo confronted the Japanese with the alternative of either seeing their war

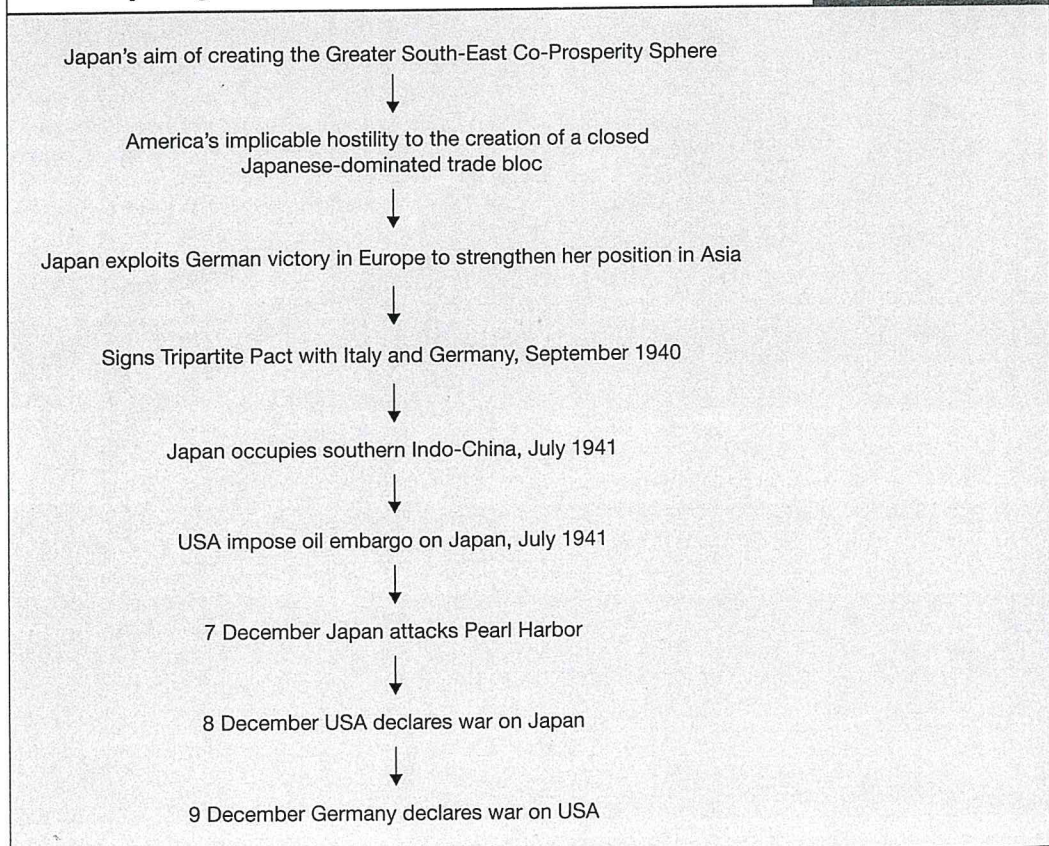


machine paralysed through lack of oil or launching, within a few months at the latest, a pre-emptive strike against their enemies.

In early December they received verbal assurances from Ribbentrop that, in the event of a Japanese attack, Germany would also declare war against the USA, even though strictly speaking the Tripartite Pact did not commit Germany to such an action as it was a defensive alliance only. Thus, at dawn on 7 December the Japanese felt sufficiently confident to launch their attack on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor in the Hawaii islands.

Hitler's declaration of war on the USA on 11 December can in retrospect be seen as a major error since one cannot with certainty say that Roosevelt, confronted with war in the Far East, would have been able to persuade Congress to declare war on Germany as well. However, it could be argued that informally the Americans were already at war with Germany, as they were committed to supplying Britain with all it needed to survive. In that sense, Hitler's declaration of war was therefore both a recognition of reality and a politically calculated gesture of solidarity aimed at encouraging the Japanese to tie down the Americans in the Pacific so that they could not assist the British in the Atlantic and Europe.

#### Summary diagram: The road to Pearl Harbor 1940–1



## 5 | The Key Debate

The historian D.C. Watt argued that the Sino-Japanese war had 'little to do with Europe' and was not the start of the Second World War. Certainly the roots of Japanese expansion in China can be traced right back to the 1890s. However, diplomatic and military events in Europe and East Asia inevitably interacted with each other. Japan exploited the absorption of the Western Powers in the First World War to seize Germany's possessions in China and to maximise its own influence there.

In the 1930s Japanese aggression had a direct impact on the policies of Britain and France. The nightmare of a Japanese, German and Italian Triple Alliance, which the Anti-Comintern Pact of 1937 seemed to indicate was in the process of being formed, was one of the driving forces behind appeasement. Similarly, Hitler's victories in 1940 encouraged the hawks in Tokyo to put pressure on the Dutch and French possessions in east Asia. In the end it was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent declaration of war by Roosevelt on Japan that prompted Hitler in his turn to declare war on the USA and so fuse both the European and Asian wars.