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## **The Best Laid Plans: Japanese Doctrinal Failure at the Battle of Midway**

**Pumpanchat Suthisamphat**

Research Scholar, Department of History, International Community School, Thailand

### **Abstract:**

*Contemporary historical scholarship on the Battle of Midway is largely in agreement regarding how the engagement itself played out. In general terms, the Japanese navy's defeat is primarily attributed to tactical failures made by the Japanese battlefield commanders. The overall aim of this paper is to broaden historical understanding of the Battle of Midway by offering an in-depth analysis of the Japanese strategic perspective both prior to and during the battle. This paper contextualizes the Battle of Midway from a doctrinal standpoint by presenting these tactical errors as deriving from the strategic context in which they were made. Specifically, this paper argues that the Japanese military intelligence apparatus grievously underestimated American response capabilities, thereby compromising the overall Japanese plan of attack. Furthermore, the governing Japanese naval doctrine of the time, Kantai Kessen, prized battleships over all other fleet vessels and deemphasized aerial and ship-based protection of aircraft carriers, leaving the strike group relatively undefended against a possible American counterattack. The battle plan also needlessly dispersed Japanese forces, leaving a large portion of the fleet unable to contribute to the attack or assist in fleet defense in the event of an American counterattack.*

**Keywords:** Midway, Kantai Kessen, Kido Butai, Yamamoto Isoroku, Nagumo Chuichi

### **1. Introduction**

The Battle of Midway (4-7 June, 1942) is now considered an inflection point in the Pacific Theatre of the Second World War. The catastrophic losses in both men and matériel suffered by the Japanese fleet during the failed surprise attack shifted strategic initiative to the naval forces of the United States, arguably altering the overarching trajectory of the Pacific War. Although the chronology of what transpired at Midway is largely undisputed in contemporary historical scholarship, this paper seeks to shed light on the question of how Japanese tactical miscalculations made prior to the battle contributed to its ultimate outcome. The paper also concludes that despite enjoying a significant numerical advantage at the outset of the engagement, a series of grave operational miscalculations by the Japanese high command proved instrumental in bringing about a stunning loss now remembered as one of the most decisive naval defeats in history.

The first section of the paper presents a general overview of Japanese fleet activity between the attack on Pearl Harbor and the fateful encounter at Midway six months later. This section also evaluates Japanese strategic objectives for Operation MI and the geopolitical significance of the Midway Atoll for Japanese and American forces. The paper then outlines a series of grave strategic miscalculations which placed the Japanese forces at a significant disadvantage before the battle even began, notably a failure to realize that Japanese cryptographic security had been compromised, an overly-complex battle plan, and inadequate force recovery time after the Battle of the Coral Sea in early May, 1942. The cumulative impact of these miscalculations are examined in detail and linked to how events at Midway unfolded. Lastly, the paper explores how the Japanese loss at Midway influenced subsequent developments in the Pacific Theatre, particularly the effect of losing both naval force superiority and a significant number of skilled naval and air officers. The paper suggests a clear link between the strategic missteps mentioned above and tactical errors made on the battlefield, compounded by a reactionary reversion to doctrinaire thinking among the Naval high command that hindered the Japanese navy's ability to effectively adapt to a shifting operational environment in which the American forces had gained strategic initiative.

### **2. Context**

The role of comprehensive intelligence regarding the location and force strength of enemy forces is a key component of any successful military engagement. An intelligence advantage can tip the scales even when faced with a numerically superior opponent. Preliminary planning efforts for the Pearl Harbor strike relied primarily on the traditional espionage technique of a single embedded spy, Takeo Yoshikawa, an attachment with the Japanese Consulate in Honolulu. Working covertly, Yoshikawa produced detailed reports of ship movements in Oahu Bay and diagrammed the layout of the planned strike zone to maximize the potential damage inflicted by the Japanese attack. Although the intelligence provided by

