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Analytical Paper: Japan's Internal and External Motivations for the Greater East Asia Conference

Around the end of 1943, a momentous event brought several independent Asian nations together for the first time in history. With the Empire of Japan as the host, five participants from different Asian territories attended the Greater East Asia Conference in Tokyo from November 5 to 6. The countries invited to participate were Thailand, Manchukuo, China (represented by the Nanjing government), Burma, and the Philippines. The provisional government of Free India was allowed to participate as an observer and was represented by Subhas Chandra Bose. These leading politicians came together under the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, a union developed and led by the Empire of Japan aiming to create a self-sufficient bloc of Asian nations. Pre-tensing the conference, this alliance served as a foundation for Japanese ideology and helped to strengthen the unity between East and Southeast Asia nations. Deliberations at the meeting were intended to be propaganda and convince members that Japan would be the "liberator" of Asia from Western powers. The international summit addressed the need for Asian countries to rally and unite against Western imperialism; however, several Japanese sentiments reveal other motivations. Though the meeting had an overarching theme and set substance of promoting equality across Asia externally, other events and research before and following the conference suggest that Japan had internal reasons for such an assembly. The Greater East Asia Conference of 1943 showcased Japan's leading motivation for promoting Pan-Asian idealism under Japan's

guidance, which was flawed because of the empire's internal intentions of legitimizing military/imperial strategy and asserting Yamato race thinking.

To understand the complex motivations behind the conference is to peel back the layers of Japan's precedented persistence of world dominance. It means looking at the surface-level agendas Japan had developed through representative speeches and declarations and analyzing the underlying economic, political, and social nature of the country. The primary purpose that attracted attention to the conference was the empowering Asian solidarity and shared interest in condemning Western imperialism in Asia. A strategic vision of Pan-Asianism and the need to unite Asian countries set forth Japan's plans for the conference. In addition to the apparent goal, the conference was also used so that Japan could simultaneously seek out East Asian allies and legitimize its military expansion through such relations. Suggestions of the continued imperialistic views of Japan are crucial to understanding why they called up so many nations. Lastly, Pan-Asianism was a front for Japan's genetically-biased ideals and objectives during the time, as seen through the dominant Yamato race. The Yamato race superiority is the core of what Japan believed, and though not explicitly expressed in the conference, ultimately eroded the rhetoric of equality the country so preached. Such an affair of so many Asian nations symbolized a turning point for Japan as the leadership recognized the benefit of secure cooperation and amicable alliances when going up against Western empires.

Japan's forefront and widely-believed motivation for holding the conference were to provide a stage for multiple Asian nations to come together under Pan-Asianism measures and conduct relations to combat Western imperialism. However, these commitments made by the empire seemingly ended up being propaganda towards the rest of Asia to turn to Japan as a leader to enter conflict with the West. Several strategic efforts during the conference, such as

who was invited or represented, what speeches were presented, and more, show how Japan tactically planned the event in their nation's favor. Providing some background, since the Russo-Japanese War of 1904, people in Asian countries who were ruled and colonized by white powers looked up to Japan as a role model because they were the first Asian nation to modernize and defeat a European country. That is why, it was natural for the Greater Co-Prosperity Sphere to trust what Japanese leadership had to say and follow in the footsteps of the established and powerful country. Furthering this context, the Japanese believed it was their mission to end the domination of white nations in Asia and free the other Asians suffering under the rule of the white powers. Taken from the memoir of the Prime Minister of the State of Burma, Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma: Memoirs of a Revolution, 1939-1946*, a collection of speeches from the conference reveals a major demonstration of Pan-Asianism. Hideki Tōjō, Prime Minister of the Empire of Japan, opened the meeting with a memorable speech praising solidarity. Tōjō stated in his speech, "It is an incontrovertible fact that the nations of Greater East Asia are bound in every respect by ties of an inseparable relationship" and that he hoped to create a world where all the Asian peoples would live together as brothers and sisters. Japan begins spinning the narrative by emphasizing all Asian nations are connected through similar cultures, people, and economic centers— though this collective adoption was also because of the mass colonization of such countries by Japan. "The Anglo-American ambition of world hegemony is a scourge of mankind and the root of the world's evils." Tōjō said to curate his argument that Western powers, pointed specifically against the United States and the United Kingdom, are the common enemy, and their imperialism endeavors in Asia are why nations need to come together. The document reveals the tension between Asia and the West during this time, as many racist laws and prejudice towards Asians were implemented from the 1920s-30s. He clearly and concisely states what he

