

The Strategic Impact of the Battle of Midway

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This paper examines the strategic impact of the Battle of Midway on the global war. Midway was the culmination of an American strategy that began in June 1941. American victory significantly influenced global events, not merely the Pacific War. This strategy originated in American fears that Japan would attack the Soviet Far East. President Roosevelt sought to prevent such an attack from June to December 1941 through economic sanctions and the reinforcement of the Philippines. After Pearl Harbor, he continued to fear a Japanese move into Siberia as well as Japanese cooperation with Germany in the Indian Ocean. In early 1942, the U.S. Navy began striking targets inside the Japanese defense perimeter, including Japan itself, in order to draw Japanese naval power into the Central Pacific. As Japan could not attack Siberia or move into the Indian Ocean without her naval aviation, American victory at Midway kept the Axis divided for the rest of the war, and kept open the lend-lease routes to the USSR.

Japanese occupation of Manchuria in late 1931 represented a grave threat to the Soviet Far East. The Soviets took this threat seriously enough to fortify and reinforce the region heavily in the 1930s.¹ Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and his declaration of German rearmament in 1935 created the obvious prospect that Germany and Japan would combine against Russia. In August 1935, the Communist International described the "league" between Germany and Japan—

¹ Alvin D. Coox, *Nomonhan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), 74-91.

which did not yet exist in reality—as a threat to the USSR, and called for world communist parties to establish a “United Front” to oppose it.² The U.S. Ambassadors to Berlin and Tokyo both noted in mid-1935 that German expansion in Europe could enable Japan to seize Vladivostok and the Soviet Far East.³

The Axis powers were strongly anti-Communist. Germany and Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact in 1936, and Italy joined in 1937. Stalin and Roosevelt naturally perceived this purportedly “defensive” alliance as aimed offensively against the USSR.⁴ Germany and Japan later concluded treaties with their Soviet foe—the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 and the Soviet-Japanese Non-Aggression Pact of 1941—but few observers regarded these Pacts as permanent. Stalin signed these Pacts to prevent the Axis from uniting against him and to divert aggression away from the USSR. Germany and Japan signed them so they could seize a defense perimeter strong enough to hold off the Anglo-Americans before they turned on the Soviets.

Roosevelt understood the basic geopolitical principle that Axis domination of Eurasia endangered American security. In his Fireside Chat of December 29, 1940, he described the Tripartite Pact of September 1940 as “a program aimed at world control” in which Germany, Japan, and Italy threatened to “unite in ultimate action against the United States”:

“If Great Britain goes down, the Axis powers will control the continents of Europe, Asia, Africa, Australasia, and the high seas—and they will be in a position to bring enormous military and naval

² Jane Degras, ed., *The Communist International 1919-1943 Documents*, Volume III (London: Routledge, 2007), 375.

³ United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1935*, Volume II (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1952), 338. United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1935*, Volume III (Washington: GPO, 1953), 108.

⁴ For Stalin’s view: Robert Whymant, *Stalin’s Spy: Richard Sorge and the Tokyo Espionage Ring* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 86. For Roosevelt’s view, Edward M. Bennett, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Search for Security* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1985), 157-158.

resources against this hemisphere. It is no exaggeration to say that all of us, in all the Americas, would be living at the point of a gun—a gun loaded with explosive bullets, economic as well as military.”

Roosevelt repeated this theme in his January 1941 State of the Union Address:

“Armed defense of democratic existence is now being gallantly waged in four continents. If that defense fails, all the population and all the resources of Europe, Asia, Africa and Australasia will be dominated by the conquerors. Let us remember that the total of those populations and their resources in those four continents greatly exceeds the sum total of the population and the resources of the whole of the Western Hemisphere many times over. In times like these it is immature—and incidentally, untrue—for anybody to brag that an unprepared America, single-handed, and with one hand tied behind its back, can hold off the whole world.”⁵

Whether or not the Axis actually had the capability to dominate Eurasia is not important. In practice, Roosevelt treated Germany and Japan as a joint global threat that required a global strategic response. As he explained to Ambassador Joseph Grew in January 1941:

“[W]e must recognize that the hostilities in Europe, in Africa, and in Asia are all parts of a single world conflict. We must, consequently, recognize that our interests are menaced both in Europe and in the Far East . . . Our strategy of self-defense must be a global strategy which takes account of every front . . .”⁶

A key element of Roosevelt’s global response to the Axis threat in 1941 and 1942 was to prevent Japan from attacking the Soviet Union. The German offensive in Russia that began in June 1941

⁵ Roosevelt’s speeches are online at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>

⁶ Online at <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/archives/pdfs/pearlharbor.pdf>

fundamentally changed the world strategic situation. The Wehrmacht made excellent progress in the first four weeks, advancing as far as Pskov, Minsk, and Zhitomir. This struggle formed the backdrop for Japanese and American decision-making in late June and early July. Foreign Minister Matsuoka thought Japan should attack the USSR immediately in accordance with German requests.⁷ The Japanese Army and Navy, however, were unprepared for war with Russia. Japan decided to mobilize, reinforce Manchuria, and move into southern Indochina. Japan informed Germany on July 3 that she was “preparing for all possible eventualities... in order to join forces with Germany in actively combating the Communist menace,” but made no specific promises.⁸

In June 1941, the Japanese Kwantung Army in Manchuria had twelve divisions confronting thirty Soviet divisions. Japan sent ten additional divisions to Manchuria in July, but the Japanese Army considered that they could not attack unless the Soviets withdrew fifteen divisions. Japan’s schedule was quite tight. An attack had to start in mid-August in order to finish before winter began.⁹

Japanese war plans involved defeating Soviet forces in the Maritime Province, then redeploying to Western Manchuria and severing the Trans-Siberian Railway. The Kwantung Army needed strong air support to break through Soviet fortifications and to eliminate Soviet heavy bombers that threatened Japan. But, the Kwantung Army only had 600 aircraft in June 1941 facing 2,800 Soviet aircraft in Siberia.¹⁰ War with the Soviets required the participation of the Japanese Navy, which had almost 1,500 operational aircraft in December 1941.¹¹ Diverting, containing, and destroying this Japanese

⁷ German Foreign Minister Ribbentrop requested Japanese intervention on June 28, July 1 and July 5. For Japan’s deliberations, see Nobutaka Ike, *Japan’s Decision for War* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1967), 60, 64-67, 69, and 72.

⁸ Ike, 75.

⁹ Coox, 1036-1042.

¹⁰ Coox, 89-91, 1036.

¹¹ *Outline of Naval Armaments and Preparations for War*, Part III (Washington: Department of the Army, 1950), 37. This total does not include training aircraft or aircraft in reserve.

naval aviation was a critical component of American Pacific strategy from June 1941 to June 1942.



Japan's War Plan: The Kwantung Army would first take the offensive in Eastern Manchuria, then redeploy to Western Manchuria and stand on the defensive.

American cryptanalysts could read Japanese diplomatic cables, which included reports from Japan's military attaché in Berlin, Hiroshi Oshima. The decrypts described Hitler's intentions, German requests for Japanese intervention, and the Wehrmacht's progress in Russia.¹² In July, American consuls observed "unusual military activity in Manchuria" and movement of troops towards the Soviet border. The U.S. Ambassador to Tokyo reported rumors of a Japanese attack

¹² Carl Boyd, *Hitler's Japanese Confidant* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 23-27. Waldo Heinrichs, *Threshold of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 121-123.

on Russia in August if German military success continued.¹³ Of course, U.S. intelligence also had considerable evidence that Japan was preparing to move south. Nobody knew which way Japan would jump. Roosevelt wished to ensure Japan did not move north.¹⁴



General Hiroshi Oshima. His reports to Tokyo, decrypted in Washington, provided an invaluable source of intelligence on German intentions.