Yoshikawa was doubtless much-valued by naval war planners, he was nevertheless not privy to the inner deliberations of the American navy, and was thus unable to precisely ascertain future ship movements, an intelligence failure which would drastically diminish the overall effectiveness of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Although bolstered by the element of surprise, Japanese intelligence efforts lacked the comprehensiveness of their American counterparts, who relentlessly maintained cryptographic security and worked ceaselessly (and successfully) to crack coded Japanese diplomatic and military communications. The absence of reliable long-term intelligence regarding force distribution undermined the overall success of the Pearl Harbor strike not only in that the American carriers remained untouched, but was also reflective of an established Japanese naval doctrine which prized battleships as the cornerstones of naval superiority. The ideological divide between traditionalist officers like Osami Nagano and Chuichi Nagumo and more forward-thinking strategists, including Isoroku Yamamoto, Tamon Yamaguchi, and Minoru Genda was manifested by the hybridized nature of Japanese fleet activities throughout the Second World War, a middle-course which sacrificed the presumed advantages of *Kantai Kessen* without fully embracing the merits of a more flexible carrier-based doctrine.

During the preparation phase of the Japanese strike on Pearl Harbor (Operation Z), Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto repeatedly emphasized the critical importance of destroying all Pacific-based American carrier forces. Unfortunately for the Japanese, despite the sinking of four battleships and inflicting extensive damage upon other facilities and ships, the primary targets of the strike - the carriers *Saratoga*, *Enterprise*, and *Lexington* - escaped unscathed. On the morning of December 7th, the *Saratoga* was setting sail from Puget Sound equipped with a new Air Group. The *Enterprise* was steaming back towards Pearl Harbor after a deployment to Wake Island with a complement of twelve F4F Wildcats to reinforce Fighting Squadron 221. Lastly, the *Lexington* was on route to Midway to reinforce the garrison there with eighteen SB2U Vindicators of the 231 Bombing Squadron. The Japanese navy's failure to complete one of the attack's primary objectives meant that although American naval forces were significantly weakened as a result, the United States remained a significant naval power in the Pacific. In light of these shortcomings, the attack on Midway was intended to deal a crippling blow to the American Pacific Fleet and ensure regional dominance for the naval forces of Japan.

Although the Japanese failed to achieve the primary objective of Operation Z, the damage inflicted upon the US Pacific fleet effectively demonstrated two main points:

- In the face of agile and well-coordinated surprise air attacks, slow and unmaneuverable battleships were largely ineffective in both an offensive and a defensive sense unless supported by comprehensive air power. This realization undermined the Japanese naval doctrine of *Kantai-Kessen* (Naval Fleet Decisive Battle) - derived primarily from lessons learned fighting the Russian navy during the Battle of Tsushima Strait in 1905 - that naval conflicts would be decided by a single major battleship engagement. Despite the relative success of the Pearl Harbor attack, Grand-Admiral Osami Nagano and other conservative members of the Ministry of the Navy remained committed to the doctrine of *Kantai-Kessen* for the remainder of the Second World War. .
- The destruction wrought upon Pearl Harbor was a testament to the power of a concentrated force "of a single powerful attack group of fighters, bombers, and torpedo planes, which would strike the enemy all at once in overwhelming strength." (Fuchida, 30)

As symbolic retribution for the Pearl Harbor attack, the Americans launched the infamous Doolittle raid; a daring strike into the very heart of the Japanese home islands. On April 18th, 1942, sixteen B25B bombers specially-modified for carrier launch deployed from the *Hornet* and the *Enterprise* and attacked Tokyo and other sites on Honshu island. Although the attack dealt only negligible damage, the Doolittle raid accelerated Yamamoto's plan for an attack on Midway and underscored the strategic imperative to sink the American aircraft carriers at the earliest possible opportunity. The Doolittle raid reinforced the threat that American Aircraft carriers posed in terms of power projection. Despite the negligible damage inflicted by the Doolittle raid, the psychological impact on Japanese morale was significant. Thus, in both a symbolic and strategic sense, Yamamoto took upon himself the task of guaranteeing the physical safety of Emperor Showa.