recommends for the future, as the speech is a call to action. The major point of discussion at the conference is highlighted by Tōjō's continuous bashing of Western empires as he describes them as "white devils" or "white demons." A fiery Asian spirit that challenges Occidental dominance can be heard at the conference, and Tōjō's speech brings out many similarly positioned speakers. In his memoir, Ba Maw of Burma remembers his speech and states, "My Asian blood has always called out to other Asians...This is not the time to think with other minds, this is the time to think with our blood, and this thinking has brought me from Burma to Japan." He continues to say, "We were Asians rediscovering Asia." Before this speech was made, Asian nations had a weak and undefined relationship with each other because of the isolating effects of colonialism. Maw's speech mainly contributes to building up Japan's glorious reputation by calling out to Asia and emphasizing that nations should rely on each other due to a strong bond of shared victimization. He hints that Japan has already taken the initiative to unite Asians and Burma is proud to be a part of the hopeful new movement. This was a powerful statement because it shows the other participating countries at the conference how Burma found homage and connection through Japan's harmonious thinking. Ba Maw's speech may have been a part of Japan's self-interest propaganda as they took advantage of Burma's assured support from the country. As a result of the conference, a document called the *Joint Declaration of the Greater East Asia Conference* was published to summarize and outline plans following the meeting. It aimed to show the world that Japan was acting on its own for personal benefits—such as colonizing other Asian countries—but to liberate East Asia from the yoke of Western imperialism and establish world peace. This paradigm of Japan, in this sense, might be best described as acting as the Asian counterpart of the white man's burden. The document's content indicated that Asian nations should conduct friendly, neighborly relations based on equality. Its main concern was not just the mobilization of

Asians against the West but also developing a connective economic policy for Asian countries. It states, “The countries of Greater East Asia will ensure the fraternity of nations in their region by respecting one another’s sovereignty and independence and practicing mutual assistance and amity.” Japan was behind this declaration and is saying that they recognize the individual value of each Asian nation to achieve equality and cooperation. A strong idea of Pan-Asianism is concluded in the document and was intended to be spread throughout all of Asia. The influence that the declaration had years after the conference was undermined by Japan’s rise to dominance once again. Japan did call together multiple Asian nations to stand up against Western mistreatment and expansion. Still, the Greater East Asia Conference can also be seen as a facade for other personal motivations contradicting the country’s original rhetoric.

In the context of the time, Japan felt the need to legitimize its military expansion while also finding allies throughout East Asia—which was why they hosted the conference to reach such goals. This was an internal and individually-beneficial reason for Japan as they realized their need to assert themselves and maintain their leading position. Many Japanese did believe in the idealistic mission to liberate Asia from Western imperialism. But at the same time, Japan realized that this idealism could only be accomplished by influencing others using self-interest. Asia could only be saved through Japanese political-economic dominance. A few years before the conference in 1941, the Atlantic Charter was issued by the United States and Britain, which set several guiding principles for the postwar world. This included the renunciation of Axis aggression, the right to self-government, more access to raw materials, and the disarmament of known threatening nations. Japan knew the political implications, especially since the Republic of China was a strong ally of the United States and the United Kingdom. Japan interpreted such diplomatic agreements as a potential alliance against them and that the West would make

proposals of extraterritoriality appealing to China. This turn of events forced Japan to rethink the treatment and policies of their occupied regions. The Japanese made many prolonged promises of independence and self-government for such areas, which created a bad reputation for their leadership. Relating to the utilization of Japanese-occupied territories, Japan's war effort had also become more critical than ever due to halted Japanese military advances since mid-1943.

Japanese forces were being pushed back into Southeast Asia and the Pacific during the war, which made access to natural resources more difficult. Both factors affected the empire's status as the leading nation in Asia, leading Japan to hold the conference. Other events that contributed to their need for East Asian allies and reinsertion in the economic playing field were the effects of the Great Depression in the United States and the Showa Financial Depression that followed Chinese boycotts against Japanese products, and the defeat at Pearl Harbor. By 1943, Japan needed to go beyond expressing rhetoric and tangibly show Asian people that they supported equality for Asian countries. The Greater East Asia Conference resulted from Japan's self-interest and preservation of its international image. Participating Asian countries in the Assembly united in supporting Asian unity and praising Japan's assistance to their own countries and the region, even though their utopian world of a connected Asia Japan had promised was actually a pursuit of individual, national power. The conference was a chance for Japan to prove it could guide Asia into a brighter future and form beneficial relations and marks that the country desperately needed. As Japan's intentions for the conference were slowly unveiled, it is critical to understand the historical and cultural thought behind the Japanese's greed for supremacy.

Japan's motivations for the Greater East Asia Conference of 1943 were, in reality, centered around the country's racial superiority theory of the Yamato race as it acted as a front for Pan-Asianism. The "Great Yamato race" was what the Japanese called themselves and how

