

Japan's New Order and Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: Planning for Empire

日本の新秩序と大東亜共栄圏—帝国建設への構想

Janis Mimura

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Summary

This essay examines the ideology and politics of Japanese technocrats during the Pacific War. Focusing on Kishi Nobusuke and his faction of reform bureaucrats, it analyzes how these technocrats viewed the war as an unprecedented planning opportunity to realize their vision of Japan's New Order and Asian empire.

In 1915, the theorist of technocracy Thorstein Veblen prophetically wrote about a temporary window of opportunity for Japan to combine its national spirit and recently acquired industrial technology with maximum effect in a major military offensive. Veblen predicted that the window would gradually close as modern technical advances eroded traditional notions of community and loyalty and introduced a materialistic and commercial mindset bringing about the "sabotage of capitalism."¹ A quarter of a century later, however, Japanese technocrats remained exceedingly optimistic about their country's prospects for war and empire. They were determined to "overcome the modern," despite the attempts of "status quo" businessmen and bureaucrats to derail the New Order movement. They believed that

more than Japan's material resources, its human resources, namely the patriotic spirit, courage, discipline, and creativity of its people, were the fount of national strength.

On August 1, 1940, Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yōsuke announced the government's policy to build a so-called "Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere." The term *Greater East Asia* implied that in addition to the core region of Japan, Manchukuo, and China, the sphere would include Southeast Asia, Eastern Siberia, and possibly the outer regions of Australia, India, and the Pacific Islands. The new policy to expand the boundaries of Japan's empire beyond East Asia emerged after France and the Netherlands fell to Nazi Germany in the late spring of 1940 and forfeited their colonies in Southeast Asia. Japan subsequently advanced into French Indochina in June 1940. Three months later in September 1940, Japan concluded the Triple Axis Pact with Germany and Italy. When diplomacy failed to lift economic sanctions imposed by the United States, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 8, 1941. These actions set the country on a course of brutal occupation of Asia and a destructive war against the United States and its allies that culminated in Japan's total defeat in 1945.



Celebrating the tripartite pact in Tokyo

The question of why resource-poor Japan would take on the world’s superpower and its allies continues to baffle analysts of the wartime period. Between 1937 and 1945, the Japanese state squeezed the economy through strict rationing in the civilian sector and control of management and labor in order to channel a dwindling supply of precious resources to the military’s ambitious production expansion and material mobilization plans.² The drain on resources from the protracted war in China, food and energy shortages, higher import costs as a result of the European war, and rapidly deteriorating trade relations suggested that Japan had little chance of victory in a war against the United States.

Japanese technocrats conceived of the Pacific War as more than a battle of resources. They viewed it as an ideological battle between the architects of a new, fascist geopolitical order and defenders of the old liberal capitalist order. From the standpoint of planning, the war represented an opportunity to complete Japan’s New Order and build the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere. For technocrats, the attack on Pearl Harbor was not only a wager to force the United States to accept Japanese hegemony in Asia, but also a means of reform. The Pacific War was the first step toward constructing a technologically advanced, self-sufficient,

regional economic sphere, or *Grossraumwirtschaft* (*kōiki keizai*). Reflecting the reformist view of war as an integral part of state reform, Major General and Cabinet Planning Board Chief Akinaga Tsukizō proclaimed that Japan would “build while fighting (*tatakainagara kensetsu e*).³



Mapping the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere

The New Order

Already by the spring of 1941, the New Order movement appeared to have reached a crossroads in which it could either flourish and develop or stagnate and congeal into the “status quo” mold. Launched in 1940 by Kishi Nobusuke and his faction of reform bureaucrats, the movement sought to reorder Japanese society along fascist lines by replacing political parties with a state mass party, subordinating commercial interests to state interests, and replacing class consciousness with national consciousness. These technocrats were concerned that the movement’s collapse would not only jeopardize long-term planning, but also place Japan in a critical predicament since it was becoming increasingly cut off from outside resources.