Beyond a psychological imperative to avenge the perceived humiliation of the American air raid, the decision to select

Midway as the primary objective for Operation MI was influenced by two primary strategic considerations:

- Although a large portion of the United States Pacific fleet had been rendered inactive by the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, five carriers (the addition of the *USS Hornet* and the transfer of the *USS Yorktown* from the Atlantic Fleet increased the original number from three to five) remained in service in the Pacific. The attack on Midway would lure out the American carriers to rescue Midway from Admiral's Kondo Occupation Force, and enable Nagumo's *Kido Butai* to destroy the American carriers in one fell swoop.
- The capture of Midway Atoll would also grant Japanese a valuable strategic foothold in the Eastern Pacific. Considering that prior to Midway the furthest Pacific outpost of the Japanese was Wake Island, the capture of Midway would extend their frontline approximately 900 kilometers eastward. The relatively close proximity to the Hawaiian Island chains would also allow airships to conduct land-based bombing raids on Oahu as well as monitor and disrupt US ship activity to and from the islands. Lastly, the capture of Midway would also deprive the United States Pacific fleet of a vital refueling station in the West-Central Pacific, impeding American access to Australia, New Zealand, and British forces in India.

In early May 1942, the Japanese sent an expeditionary force to seize and occupy Port Moresby in New Guinea and the nearby island of Tulagi. As part of the covering force for the Japanese invasion of Port Moresby and Tulagi, Isoroku Yamamoto dispatched Carrier Division 5 - Shokaku and Zuikaku - under Rear Admiral Shigeyoshi Inoue to provide air cover for the invasion. Although the Japanese managed to successfully occupy Tulagi, the unexpected appearance of Task Force 11 and 17-Lexington and Yorktown- prevented them from decisively concluding the Port Moresby invasion. Although the Lexington was sunk and the Yorktown heavily damaged, the Shokaku was critically impaired and the Zuikaku air group rendered inactive during the engagement. Thus, Admiral Nagumo's Kido Butai strike force was deprived of a significant portion of its air striking power and Japan's two most modern carriers missed the fateful encounter at Midway. Nevertheless, under considerable pressure from the Tojo Government, Yamamoto was pressured to comply with orders for the attack to begin by early June, in order to commemorate the naval victory over the Russians at the Battle of Tsushima Strait in 1905. The precedence of political prerogative over pure tactical considerations was yet another factor which undermined the fundamental integrity of the Japanese battle plan.

Beginning in the 1930s, the Japanese military and political command began to rely heavily upon increasingly sophisticated cryptographic systems to protect sensitive military and diplomatic communications. The Japanese ambassador to Berlin, Baron Hiroshi Oshima, had earned sufficient trust from the Reich to acquire an Enigma Machine, which the Japanese subsequently developed into the 'Purple Machine' used to transmit highly-classified information between the Axis powers and within the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere beginning in 1938. Unbeknownst to the Japanese, however, United States intelligence services had had the capability to intercept Japanese messages in the Pacific since at least 1941. In fact, the Americans were able to decipher the infamous Nomura Note from Tokyo before the Japanese embassy in Washington was able to do so. Indeed, there is ample evidence suggesting that the Americans had been aware of the approaching conflict with Japan well before open hostilities began, although that is beyond the scope of this paper. Yet it remains evident that the Japanese failure to maintain secure channels of communication originated long before the disastrous encounter at Midway, with a decisive impact both the battle itself and subsequent naval engagements across the Pacific.

The US first became aware of the existence of JN25B during the Currier-Sinkov mission, and shared information about the code with British Military Intelligence in Singapore, initiating a fruitful intelligence-sharing partnership with the British Government Code and Cypher School (GC&CS) that endured for the duration of WWII. Under the command of Commodore John Rochefort, a secretive unit based in Pearl Harbor operating under the codename OP-20-G used early IBM computers to decode thousands upon thousands of sensitive Japanese military communications. Although the messages could not be deciphered in their entirety, the repetition of certain key phrases (notably the term 'AF') and markedly increased radio traffic around mid-May led Rochefort to hypothesize that AF was code for Midway. To confirm this hypothesis, Admiral Nimitz authorized a cunning ploy to release an open message that the water sanitizers on Midway were broken.

