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Summative Assessment #2: A Strategy for Ending the Pacific War

In April 1945, President Harry S. Truman inherited not only the burden of global leadership but also the full weight of concluding a devastating war in the Pacific. He sought options short of nuclear weapons to bring about Japan's surrender within the year. The answer lies in a multidimensional approach that blends blockade, strategic bombing, psychological pressure, and a threat of invasion, but with flexibility to adapt as circumstances change. Drawing on the strategic observations of Mahan, Corbett, Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, and Wylie, I recommend a strategy of continued and intensified maritime-economic warfare, reinforced by conventional bombing and conditional diplomatic overtures, that maximizes cumulative pressure while holding sequential options in reserve. This approach would exhaust Japanese capacity and will to resist without requiring an immediate ground invasion or atomic solution.

The Pacific war by April 1945 already displayed many characteristics of what Clausewitz termed a war "to disarm the enemy," but its prosecution had been constrained by terrain, distance, and dispersed enemy forces (Clausewitz, *On War*, 77). Japan was a military shadow of itself, but its government had not yet surrendered. Clausewitz also reminds us that the political aim must shape the military means. Here, Truman's political objective to end the war swiftly with

acceptable U.S. casualties, suggests a strategy designed to collapse Japan's physical ability and psychological willingness to continue fighting, rather than force unconditional surrender through immediate land invasion.

The foundation of this strategy should remain maritime. Alfred Thayer Mahan argued that sea power determines national strength and that command of the sea denies the ability to sustain a nation through maritime trade. "It is not the taking of individual ships or convoys, be they few or many, that strikes down the money power of a nation; it is the possession of that overbearing power on the sea which drives the enemy's flag from it ... and which, by controlling the great common, closes the highways by which commerce moves to and from the enemy's shores" (Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power*, Chapter II). By April 1945, the U.S. Navy, through its blockades and submarine *guerre de course*, had isolated Japan from vital imports of food, fuel, and raw materials. Baer highlights the cumulative impact of the United States submarine operations, noting that "U.S. submarines sank 1,113 ships of the Japanese merchant marine, over half of all such ships sunk by American forces," and that the Japanese economy "could never make up the loss of that merchant tonnage or of the cargoes that were sent to the ocean floor" (Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power*, 244). Intensifying the naval blockade would further deprive Japan of the means to fight, reflecting Mahan's view that victory at sea comes not from territorial conquest but from economic isolation: "By the destruction of the enemies' own shipping and by denying neutrals the right to carry to them many articles of the first importance, Great Britain placed the hostile countries in a state of comparative isolation" (McCranie, Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought, 218).

Julian Corbett's theory refines this approach. Mahan perceived the decisive naval battle as indispensable, while Corbett argued that maritime strategy does not always aim for battle, but for

control of communications and coordination with the land forces. As he writes, “the object of naval warfare is the control of communications, and not, as in land warfare, the conquest of territory” (Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 32). This emphasizes the idea that when war aims are territorial, naval forces alone are insufficient and must coordinate closely with the army to achieve strategic objectives. By April 1945, the U.S. had already established bases in the Marianas, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa, enabling a sustained aerial bombardment campaign and further tightening the blockade. Corbett would advocate continued pressure from sea and air, not as an end in itself, but as a means to facilitate psychological attrition and force Japan into a diplomatic corner.

This is where J.C. Wylie comes in with his sequential versus cumulative strategies that neatly form the decision space. Sequential strategies unfold in a planned series of actions like the proposed invasion of Kyushu. Wylie describes cumulative strategy as a pattern composed of numerous independent actions, each contributing incrementally toward an outcome whose overall impact may not be immediately predictable. He cites the U.S. submarine campaign against Japan as a prime example, where success emerged through the gradual buildup of operational effects over time (Wylie, *Military Strategy*, Appendix A). Submarine warfare, firebombing raids, and psychological warfare all fit into the cumulative bucket. Cumulative methods, as Wylie insists, generally evade enemy counterattack, depress morale, and are ultimately decisive, even if not apparent at the moment. Wylie’s point is reinforced by the great success of the submarine campaign and strategic bombing, including the fire bombing of Tokyo and the devastating raids on Japan’s industrial heartlands. Each of these actions were not by itself decisive, but together they destroyed Japan’s war economy and internal cohesion. Persistence in

this cumulative strategy of blockade, fire-bombing, and leaflet psychological warfare would have brought Japan to surrender without atomic bombs.