One of the most difficult challenges in establishing the New Order was to obtain the cooperation and expertise of business. Since the 1930s, technocrats had sought to combine state planning with private initiative. Drawing upon the lessons of Manchurian industrialization, technocrats downplayed the anti-capitalist rhetoric of the New Order and recast their policies in more business-friendly terms. In a press interview in August 1942, Kishi distinguished the new control measures from those of Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro dating from 1940. He complained that there had been “too much theory” in the proposed reforms and stressed that implementation, not theory, was the overriding concern.”⁴



Kishi Nobusuke

Technocrats also acknowledged that the state ought to defer to business leaders on issues concerning the internal management of their

firms. In Manchuria, reform bureaucrats had abandoned the special company system based on the principle of “one industry, one company” and turned to Nissan president Ayukawa Yoshisuke to reorganize and consolidate the special companies within Nissan’s own corporate structure. Now in Japan, planners sought to address the lackluster performance of the new industry-based control associations.

In a scathing report on the control associations, the cornerstone of the Economic New Order, the Cabinet Planning Board identified the source of their weakness.⁵ The first problem was the lack of enthusiasm and support from business. The report accused business of sabotaging the control associations by refusing to supply the best managers, denying government inspectors access to factories, and generally obstructing their smooth functioning. The second problem was their heavily bureaucratic character. The control associations had become no more than an additional administrative layer, rigidified and unresponsive to the needs of the members firms. The third problem was the lukewarm, noncommittal attitude of the bureaucracy. The various ministries needed to overcome their sectionalism and completely transfer the relevant powers to the control associations. The real challenge was to obtain the expertise of business leaders. Given the top-down, authoritarian nature of the control associations based on the so-called “*Führer* principle,” their fate was completely dependent upon the ability of the leader to effectively manage the member firms and command their respect and allegiance.

In a major shift in strategy, Kishi struck a compromise with business in the form of the new Munitions Corporation Law of October 1943. Similar to the arrangement made with Nissan in Manchuria, Kishi enticed certain companies to expand production in munitions-related areas and meet government targets by providing state subsidies and financial

guarantees. The new law essentially allowed the government to bypass the control associations and work directly with selected munitions firms to achieve state goals. As officially designated “munitions companies,” these firms were made accountable to the state, not to shareholders. In exchange, they were granted preferential treatment, subsidies, financing, and a free hand in meeting state targets.

As the Cabinet Planning Board pointed out, however, business was only part of the problem; the other problem was the bureaucracy. In their plans for a “bureaucratic new order” (*kankaishintaisei*), reform bureaucrats called for a complete overhaul of the bureaucracy, especially in four areas: bureaucratic ethos, civil service employment system, organizational structure, and duties and responsibilities. Kishi called for a fundamental reorientation of the bureaucracy away from its traditional, status-bound, rule-based approach toward a more task-oriented approach that focused on increasing productivity and performance. The main problem was the power mentality of bureaucrats or bureaucratic sectionalism. He noted that it would be impossible to establish a bureaucratic new order and raise efficiency unless the turf battles among bureaucrats were eliminated. In addition, as a result of the rapid expansion of duties, the bureaucracy had become a cold and impersonal place where department and section heads knew and cared little about the welfare of their staff and ministers. As part of an effort to improve the work environment, he called for higher compensation for bureaucrats, particularly at the middle and junior level.

The most radical proposal was to open up the civil service employment system to the private sector in order to attract new talent and expertise. As Kishi explained, the Meiji bureaucratic appointment ordinance had outlived its purpose of providing a regularized

and impartial system of recruitment and training and cultivating *esprit de corps* among civil servants. With the increase in scope and complexity of administration, particularly in the economic area, officials with technical and practical experience were urgently needed. Bureaucrats ought to be recruited not on the basis of passing the rigorous civil service exam, but on the basis of their skill, knowledge, and practical experience. By abolishing this ordinance and eliminating the examination requirement, people from the private sector could become eligible for public office.