The first step was an oil embargo. In response to Roosevelt's request, Admiral Harold Stark told the President on July 21 that an embargo would cause Japan to attack Malaya, the Netherlands East Indies, and possibly the United States. Stark recommended imposing the embargo only after Japan had attacked Siberia.¹⁵ An attack on Siberia was exactly what Roosevelt wanted to avoid. Thus, he froze Japanese assets on July 26 and imposed a de facto oil embargo on August 1. He believed that even small shipments of oil might encourage or allow Japan to attack Russia, whose survival was vital to

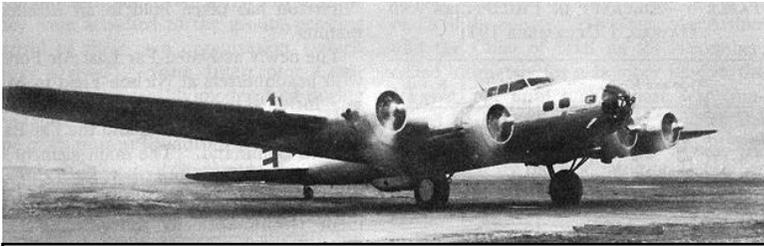
¹³ *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers, 1941: The Far East* (Washington: USGPO, 1956), 1012.

¹⁴ Heinrichs convincingly shows that Roosevelt's actions from July to December 1941 are consistent with a strategy of preventing Japan from attacking Siberia. This paper extends the same logic into June 1942.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 835-840.

American security.¹⁶ The embargo powerfully undercut Tokyo's "Go North" faction.¹⁷

Whether the embargo continued depended on events in Russia. In August, logistical difficulties and stout Soviet defenses slowed the German advance. Near Smolensk, encircled Soviet troops fought bitterly until August 4. In the Ukraine, the Germans surrounded a large Soviet force near Uman. The Soviets expected to hold roughly the Leningrad-Smolensk-Kiev-Odessa line until mid-October, when bad weather would halt operations. But, they did not hold this line. Given continued German victories from September to December, Roosevelt had to keep the embargo in place and take other measures to deter Japan from attacking Siberia.¹⁸



B-17D: The deployment of B-17s to the Philippines in late 1941 sought to draw Japanese attention to the south, and away from Siberia.

One such measure was a buildup in the Philippines that included expanding the Philippine Army and sending hundreds of B-17 bombers and P-40 fighters to the islands.¹⁹ These aircraft began arriving in October. Britain supported this effort with a buildup in Malaya. Many authors criticize Roosevelt for trying to intimidate Japan with insufficient military force to make the policy credible. However, given the danger to Siberia, Washington had to divert Japanese attention southward *despite* U.S. military weakness.

¹⁶ Heinrichs, 141-142.

¹⁷ Coox, 1046.

¹⁸ Heinrichs, 179.

¹⁹ Heinrichs, 175-176.

On the Eastern Front, the Germans resumed their advance in August. The Wehrmacht isolated Leningrad, and encircled 665,000 Soviet troops near Kiev, which fell on September 19. Army Group Center crushed over 500,000 Soviet troops between Smolensk and Moscow on September 30. Snow fell on October 6, and then rain turned the ground into a sea of mud. Nevertheless, the road to Moscow was open, and the Germans were within 100 miles of the city. Stalin ordered the Soviet government evacuated, and Muscovites briefly panicked.

Winter was rapidly approaching, but Roosevelt feared that if Moscow fell, Japan would attack anyway. The change of government in Tokyo caused him great alarm. On October 15, as Moscow evacuated, Fumimaro Konoye resigned, and War Minister Hideki Tojo became Prime Minister. American intelligence believed that Tojo, who hated the Soviets, would soon attack them, and other observers agreed. Washington warned U.S. forces in the Pacific that a Japanese attack on Russia was a “strong possibility.” Roosevelt wrote to Churchill, “The Jap situation is definitely worse, and I think they are headed north.”²⁰

To counter this, Roosevelt ordered an accelerated reinforcement of bombers to the Philippines, and the Army devised a scheme for shuttle-bombing Japan between Luzon and Vladivostok. Belief in the deterrent power of B-17s was rather exaggerated. General George Marshall thought Philippine-based bombers “probably would make [Japan] feel they didn’t dare take the Siberian thing.” Secretary of War Stimson believed B-17s would restrain Japan and “preserve the defensive power of Russia in Europe.”²¹ Churchill ordered two heavy ships to Singapore as an additional deterrent.

Philippine defenses, and the bomber force, would not be ready until early 1942. From a narrow military perspective, in October

²⁰ Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962), 134-136, 155-157, 164-165. Heinrichs, 190-192.