"Washington remained skeptical. For one thing, they still hadn't pinned down exactly what the Japanese meant by "AF." Rochefort [cryptography] was always sure it was Midway but he needed proof. Around May 10 he went to Layton [intelligence] with an idea. Could Midway be instructed to radio a fake message in plain English, saying their fresh-water machinery had broken down? Nimitz cheerfully went along with the ruse . . . Midway followed through " (E.B Potter, Nimitz)

When decrypted JN25B messages reported the same information under the heading of 'AF', Rochefort's hypothesis was confirmed and the US Navy immediately began preparations for the impending naval attack and bombardment of Midway. Further decryption of JN25B messages disclosed three additional components of the Midway Operation:

- The Japanese would definitely be without Carrier Division 5- Shokaku and Zuikaku- due to the damage suffered at the Coral Sea.
- The Kido Butai would strike Midway sometime between the 3rd and 5th of June.
- As with the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese carriers would launch their planes from a distance of approximately two hundred and forty miles from the Midway Atoll.

Japanese code breakers' failure to consider the oddity of sensitive American military communications being broadcasted over weakly protected channels, compounded by a failure to adhere to cryptographic protocol and not changing the JN25B code for over three years proved a disastrous miscalculation, depriving the Japanese of the element of surprise which had been critical to the success of the Pearl Harbor operation. \

In addition to detailed knowledge of the impending Japanese carrier-borne strike, the United States was also able to reinforce the island's defences in preparation for the arrival of the Kido Butai and the accompanying invasion force. Foreknowledge of the Japanese attack encouraged Admiral Nimitz to reinforce the Midway garrison, with a particular emphasis on air defence and heavy bombers. The island's air contingent was reinforced with 21 Heavy Bombers, 34 Dive-Bombers, 28 Fighter planes, 6 torpedo bombers, and 16 patrol planes. Notably, the addition of 16 PBY Catalina patrol planes enabled the Americans to comprehensively patrol Midway's western perimeter and quickly identify the coordinates of the Kido Butai. Furthermore, prior knowledge of Operation MI enabled Admiral Fletcher to place his Task Force 17 and Admiral Spruance's Task Force 16 250 miles northeast of Midway, an ideal location to ambush the Kido Butai while the Midway bombing was in progress.

### 3. Miscalculations

When planning a surprise attack, comprehensive intelligence is but one of several necessary criteria for increasing the odds of a successful outcome. Other critical factors to consider are ensuring that all sufficient offensive power is present, all available forces are properly positioned and capable of coordinating with one another in order to effectively respond to unexpected changes in the battle environment. The strategic planning for Midway failed to address each of these considerations, relying instead on the assumption that American defenses would be minimal and primarily land-based, that the weather would be clear, and that Nagumo would not come to outpace Yamamoto's battleships. These imprudent miscalculations would prove fatal in the outcome of the forthcoming battle, yet derived from previous experiences both at Pearl Harbor and the Coral Sea. Unfortunately for the Japanese war planners, when formulating military strategy, the tendency to apply successful tactics learned from previous engagements to new conflicts has a decidedly intermittent success rate.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on the morning of December 7th, 1941 was a masterpiece of strategic planning, involving six fleet carriers (Akagi, Kaga, Soryu, Hiryu, Zuikaku, Shokaku) striking thousands of miles across the Pacific in complete radio silence, thereby gaining the element of surprise while maximizing the potential damage inflicted on the United States Pacific Fleet. The daring strategy paid off, dealing a major blow to American naval capabilities, although as mentioned the failure to take out the carriers and inflict lasting damage on the infrastructure of Pearl Harbor would return to haunt the Japanese in later months.

