

# The military role of the USA during the Second World War

As US relations with Germany deteriorated alarmingly during 1939–41, so they became ever more fraught with Japan. This chapter looks at the worsening of relations between the USA and Japan and the aggrandisement of Japan's empire in South-east Asia and China. It considers how war between Japan and the USA broke out and how the USA became involved in the war in Europe, helping the UK in the West and then the USSR on the Eastern Front. The chapter then considers the military role of the USA in the Pacific War and then in the European theatre.

You need to consider the following questions throughout this chapter:

- ✦ Why did relations between the USA and Japan deteriorate in the years 1939–41?
- ✦ What was the strategy of the USA in the Pacific War?
- ✦ Why did President Truman decide to use the atomic bomb?
- ✦ Why was the role of the USA crucial in the war against Hitler?

## 1 The USA and Japan 1939–41

▶ *Key question: Why did relations between the USA and Japan deteriorate in the years 1939–41?*

### KEY TERM

**Indochina** The region of South-east Asia which was a colony of France.

In the late 1930s, Japan edged closer to alliances with the fascist dictators in Europe. The US government became alarmed as it watched Japan's military encroachments into **Indochina**. Roosevelt showed his displeasure by pressuring Japan economically in the hope that such actions would end Japanese activities. The Japanese military held such power in government that it dictated foreign policy. Its key aim was to destroy any chance of the USA interfering with imperial and economic expansion.

Why did Japanese activities in China concern the USA?

### Japan's imperial and economic expansion

In the later years of the nineteenth century, Japan experienced an industrial revolution. Japan's leadership sought to emulate the great powers of Europe and build a large territorial and trading empire. The Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and further incursions into China in 1937 created tremendous tension with the USA. The USA had many investments in China, had developed close trading and commercial links with it, and looked on the country as a close friend. Roosevelt wanted to help China but at the same time did not wish to enter into war with Japan. His advisors gave

conflicting advice; Cordell Hull (Secretary of State) thought that trade sanctions would push Japan to become more aggressive yet Henry L. Stimson (Secretary of War) and Henry Morgenthau (Secretary of the Treasury) thought that sanctions would cripple Japan and prevent further actions. Roosevelt knew that sanctions against Japan would damage the USA's economy. US investments in Japan were double those in China and 50 per cent of US exports to Asia went to Japan.

The **1911 trade treaty** between the USA and Japan expired on 26 January 1940 and Roosevelt informed the Japanese government that trade would rest on a day-to-day basis. There was a public opinion poll directly after this and 81 per cent of Americans approved of Roosevelt's action. However, Roosevelt did not begin an arms embargo or even a trade boycott of Japanese goods.

### US public opinion

Public opinion in the USA sympathized with China. The Japanese massacre in Nanking in 1937 increased antipathy against Japan and Japanese bombing of Chinese civilians in Shanghai aroused great anger in the USA, not only among the people but also among its government. On 1 July 1938, the US Department of State notified aircraft manufacturers and exporters that the US government was strongly opposed to the sale of aircraft and allied equipment to countries that attacked civilian populations. Roosevelt thought that this 'moral embargo' would push Japan towards peace in China.

### The Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere

In July 1940, there was a change of government in Japan and the new, militaristic cabinet announced a plan to achieve 'a new order in Greater Asia'. This new order, the 'Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere', was Japan's attempt to create a bloc of Asian nations free of influence from Western nations and provide living space for Japan's growing population. It was also a response to the defeat of France and the Netherlands by Nazi Germany in 1940, which placed their empires in the Far East in a precarious position. Japan hoped to capitalize on this.

The US retaliated with the Export Control Act of July 1940, which authorized the president to stop the export of basic war materials in the interest of national defence. Licences were refused for exporting aviation gasoline and most types of machine tools to Japan. Existing trade agreements with Japanese companies were cancelled, stopping the sale of planes, chemicals and iron.

### Japan's foreign agreements

Japan then became a member of the **Three Power Pact** of September 1940 with Germany and Italy. Each country promised to help the others in the event of war with the USA. On 22 September 1940, Japan agreed with the French government of Indochina to grant Japan the right to station 6000 troops there, and to move troops and supplies through northern French Indochina.

#### KEY TERM

**1911 trade treaty** A treaty to improve trade and commerce between the USA and Japan.

**Three Power Pact** This pact, between Germany, Italy and Japan, was signed on 27 September 1940. It is also called the Tripartite Pact.

 **KEY TERM**

**US General Staff** The senior officers who advise in the planning and execution of military policy.

**Axis** The alliance of Germany, Italy and Japan.

The Russo-Japanese Non-aggression Pact was signed in April 1941. Each country said that it would remain neutral if the other went to war. This gave Japan confidence in its desire to increase its empire in South-east Asia. In response, the **US General Staff** began to increase the number of troops in the Philippines and sent additional aircraft there, from June 1941, such as the B-17 Flying Fortress bombers.

### US–Japanese trade conflict

Japan seized the French colonies in Indochina in July 1941. The USA responded by cutting off all supplies of oil, iron and rubber to Japan. As Japan imported more than 85 per cent of its oil from the USA, the ban was a crippling blow. Roosevelt's executive decision stated that the ban was 'to prevent the use of the financial facilities of the USA and trade between Japan and the USA in ways harmful to national defense and American interests'. The Japanese complained that their economy would collapse without oil. The USA insisted they would only lift the ban if the Japanese held peace talks with the Chinese. Japan retaliated by freezing US assets. Trade between the two countries came to a halt. Roosevelt closed the Panama Canal to Japanese shipping, which meant that any trade for countries on the Atlantic seaboard would have to go round Cape Horn. This would not only slow trade but also make it more expensive. Roosevelt then indicated that the USA would take steps to protect US interests if there were any further Japanese encroachments into Asia.

Why did US–Japanese negotiations fail?

## US–Japanese negotiations 1941

### Japanese aggression

When General Tojo replaced Prince Konoye as Japanese premier on 18 October 1941, the Japanese mood hardened. Tojo's appointment showed how the military in Japan were now in full control of foreign policy. (Tojo had directed the negotiations that led to the **Axis** alliance with Germany and Italy. He had also led the Japanese army in occupied China.) Desperate to find a new source of oil, the Japanese planned to attack oil-rich British Malaya and Dutch colonies in South-east Asia (Java and Sumatra). They knew, however, that the USA might act to stop them and that they were not strong enough to fight both the British and US Pacific fleet. Japan then planned to destroy the US Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. They would then be able to attack the British and Dutch possessions and gain the raw materials needed to pursue a war with the USA. The Japanese were extremely confident of victory in a war with the USA provided they could use surprise and gain early success.

Despite mounting tension, the Americans and Japanese met many times during 1940–1 to discuss Japanese aggression in China and Indochina, although they did not make any real agreements.