During the Pacific War, administrative reform became a top priority. The cabinet pushed through the Wartime Special Administration Law (*Senji gyōsei tokurei hō*) and Wartime Special Administration Powers Ordinance (*Senji gyōsei shokken tokurei*) in March 1943 in order to strengthen policymaking at the executive level and cut through bureaucratic sectionalism and red tape. The former provided for the issuance of imperial ordinances to expand productive power that could overrule existing legislation prohibiting or controlling certain activities and permit intervention in areas under ministerial jurisdiction. The latter greatly increased the authority of the Prime Minister over the ministries with regard to the production of the five priority industries of iron and steel, coal, light metals, ships, and aircraft. The government also established the Cabinet Advisory Council comprised of leading technocrats and industrialists. The Council provided greater exchange and collaboration between bureaucrats and the private sector. In November 1943, the government streamlined and consolidated the Cabinet Planning Board and the ministries of agriculture, commerce, communications, and railroads into three new ministries: the Ministry of Munitions, the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce, and the Ministry of Transport and Communications.

In addition to mobilizing business and the bureaucracy for war, technocrats sought to

boost public confidence in Japan's war capability. Technocrats believed that Japan had a good chance of prevailing against the larger, resource-rich nations. Their optimism was based on a new conception of national strength. Military technocrats had argued that in modern total wars, the definition of national power had changed. Economic power was but one component of national power. Two other factors were equally important - human power and spiritual power, without which materials and funds had no value. Japan was blessed with abundant human power both in terms of its population growth rate and the excellence of the Yamato people, particularly with regard to "brain power" or scientific and technological power. Cabinet Planning Chief Akinaga predicted that the efficient organization and redeployment of labor to productive, war-related industries and steady population growth would overcome any shortages in labor.

Civilian technocrats claimed that the new type of war was based on a new type of thinking centered on materials and technology, not finance and diplomacy.⁶ As Kishi explained, the meaning of "rich country, strong army" had changed. National wealth and power were no longer measured by a country's national income, but by the quantity and quality or precision of its materials and the ways in which they were organized and mobilized for national defense.⁷ The challenge was to increase production through superior organization and eliminate the contradictions and inconsistencies in the production process. Technocrats held that in the new world order, economies were undergoing a fundamental shift from a money-based economy to a materials-based economy. This shift reflected the dictates of the planned economy in which material balances and quotas, not prices and profits, served as the benchmark for economic activity. But more important, it highlighted the pivotal role of technology in the production process and in the creation of synthetic resources.

Technocrats also sought to provide a new theoretical approach toward measuring national wealth. Mōri Hideoto, a key ideologue of the reformist faction, argued that classical economic theory had become outdated in terms of both its assumptions and methodology. Until recently the nation's resources had been assessed by national income (the total amount of goods and services produced in an economy), which was based upon the individual's pursuit of self interest. As he explained, in classical economic theory, consumption was defined as the individual's fulfillment of desires and needs which are freely determined and restricted only by their marginal utility or the individual's financial means. In the new era of state planning and autarky, however, a distinction was made between state and national (private) consumption. The latter was no longer conceived in terms of the free will of the individual. Since both production and consumption within the bloc were controlled by the Japanese state and "liberated" from foreign control, "national consumption was made free by the state."⁸ Consumption was created, constructed, and planned via the state and only via the state was it made "free."

Mōri defined national wealth (*kokumin shiryoku*) as the "total capital mobilization of the state" or "total productive power of state capital." State financial resources were distributed for public finance, consumption, and industry for the purpose of contributing toward the war economy and maximizing the efficiency of state planning. National wealth was not assessed in the monetary terms of national income, which also included elements that did not directly contribute to the war economy, but rather in terms of their relative value or contribution toward fulfilling state plans.

Technocrats called for a restructuring of public finance accounting in order to clarify and specify the role of various components of the economy and the different approaches taken

toward them. Rather than dividing the budget into a General and Special Accounts, they proposed to create four categories within the General Accounts budget for official finance, re-production or reinvestment, reserves and stockpiling, and welfare. Whereas the state would continue the traditional cost-benefit management approach toward regular day-to-day official finance, it would adopt what they referred to as the “long term investment approach” toward the other three categories. Welfare, production, and stockpile-related programs were viewed as future public revenue sources and should be funded by public debt. The Special Accounts Budget would in turn draw upon these four budgets for funds. By rejecting the theoretical basis and methodology of foreign assessments of Japan’s national wealth, reformists sought to show how the outside world underestimated the extent of Japan’s true wealth and war preparation.