The sheer audacity of Yamamoto's Pearl Harbor gambit cemented his status among the Japanese high command, and his proposed battle plan for Midway, formulated by Minoru Genda, was approved after only minor debate. The planning of the Midway attack was distinguished by Yamamoto's characteristic tactical audacity. In coordination with the massive Midway strike force, a parallel group under the command of Admiral Boshiro Hosogaya would simultaneously attack targets in the Western Aleutians, ideally throwing the Americans off-balance and dispersing the concentration of their naval response to the Midway occupation.

Despite underlying similarities in tactical philosophy, distinct differences remained between Midway and Pearl Harbor, notably in terms of force composition and coordination. In contrast with Pearl Harbor, which comprised a single major force, Operation MI involved four large forces acting in concert:

- Kido Butai, Carrier Strike Force, commanded by Chuichi Nagumo (4 Fleet Aircraft Carriers, 2 battleships, 2 heavy cruisers, 2 light cruisers, 11 destroyers)
- Midway Occupation Force, commanded by Nobutake Kondo ( 2 battleships, 1 light carrier, 8 heavy cruisers, 1 light cruiser, 10 destroyers)
- Central Force, Main Fleet, commanded by Isoroku Yamamoto (7 battleships, 1 light carrier, 3 light cruiser, 21 destroyers)
- Aleutian Diversionary Force, commanded by Boshiro Hosogaya (1 fleet carrier, 1 light carrier, 3 heavy cruisers, 1 light cruiser, 3 destroyers)

Operation MI called for the bombardment of Midway Atoll by the Kido Butai. The initial surprise strike would soften the coastal defences and allow Kondo's occupation force to beach Midway and occupy the atoll. All of these steps would be accomplished with Admiral Yamamoto's Central Force providing anti-aircraft and close combat support for the Kido Butai and the Occupation Force. Meanwhile, the Aleutians diversionary force would establish a beachhead on the North American subcontinent and divide the American response. However, Yamamoto's strategy failed to consider several key points:

- A marked speed disparity between Nagumo's carriers and his own Central Force's Battleships meant that during the sail to Midway, Yamamoto's Central Force could not keep up with Nagumo's carriers, eventually coming to trail them by approximately four hundred miles. By the time the air attack was launched, Yamamoto was too far behind the Kido Butai to provide effective anti-aircraft fire, forcing the attack force to rely on its own, weaker, anti-aircraft defense and Combat Air Patrol. Furthermore, the absence of Yamamoto's Central force meant that his Battleships would not have been able to provide covering fire for Admiral Kondo's occupation force had a land invasion occurred.
- The Aleutian diversionary force diverted an additional fleet-carrier, Jun-yo, from the Midway carrier strike group. Taking into account the absence of the Shokaku and the Zuikaku of Carrier Division 5 (which had been present during the Pearl Harbor attack) the Japanese air projection capacity over Midway was significantly reduced by the diversion of Junyo and its 50 aircraft complement. Comparatively, the Pearl Harbor carrier strike force had 414 aircraft at Nagumo's disposal, while the Midway carrier strike force could only muster 248 aircraft.
- Based on their experience at Pearl Harbor, the fleet commanders maintained strict radio-silence. In consequence, initial reports of American Carrier signals near Midway (received by Yamamoto) were not transmitted to Nagumo on the Akagi, under the assumption that Nagumo has already received the same information. Similarly, the news of the discovery of Admiral Kondo's Occupational force by American reconnaissance on the morning of June 3rd was reported to Yamamoto but not to Nagumo's carrier fleet. The primary reason for this lack of communication was a delayed and uncoordinated communications system, as well as a rigid adherence to complete radio-silence for the Kido Butai, as the success of the initial carrier strike was believed to depend on the element of surprise. In consequence, Admiral Nagumo entered the battle

without knowing that American reconnaissance had already located a major component of the Japanese strike force, and were preparing an all-out search for his carrier group. This regrettable state of affairs also lead Nagumo to believe that there were no American aircraft carriers in the vicinity of Midway, and thus an all-out attack was launched without accounting for the potential appearance of American Carriers.