²¹ Heinrichs, 193-197.

1941 America should have conciliated Japan diplomatically for six months.²² Japan knew of the growing threat; her consulate in Manila watched the B-17s arrive and monitored MacArthur's military buildup. The Japanese press rightly accused America of seeking Soviet bases for bombing Japan.²³ Rather than lying low, on November 15, General Marshall held a press conference to announce the U.S. capability to bomb Japan from the Philippines. This news appeared in *The New York Times* on November 19.²⁴ The U.S. also suddenly shifted gears diplomatically in mid-November. Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Japanese Ambassador Kichisaburo Nomura were trying to reach a temporary settlement, and Roosevelt contemplated a six-month agreement giving Japan some oil in exchange for a pledge to remain at peace. However, on November 26, Hull presented the "Ten Point Note," which contained unacceptable demands, such as Japanese withdrawal from China and Indochina. This forced Japan to go to war to relieve the effects of the oil embargo.

Washington shifted to a hard line in mid-November due to developments on the Eastern Front. On November 15, the Germans launched Operation Typhoon – the assault on Moscow. They were within twelve miles of Moscow on November 28, and five miles away on December 2. Although Marshall, Stark, and others argued for conciliating Japan temporarily, Roosevelt still feared Japan would move north if Moscow fell.²⁵ In late November, the Kwantung Army's airpower had been transferred to the south. A temporary diplomatic settlement might release Japanese naval aviation to support the Kwantung Army, but the "Ten Point Note" made this impossible. As late as December 5, when Navy Secretary Frank Knox informed Roosevelt that the Japanese fleet was at sea, Roosevelt worried that this fleet was preparing to attack the USSR.²⁶ On December 7, America

²² Heinrichs, 204-205.

²³ Wohlstetter, 165.

²⁴ Michael Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 100-115.

²⁵ Heinrichs, 213-214.

²⁶ John Toland, *Infamy* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 294.

paid a heavy price for diverting Japan during the period of maximum danger to Russia.

Pearl Harbor resolved some basic uncertainties. Germany and Japan were at war with America and Britain, but Japan was not at war with the Soviet Union. In principle, the Allies could concentrate on defeating Germany first in accordance with prewar plans. But would the Axis remain divided? The Allies knew that Germany would mount a powerful spring offensive in the USSR, and could not expect Japan to remain passive once she had secured her defense perimeter. Allied planners certainly could not ignore the possibility that 800,000 Japanese troops in Manchuria might attack Siberia in the spring or summer.

Washington still relied heavily on Oshima's reports to understand Axis intentions.²⁷ In the first months of 1942, Germany repeatedly requested that Japan help knock out the USSR and enter the Indian Ocean to link up with German forces.²⁸ Tokyo actively considered the options Roosevelt most feared; the Kwantung Army advocated action against Siberia, and elements within the Navy argued for an Indian Ocean offensive.²⁹ Japan actually began strengthening the Kwantung Army with units returned from southern operations.³⁰ Washington was not privy to Japan's internal debate, but simply could not assume that the Axis would not coordinate their actions as the Germans suggested. In March 1942, Roosevelt was concerned enough, undoubtedly as a result of reading Oshima's

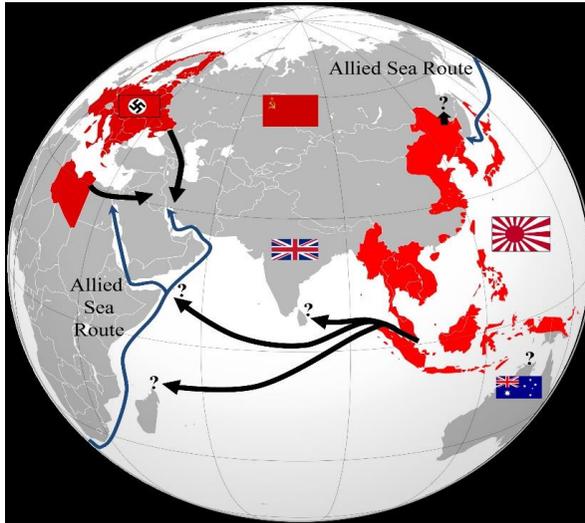
²⁷ Boyd, 42-43.