Technocrats argued that national power should be understood in terms of its dynamic force. They held that the synergistic energy derived from its material, human, and spiritual resources and the self-propelling momentum of Japan’s advanced national defense state would determine victory in war. According to the government engineer Matsumae Shigeyoshi, the power of the national defense state should not be expressed in the static terms of the size of its air force or number of troops, but rather in the dynamic terms of the state’s ability to focus the energies of every aspect of society toward the goals of the perpetual expansion of productive power, technological advance, and increased efficiency both in terms of time, materials, and labor. Matsumae explained the dynamic nature of national power by likening the national defense state to a magnet whose force continually pulls the iron particles in one direction and in turn magnetizes them.⁹ In another mechanical analogy, he compared the national defense state to a top:

A top spins on its axis. The faster the top spins the more it stabilizes. When it spins at a very high speed, it attains a degree of stability by which motion and inertia become indistinguishable. As the rotational power gradually weakens, it begins to totter. At the end, when its rotational speed finally reaches zero, the top falls on its side. The so-called national defense state is a state with tremendous rotational force. Needless to say the essential idea behind the defense state is the dynamic rotation, which concentrates the total power of the state, or the totality of the economy, the military, politics, and culture, at the center.¹⁰

The attempt to redefine national power in terms of such mechanical analogies and other intangible forms of spiritual and organizational power, potential national wealth, and “revisionist” accounting in the face of real material shortages, financial crisis, and human suffering reveals the moral compromises of Japan’s technocratic leaders. The utter absurdity of Matsumae’s analogy offers three insights into wartime technocratic leadership. First, it conveys the deep contempt of Japan’s wartime leaders for public opinion and discourse about politics and matters of life and death such as war. Second, the retreat into abstract formulations about spinning tops and magnets suggests a difference in degree, not essence, of the shallowness of the theoretical reasoning and rational formulations of technocrats. The top analogy offers a poignant caricature of the seemingly sophisticated, cosmopolitan theories about geopolitics, the new world order, and the national essence. More important, it reveals the alarming irresponsibility of Japan’s wartime leaders and their inability or refusal to grapple with real issues determining their nation’s fate.

sensō) in which Japan was building a *Grossraumwirtschaft* reflecting the modern trend toward national land planning and great power blocs. Technocrats argued, from the standpoint of economic rationality, that the weak, backward countries of Asia could not thrive independently outside of a larger regional bloc. Only through the synergies and economies of scale of such a bloc and the technological leadership of Japan could Asia compete with the West. Moreover, by describing the war as a “hundred year war” technocrats emphasized Japan’s long-term commitment to the Asian region. In the new era of multi-year planning, they explained, the first phase of construction would focus on obtaining essential raw materials needed for military victory against the Allies, followed by the long-term development of basic, civilian industries in Asia.

The Greater East Asia Co-prosperity put forth an alternative, ideological basis and a new unifying, organizational principle to articulate the multiple military, political, economic, cultural, and ethnic ties between Japan and Asia. As a “pan idea” it was based upon the geopolitical theory that the world would be divided into pan-regions consisting of four large economic spheres centered on the “core” industrial regions of the United States, Germany, the Soviet Union, and Japan. Within the bloc, “co-prosperity” would replace the Wilsonian ideal of “Open Door” in East Asia. In place of the liberal principles of “self-determination” and “self-interest” of the individual Asian countries within the international economy, reformists advanced the principle of “coexistence” of the Asian peoples within a self-sufficient bloc. Its organizational basis would not be free trade based on a country’s comparative advantage in natural resources or profitable market strategy, but rather the organic, hierarchical, functionalist principles of “totalism” (*zentaishugi*) and the multilateral business organization in which each member country, according to its ability

(*kaku minzoku no bun ni ōjite*), contributes its raw materials, labor, capital, or technological expertise for the benefit of the bloc as a whole.