The triad of strategic miscalculations mentioned above not only disadvantaged the Japanese at the outset of the battle, but also contributed directly to the destruction of the Japanese fleet carriers Akagi, Kaga, and Soryu by SBD Dauntless dive bombers. Firstly, Yamamoto's inability to maintain pace with Nagumo's Kido Butai meant that a large proportion of Japanese anti-aircraft capacities were not able to contribute to air defense during the battle. As a result, when Torpedo Squadrons 8 and 6 from the carriers Hornet and Enterprise engaged Nagumo's ships, Japanese defenses were comprised largely of combat air patrol fighters. The Zeros, with superior maneuverability and speed, effectively engaged the American torpedo bombers, shooting down twenty-five of twenty-nine attackers. However, while the Zeros were occupied dog fighting the low-altitude torpedo bombers, a second wave of dive bombers from the Enterprise and the Yorktown, VB6 and VB3, arrived and wreaked havoc upon the Kido Butai. If Yamamoto's ships had been close enough to provide anti-aircraft support to support the existing CAP fighters, then the Japanese ability to respond to the American counterattack would have been significantly enhanced.

Secondly, although the Japanese enjoyed an overall numerical superiority over the Americans prior to Midway, their forces were nevertheless diminished by the absence of the Zuikaku and the Shokaku, compounded by the loss of the ships designated for the Aleutian diversionary force. Consequently, when the initial wave of American torpedo bombers approached the Kido Butai, the entire force of CAP fighters were dedicated to repelling the attack, leaving no reserve in place to counter the subsequent onslaught of Dive Bombers. Alongside the absence of sufficient anti-aircraft artillery, the lack of an additional complement of defensive air support had disastrous consequences for the Japanese. Ironically, the theory of Kantai Kessen, which dictated a mass conglomeration of all available forces, would have been beneficial in this case. Yamamoto's willingness to disperse his forces represented a departure from the traditional Japanese naval doctrine. Granted, the entire Midway strategy was predicated upon the Americans not expecting to be attacked, but the failure to plan for the eventuality of a counterstrike in force clearly affected the outcome of the Battle of Midway.

During any complex military action, the ability for various units to communicate with one another in order respond quickly to changes in the battle environment is a widely-accepted necessity for a successful outcome. However, Yamamoto's decision to maintain complete radio silence and withhold information from Nagumo regarding the detection of American carrier signals in the vicinity of Midway Atoll crippled the Kido Butai's response. After the initial strike on Midway, Nagumo prepared a second strike on Midway, without knowledge of the appearance of USN carriers. When Scout Number 4 from the Tone spotted the Yorktown, Nagumo was faced with a quandary: whether to attack the Yorktown with his planes carrying weapons designed for ground-targets or to rearm his strike group with torpedoes. To compound the dilemma, Lt. Tomonaga's initial strike on Midway was returning and had to land on the carrier or ditch into the ocean. Nagumo was now faced with three options: launch a strike on the enemy carriers with land based weaponry, rearm his strike group with torpedoes and attack the carriers, or continue the bombardment of Midway. His decision to rearm the strike group with torpedoes proved fateful, and is remembered as one of the most poorly-timed decisions in military history. Just as the rearmament progressing in the hangars of all four carriers, the American dive bombers came upon the Japanese carriers with bombs and fuel hoses littered on both the hangar and on the deck. The resulting strikes, including five hits on the Kaga, three on the Soryu, and a single devastating hit on the Akagi decisively crippled the Kido Butai.

#### 4. Conclusion

The loss at Midway fundamentally altered the balance of power in the Pacific Theatre and arguably represented the decisive moment when the Axis powers lost strategic initiative on the Asian continent. The sinking of four fleet carriers and a heavy cruiser meant that the Japanese navy could no longer mount effective long-distance offensive operations without simultaneously compromising their defensive capabilities. Furthermore, the loss of a significant number of trained pilots meant that the overall skill level of the Japanese naval air wing had been crippled. In particular, the death of Rear Admiral Tamon Yamaguchi deprived Japan of one of its most talented and revered leaders, who alongside Yamamoto had forcefully urged the strengthening of Japanese carrier forces. The construction of additional carriers after Midway was a clear case of too little too late, with the Unryu-class vessels (Unryu, Amagi, and Katsuragi) only entering service in 1944, by which point the tide of the war had already decisively turned against the Japanese.