they self-distinguished from other Asian races. According to John Dower in *War Without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War*, the Japanese described the Yamato race as the group of people destined to dominate the other racially inferior Asian populations and brought back ideas focused on genetic superiority. The term and ideology began near the end years of World War II when Japan felt the need to continue its racially separating notions to feel almighty again. In a press conference in 1940, Japanese Foreign Minister Yōsuke Matsuoka stated that “the mission of the Yamato race is to prevent the human race from becoming devilish, to rescue it from destruction and lead it to the light of the world,” which is significant because it attracted much initial support and followers from Asian countries. Nationalist leader Sukarno created a formula that labeled the country with the “Three A’s—Japan the Light of Asia, Japan the Protector of Asia, and Japan the Leader of Asia.” This reveals Japan’s successful influence over parts of Asia under the ideal of Yamato, which would also encourage the empire to take advantage of the social weapon during the conference. Circling back to the first stated motivation of Pan-Asianism, the prejudiced Yamato race perspective undermines ideas of Asian equality, suggesting that Japan’s genuine motives were double-crossing and put on as a mask to a bigger plan. The concept of Yamato was the foundation of many topics discussed during the conference and was Japan’s malicious attempt to gain authority over Asian nations under the pretense of solidarity. A report called *Global Policy with the Yamato Race as a Nucleus Report* shows a collection of Japanese racial thought. The report was written by approximately forty researchers associated with the Japanese Population and Race Section of the Research Bureau of the Ministry of Health and Welfare in July 1943, before the conference. It was a classified secret that circulated within the government but was meant for public consumption rather than a practical guide for policymakers and administrators. It states that each ethnic or national group had its “proper place” on the regional

or global stage, and Japan was the “leading race” of Asia and, implicitly, the whole world. Such a statement shows that Japan had borrowed ideas from Western intellectuals because Western models of racism also use the term “leading race.” The report’s content and concluding details validate that Japan used this mindset at the conference. The Japanese never wanted to be equal with all the other Asian countries because they innately thought they were god-like in the grand scheme of things. The document also outlined blueprints for consolidating the inferior peoples of Asia in an autarkic bloc— or what is now known as the Greater Co-Prosperity Sphere—with Japan in its rightful place as their political, economic, and cultural head. A line in the report states, “We, the Yamato race, are presently spilling our “blood” to realize our mission in the world history of establishing a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. To liberate the billion people of Asia, and also to maintain our position of leadership over the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere forever, we must plant the “blood” of the Yamato race in this ‘soil.’” This line conceptualizes that Japan will guide Asian countries from Western mistreatment. It then evidences it by emphasizing the Yamato race supremacy rather than the Asian equality rhetoric spotlighted in the assembly. It indicates, again, that Japan’s intentions were not pure because of the deeply rooted Yamato thought. Additionally, a section of the report is dedicated to a population policy, which uncovers a Japanese plan to send its citizens overseas as permanent settlers to colonize and advance the Yamato race. Referring back to the second argument of Japanese motivations to expand for economic and military strength through the conference, the *Global Policy with the Yamato Race as a Nucleus* report suggests there were also racially-backed reasons why Japan was looking to mobilize. Ultimately, the report shows the empirical racism ingrained in well-educated Japanese practitioners and makes people question what Japan meant by the slogans “Pan-Asianism and “Co-Prosperity when said during speeches at the conference.



While speakers at the conference publicly called for Pan-Asianism, racial harmony, and liberation from the white colonial ventures, privately, the Japanese leaders were paying attention to developing relations among the different races and countries so that they would eventually fall under their leadership. The hard effects of the Yamato ideology were seen moments after the conference, where Japan's Pan-Asian claims were just a myth. There were barely any shifts towards Asian unity as Japan was still racist and exploitative towards other Asians. In Ba Maw's memoir, he states, "The brutality, arrogance, and racial pretensions of these men remain among the deepest Burmese memories of the war years; for a great many people in Southeast, these are all they remember of the war" as to describe how Japanese soldiers treated people of Burma with their racial superiority as an excuse. Other instances of harsh Japanese rule after the idealistic statements made at the conference include the thousands of Asian deaths during the construction of the Burma Death Railway, the taking of Chinese and Korean people as slaves, and more. With the Yamato race at the core of all Japanese political, economic, and social thought, the purpose of the Greater East Asia Conference can be constructed based on the outcome— the Japanese continuously taking a position of dominance over Asian nations.

Aimed to be a sincere and revolutionary gathering that would set forth a motion of changes within Asia through peaceful union, the original goals of the Greater East Asian Conference of 1943 were overtaken by corrupt Japanese motivations. Despite promising a new and fair Pan-Asianism order, Japan broke those dreams because of imperialistic self-interests and a racially-biased perception towards their neighboring nations. In the end, the conference failed to establish a peaceful realm of Asia as inequivalent could still be seen everywhere. Amid the sentimental speeches and unifying statements made during the conference, it was difficult to tell what Japan's scheme was. Points earned during the conference helped Japan instill a

center-periphery relationship within Asia, which was designed to ensure the supremacy of the Yamato or Japanese as the all-mighty race. This meant all currency and finance would naturally be tied to the yen, Tokyo would control all major transportation and communication networks, Japan would be responsible for producing high-quality manufactures in the heavy-industry sector, and more unbalance. Rather than delivering an uplifting call of a union to forty-six representatives, associates, and observers at the event, Japan propagated only itself. The conference was held just to be used as a political tool serving in the hands of Japan to revive Japanese power and take advantage of the shared Asian spirit.

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