Technocrats emphasized that Japan would not replace the West as the new imperialist power in Asia. Rather, Western capitalist colonial “exploitation” of Asia would give way to mutual “co-prosperity” of a liberated Asia resulting from the increased wealth and power produced by the Asian bloc. They argued that Japan, with its technical and industrial expertise, would lead Asia into the new technological era. Ultimately, though, they justified Japanese leadership of the Asian sphere to themselves not in terms of superior Japanese technology, but in terms of the Japanese geopolitical notion of “greater Japan” (*dai Nihon*), in which Japan is a superior organism that is entitled to grow at the expense of other Asian countries.

Technocrats saw Japan’s position shifting from a peripheral nation in the capitalist world order to a core nation within the concentrically arranged regional bloc. Planners described the co-prosperity sphere as consisting of a “Core Sphere” composed of Japan, Manchuria, North China, the lower Yangtze region and a Soviet-occupied north coastal region, a “Lesser Co-prosperity Sphere” composed of the Core Sphere and Eastern Siberia, China, Indochina, and the South Pacific, and a “Greater Co-prosperity Sphere” which included the Lesser Co-prosperity Sphere as well as Australia, India, and the Pacific Islands.¹² The latter represented no more than the “outer boundary” or peripheral sphere of the Japan-Manchuria-China Bloc.

In justifying the new Asian bloc, they promoted the geopolitical concept of “living sphere” to explain the military’s dual strategy of northern and southern advance. In his formulation of the East Asian Cooperative Body in the late 1930s, reform ideologist Mōri had distinguished between Japan’s reformist “continental policy” in north China and its liberal, imperialist

“maritime policy” in central and south China. Now he modified his position to argue that the two “living spaces” of the Asian continent and the Pacific Ocean were uniting into a “homogenous single space.” In 1940 he argued that the Pacific Ocean had taken on a new significance and was becoming the foundation of a new world order; he suggested that “...with regard to the historical stage of the life struggle of the Japanese ethnic people, [we] have finally discovered the possibility of organizing the waters of the Pacific Ocean, together with our land, into a living sphere.”¹³

In a public broadcast a month after Japan’s declaration of war against the Allied powers, Mōri proclaimed that Japan’s possession of both a continental and maritime base placed it in the optimal geopolitical position to win the war. England was a maritime power but lacked a continental base, whereas the continental powers Germany and the United States both lacked maritime bases. He predicted that Germany, although it was on its way to establishing a European continental state via the European war, would be handicapped geopolitically because of its lack of a maritime base. Japan, in contrast, with its recent acquisition of the vast resources of Asia, would be able to build an undefeatable “greater East Asian economy of co-prosperity.”¹⁴

Finally, the sphere presented opportunities for “national land planning,” whose basic goals and principles were laid out in the Cabinet Planning Board’s “Outline for the Establishment of National Land Planning” (*Kokudo keikaku settei yōkō*).¹⁵ National land planning was conceived as part of Konoe’s New Order movement, but went beyond other New Order plans in incorporating a broader and more comprehensive spatial dimension to planning. Technocrats viewed national planning as the most advanced form of state planning. According to one technocrat, national planning went beyond the narrowly conceived “production technology” (*seisan gijutsu*) of the

Soviet, Manchurian, German, and Japanese five- and four-year plans. These plans merely sought to meet limited, short-term targets for increasing production in industry and agriculture by temporary measures such as extending labor time or installing new equipment within a given geographical setting. National planning represented a new type of “construction technology” (*kensetsu gijutsu*) in which officials take a long-term - one hundred year - approach and seek the optimal geographical location of industries within the bloc.¹⁶ Now, the state sought to determine the most efficient distribution of the various facilities of the economy, population, culture, and society in order to promote the comprehensive development, use, and preservation of the native land in accordance with the state’s goal.