In overall strategic terms, the Japanese gamble at Midway was intended to establish a protective zone around the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere by isolating Australia and denying the American navy access to the Southwestern Pacific, thereby supporting the land-based westward push against British forces in Myanmar and India, and potentially enabling the Axis powers to link up in the Middle East. After Midway, although the Japanese retained a measure of numerical parity with carriers and even enjoyed an advantage in terms of battleships and heavy cruisers, they were nevertheless relegated to a defensive position. Subsequent battles on Guadalcanal, Santa Cruz, and in the Philippines sea steadily diminished Japanese naval capabilities precisely when the United States was consolidating and expanding its own.

Although the loss of men and materiel at Midway significantly disadvantaged the Japanese military vis-à-vis the Americans, the Japanese High Command's doctrinal inflexibility only accelerated their impending defeat. In a symbolic sense, the inexorable spread of Imperial Japanese forces had been decisively checked, and commanders like Yamamoto executed

subsequent campaigns with a renewed sense of caution. During the fight for Guadalcanal, Yamamoto kept his remaining larger vessels in reserve, notably the 'Super-battleship' Yamato, its sister vessel the Musashi, along with the 16-gun battleships Nagato and Mutsu. The cumulative impact this additional firepower would have had upon the American navy should not be underestimated. The Japanese naval doctrine of Kantai Kessen (Naval Fleet Decisive Battle) was only partially implemented at Midway in the sense that the battle plan aimed to neutralize American naval forces in a single blow. However, Yamamoto's disagreements with the doctrine led him to disperse his forces and attempt to replicate the more overtly offensive strategy that had served him so well at Pearl Harbor. After Midway, however, the Japanese High Command reverted back to Kantai Kessen with renewed vigor, albeit while acknowledging the central importance of maintaining carriers as the focal point of a battle group rather than relying primarily on battleships. The shift in focus from battleships to carriers was evident in the construction of the Unryu class carriers (16 planned, 3 completed, 1 operational) and the super-carriers Taihou and Shinano. While the Japanese constructed only five carriers during the remainder of the war, the United States Navy was able to put more than twenty fleet carriers into action during the same period.

In response to the flawed coordination of bombing runs and combat air patrol defense, which directly contributed to the sinking of Nagumo's carriers, the Japanese Naval leadership instituted moderate reforms to the protocols governing the refueling process of aircraft and took steps to balance offensive and defensive considerations in the battle environment. Yamamoto also maintained his enthusiasm for the prioritization of offensive air-capabilities in the Battles of Santa Cruz and Eastern Solomons. Overall, however, the core strategic orientations of the Japanese navy remained essentially unchanged throughout the remainder of the Pacific War.

Looking back over the long history of military conflict, analysis of failed battle outcomes often assign blame to tactical decisions made in real time by commanders on the field of war. Considering how quickly an operational environment can shift, it is unsurprising that the individuals responsible for reacting to such changes in real time often become the focus of the historical lens. Nevertheless, a great many other factors completely unrelated to battlefield decisions can also influence the outcome of a given engagement. As the case of Midway demonstrates, the allocation of forces at the outset of a battle, the selection of time and place for initiating engagement, tactical doctrine governing all aspects of offensive and defensive actions, and the preservation of operational security can also have a decisive impact on battle outcomes. In the case of Midway, every single one of the abovementioned factors played a role in the Japanese defeat; Yamamoto's fateful decision to separate deprived the Japanese strike force of valuable offensive and defensive capabilities when they were most needed, the selection of Midway Atoll as a target allowed the Americans to coordinate their response with a combination of land- and carrier-based forces, the Kantai Kessen doctrinal emphasis on delivering a single decisive blow, and most notably the loss of the element of surprise significantly undermined the odds of victory before the first plane had even left the decks of the Kido Butai.

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