Sun Tzu offers complementary wisdom. Sun Tzu advises that “it is better to capture an army entire than to destroy it” and that “supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting” (Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 45). A brutal invasion of the Japanese home islands would be costly and unnecessary if alternative pressures could achieve surrender. By April 1945, Japan was nearing collapse. Maintaining and increasing that pressure while offering diplomatic language that allows Japan to surrender without total humiliation would reflect Sun Tzu’s principle of avoiding direct confrontation when other means are available. Allowing retention of the emperor in some form could split Japan’s leadership and provide a pathway to surrender. As Bernstein notes, “critics of the atomic bombing have often pointed to the postwar statements by a number of wartime U.S. military leaders who contended, or implied, that the atomic bombings were unnecessary, and that the war could have been won within a reasonable period by conventional military means” (Bernstein, *Alarming Japanese Buildup*, 562).

Clausewitz’s emphasis on the psychological dimension of war further supports this strategy. He warns of the “culminating point of victory” which is the moment when continued attack may become counterproductive (Clausewitz, *On War*). A direct invasion could prove not only expensive in terms of lives but also potentially energize Japanese resistance. Kamikaze defense at Okinawa, which caused more than 12,000 U.S. deaths, gave a hint of what a homeland invasion might look like. Bernstein’s research shows that by August 1945, U.S. planners feared “the ratio for American forces in southern Kyushu had dangerously dropped” and that casualty estimates were increasing dramatically (Bernstein, *Alarming Japanese Buildup*, 580). Yet even amid this buildup, Bernstein argues, the growing Japanese desperation and the success of

blockade and bombing made the continuation of Operation Olympic uncertain and the war's end possible without it.

One possible counterargument is that without the terrible shock of the atomic bomb, Japan might never have surrendered. With the Kamikaze campaign, the entrenched defense of Iwo Jima, and the dogged refusal to promptly surrender even after Tokyo had been devastated, it suggests that only a massive psychological shock, such as Hiroshima provided, would have accomplished surrender. This interpretation is corroborated by the defenders of the bomb for who cite U.S. casualty estimates for Operation Olympic reaching as high as 268,000 (Bernstein, *Alarming Japanese Buildup*, 575). Yet this argument ignores the flexibility of the Japanese leadership and the changing dynamics of summer 1945. The Soviet entry into the war on August 8, combined with relentless U.S. bombing and starvation, dealt a fatal blow to Japan's strategic calculus. As Sheldon Garon shows, Japan's civil defense collapsed, urban morale was shattered, and food distribution systems were in chaos by mid-1945 (Garon, *On the Transnational Destruction of Cities*, 264–268). The total devastation, the firebombed cities, the psychological warfare, the economic ruin, and the geopolitical isolation made resistance undefendable.

Looking at the situation as it stood, there's a strong rebuttal that steady pressure, without resorting to atomic bombs, might have been enough to bring Japan to surrender. Officials like Joseph Grew and Henry Stimson had pushed for a policy that left room to preserve the emperor, believing it might create fractures among Japan's leadership. By the summer of 1945, General Marshall who at one time had been an ardent proponent of Operation Olympic, had also begun to have his doubts about its necessity, particularly now given Japan's large numbers of troops on Kyushu (Bernstein, *Alarming Japanese Buildup*, 590). If Truman had leaned into a mix of naval pressure, leaflet campaigns, stepped-up firebombing, and subtle diplomatic signals, it's possible

Japan would have taken the opportunity to surrender on terms that preserved national dignity. Ultimately, ending the war without the cost of massive and horrific human loss.

In short, by the middle of 1945, Truman had a real chance to bring the war to a halt without the need for atomic bombs or a need to launch an invasion that would cost hundreds of thousands of lives. Staying true to the thinking of Mahan and Corbett, the United States must maintain control of the sea and cut Japan off from what it needed to keep fighting. That means strangling supply lines, not storming beaches. Guided by Wylie and Clausewitz, the cumulative erosion of Japan's economic and psychological capacity should be pushed to its breaking point. And with Sun Tzu in mind, the U.S. should seek to break the enemy's will through non-battle means, while remaining flexible. A conditional peace offer, coupled with intensified siege tactics, would create an opportunity for surrender without invasion. It would have been a strategy that saved American and Japanese lives alike and still achieved a decisive victory.