²⁸ Boyd, 50, 52-53.

²⁹ H. P. Willmott, *The Barrier and the Javelin* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1983), 37, 40-42. Henry P. Frei, *Japan's Southward Advance and Australia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 163. Edward J. Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 34.

³⁰ *Japanese Preparations for Operations in Manchuria (Prior to 1943)*, Japanese Monograph No. 77 (Washington: Department of the Army, 1954), 28-33.

cables, to order the Army to examine the ramifications if Japan attacked the USSR in the summer.³¹



Roosevelt's Nightmare: In early 1942, Germany urged Japan to attack the USSR and to advance into the Indian Ocean to support the German drives into Egypt and the Caucasus.

After Pearl Harbor, the Army Air Forces proposed attacking Japan from Siberia. American bombers could only get to Siberia while the Soviets were neutral, but neutrality was exactly why the Soviets could not accept them. The Joint Staff advised that the best way to assist Russia was to divert Japanese airpower elsewhere – preferably in the South Pacific, a diversion that actually came to pass after the Marines landed on Guadalcanal in August. Thus, the misguided Siberia scheme went nowhere. Bombing Japan from the Aleutians was considered, but weather, logistics, and basing proved prohibitive. However, the U.S. did establish the Alaska-Siberia air route through which 8,000 aircraft eventually reached the Soviets.³²

³¹ Maurice Matloff and Edwin M. Snell, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1941-1942* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1953), 143.

³² *Ibid.*, 142-146.

The U.S. Navy was the only viable instrument for influencing Japanese actions. At the Arcadia conference in late December 1941, Churchill proposed U.S. carrier strikes against Japanese cities in order to force Japan to bring her fleet home and relieve pressure on Britain.³³ The participants discussed launching Army bombers from carriers for operations against French North Africa.³⁴ These ideas were the genesis of the Doolittle Raid.

In February and March, U.S. carriers raided Wake Island, the Marshalls and Gilberts, Bougainville, Rabaul, and New Guinea. These strikes inside Japan's defense perimeter had the intended effect of drawing Tokyo's attention to her vulnerability in the Central Pacific.³⁵ Meanwhile, the Japanese Army captured Rangoon and advanced to the Indian frontier, and Japanese carriers raided the Bay of Bengal in early April. These actions exacerbated British fears in the region. Britain seized Madagascar to deny it to Japan, and Churchill repeatedly requested American carrier action in the Pacific to compel Japanese withdrawal from the Indian Ocean.³⁶

The Doolittle Raid of April 18 is usually interpreted as an effort to "raise morale," but actually sought to divert Japan from operations elsewhere. A month later, the British thanked the U.S. Navy for "the action taken by the United States Fleet in April in an endeavor to relieve the Japanese pressure on the Indian Ocean"³⁷—evidently they believed the raid came in response to their repeated requests. The raid achieved its critical diversionary purpose; it cemented Japan's crystallizing consensus for invading Midway in order to bring American carriers to battle and destroy them.³⁸ Bombs falling

³³ Foreign Relations of the United States, *The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1968), 27, 34-35, 66.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 164, 169.

³⁵ Willmott, 56-65.

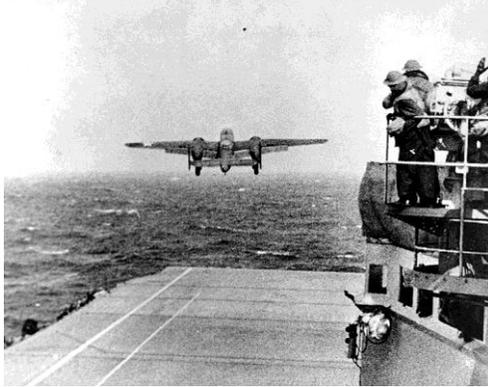
³⁶ Warren F. Kimball, *Churchill and Roosevelt: The Complete Correspondence*, Volume I (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 381-382, 418, 442-443, 452-454. Willmott, 331-332.