National land planning was first introduced and promoted by British planners as part of the movement for regional and urban planning. It was advocated as a means to decrease overpopulation and congestion in the major metropolitan areas by promoting satellite cities and towns, incorporating green belt areas, building a nationwide transportation network system, and formulating plans for regional growth. In contrast to the liberal type of national land planning focusing on suburban development, the authoritarian regimes of Soviet Russia, Germany, Italy, and Japan looked to national land planning primarily as a way to expand national productive power. The Soviet Five Year Plans, German Four Year Plans, Manchurian Five Year Plans, and Japanese Four Year Plans represented the first steps toward authoritarian national land planning.

Japanese planners classified national land planning in the various industrialized countries according to two general criteria.¹⁷ First, the state adopted either authoritarian planning from above or democratic planning from below depending on whether it had a liberal or totalist political system. Second, depending

upon the particular developmental circumstances and history of a country, the state pursued the goal of either redesigning existing areas (*kokudo saihenseishugi*) or developing new land (*kokudo shinkōshugi*). Among countries which possessed undeveloped frontier land, the United States pursued grass-roots planning from below, reflecting its liberal tradition, whereas Soviet Russia imposed centralized planning from above in accordance with its authoritarian political system. Among those countries smaller in scale which lacked open uncultivated land and focused on restructuring developed areas, England attempted bottom-up type liberal planning to address the social problems of industrialization, whereas Germany pursued top-down planning primarily for the purposes of national defense.

Ultimately, technocrats viewed the liberal system as an obstacle to true national land planning. They argued that since liberal countries did not tolerate top-down planning, they could only partly implement national land planning from below. Planning of the vast undeveloped resources in the United States stopped at the regional level because the state was not strong enough to restrain freedom and coordinate the various interests at the local and regional level. In terms of restructuring metropolitan areas in England, the challenges were multiplied. Suburban planning in England never took off because the state was unable to tackle the source of urban congestion: the *laissez-faire* economy, which permits uncontrolled economic and urban development devoid of an overall planning authority and vision.

Technocrats pointed out that national planning was not individual planning expanded to the national level, but rather the task of “determining the order of the land and striving toward its comprehensive functioning at the highest efficiency level.” For this reason, they argued that totalist regimes like Japan and Germany were best suited to carry out national

land planning. Moreover, among totalist states, they believed that the Japanese case was unique because Japan possessed both the challenges of reorganization of their native land and frontier development of its East Asian empire. The Japanese state’s goals were to: build a national defense state system in Japan that incorporates strategic spatial planning for defense; establish an autarkic sphere in East Asia to secure resources for Japan; address Japan’s social problems of urbanization resulting from rapid industrialization; and coordinate the various plans in a comprehensive way.

The ambitious planning visions, projects, and dreams of Japanese technocrats were soon dashed as the tides of war turned against Japan. But the biggest planning opportunity for Japanese technocrats came after its defeat, when the country faced the daunting task of rebuilding its economy and society from the ground up. From the late 1940s, following America’s reversal of its occupation policy so as to make Japan the bulwark against communism in Asia, civilian technocrats emerged as the key architects of Japan’s high-growth system. Upon his release from Sugamo prison in 1948, Kishi set about building the Liberal Democratic Party and strengthening the ties between bureaucrats, business, and the public along the lines envisioned in the wartime New Order.

Kishi and his technocratic planners were also a key force behind Japan’s postwar economic reentry into Asia. As prime minister from 1957 to 1960, Kishi became the first Japanese head of state to visit the countries of Southeast Asia. He promoted his own vision of “Asian development” that appealed to wartime notions of “co-prosperity,” Asian liberation, and state-led growth. Given Japan’s controversial wartime past and the trans-war continuities in technocratic personnel, institutions, and concepts, it is not surprising that its Asian partners have continued to view Japanese development projects in the region with a

certain amount of distrust. Japan's mixed legacy of planning challenges us to critically examine the ideological basis, politics, and lessons of wartime planning and to squarely confront the contradictions between the ideals and reality of Japan's wartime system.

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Notes

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