³⁷ J. R. M. Butler, *Grand Strategy*, Volume III, Part II (London: HMSO, 1964), 487.

³⁸ Willmott, 118-119.

on Tokyo ensured that Oshima's April 6 message, which urged Japan to attack the USSR, fell on deaf ears.³⁹ Oshima's message, when read in Washington, could only have highlighted the necessity for the Doolittle Raid.

Photo # 80-G-41196 B-25 lifts off from USS Hornet on Doolittle Raid



The Doolittle Raid fixed Japan's attention on the Central Pacific.

The need to contain and divert Japan affected the Allied debate over the Second Front. On April 1, Roosevelt approved the U.S. Army plan to liberate France in 1943. Churchill endorsed this program on April 14, with the proviso that the Allies had to stop Japan from linking up with Germany in the Indian Ocean.⁴⁰ Marshall and Eisenhower agreed that this was crucial. In May, Roosevelt asked General MacArthur, then in Australia, for his views on strategy. MacArthur believed that America should launch a Second Front not in France, but *in the Pacific theater*—"Nowhere else can it be so successfully launched and nowhere else will it so assist the Russians."⁴¹ This would relieve Japanese pressure on Russia, Australia and India. In a very real sense, MacArthur's recommendation was *actually implemented*. Despite the approved strategy of "Germany First," the U.S. Army sent four times as many men to the Pacific as to

³⁹ Boyd, 62-63.

⁴⁰ Matloff and Snell, 189.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 215.

Europe from December 1941 to July 1942. America first took the offensive in the Solomons in August, not in Europe. Roosevelt and Marshall considered a landing in France vitally important to relieve pressure on Russia. However, the perceived threat, derived from diplomatic traffic, of German-Japanese cooperation forced deviation from Marshall's plan.

Japanese defeat at Midway was by no means preordained, and the strategic consequences were profound. Destruction of her carrier force foreclosed Japan's offensive options, including moves into the Indian Ocean or against Siberia. Nevertheless, some in Washington regarded the seizure of Attu and Kiska as a prelude to an attack on Siberia. On June 17, Roosevelt warned Stalin that the attack on the Aleutians "presents tangible evidence that the Japanese government may be taking steps to carry out operations against the Soviet Maritime Provinces."⁴² He pledged American support if Japan did so.

Largely forgotten today is the critical importance of the Indian Ocean sea routes in 1942, which sustained British forces in Egypt and India.⁴³ Some 24% of all U.S. aid sent to Russia went via the Persian Gulf, while another 47% sailed under Japan's nose into Vladivostok in U.S. ships transferred to the Soviets. Japan's failure to interdict these routes accelerated Axis defeat.

⁴² Boyd, 61.

⁴³ Willmott, 48-49.



Hiryu Burns: Defeat at Midway foreclosed Japan's offensive options and kept the Axis divided for the rest of the war.

In July, the Germans, unaware of Japanese losses at Midway, renewed their call for Japan to attack the Soviets. Once again, they asked Japan to enter the Indian Ocean to capitalize on Germany's thrusts into Egypt and the Caucasus. Tokyo responded that attacking the USSR was impossible. Nevertheless, Hitler clung to this idea until early 1943. Meanwhile, from 1942 to 1944, Japan advised Germany to make peace with the Soviets and fight the Anglo-Americans in the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean. Hitler rejected this, and the Axis remained divided for the duration of the war.⁴⁴

Retrospectively, we know that Axis wartime coordination was poor. Nevertheless, America's successful effort to hinder that coordination was a genuine achievement. From June 1941 to June 1942, Washington had credible intelligence that a Japanese danger to the USSR existed. To avert this danger, Roosevelt diverted Japanese attention with economic sanctions and a buildup in the Philippines

⁴⁴ Boyd, 62-65.

before Pearl Harbor, and used naval aviation in the Central Pacific to do so after the war began. These strategic diversions succeeded. Both times, Japan jumped in the desired direction (away from Russia). Due to American actions, the prerequisite for Japan to attack Siberia—a secure Pacific defense perimeter—was not met, and thus the attack could not begin. Writ large, the Battle of Midway was a Second Front in the Pacific that denied Japan the opportunity to open or expand additional fronts of her own.

